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HON-H226 The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen

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Formal Essay 1

As we know, there are two levels in which we can view a Coen brothers' film: conventional and sophisticated. The first level, conventional, appeals to the general or mass audience playing into the surface level mentality of a good story well told. This conventional approach appeals to general society that is looking to watch films without having to dig deeper into the existential undertone of what aspects of society are being challenged through this piece of art. The second level, sophisticated, appeals to the “cult” audience playing into the knowledgeable and alluding to genre conventions, history, and style. This sophisticated approach appeals to the niche audience that understands the Coens’ signature and is aware of the underlying issues that their films are looking to challenge. This audience is the one that uses a genre approach to the study of film, and if not a study of film, enters into an implicit contract with the filmmaker to try and gain a deeper understanding of what the film is pointing to.

According to the "Approaching Film Genre" chapter of *Film Genre: From Iconography to Ideology* by Barry Keith Grant, the benefits of using a genre approach to the study of film and to the understanding that must precede judgement are taking a deeper dive into being aware of the similarities and signatures of certain genre pieces and how directors can alter them in their own original ways. In “Approaching Film Genre”, Grant explains “Genre movies allow for an economy of expression through conventions and iconography,” and how understanding that a film created within a specific genre will essentially fall into the stereotypical conventions of said

genre and its iconography – or symbolic elements – will be present (8). However, as Grant quotes John Cawelti, “...all art be thought of as existing on a continuum between invention and convention,” I believe it is insinuating that there is a large range of interpretation within a film even when it is created as part of a specific genre (6). Along with this, being able to fully understand what a genre film consists of helps us, as a society or sophisticated viewers, to not rashly judge the film as a whole. It helps us understand the thematic elements of a genre piece, such as film noir, which then precedes our judgement of the artwork.

Taking film noir as an example, its conventions include “low-key lighting and narrative flashbacks,” character(s) enticed into committing a criminal act often due to a potential romantic interest, power dynamics, and an ultimate sort of demise (Grant 11). I saw all these conventional elements come into play while watching *Blood Simple*, as there is constant low-lit lighting, Marty and Ray being lured into committing murderous acts due to the common romantic interest of Abby trapping the three of them into a love triangle, Visser employing a sort of power dynamic over Marty and Marty holding a power dynamic over Ray, and ultimately all four main characters (Marty, Ray, Abby, and Visser) falling to different levels of doom. Along with this, having a love triangle being the cause of criminal acts is not a new concept, but the way in which the Coen brothers directed and created *Blood Simple* is what makes the film original.

Further, “Like conventions, iconography provides genres with a short-hand for conveying information and meaning succinctly,” such as gloomy weather which plays into the feeling of demise, windows, and neon lights which all represent the darkness that lies within the film’s plot and characters (Grant 12, 24). *Blood Simple* incorporates film noir iconographies such as rainwater in the opening scene when Abby and Ray are driving in a car at night as I, a viewer, am being informed that these characters are having an affair. Further, *Blood Simple* incorporates

film noir iconographies such as windows in the scene where Abby escapes from Visser into the neighboring apartment through climbing out of her bathroom window, and that window plays an important role throughout that entire scene as Abby stabs Visser's hand as he tries to grab her by reaching over. The iconography of neon lights is also used throughout *Blood Simple* in Marty's bar and when Marty and Visser are solidifying a deal when Visser says that he's killed both Abby and Ray. The purple and orange neon lights shine to the side of Visser's face, contrasting with the lack of light and overall darkness within the room and film as a whole, painting Visser's face in a way which looks twisted and evil – an unsettling film still when the scene is paused.

Although there are various conventional and iconographic elements that define a film genre, particularly film noir, as I have discussed above, the Coen brothers alter these features to create original works of art. In terms of the Coens putting their twist on their film noir films, such as *Blood Simple*, it's evident that they have their own stylistic and idiosyncratic techniques to make a film noir uniquely depictable as a true Coen film. For example, films are typically presented from one main character's perspective, while the other characters remain secondary. However, *Blood Simple* was presented from four different perspectives, Marty, Ray, Visser, and Abby. There were multiple instances within the film when it switched from Marty's film to Ray's film to Visser's film then to Abby's film. Along with this, the Coens did a beautiful job engaging the viewer as part of the story, whether that be a conventional or sophisticated one. The only person who knew the back stories and had a holistic understanding of the plot was the viewer, or me, unlike the characters within the story.

However, the only character who ended the film, truly understanding the plot was Visser. This was also quite unsettling to me due to the fact that in a group of four morally estranged characters, essentially the “outsider” of the four characters was the one who died knowing

exactly how everything played out. To me, this was disturbing because Visser was an outside character who was not driven or directly affected by the marital issues within the love triangle including Marty, Ray, and Abby. Visser was an agent of chaos that was solely driven by greed and power and had no emotional investment into the private romantic lives of the three characters directly involved. He entered the storyline as, essentially, just a contractor who turned out to be a dark, twisted, and evil person. Not that I believe either of the characters were on a moral high ground, but Marty, Ray, and Abby were all involved in committing criminal acts due to their romantic and emotional investment and history. Visser, on the other hand, was involved in committing criminal acts due to his sole driver of greed. He had no emotional investment or historical understanding of who these people were, all he wanted was money and he was willing to go so far as to murder everyone in his way to get the money he wanted. Visser's character bothered and disgusted me due to this and left me feeling uncomfortable with knowing the fact that only he truly understood what happened, even though he died.

As we discussed in class and above, the Coen brothers thoroughly enjoy involving secondary characters as agents of chaos – such as Visser in *Blood Simple* and *the brothers who escaped prison and the biker in Raising Arizona* – in order to throw the characters' dynamics off balance. Along with this, what makes a Coen film unique is how the brothers incorporate their signatures in each of their films such as unpredictable endings, crime over law, characters taking authority and justice into their own hands, police irrelevance, power relations (such as the man behind the desk) and how as viewers we don't identify with the powerful, dark humor, one female role surrounded by hysterical men, use of silence or lack of dialogue, and violence in different forms. I believe the Coens are self-aware postmodernist filmmakers, as talked about in R. Barton Palmer's chapter 2 titled "The Coen Brothers: Postmodern Filmmakers", through their

critique of American society while tapping into popular culture. The Coens use their unique individuality to create postmodern art – which is often critiqued to be unsubstantial – which appeals to both the conventional and sophisticated viewer. The Coens uniquely create their genre films as those that can be enjoyed as good stories well told, while also possessing the ability to be analyzed and understood as films critiquing society and its power dynamics, police irrelevance, and toxic masculinity.

For example, I found their signature and critique of power relations very evident in *Blood Simple* and *Miller's Crossing*. In *Blood Simple*, both Visser and Marty are essentially the men behind the desk, holding their own power over each other which is beautifully visualized in the scene where Visser tells Marty that he has killed both Abby and Ray and Marty is handing Visser the money. Both are men behind their ends of the desk, holding a power over the other – Visser killing two people for Marty and Marty having money that Visser wants. What I found interesting in this dynamic was the use of music that intensified and created a feeling of suspense, ultimately leading to Visser shooting Marty, which I found unpredictable. In *Miller's Crossing*, the power dynamics are shown a bit differently as Tom is never the man behind the desk, Leo and Caspar are, but Tom is always the man being listened to as if his word holds more weight than the word of the man actually sitting behind the desk.

Tying into this, the Coens showcase their idea of police irrelevance through none of their characters getting into serious trouble with the law. The power dynamics come into play as those characters having the most weight and power within the films – more so than law enforcement could ever have. Further, the Coen brothers often consciously play into the conventions and iconographies of film noir, acknowledging that they are, in fact, creating a genre piece. For an iconographic example, the four fish that are on the table when Visser and Marty are having a

discussion in *Blood Simple* can very well be a representation of the four main characters of the story. The four dead fish symbolizing the four characters that are destined to doom in their own ways, which as we know, is a signature of film noir.

Along with this, I found the Coens' signature of having a singular independent female role very evident in *Blood Simple*, *Raising Arizona*, and *Miller's Crossing*. As we discussed in class, the Coen brothers enjoy employing their signature of an independent female being surrounded by hysterical men to critique toxic masculinity – and I may be biased, but this is my favorite of the Coens' signatures. In *Blood Simple*, Abby is surrounded by Marty, Ray, and Visser as three ridiculous men going to extreme lengths, such as murder, to get what they want. In *Raising Arizona*, Ed is surrounded by Hi, the biker, and the brothers who escaped prison as men who are essentially in a competition through their masculinity as to who can steal one of the quintuplets for good. Lastly, in *Miller's Crossing*, Verna is surrounded by Tom, Leo, Bernie, and Caspar as they all fight to be the ultimate man behind the desk in power. Overall, the main character dynamic was how there was only one woman as a main character in each of their movies while the surrounding men fought to death for an underlying masculinity issue.

Further, the Coens play into the genre films and how some critics express that all films are the same. As I mentioned earlier, I believe the Coen brothers to be very self-aware filmmakers, so much so that they consciously play into the concept that they know they are not making a brand-new film and they know that it has been done before. For example, in *Blood Simple*, the Coens incorporated its signature musical score, "It's the Same Old Song (But with a Different Meaning)" as a nod to consumers to express the mentality that the brothers know *Blood Simple* is a stereotypical story, just altered and portrayed in a different way. The Coen brothers

use their own stylistic conventions and techniques to enhance their plots and characters within each of their films while simultaneously abiding by the genre they are creating their film in.

The concept of genre, as discussed in our class sessions and readings, help us understand the style, characters, plots, and themes of Coen films due to the idea of all art existing on a continuum of invention and convention. We can study genre concepts and understand, for example, what a movie in film noir includes in terms of the plotline and its stylistic elements through production. However, it helps us understand and appreciate the individuality that comes with a genre work and what makes it different from all other films within that specific genre. It helps us critically evaluate how beautifully each film has taken its own route in portraying a certain genre instead of falling into the same tropes as all other films in its genre. Taking from studying genre, I have grown into a viewer that can – or at least try to – be a part of the sophisticated, cult audience when it comes to a film created by Joel and Ethan Coen.