

### **O BROTHER, WHAT ART THOU?: POSTMODERN PRANKSTERISM, OR PARODY WITH A PURPOSE?**

To pin a label on *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, you seem to need more hyphens than warts on a horny toad. Reviewers, trying to serve up the film as something moviegoers could digest, stirred together a genre soup called something like a "Depression era-Mississippi-buddy-chaingang-roadtrip-musical comedy." Ruminating over the film's allusions to other films, literary texts, and cultural images, critics were invariably troubled by what to call--much less what to think about--such a rich melange. In one particular gumbo of mixed metaphors, John Anderson of *Newsday* called the film a "collection of free-floating political-cultural myths that the Coens have harvested and wed to literature." Other reviewers, wrestling with *O Brother's* patchwork of quotations, allusions, and homages, turned to one-word descriptions that evoked the very soup they were trying to climb out of: they called it a mix, a medley, an amalgam, a collection, an assemblage, a trove. While some reviewers reveled in such revelry, some--often the same ones--blamed the film for a lack of coherence, complained that it has "too much of everything going on" (Strauss). Roger Ebert argued that its "narrative train" lacks an engine, while Patrick Z. McGavin argued on *IndieWIRE.com* that the film lacks an "essential shape" or "essential emotional register." Ah, yes, the search for engines and essences--just where is that master concept to drive the train into the station?

What all this talk of quotations, allusions, assemblages, and messiness suggests, of course, is that the Coens are mucking about in the postmodern. McGavin found the film "entertaining, funny, [and] vibrant," but he also declared it "thin" and "weightless," the work of "postmodern pranksters." Reaching into America's popculture past for songs, movies, and stories while at the same time reaching into the ancient Greek past for Homer's *Odyssey* of Homer, the film has everything to justify McGavin's latter charge: reconfiguring cultural referents cut loose from their historical moorings is a hallmark not only of many Coen films, after all, but of postmodernism as a whole. In an interview on the *O Brother* DVD the filmmakers invoke the very language of postmodernism: it's the "Lawrence of Arabia [David Lean, 1962] of hayseed movies," a "Ma and Pa Kettle movie with really high production values," a "sophisticated Three Stooges film." Elsewhere they invoke *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), and the biggest in-joke of all, Preston Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels* (1940). Their self-deprecating humor likewise suggests a decidedly postmodern stance, a resistance to being pinned down by serious intent. In another interview, Joel Coen said that Homer just "seemed like a good hillbilly name," and that he and his brother had never even read the original *Odyssey*, only the Classic Comics version (Pickle). This conflation of high culture and pop, Greek epic and slapstick, and their deflation of all things "high-brow" are, of course, precisely what leave Coen and his younger brother vulnerable to charges of "postmodern prankster[ism]."

Fredric Jameson's consideration of postmodern pastiche and lament for parody's lost prowess might help us make more sense of *O Brother*, might find in it a prime example of parody without a target, an ahistorical lever without a fulcrum with which it might move the world. Like the Doctorow novel that Jameson analyzes, the film seems "organized systematically and formally to short-circuit an older type of social and historical interpretation which it

perpetually holds out and withdraws" (23). In cahoots with the "repudiation of interpretation," *O Brother* is the very symptom of the postmodern--and the brothers' answers in interviews only reinforce the suspicion that their film has no real point. (All of which makes me, as I write this article, feel somewhat foolish. Say "dialogical" or "hegemonic," and you can almost hear the Coens snickering in the margins. Still, though, something more serious than shallow playfulness or adolescent irony emerges from their laughter, so I proceed.)

If we accept the logic of Jameson and many critics, *O Brother* becomes nothing more than a veritable filmic theme park of American simulacra destined to take its place beside L.A.'s City Walk or California Adventure, the latest Disney horror. But is this all there is? On the contrary: the Coens' use of pillaged cultural materials is more substance than simulacra; what begins in apparently empty parody becomes a complex dialogic defense against the very com-modification of art and culture that Jameson so laments.

Two theoretical alternatives to Jameson underpin this perspective. First, if we apply Charles Jencks's notion of double-coding to the borrowed fragments of the film--as Linda Hutcheon does for architecture in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*--something more serious than shallow playfulness or adolescent allusiveness begins to emerge. In simple terms, double-coding means that the self-conscious lifting of images and styles from the past and placing them in contemporary contexts does not rob them of significance or historic weight. On the contrary, the allusions now comment on both the borrowed styles and the present historical moment. In Simon Dentith's terms, such texts (or buildings) work in two registers at once. Janusfaced, they create a multi-directional dialogue among creator, borrowed materials, and the present.

*O Brother*'s dialogue with Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels* has much to teach us here. The Coens borrow a whole host of elements from the film that gave *O Brother* its title, among them the "man of constant sorrow" from the Soggy Bottom Boys' hit song. Ulysses Everett McGill owes a great deal to Sturges's film director Sullivan, who sets out in hobo clothes "to find trouble." He aims to learn about poverty the hard way in order to make his next film "a commentary on modern conditions. Stark realism. The problems that confront the average man." Planning to create "a true canvas of the suffering of humanity," he hopes to thus "realize the potentiality of film as the sociological and artistic medium that it is." He soon finds trouble, all right, ending up on a Southern chain gang that at one point shuffles into an African-American church to watch cartoons with the assembled congregants. The prisoners shuffle down the aisle, leg chains clanking, as the worshippers raise their voices, singing "let my people go." Watching *Sullivan's Travels*, one can almost hear the Coens licking their chops over such an odd concatenation. In fact, the chain gang, the vicious sheriff, the prisoners' night at the movies, the pointed singing of spirituals, the Depression-era South (replete with Spanish moss hanging from trees outside the church), and the episodic nature of Sullivan's troubles (including a slapstick moment as he hops aboard a moving freight train) all make their way into *O Brother*. More importantly, however, the Coens have entered into a dialogue not simply with a few tropes, plot elements, and the proposed title of Sullivan's project, but with something much more substantive.

Sullivan's *Travels* is not just a comedy but a critique of the film industry's early-1940s turn away from comedy toward social realism.<sup>(n1)</sup> Sullivan's initial commitment to a film of "social significance" is comically undercut at every turn. When he asks his studio head, "How can you talk about musicals at a time like this, with the world committing suicide? With corpses piling up in the street?" the chief argues that Sullivan's previous films have succeeded precisely because they've been light, the product of his privileged background: they don't "stink of messages." Even though his own servant warns him that the subject of poverty is not "interesting"--for "[t]he poor know all about poverty. And only the morbid rich would find the topic glamorous"--Sullivan persists.

Sturges's pointed and comical critique thus punctures the film world's fashionable embrace of poverty, and no later than the moment Sullivan first launches his travels. He sets off down the road, dressed in rags, his possessions in a bandana tied to a stick. Crawling along at the speed of his footsteps, the studio's publicity bus follows, a studio functionary dictating Sullivan's story to his secretary: "into the valley of the shadow of adversity ... alone and unattended, prey to passing prowlers, poverty and policemen ... with only ten cents in his pocket ..." Responding to this last bit, another aide-de-camp quips, "I wish I had what was in his bank account." The absurdity of image-makers packaging Sullivan's wanderings for studio publicity is matched only by the absurdity of the wealthy Sullivan assuming he could suffer real poverty. Only when he's hit on the head and forgets who he is can he descend into authentically dire straits. Assumed dead, his identity mistaken, and imprisoned, Sullivan loses his jail privileges--as well as all others, for that matter--and effectively disappears from the world of movie-making. Now, though, he can finally experience true suffering. Still, as the blind prophet of *O Brother* might intone, the treasure he seeks is not the only one he finds. A bounty even richer than the knowledge of true poverty reveals itself as he watches cartoons in the church. Hearing the convicts and the poor congregation laughing at the images on screen, Sullivan realizes that laughter "is all they have"--a revelation that he takes back to Hollywood, where he abandons his plans for making *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and rededicates himself to comedies.

Sturges's defense of comedies that don't "stink with messages" seems to stem from two convictions: first, that the 1940s film industry's turn toward social realism is beyond disingenuous. It is, rather, a move by which privilege, money, and the "morbid rich" can further exploit the poor.<sup>(n2)</sup> Second, the film argues--even celebrates the fact--that comedy has authentic cultural value. Sturges even dedicates the film to "the memory of those who made us laugh: the motley mountebanks, the clowns, the buffoons, in all times and in all nations, whose efforts have lightened our burden a little." The Coen brothers have made a film that allows them to claim this dedication for themselves. They have absorbed Sturges's dismissal of films with "messages," as well as his celebration of comedy, his recognition that the film industry not only traffics in images of suffering, but does so for profit alone.

So while fragments of *Sullivan's Travels*, in the best postmodern fashion, have been ripped from their original context, they have not been emptied of their significance. *O Brother* pays homage both to Sturges and to Sullivan's revelation about entertainment, ultimately even carrying on Sturges's work. For *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* may be the title of Sullivan's proposed film, but the Coens' *O Brother* is hardly the "message" film Sullivan intended to make. They have made a film about "trouble" in the Depression-era South, but they have done so in

the spirit that Sturges celebrates, that in which comedy, even musical comedy, has value. Rob Content, Tim Kreider, and Boyd White even argue in *Film Quarterly* that its comedy disguises a serious social purpose, articulated in the "disquieting moments of real cruelty," the "bleached colors" of the sepia-toned print, and the "knowing selection of mournful 'ol-timey' songs about joblessness, hunger, prison, and death" (41).<sup>(n3)</sup> As James Mottram writes, *O Brother* is "a bright, breezy musical comedy ... underpinned by a simmering politically and socially conscious landscape" (157). Comedy is thus the sweet coating that helps the bitter pill go down, deflecting the current market's suspicion of openly didactic filmmaking.

Just as the Coens have adopted Sturges's embrace of comedy, they have also transposed into their own personal key his quarrel with the image industry. By playfully manipulating images from films ranging from *The Wizard of Oz* to *I Am a Fugitive from the Chain Gang* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1932), they underscore the film's awareness of itself as image, as film. *O Brother* makes no pretense of realism here; instead, it celebrates film as pure play. At the same time, it expresses a good deal of anxiety about the commercial packaging of culture. Consider the political and commercial exploitation of the Soggy Bottom Boys. (A boy band created only to make money--who could have thought the music industry so cynical?) Buoyed and protected by their commercial success, they become political instruments in Pappy O'Daniel's reelection campaign. The film itself, though, presents genuine Southern folk music entirely without irony, as though insisting on the value of authentic culture beyond its commercial worth. In building a protective showcase for music as something more than mere consumable, then, *O Brother* both subverts a Jamesonian view of postmodern culture and resists the commercial cooptation of art. The music's authenticity and rootedness in Southern culture are uncompromised despite their incorporation in a commercially successful film.

The second theoretical alternative to Jameson is, of course, Mikhail Bakhtin, for whom such assemblages as *O Brother* contain the dialogical energies of the carnivalesque. According to Bakhtin, there may no longer be a discourse with which to launch a leftist critique; happily, though, no univocal voice of cultural authority and identity can remain unchallenged by a host of, ironically commenting other voices.

Bakhtin defines true parody as a mode in which "all parties to the exchange [laugh] in all directions" rather than in just one, "at people and at things" (Morson and Emerson 434). Such parody sounds a lot like Menippean satire, and if we want to affix a meaningful generic label to *O Brother*--one without all the critics' hyphens--we can call it that. Dentith defines this satiric mode as one of "self-parodying serio-comic writing" that mixes poetry and prose, and, like the *Satyricon*, might provide "a learned parody of learning, or indeed a philosophical parody of philosophy, by means of a comic self-parodying narrator" (47). The Menippean satire, above all, keeps a reader (or viewer) off-balance as it moves among a number of registers, mixing genres and undercutting seriousness with comedy, comedy with seriousness. Dentith adds that "Menippean satire does not point to any consistent philosophical attitude, except perhaps to a common sense which distrusts any high-falutin' or long-winded ways of claiming to understand or make sense of the world" (49). It creates that off-balance feeling we hear as reviewers try to pin down the "essence" of *O Brother*. Like Proteus, though, the film eludes capture, shape-

shifting and laughing at the effort, at itself, and at us. And as that laughter flies in all directions--which, of course, is what makes its train seem to lack an ideological engine--the Menippean label fits *O Brother* like a key fits its lock.

Still, as Bakhtin explains, a work's characterization as a Menippean satire doesn't mean that there's nothing serious afoot. Citing the sonnets that open *Don Quixote*, Bakhtin offers us a way to think of the fragments and allusions that float through *O Brother*. They are not really sonnets, he argues, but images of sonnets, and, like all such images of language, are "images of various world views [inseparable] from the living beings who are their agents" (49,51). The myriad image-fragments and allusions in the Coens' film, then, are images, but they are not only images: they are instead images of various worldviews and signs of the living beings who created them. There is, for Bakhtin, moreover, a center in all this, the still point at which the artist stands. In the novel--the concrete means by which Bakhtin exemplifies heteroglossia--"there is no unitary language or style," but "at the same time there does exist a center of language (a verbal-ideological center)... The author ... cannot be found at any one of the novel's language levels: he is to be found at the center of organization where all levels intersect" (48-49). In the case of *O Brother*, we may not be able to identify the Coens as writers with any particular point of view, but we can identify them as orchestrating agents who stand at the point where all images intersect. This unifying center, however, imposes no unifying order. In fact, the energy of such heteroglossia, like that of Menippean satire in particular, is centrifugal, according to Bakhtin. It disrupts order "either purposefully or for no particular reason" (Morson and Emerson 30). Like the lords of misrule, the Coens create mayhem for its own sake. Yet the misrule of Carnival also serves a subversive purpose, especially when the disruption of order is purpose enough. Even in an admittedly postmodern world that traffics in culture, that disruption underscores the power and autonomy of the artist.

*O Brother* is not the first Coen film to work at the knot between creativity and commercialism. In *Barton Fink*, the title character's desire to create a theater of "the common man," about "simple folk dreaming of something higher," turns into nothing but sweat, blood, and fiery apocalypse once he finds himself pressured to write a formulaic wrestling picture with that marketable and entirely reproducible "Barton Fink feeling." Fink's obsession with his own packaged genre, stories about the "average working stiff," deafens him to the stories of Charlie Meadows, the real working stiff next door--and, in the end, with disastrous results. While Barton Fink is celebrated as a writer--"Kiss this man's feet," his studio head commands one of his flunkies, "This man creates for a living"--he is also forcefully reminded that "the contents of your head are the property of Capitol Pictures." Barton Fink is therefore informed by the knowledge of both what filmmaking threatens to become and how it compromises creativity. So, how to avoid the packaging, labeling, and marketing that oversimplify and often compromise authentic artistic aims? In Bakhtinian terms, this situation is not such a problem, for the dialogical interplay of so many voices keeps any one of them from dominating. At the center of the carnival the filmmakers stand, protecting their autonomy and creative power through play.

The subversive potential of the carnivalesque becomes even clearer in examining *O Brother's* playful interaction

with Homer's *Odyssey*. While many borrowings seem mere fodder for jokes, more serious implications emerge in the film's comic distance from its original. Few critics have dwelt long on connections between the two except to point out the more obvious borrowings, among them the Sirens, the Cyclops, the hero's journey toward home and his coveted wife Penelope.<sup>( n4)</sup> Yet the Coens have also captured the subtleties of Homer's protagonist: his gift of gab, his inventive stratagems, his vanity. These characteristics provide a host of jokes throughout the film, as when Everett's empty can of Dapper Dan leads the bloodhounds to the fugitives, or his wily plans more often than not go awry. The filmmakers also seem to delight in carrying Homer's plot lines to absurd extremes, as in the two Penelopes' final demands of their husbands. Homer has his Penelope test her returned husband's identity through the suggestion that he move their bed, which only he would know is unmovable, having built it around a living tree. Only when the hero passes the test can he fully come home, see his throne and marriage restored. The Coen brothers turn a similar exercise of spousal caution into an abuse of power. Penny Wharvey refuses to reclaim her errant husband until he has retrieved her wedding ring from the bottom of the lake. This paterfamilias, the Coens joke, may never be able to return home.

The Coens also crack wise with Homer's theology. Homer's hero struggles throughout his journey, divided between an insistent reliance on his own powers and reliance on the gods. The Coens turn this important thematic element into a running joke, pitting Everett's faith in his "powers of abstract thought" and in the local electric company against the seeming powers of the divine. In both works, the hero nearly drowns because of his own stubbornness: in Homer's epic, Odysseus finally prays for help and is brought to the shores of Ithaca through divine intervention, whereas in the Coen brothers' film, the deluge *ex machina*, as if in answer to his prayer just seconds before, both saves Everett from being hanged and threatens his very life. Is it divine intervention or the lucky timing of the electric company's flooding the valley? Does the cow on the floating roof prove the power of divination just as the electric company asserts its scientific will? *O Brother* makes Homer's theological positions the fodder for humor, and the host of jokes made from other parallels might well provide plenty of support for claims that the Coens are out just for a lark. Their joking disavowals of seriousness aside, though, the filmmakers have mined Homer's epic for more than a few plot lines and jokes. But what more, and to what end? Ebert comes close to a revelation when he suggests that the Coens' version of epic wandering has "absorbed" *The Odyssey's* "spirit" but exhausted his spirit by being, "like its inspiration . . . one darn thing after another." By looking past the superficial resemblances between the works and looking into their radical differences, though, we can see the film as more than a picaresque and self-bemused pastiche of cultural referents. If we can see *O Brother* as carnivalesque or Menippean, parodic without a target, then what does it subvert? Is there really, in the end, anything serious afoot?

The hero, for one, is afoot, abroad in the world and headed toward home--and in the same trajectory of that epic wandering, the subversiveness of *O Brother* reaches its full power. With *The Odyssey*, *O Brother* shares the epic topos of travel whose complex itinerary, no matter its turns and delays, is ever homeward. As the place that anchors both the beginning and end of travel, "home" in *The Odyssey* represents a complex site where political and sexual desires coincide. Desire, in fact, is the root of epic travel, and nostoi, or stories of homecoming, give

us our own word nostalgia, a desire for the past as a home of utopian possibility. In the ancient epic, neither the hero's sexual nor political desire can be wholly satisfied without the other, for both depend on the paterfamilias reclaiming his rightful place. In Homer's version, both the faithful Penelope and the restless Ithaca wait, both perched on the abyss of marital and political chaos as long as the hero wanders. As a culturally celebrated text, Homer's *Odyssey* functions, then, as a map of the ideal polity: Ithaca is contrasted throughout the work with not-Ithacas, and even Calypso's idyllic island paradise, which promises not only sexual pleasure but immortality, falls short of the homeland's nostalgic allure. The Cyclops' island, where inhabitants live in isolation, tend no fields, honor no government, and eat their neighbors, highlights by its barbarism everything good about Ithaca. Homer's epic thus underscores the interdependence of political viability, patriarchy, and a coherent--and monological--cultural identity. There is, in short, no place like home, its essence incomplete without Odysseus, warrior king and paterfamilias.

Based on this reading of Homer, one could make a serious case that *O Brother* imitates more than just a few scenes, the traits of its protagonist, and a general plot line. It sets up a dialogue with the epic intentions and political ideals of Homer's text, and, by extension, with mainstream Western culture as a whole. Like his namesake, Ulysses Everett McGill bursts the bonds of incarceration, driven by a need to both thwart the impending nuptials of Penny Wharvey and to be restored as the paterfamilias. His trajectory of desire moves through the American South, its various geographies marked by set-pieces of native folk music and popular images of the region: hound dogs, hoedowns, Klansmen, populism, river baptism, Bible salesmen, backwoods cabins, swimming holes, farms, and barns. As in Homer's text, there are shady politics and a whole host of places nobody would want to stay for long. They aren't home. Like Homer's epic, then, *O Brother* articulates a cultural identity within the spaces marked by desire; the "meaning" of the South is mapped out by that impetus toward home.

At the same time, though, the film resists the kind of meaning-making that Homer takes for granted. By playing with the celluloid remnants of films past, this assemblage of allusions to past styles and genres also comments on the very attempt to offer a packaged, monological account of regional culture. Returning to the cultural significance of Homer's epic and running it through the sieve of American image-making, the film's parodic spirit openly mocks the neat conflation of nation-making, patriarchy, and cultural coherence that is the essence of Homer's poem. Treasure seekers, beware: there is no such essence here. (If you want that, go listen to George W. Bush invoke "all that America stands for" as he sells out the environment or manages the "war" on terrorism. Better yet, go watch *The Birth of a Nation* [D.W. Griffith, 1915].) Such a pointed argument may well have been absent from the film's design, but it is certainly one of its effects. This is no small political point. In its evocation of the South, *O Brother* is as far from Homer as one can get. "There's no place like home," inflected just a little differently, says that there is no place like home. The home that nostalgia longs for doesn't exist. In fact, it never did.

Bakhtin reminds us that the satyr plays that followed and parodied Greek tragedy were "parodic-travesty

counter-presentations of lofty national myths" (54). Even Homer's hero had his "comic Odysseus" counterpart, his satyr play a parodic and "indispensable" conclusion to the tragic trilogy. *O Brother's* address to Homer functions in much the same way. Nothing makes the film's subversion of epic political rhetoric--the monologic rhetoric of American mythmaking--more apparent than the scene of the Ku Klux Klan rally. Composed variously of Busby Berkeley, *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Birth of a Nation*, and *Triumph of the Will* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1935), the film so absurdly parades before us the dark heart of the American South that it manages to simultaneously preserve a sense of both horror and hilarity. As Ebert muses somewhat disconcertedly, the Coens manage to make it "look ominous and ridiculous at the same time." But exactly: juxtaposing a lynching with elaborately choreographed klansmen singing "Oh-wee-Oh" ridicules the rhetoric of nationalist purity and coherence without minimizing its dangers. The two iconic weapons hurled at the violent Cyclops are the Confederate battle flag and the burning cross. He saves himself from being blinded by the first--a joke on us if we expect Homer's story to play out here--but the burning cross, we assume, does him in. (Incidentally, in Joyce's *Ulysses*, the Cyclops is also a character whose relentless, monologic, and violent nationalist politics constitutes the biggest threat to Leopold Bloom's incident-filled day. Joyce makes metaphorical hay with the Cyclops's one eye, emphasizing as he does throughout the novel the importance of parallax, the view of an object from two different positions. Nothing threatens this democratic embrace of multiple viewpoints more than a single eye, a single voice.) The monological control of culture--whether by capitalism or political hegemony--is dangerous. *O Brother* thus unmasks nostalgia for the Old South as a violent longing for an ideal past that never was, for a polity whose racial and political strife undermines the unattainable coherence for which epic desire longs. In fact, the Klan scene in *O Brother* underscores the film's mockery of the cultural monologism on which such virulent patriotism depends, and which the contemporary packaging of America attempts to enforce. Content, Kreider, and White make a related argument about the film's social conscience, its laying bare the shared destiny of the poor. In its depiction of race, particularly in the Klan scene--during which the convicts rescue Tommy and, like him, are threatened with lynching--the film promotes "a solidarity of the oppressed, resistance to abusive power, and the embrace of universal brotherhood that transcends race" (41).( n5)

Rather than make these points explicitly, *O Brother* dramatizes them in the slippery language of slapstick and indirection, through heteroglossia and Menippean energies, through the very postmodern allusiveness that makes critics squirm. Homer, too, made his epic out of the bits and pieces of storytelling gathered through generations of mythmaking and song. But the epic bard passed them on as they had been received, without comment and without the dialogism of different voices. For Homer's audience, the poem functions entirely without irony; it conveys theology, cultural history, politics, identity, and values, all through legend and song. For all its component parts, Homer's poem is monologic. The Coen brothers, on the contrary, have assembled a cultural hoard of popular images, stories, and songs of the American South and made of them a Menippean satire, setting languages and worldviews into heteroglossic dialogue. What this bit of filmic fun preserves is a reverence for American authenticity; what it subverts is the easy packaging, marketing, and flattening out of authenticity that Jameson fears is postmodernism's ugly end.

But, then again, what have the Coen brothers been up to all these years if not revering American cinematic history and American culture in all their quirky multiplicity? Each film genre they invoke and reinfect is an homage not to a commercial industry but to artists and their art. *O Brother* celebrates that art's comic lineage and asserts the artist's power to disrupt and to create against the grain of easy commercial packaging at the same time that it self-consciously celebrates film as the art of the image, an indelible part of the American landscape. For the Coen brothers, that landscape is various and weird, hardly the sleek, shiny, version that the mainstream culture industry tries to sell. Whether we're wandering through a catalogue of old film bits in the 1930s South of *O Brother*, suffering *The Big Lebowski's* 1960s hangover amid George H. W. Bush's early '90s or listening to the peculiar accents of *Fargo* amidst the frozen wastes, the Coen brothers remind us that there are many Americas, many cultures worth honoring and preserving in all their differences, in their varied contributions to the cultural mix--or amalgamation, assemblage, or medley--that we call home.

### Footnotes

(n1) See Pauline Kael's account of this turn toward Stalinism (before Stalin's actual policies became known) and thus toward terrible comedy. She writes: "By the end of the thirties, the jokes had soured. The comedies of the forties were heavy and pushy, straining for humor, and the comic impulse was misplaced or lost.... The comic spirit of the thirties had been happily self-critical about America, the happiness born of the knowledge that in no other country were movies so free to be self-critical. [But in the forties, a kind of self-hatred began to show] in the phony, excessive, duplicit use of patriotism by the rich, guilty liberals of Hollywood in the war years" (40). World War II gave way to sentimental patriotism as writers became "political in the worst way.... They became naively, hysterically pro-Soviet" (41-42). The one exception, in Kael's view, is Sturges, who continued to make comedies in the self-critical style of the thirties.

(n2) James Mottram makes a similar point in *The Coen Brothers: The Life of the Mind* (157).

(n3) Kent Jones, writing in *Film Comment*, also addresses *O Brother's* color scheme, pointing out that the result "is a lean, hungry image, drained of the hazy lyricism that plagues most depression-era films" (49). Though Jones doesn't extrapolate a moral point to the film, the "drained" landscape of the South clearly undercuts a reading of the film as purely comedic and shallow.

(n4) Perhaps the most extensive tracking of such parallels appears in Mottram (159-61).

(n5) Sean Chadwell, in the *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, views *O Brother's* music in similar terms, arguing that the Coens visually counter the elision of African-American musical forms from the cultural story of "old-timey" music--by making obvious Tommy's central role in the *Soggy-Bottom Boys'* success (6-7).

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Everett, Pete and Delmar take it on the lam.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Preston Sturges' Sullivan looking for the troubles of the common man.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Big Dan Teague (John Goodman), the Coens' violent, one-eyed ideologue.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Vernon T. Waldrip (Ray McKinnon) hears the Soggy Bottom Boys perform.

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