CINEJ CINEMA JOURNAL
ISSN 2159-2411 (PRINT) ISSN 2158-8724 (ONLINE)

The Lexicons of Cult Film: Rhetoric, Media, and *The Big Lebowski*

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Volume 13.1 (2025) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/Jj.2025.659 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Abstract
In this paper, we explore how *The Big Lebowski* provides "equipment for living," to explain the Lebowski phenomenon and answer the question: How do individuals use *The Big Lebowski* to communicate across cultures? In answer to this question, we argue that the shared lexicon of the cult film serves as a diagnostic tool, which fans use to identify each other, size up their situation, and determine a course of action. In one sense, the film is both a representative anecdote and an unrepresentative anecdote, which draws viewers into a comic frame and allows them to see new ways of thinking and acting in an otherwise typical situation. Ultimately, the co-opting of the film's ethos and lexicon by fans "individualizes" popular culture, subverting film (a big-budget medium historically dominated by the auteur-director model) and positioning fans as both artistic consumers and creators.
Keywords: rhetoric; The Big Lebowski; Kenneth Burke; fan studies; cult film; Hollywood

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Introduction

"Lemme tell you a story." The young man on the screen tries not to slur as he gesticulates with his red solo cup: "I was at a bar, listen, a pub, in London when this guy is talking to the bartender, and he's not really listening you know, just serving drinks, and the guy says, 'With friends like these,' and the bartender just stops, and a look comes into his eyes, and he says, 'With friends like these, Dude'" (Chung, 2008). This exchange introduces the "Lebowski Effect," a phenomenon that forms a central focus of the Lebowski Fest documentary, *The Achievers*. The effect is simply this: Two erstwhile strangers meet, one happens to drop a line from the Coen Brothers' 1998 film *The Big Lebowski*, and a bond is forged. Lines from the film fly back and forth, as each seeks a more appropriate line for the present circumstances.

No small amount of curiosity surrounds the popularity of the Coen Brothers' film. Despite its dismal box-office opening, the film has spawned a cult following that spans the globe.[1] It has become the focal point of festivals that celebrate the *joie de vivre* of the protagonist, and it has been quoted in official proceedings by federal district judges and state representatives. A quick

Volume 13.1 (2025) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2025.659 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

reference to *Reddit* yields several threads, including one with over two thousand responses titled, "What do so many people find enjoyable in *The Big Lebowski*?" The *Fandom* wiki for *The Big Lebowski* has seventy-five pages, including one called "Objects of Great Import" and another simply called "Metaphysical." Scholars such as Barbara Klinger (2010) have documented the film's ephemera as evidence of its cult status, including merchandise, websites, late-night screenings, and special edition re-releases that position the film in a wider (male-dominated) "replay culture." Jeff Jaeckle (2014) and others have analyzed how the characters' speech patterns may also contribute to its cult status; repetitive dialogue lends the film a coherence seemingly lacking in the plot. In sum, media industries have capitalized on the film's aftermarket vitality, and fans employ the film as a diagnostic tool for navigating social settings. In this essay, we further consider the communicative functions of cult films such as *The Big Lebowski*, asking how they contribute to language more broadly.[2] We argue that the film acts as both a representative and unrepresentative anecdote, which draws viewers into a comic frame and allows them to see new ways of thinking and acting in an otherwise typical situation. Ultimately, the co-opting of the film's ethos and lexicon "individualizes" popular culture, subverting film and positioning a community of fans as artistic consumers *and* creators.

This essay analyzes the rhetoricity of cult films such as *The Big Lebowski* to better understand how popular culture shapes language. Scholars such as Jaeckle or Stern and Wilkinson

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(2012) have connected the film to concepts in linguistics, opening avenues for others to analyze *The Big Lebowski* vis-a-vis communication. This article extends such conversations by approaching the film through rhetorical studies. On the one hand, fans "use" the film as a tool, quoting lines to diagnose social settings and create a sense of identification. On the other hand, when films establish a fandom that has its own language and subculture, it subverts how individuals traditionally consume media. The rhetoric of *The Big Lebowski* enacts a form of social action and constitutes a group of fans. Ultimately, cult films not only reflect culture but also perform social actions, organizing viewers into groups, generating new meaning, and refiguring aesthetic forms.

The Big Lebowski and Burkean Rhetoric

The film opens with a rendition of the Western classic "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" and a voiceover that announces viewers will hear a story, not of a "dark night in a city that knows how to keep its secrets," but of a man they call the Dude. Like this song, which was originally composed by Bob Nolan while he was caddying in Los Angeles, the Dude is not from the West. He is a product of Los Angeles, a modern city full of too-clean streets and too-bright lights that deny both the cowboy and the noir detective—the generic predecessors of the Dude. The opening scene sets up the comedy that follows, which is a denial of filmic expectations. An anti-hero fails to meet

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expectations in a picaresque film that carries the plot forward only by force of habit or to fulfill a narrative drive toward resolution.

In the tenth-anniversary bonus feature short documentary "The Making of *The Big Lebowski*," Joel and Ethan Coen describe the film as burned-out hippie slacker meets hard-boiled detective. The plot follows the formulaic structure of a Chandleresque detective story. A case of mistaken identity leads a private dick to scout the seedy underbelly of Los Angeles for the wife of an ersatz millionaire between episodic blackouts and knockouts. Jeff Bridges plays the role of "the Dude," a stoner who is neither a private eye nor streetwise but lovably confused while "adhering to a pretty strict, uh, drug regimen to keep [his] mind, you know, uh, limber." This creates a film that is seemingly boring and vapid because the protagonist constantly fails to move the plot forward, and the plot bullies its way along from point to point with seeming disregard for the characters it carries in its wake. The film perhaps demonstrates why the "soft-boiled" detective story never caught on.

One of the communicative features of *The Big Lebowski* qua cult film is its function as an anecdotal tool. For example, "Lebowski quoter" has become an increasingly popular descriptor (in playful and pejorative contexts), which exemplifies the identificatory role of cult films. As Falvey (2021) explains in connection to the cult-classic *Re-Animator* "[its] endurance has been marked by a consistent fanbase exhibiting cultist forms of reception and appreciation, which

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demonstrates its sustained cultural significance while re-mediating it to the center of an intertextual, and intermedial, constellation of texts" (p. 89). As the original film is incorporated into comic books, musicals, pornographic films, and everyday life, it serves as a point of identification amongst fans who refer to the Urtext as an anecdote to explain their present predicament. Just as Alan Ball's script has Lester, the protagonist, use *Re-Animator* to connect with Ricky, the teenager next door infatuated with Lester's daughter, in the 1999 film *American Beauty*, so to do Lebowski quoters use the film as a repository of anecdotes to identify an unfamiliar situation.

In the context of rhetoric, many scenes in the *The Big Lebowski* can serve as representative anecdotes, an idea Kenneth Burke describes in *A Grammar of Motives*: "[M]en seek for vocabularies that will be faithful *reflections* of reality [through] vocabularies that are *selections* of reality" (p. 59). While any number of anecdotes provide a rich source of information for a given society, Burke singles out as "representative" those that are both reductive in their selection and suited to a specific subject matter in their scope. For example, in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Burke describes proverbs as representative anecdotes and compares them to medical diagnoses. Like a skilled physician, proverbs diagnose by labeling a situation such that it can be classed and treated in accordance with its type. Similarly, saying "Fuck it, let's go bowling" or "I am the Walrus" or "Shut the fuck up Donny, you're out of your element" gives an apt description and creates a word-

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phrase to explain an experience. These descriptors serve in their time and place as more useful word-phrases than that of the ordinary English vernacular.

Cult films such as *The Big Lebowski* function as the Burkean proverb writ large; they serve a vital function in the evolution of language. The film operates much the same way as literary works that "single out the patter of experience that is sufficiently often *mutandis mutatis*, for people to 'need a word for it'; and to adopt an attitude towards it" (Burke, 1997, p. 300). But the film also illustrates the tension between representative and "unrepresentative" anecdotes. Even as fans quote lines in their everyday life, the film rarely serves as a literal analogy to events they will experience. While the narrator (Sam Elliott) identifies the Dude as the man for his time and place, the narrator seems to lose his place and leaves viewers to interpret the film on their own. The film is an expansive anecdote that vacillates between the representative and unrepresentative; it offers a distinct way of representing the world, yet the scenarios in the film are anything from ordinary. Where the narrative follows the dictums of the Chandleresque detective story—a case of mistaken identity, femme fatale, money drop gone wrong—the film also deflects reality. Despite its seemingly quotable lines, the film makes its viewers aware of its *unsuitability* as a singular source for a new vocabulary. When the Dude bumbles through the plot, issuing a sixty-nine-cent check, mystified in annoyance with the tough guy pissing on his rug, and his perennial solution—going bowling—he gives viewers a more accurate picture of how they *ought* to respond to the slightly less

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bizarre plot twists in their own lives. This is why it's funny. The movie shows the incongruities of our experiences, lending us a new perspective; it is an anecdote that invites us into the comic frame.

The comic frame of *The Big Lebowski* arises from its incongruity—from dudeisms, quotes, and scenarios that sometimes seem to *mis*identify a situation. For example, scholars Stern and Wilkinson (2012) analyzed applications of ordinary language in the film; lines such as "It's just like, uh, your opinion, man" are not just funny to most viewers because of the line delivery, but also because it seems like a misuse of the term "opinion" (p. 247). The dialogue creates dissensus in these moments, or what might be termed a "perspective by incongruity." And such a perspective is both verbal and visual. Verbally the audience is often presented with an eponymous dudeism such as "Obviously, you are not a golfer," which the Dude offers in answer to a query about his bowling ball. Visually, the film shows scenes such as the juxtaposition of the Dude and the titular Mr. Lebowski. Just before the two square-off in Mr. Lebowski's office, we see the Dude's reflection in a mirrored plaque proclaiming him "Man of the Year" while at the same time asking, "Are you a Lebowski Achiever?" As shown in Figure 1, such scenes foreground incongruity. Viewers are confronted with a juxtaposition of images that challenges the established order — the division

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between “achiever” and “slacker”—that they can in turn use to reconsider established social norms.

Figure 1 the Dude (Bridges) sees his reflection in a mirrored cover of Time magazine

For Burke, the comic frame is not simply a genre, but an epistemology—a way of interpreting the world. Burke identifies a rhetorical, critical perspective by incongruity to suggest that such juxtapositions can be highly effective in changing a reader’s or viewer’s point of view. The phrase “perspective by incongruity” initially related to Nietzsche’s cult of perspectives and dart-like style of attacking several ideas in quick succession (Burke, 1964, p. 88). Burke claims that, “Nietzsche establishes his perspectives by a constant juxtaposing of incongruous words, attaching to some name a qualifying epithet which had heretofore gone with a different order of names” (Burke, 1964, p. 90). For fans of *The Big Lebowski*, dudeisms, quotes, and scenarios from the film

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push conversations into the comic frame, allowing interlocutors to see life from the Dude's perspective. More importantly, as fans share in this comic renaming, they foster a community that shares an incongruous perspective on the topic at hand.

If Nietzsche exemplifies the procedure of perspective by incongruity, then the systematic underpinnings of the procedure Burke identifies with the French philosopher Henri Bergson (Burke, 1964, 92). Bergson sees life as a series of temporal abnormalities without connection to each other. Every moment, and the events of that moment, exist within a self-contained framework without reference to a unifying *monas monadum*—a master principle connecting singular metaphysical entities. Thus, conceptions of the universe that apply understanding from one moment to another belie the very fabric of space and time. When, for example, a physicist describes the path of a planet around a star as a synthesis of tangential and centripetal forces, the physicist's language does not describe the reality of the planet's motion. The planet merely moves: "the actual motion *is* the synthesis, and it is never anything else" (Burke, 1964, p. 93). Burke (1964) then resolves the system of incongruity through ideas found in Bergson's writing:

Bergson proposes that we deliberately cultivate the use of contradictory concepts. These will not give us the whole of reality, he says, but at least they will give us something more indicative than is obtainable by the assumptions that our conceptualizations of events in nature are real,

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and to be taken as fundamental enough for brilliant men to set about scrupulously treating these necessary inadequacies of thought and expression as though they reflected corresponding realities in nature. (p. 94)

Therefore, if one treats the world as a series of events which cannot be reduced to a synthetic formula—thesis, antithesis, synthesis—then one will begin to see the world as at all times unified. The planet does not fight between thesis and antithesis, but moves merrily along the only available route, the unified path.

The Dude abides. This simple statement from the conclusion of the film is also a prime illustration of Burke's interpretation of Bergson. The plot, characters, cinematography, and all other elements which make up *The Big Lebowski* are subsumed within this declaration. In discussing the larger philosophical implications of the film, we often found ourselves at a standstill—unable to agree on whether the Dude is a more perfect incarnation of the nihilism espoused by his antagonists in the parking lot of the bowling alley, or if perhaps the Dude is the antithesis of nihilism, and if so, what might that antithesis be called—yet the finer points of our debate could be subsumed within the larger assertion "The Dude abides," which summarizes the opposing forces that denied our attempts at synthesizing the film.

In order to assist one in thinking of a planet moving along a unified path, Burke suggests exorcism by misnomer. "The notion of perspective by incongruity" Burke writes, "would suggest

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that one casts out devils by *misnaming* them" (1964, p. 133). That is, one would treat the devil like you would treat a Boggart from the Harry Potter series. An example from *The Big Lebowski* is when the child-like Donny is afraid of the people who have set fire to the Dude's car, finally killing it. "Are these Nazis, Walter?" Donny asks, like a child frightened by an object in the corner of his room. Walter approaches the object of Donny's fears and reveals them, "No, Donny, these men are nihilists. There's nothing to be afraid of." In Burke's original illustration, the adult relieves the child's fear by revealing the object they feared was not a monster, but a mere coat rack. In both instances, fear is abated not by the naming of the fear—"you are afraid because there is a monster in the corner" or "you are afraid because the Nazis have set fire to the Dude's car"—but by the authoritative misnaming of the fear—"you are afraid because there is a coat rack in the corner," "You are afraid because the harmless nihilists set fire to the Dude's car." This misnaming leads from Burke's system of perspective by incongruity described in *Permanence and Change* to Burke's conception of the comic frame in *Attitudes towards History*.

Burke proposes several poetic attitudes which an individual might adopt when examining history including the epic, the tragic, and the comic. Whereas in the tragic frame people are vicious monsters who are intent on crime, in the comic frame people are seen as mistaken fools caught in

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their own stupidity. When one views history through a comic frame, one perceives history as a spectator at a play who sees the action of the stage:

> The audience, from its vantage point, sees the operation of errors that the characters of the play cannot see; thus seeing from two angles at once, it is chastened by dramatic irony; it is admonished to remember that when intelligence means *wisdom* (in contrast with the modern tendency to look upon intelligence as merely a *coefficient of power* for heightening our ability to get things, be they good things or bad), it requires fear, resignation, the sense of limits, as an important ingredient. (Burke, 1961, pp. 41-42)

Thus, comedy requires the maximum of what Burke refers to as forensic complexity—the ability to use the tools of the marketplace, which Burke (1961) defines as "scientific-causal relationships evolved by complex and sophisticated commerce" (p. 254).

Through the comic frame one is able to see things as both participant and spectator, but in order for one to use this ability one must be able to reason beyond the level of childish theses—statements of mere fact such as one might hear in a kindergarten class where argument and rebuttal consist of "did so," "did not." In order to use the ability granted by the comic frame one must be able to reason syllogistically, using the tools of the marketplace. Burke writes: "The comic frame, in making a man the student of himself, makes it possible for him to 'transcend' occasions when he has been tricked or cheated, since he can readily put such discouragements in his 'assets' column, under the head of 'experience'" (p. 171). What Burke is saying is that a man viewing life from the comic frame is able to fully engage in a description which falsifies an object, and simultaneously identify the falsified elements of the description in order to better understand the full

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dimension of the object. "The comic frame" writes Burke (1961), "should enable people *to be observers of themselves*, *while acting*" (p. 171).

To summarize, the comic frame is an attitude towards history that considers man as a fool caught in his mistake. When viewing history through this attitude, one is able to see history both as a participant and as a spectator. The ability to see history as both a participant and a spectator requires one to understand scientific-causal relationships. The tool for exposing these relationships is perspective by incongruity, which is a "method for gauging situations by verbal 'atom cracking'...a word belongs by custom to a certain category—and by rational planning you wrench it loose and metaphorically apply it to a different category" (Burke, 1961, p. 308).[3] An apt description of the Coen Brothers' soft-boiled detective story.

Fans as Producers and Consumers

Cult films such as *The Big Lebowski* can position fans as "observers of themselves" and refigure their relationship to history. This, in turn, changes the relationship between artistic consumption and production, as viewers can interact with films in new ways. As scholars in fandom

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studies have long documented, fan culture allows viewers to take control of media beyond mere consumption. For example, philosopher Michel de Certeau describes this type of media "poaching" in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980): "Today, the text no longer imposes its own rhythm on the subject" (p. 176). Certeau challenges the once-commonplace notion that readers or audience members absorb and consume texts passively, and, in many ways, he anticipates the user-generated discourse networks that dominate today's media landscape. In the context of the film industry, the high barrier of entry has traditionally limited audience engagement. Fandom therefore allows viewers to "speak back"; they redefine and refigure media by adopting it in their everyday lexicons. They become *producers* as well as consumers when they use the film to create representative anecdotes for their time and place.

The film reflects the Burkean rhetoric of its audience as characters adopt quotes (sometimes *mis*quotes) and repeat each other. Obvious examples include the Dude's appropriation of George H. W. Bush's phrase "This aggression will not stand"; Theodor Herzl's "If you will it, it is no dream"; and V. I. Lenin's "Look for the person who will benefit." In each of these examples, characters use such expressions to rhetorical ends; they diagnose a situation, and the expressions inform the characters' behavior and beliefs. Yet each quote also tends to be acontextual, which potentially impels fans to consider their own use of allusion. In the first example, as shown in Figure 2, the Dude views Bush on screen in the supermarket, creating a *mise-en-abyme* effect in

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which viewers voyeuristically observe another person watching a TV broadcast. But what is more notable is how the Dude *repeats* Bush a few scenes later when meeting with Mr. Lebowski. On the one hand, the Dude "teaches" viewers how to navigate and use media, much like what they are seeing on the screen as they watch *The Big Lebowski*. On the other hand, however, attentive viewers will notice that incongruities appear. For example, Bush's famous proclamation arguably signals the peak of American imperialism, and the quote is divorced from its wider geopolitical context when used by the Dude. Or, despite Walter's philosemitism throughout the film, his use of Herzl's expression "If you will it" is disconnected from the politics of Zionism and kibbutzim. Walter's reference to Lenin is likely a misquote from "Who Stands to Gain?," a 1913 article in *Pravda* criticizing how tax money often goes to private armaments companies. Again, characters use these "proverbs" or phrases to navigate their social situation—much like fans quote the film—establishing a pattern of anecdotes in *The Big Lebowski*. Fans do what the characters do; they repeat lines to make sense of the world around them. Rhetoricians have emphasized the power of quoting or using proverbs in such a way, but Burkean rhetoric foregrounds the identificatory power of such intertextuality. It signals to viewers an ethos or identity that they can connect with to anchor them as the confusing plot unfolds.

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Figure 2 the Dude (Bridges) glances at George H.W. Bush delivering a speech

Characters also frequently repeat each other or misquote each other, which helps establish the "comic frame" through which viewers might recognize themselves as observers and participants in the world. Perhaps the best example is Donny (Steve Buscemi), who becomes a more suitable surrogate for the audience than the Dude or Walter—especially when applying a rhetorical approach to the film. Donny parrots the Dude's and Walter's lines, misunderstands others, and interjects in various scenes. For example, when we first see Donny in the bowling alley, Walter describes him as a clueless viewer lost in the convoluted plot: "You have no frame of reference here, Donny. You're like a child who wanders into the middle of a movie." Like Donny, many viewers watching the film for the first time are confused (Dill and Janke, 2013). So, Donny tries to repeat others and enter conversations that are seemingly closed between the Dude and Walter.

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But this confusion that Donny demonstrates (and that viewers may experience) is not necessarily the result of poor writing; the meandering, confusing plot of *The Big Lebowski* serves an important function. As Joel Coen notes in a 1998 interview, the plot is "hopelessly complex" but "ultimately unimportant" (Stone, 1998, n.p.). When responding to Walter's quote about Lenin, for example, Donny repeats "I am the Walrus"—a line further repeated by Lebowski fans. Such a scene encapsulates the type of rhetoric at work, including both the use of quotes and references as well as the incongruities that establish a "comic frame." When Donny "misapplies" a quote, he provides viewers an opportunity to recognize their role as spectator-participant. Donny may be "wandering" into the middle of a film with "no frame of reference," but such metanarrative moments also help viewers make sense of how they are reflected in the film.

Furthermore, cult films such as *The Big Lebowski* reframe the individual viewer and the audience as a collective group. On the one hand, a cult film may serve as a representative anecdote for a single viewer, challenging them to view history and the world through a comic frame. It is an interpersonal tool to establish and identify situations, to respond and make sense of social settings, and to create and redefine an identity and relationship to history. On the other hand, the communal nature of the audience shifts, redistributing those aspects of art, of our social worlds,

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that are made visible. In the context of *The Big Lebowski*, the film furnishes its audience with language—with rhetorical frameworks through which they might interpret the world.

The repetition of language, whether within the film itself or when quoted by fans, is particularly connected to the plot of *The Big Lebowski.* Nieland (2009) and Jaeckle (2012) have suggested that familiar phrases and repetitive speech patterns are a comfort to first-time viewers lost in the seemingly incoherent story. And those same patterns are a comfort to returning viewers or fans (Nieland 2009). Yet the dialogue itself is only a small part of the film. The movie is highly visually stylized, its characters carefully balanced with one another (the calm Dude; the animated Walter), and the narrative alludes to well-established genre principles while rarely foreshadowing what will come next in the story. The meandering narrative and protagonist reflect how the audience uses film as fans; it resists cohesive meaning while also challenging the dichotomies between production and consumption.

The tension over how viewers should interact with a "hopelessly complex" plot repeatedly comes to the surface of the story itself. For example, in the Dude's exchange with Mr. Lebowski, the debate is about how we are to interpret the story of a man pissing on another man's rug:

> LEBOWSKI: Hello! Hello! So every time—I just want to understand this, sir—every time a rug is micturated upon in this fair city, I have to compensate the—
> DUDE: Come on, man, I'm not trying to scam anybody here, I'm just—
> LEBOWKSI: You're just looking for a handout like every other—are you employed, Mr. Lebowski?

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Notably, the scene is framed around the notion of producers and consumers; the Dude, naturally, falls into the latter category, according to the titular "Big" Lebowski. Mr. Lebowski repeats the term "bum" nine times, perhaps indicating anxieties he harbors toward his own identity. The film resists such a reductive view, as we later learn that Mr. Lebowski is anything but a "producer." Again, this scene foregrounds how characters and viewers might interpret who is using whom in the story, breaking down the clear dividing line between "producer" and "consumer." And *language repetition* plays an important role in signaling this breakdown to viewers; fans watching the film more than once will notice the repetition of "bum" and its changing meaning.

In short, while the convoluted plot led many critics to pan the film upon its release, its seeming incoherence is precisely why it's important to understand the rhetoricity of cult films. For example, film critic Alex Ross writes in a 1998 review for *Slate* that "The trouble starts with the plot [. . .] the great flaw in most of the Coens' work is, surprisingly, an inability to sustain a plot over a two-hour span" (para. 6). But, as suggested here, the film's ability to serve as rhetorical anecdotes—and, consequently, to invite readers into a comic frame—makes the plot secondary for many fans. In many moments, the film does indeed address this paradox, inviting viewers to "fill in gaps" on their own. In doing so, the film also exposes gaps, positioning its viewers as a community; the film and critical industries struggle to control the meaning of a film that so openly

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resists them. By establishing a community of fans who simultaneously create and consume meaning, cult films such as *The Big Lebowski* disrupt traditional filmmaking and criticism by creating new forms of language for which the audience is more heavily involved. Fans have the potential to "make audible" what used to be "inaudible" when they do something as simple as quoting lines in their everyday lives.

This is a distinct type of rhetoric that does not advance a single claim by moving though individual points. Instead, the film constitutes its community, using the dissensus or complexity of the plot as a tool of identification. Viewers can see how others in the film adopt expressions and phrases that are suited for their particular social situation, and fans in turn use the movie as a form of "equipment for living" (Burke, 1997; Young, 2000). And *The Big Lebowski* offers such a strong example of this type of language play and quotability precisely because of the complex plot. It is easy for fans and viewers to get lost in the meandering story, which makes the repetition of language that much more important.

Conclusion

Released in 1998, The Coen Brother's film *The Big Lebowski* starring Jeff Bridges and John Goodman, met with moderate success at the box office. Many of the films most devoted fans never saw its brief run in the theatres, and those who did recall it with some level of distaste, one interviewee in Eddie Chung's documentary *The Achievers* recalls hating the film in the theatre,

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even though she now regularly attends Lebowski Fest, a festival which celebrates all things Lebowski. According to the Internet Movie Database, the film—which cost approximately $15,000,000 to make—only grossed $17,451,873 in the U.S.[4] Despite this disappointing run, *The Big Lebowski* became the "first cult film of the internet age" (Chung, 2008). As we have argued throughout the paper, the reason for this popularity is the film's ability to waver between a representative anecdote and an unrepresentative anecdote. Its use of the comic frame, and the tools thereof, highlight the "medicinal" qualities of the film, assisting us in naming our own maladies through our tear-stained face, and agree with Mr. Lebowski that the bums WILL always lose. These rhetorical features are reflected by the characters themselves, whose intertextual use of quotes to understand their situation reflects a broader, disruptive technique. The audience plays a greater, more audible role in creating meaning in this sense rather than passively consuming the plot.

The Coens suggest that most of the memorable characters were written for the actors who played them, John Turtouro as the pedophile bowler Jesus, John Goodman as the Vietnam vet-cum-devote Jewish mystic, Jeff Bridges as a perpetually stoned bum. Lines like "The bums will always lose" or "With friends like these" or even non-sequitur's like "I am the walrus" become badges of membership within a community of fans. Furthermore, these lines are descriptors that

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explain the seemingly random occurrences of life as part of bizarre plot. There are certainties of the genre which guarantee that there will be twists, but also that these twists will take recognizable form.

As noted above, the Lebowski Effect is when two erstwhile strangers begin swapping lines from the Big Lebowski and discover a common bond through the film. It gives grand vocabulary of Lebowski-isms, which "the achiever" (the fan of the film) can deftly and adroitly employ in diagnosing any situation. These dudeisms become proverbial medicine for the achievers. For admonition, the achiever has "Careful Man, there's a beverage here," "Ever thus to deadbeats," and "The Bums will always lose!" To rebuke, the achiever may employ "At least I'm housebroken," "Obviously, you are not a golfer," "This aggression will not stand, man," or the ever popular "Forget it, Donny, you're out of your element!" Finally, for consolation, the achiever turns to the epithet of the film, "The Dude Abides."

These proverbs have a direct bearing on the achiever's welfare because they imply a command. They remind the achievers of what to expect, for example the admonitions above instruct the achiever to anticipate adversity and hostility from sources of authority. The rebukes listed above instruct the achiever that adverse situations may be the result of a misunderstanding. The consolation, from the cathartic conclusion where all pity and fear brought up by the film is assuaged through the knowledge that "The Dude Abides," and the potential of little Lebowski's

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entering the world, also serves to console the achiever in the knowledge that the ethos of the Dude persists, even though the film is over.

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ENDNOTES:

[1] The film, which cost approximately $15,000,000 to make, only grossed $19,488,923 in the US and Canada, according to the Internet Movie Database, webpage "The Big Lebowski," from *IMDB.com*, last accessed March 15, 2025.

[2] The "quotability" of films is an important measure of their cult status. For example, Umberto Eco gestures to this idea by suggesting that, in order to be a "cult film," a movie must "provide a completely furnished world, so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they

were part of the beliefs of a sect, a private world of their own, a world about which one can play puzzle games and trivia contests." See Eco (1985).

[3] Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 308. The phrase, *rational planning* in this quotation means that the metaphorical application of word from a certain category to a different category is intentional and not the result of a mere misstatement.

[4] Internet Movie Database, "The Big Lebowski," IMDB.com last accessed April 5, 2012.

Volume 13.1 (2025) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2025.659 | http://cinej.pitt.edu