Treasures from the Yale Film Archive

The Big Lebowski

Friday, September 15, 7 p.m.
Humanities Quadrangle Lecture Hall

Directed by Joel Coen
Screenplay by Ethan Coen and Joel Coen
Cinematography by Roger Deakins
Produced by Polygram Filmed Entertainment (1998), 117 mins.
Starring Jeff Bridges, John Goodman, Steve Buscemi, Julianne Moore,
John Turturro, David Huddleston, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Tara Reid,
Sam Elliott, Ben Gazzara, Peter Stormare, Aimee Mann, and Flea
When Joel and Ethan Coen began shooting their seventh feature film, *The Big Lebowski*, in early 1997, their last film, *Fargo*, was still in theaters and racking up award nominations, having been released the previous March. The Minnesota-born filmmaking team had made their name with off-beat, stylistic, occasionally violent and reliably (if darkly) funny films including *Raising Arizona, Miller’s Crossing, Barton Fink*, and *The Hudsucker Proxy*. Their most recent film, darker and more violent than any of their previous films, had somehow become their most commercially and critically successful: the film garnered seven Academy Award nominations, eventually winning the brothers their first Academy Award for original screenplay, and Frances McDormand the first of her three (and counting) Best Actress awards for her portrayal of Chief of Police Marge Gunderson.

The script for *The Big Lebowski* was begun around the time the brothers made *Barton Fink* (released in 1991), but since the role of Walter Sobchak had been written specifically with John Goodman in mind, the Coens proceeded to shoot *Fargo* instead when Goodman’s shooting schedule for *Rasanne* wouldn’t allow him to take the role. The character of Sobchak was based on the filmmaker John Milius (director of *Big Wednesday* and *Conan the Barbarian*, co-screenwriter of *Apocalypse Now*), while Jeff “The Dude” Lebowski (Jeff Bridges) took inspiration from the Coens’ friend Jeff Dowd, a member of the Seattle Seven antiwar activist group and film producer. Aspects of their friend Pete Exline, disgruntled Vietnam veteran and owner of a “rug that really tied the room together,” were blended into both Walter and the Dude.

In many ways a tribute to the hard-boiled detective story, *The Big Lebowski* completes an unofficial trilogy of homages for the Coens, beginning with *Blood Simple’s* mix of adultery and murder à la James M. Cain, followed by *Miller’s Crossing’s* Dashiell Hammett-esque world of self-loathing heroes. *The Big Lebowski* offers a reclusive tycoon in a wheelchair, a pair of dangerous women associated with him, and a wealthy playboy, all of which directly echo Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*. While not strictly a detective story (the seed of the screenplay began when the Coens heard a story about a friend of Exline’s whose car was taken for a joyride by a young thief who left his homework—“in a baggie”—in the car), the film uses Chandler’s novel as a kind of template, and, picking up where Robert Altman’s Chandler adaption *The Long Goodbye* left off 25 years before, situates the characters in Gulf War-era Los Angeles, where Chandler’s lineup of hard-boiled detectives and blackmailing book dealers is updated to include a pothead doofus, an avant-garde artist, and a band of nihilists.

At the time of its release in March, 1998, film critics weren’t crazy about *The Big Lebowski*. Gene Siskel wasn’t alone when he found the film something of a letdown after *Fargo*: in conversation with Roger Ebert (who liked the film) on an episode of *At the Movies*, Siskel introduces the film as a “would-be comedy” and says, “I just think the humor is uninspired... *Kingpin* was a much funnier film set in the world of bowling. Jeff Bridges’ character wasn’t worth my time. There’s no heart to him like, say, the Frances McDormand character in the Coen brothers’ *Fargo*. *The Big Lebowski*, a big disappointment.” Time has been kinder to the film, now acknowledged as a true cult classic, the first of the Internet era and perhaps the last mainstream Hollywood film to achieve this status.

In 2002, the first Lebowski Fest was organized in Louisville, Kentucky, with 150 fans gathering to celebrate the film with costume contests, bowling, and, of course, White Russians. By the tenth iteration of the homegrown fan festival in 2011, Jeff Bridges, John Goodman, Julianne Moore, Steve Buscemi, and John Turturro reunited on stage in New York City to discuss the film and its enduring legacy in front of a sold out crowd of more than 2000 Achievers.