

# The Coenesque Zones: Alternative American Settings Beyond the Constraints of Everyday Logic in the Cinematic Works of Joel and Ethan Coen

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**Abstract** On the surface, all films of Joel and Ethan Coen unfold in strictly defined local American settings. Closer scrutiny reveals that these environments, despite numerous features concurrent with their real-world counterparts, are actually nonexistent and non-illusionist, alternative realms which parallel what Brian McHale refers to as “zones” in postmodernist literary fiction. Like many postmodernist and metafictional writers, the Coens delineate the boundaries of their own, meticulously constructed, parallel territories and create heterotopian spaces of fictional worlds by combining conflicting chronological frameworks, blending noncontiguous aspects of unrelated realities as well as fusing history and fiction. By crossing the ontological borders and constraints of time and geography, the directors destabilize and deconstruct common-sense contextual constructions forcing the viewer to review their understanding of what constitutes objective reality. I am analyzing how the Coens generate their universes by making different historic frameworks overlap, using anachronisms and juxtaposing incongruous aesthetics. I am also showing how seemingly average Middle American settings paradoxically function as “zones” both in literature and the cinematic works of the Coen brothers. As a consequence of the process of defamiliarization they undergo, America appears to be a heterogeneous amalgam of discontinuous solipsisms. The Coens’ Arizona or Texas are mental rather than geographical entities, ultra-stylized, closed, synthetic film-spaces “two steps to the left of reality”, projections of cultural myths, stereotypes and beliefs that complement the films’ stories.

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## 1 Introduction

As Patricia Waugh (1985) observes, metafictional prose foregrounds the role literary conventions play in the simultaneous act of describing and creating objects in fiction and, therefore, it predominantly projects universes which are potentially possible but markedly different from the world as we know it. The ‘truth’ status of both literary fiction and what is believed to be ‘reality’ is examined and reviewed. According to Waugh (1985, p. 90) metafiction tends to “explore the notion of ‘alternative worlds’ by accepting and flaunting the creation/description paradox, and thus expose how the construction of contexts is also the construction of different universes of discourse.” Commonsense contextual constructions of the everyday world are destabilized, the awareness of possible alternatives to this reality is increased and the reader is effectively prevented from settling into any given context.

Brian McHale (1987) draws our attention to a typically postmodernist predilection for building within a literary work a heterotopian space of a fictional world. McHale (1987, p. 45) calls it a “zone” and defines it as a setting whose space is “less constructed than *deconstructed* by the text, or rather constructed and deconstructed at the same time.” In order to build a zone a number of strategies are employed: noncontiguous, unrelated realms are juxtaposed; an alien space might be introduced within a familiar space; two familiar worlds may paradoxically overlap creating a new, highly disorienting third reality; places are also linked with unsanctioned attributes which undermine conventional wisdom and automatic associations.

The settings in the cinematic works of Joel and Ethan Coen, frequently labeled as postmodernist filmmakers, often bear a striking similarity to such literary heterotopias, including Thomas Pynchon’s zone in *Gravity’s Rainbow* which projects an ontologically unstable, impossible, pluralistic reality where, as McHale (1987, p. 45) points out, “our world and the ‘other world’ mingle with increasing intimacy, hallucinations and fantasies become real, metaphors become literal, the fictional worlds of the mass media—the movies, comic-books—thrust themselves into the midst of historical reality.” According to R. Barton Palmer (2004, p. 50), detractors of the Coens who accuse their artistic output of being merely a series of cynically shallow stylistic exercises, fail to recognize the fact that their “ideas and themes are developed in the context of cinematic re-creation, of the fabrication of derivative ‘sealed universes’ quite distinct from one another.” Searching for a meaningful key to the interpretation of the directors’ productions, which, as Palmer (2004, p. 52) observes, “do not constitute an oeuvre in the neo-romantic sense of *the politique des auteurs*” and show no intention to create any continuity from one picture to the next, one should focus not only on the obvious classic Hollywood models for their films but also acknowledge the fact that the Coens’ influences are primarily literary rather than cinematic. Even though numerous critics, including Eddie Robson (2003) and Robert Ziębiński (2008), notice the impact of

hard-boiled and southern gothic writers while Palmer (2004, p. 52) also highlights some similarities with the neon noir fiction of Elmore Leonard and Raymond Carver, what seems to go unnoticed is the staggering number of parallels between postmodernist prose or metafiction and the Coens' highly intertextual American narratives. One of them is the manner in which the Coens delineate the boundaries of their own, meticulously designed, idiosyncratic territories and create heterotopian spaces of fictional worlds by subverting stereotypical perceptions, combining conflicting chronological frameworks, blending incongruous aesthetics and inconsistent aspects of unrelated realities as well as fusing history and fiction in order to create self-standing alternative visions of what might be at first glance believed to be typical American locations. Analyzing the techniques employed by the directors to construct their filmscapes and being able to see how closely they correspond to relevant literary devices seems crucial in understanding the directors' deconstruction of American culture and the ensuing critique of American values and dreams.

## 2 The Big Lebowski

### 2.1 *A Carefully Constructed Time Perspective*

One of the themes of *The Big Lebowski* is the exploration of the Los Angeles society. What makes this setting particularly interesting to the directors is the fact that it is a place where some cultural and social patterns thrive although they have virtually died out elsewhere. The film is actually set in what Körte (2001, p. 200) refers to as “a peculiar time warp”—on the surface the viewer perceives it as the 1990s thanks to the narrator's introduction, the references to the ongoing Iraqi invasion of Kuwait; at the same time, however, we cannot fail to notice that the story has been placed in a carefully constructed yet highly confusing time perspective where, according to Körte (2001, p. 200), within the framework of the 1990s “the 1970s are struggling under the weight of the 1960s, and (...) the pop culture icons of the recent past are shot through with allusions to the literary noir of the 1940s.”

The main characters of the Dude and Walter are direct throwbacks to the past refusing to leave an era which ended years ago and maintaining an anachronistic approach to the realities that surround them. Their appearance, the choice of clothing, emotionality, behavior, manner of speaking and life priorities are out of tune with the 1990s setting in which they operate. The Dude epitomizes the haze and hedonism of the hippy times by refusing to have an occupation, smoking joints and taking a daily dose of White Russians, listening to Creedence Clearwater Revival. The defining moments of his life, such as being one of the authors of the original Port Huron Statement, the 1962 civil rights manifesto of an American

student activist movement, are seriously dated and clearly meaningless for anyone unfamiliar with the time context he adopts. His friend Walter Sobchack, like the demobbed characters of *Taxi Driver* or *The Deer Hunter*, explicitly manifests his Vietnam war veteran experience and trauma and cannot refrain from making oddly inappropriate and compulsive references to the conflict in all possible situations. In addition, he has an obsession with all things militaristic, he finds it difficult to control his anger and frequently makes use of strategies suitable for a combat soldier but painfully unacceptable in the 1990 s realm of *The Big Lebowski*. When one of the bowling game players does not admit to stepping over the line and insists that he should be awarded eight points, Walter simply takes out a gun and insists on following the rules, making it clear that his frequent bouts of political correctness are just a desperate attempt at keeping in tune with the times and culture where he does not belong.

The film's collection of chronologically displaced figures and themes is significantly more extensive. Sam Elliott as the Stranger, who is at the same time the film's narrator, speaks in heavy old-fashioned laid-back Western accent and, using his own anachronistic frame of reference of an American pioneer evoked in the first scene by the Western-like image of rolling tumbleweed and male voices gently singing Bob Nolan's classic cowboy song *Tumbling Tumbleweeds*, claims that the Dude's adventures are an example of "the way the whole durned human comedy keeps perpetuat[ing] it-self, down through the generations, westward the wagons, across the sands a time." Lebowski's elder daughter Maude is an eccentric, feminist artist whose expressionist vaginal art definitely brings to mind the 1960s Fluxus movement. Her vinyl collection includes a record by a fictional band Autobahn whose cover bears a striking resemblance to Kraftwerk's album *Man Machine* and the name pays homage to the German band's 1974 breakthrough vintage electronica masterpiece. The character of the adult movies producer Jackie Treehorn echoes porn industry moguls from the 1970s like Hugh Hefner while the old Lebowski in his wheelchair recalls General Sternwood in Howard Hawks' cinematic version of Chandler's *Big Sleep*. The private detective shadowing the Dude, who is himself a pastiche hippy version of Philip Marlowe, seems to come straight out of Chandler's novel *The High Window*. Walter claims that the paralyzed man Arthur Digby Sellers whose son might have stolen the Dude's car along with one million dollars was a writer of 156 episodes of the old TV series called *Branded*, which was an actual 1965 western show. Additionally, the man shown bowling in the picture on the Dude's wall is President Richard Nixon, an unlikely image to be displayed by anyone in the 1990s. The film's leading motif of bowling as a culture rather than sport was, as Joel Coen admitted in the interview by Ciment and Niogret (2000b, p. 168), an indication that all the characters are strangely embedded in patterns of bygone times and thus it was "important in reflecting that period at the end of the Fifties and the beginning of the Sixties. That suited the retro side of the movie, slightly anachronistic, which sent us back to a not-so-far-away era, but one that was well and truly gone nevertheless."

## 2.2 *Discontinuity*

A prominent feature of *The Big Lebowski*'s plot is the sense of fragmentation induced in the viewer. Like other locations in the Coens' films its setting projects itself as a heterotopian concentration of conflicting solipsisms and the story relies heavily on juxtaposing incongruous, self-contained episodes evoking a feeling of disorientation and discontinuity. The viewer, similarly to the film's main protagonist, travels through a multitude of worlds in their own right, individual solipsisms inhabited by disunited figures and is thus exposed to a collection of confusingly diverse and apparently unrelated puzzle elements and given a task of putting them together to come up with a definitive answer to the kidnapping mystery the Dude was commissioned to resolve. The efforts are, however, frequently subverted by the directors so as to enhance the overwhelming sense of disconnection and impenetrability reminiscent of plots in novels like Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* as well as classic hard-boiled detective prose often mentioned by Joel and Ethan Coen as their primary source of inspiration. Erin A. Smith (2000, p. 82) states that the plots of hard-boiled stories, such as Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* on which *The Big Lebowski* is indirectly modeled, were excessively complex and convoluted and lacked a coherent narrative trajectory relying on the labyrinthine combination of "loosely linked scenes of action (...) without being particularly concerned with the larger story (...)." As the literature of choice for working-class readers, the fiction tended to reflect their alienation in the increasingly confusing everyday reality, evoked the repetitive, episodic character of their jobs, expressed the sense of speed involved in the modern reconceptualization of time as a commodity and thus, as Smith (2000, p. 83) points out, rejected "the unities of bourgeois cultural organization and logic." According to Smith (2000, p. 11) "these stories are collective fantasies offering representations of the plots, characters and idioms through which readers of this class made sense of their world."

For O'Brien (1997, p. 16) hard-boiled literature, permeated by ubiquitous uncertainty, dissatisfaction, ugliness, horror and violence, offers a grotesque vision of capitalist America and its corrupted institutions set in a "dark world below the placid surface (...). This other America, when it is not a bleak rural wasteland inhabited by murderous primitives, is a glittering hell ruled by money and violence, flaunting images of beauty that are either deceptive or unobtainable." As O'Brien (1997, p. 77) notices, "what the Marlowe novels are finally about is loneliness in a sprawling city devoid of spiritual comforts. For a variety of reasons—greed, egotism, fear, selfish lust, or sheer thick-headedness—none of the people in the city can offer anything in the way of a human relationship." Hard-boiled prose, despite its proletarian virility, wit and frequent outbursts of comic energy, often appears to be set in an alternative, unreal realm of gloom and void which O'Brien (1997, p. 80) defines as "poised so precisely on the edge of the real that it seems to cancel itself out." The Coens draw upon their fascination on the

genre to project their own distorted American settings beyond the constraints of everyday logic and use them as an appropriate background for their critique of the country's social, cultural and business systems as well as the expression of the overwhelming sense of isolation, discontinuity and confusion triggered by the degeneration of the American Dream and its mythical institutions.

### 3 The Hudsucker Proxy

#### 3.1 *The Disturbed Timescale*

The sequence of events within the plot of *The Hudsucker Proxy* exemplifies the disturbed timescale of the film—undermining the principles of chronological realism the directors squeeze into one month of the plot's span not only the numerous ups and downs of the main protagonist but also the complete history of his brainchild being developed, marketed, sold, labeled a failure and eventually becoming a resounding success. The time framework of the film is complicated and ambiguous and the directors explicitly manifest it in the very first scenes by drawing our attention to the gigantic clock and the slogan “The Future Is Now” proudly gracing the façade of the impressive Hudsucker Industries building in addition to making us aware that these are the last moments of New Year's Eve at the end of 1958, a symbolically confusing moment of what was thought to be the future becoming a contemporary experience. Norville Barnes, the company's CEO, has just stepped onto the window ledge and contemplates a jump into the void below. However, we know neither the past background of the dramatic situation we have to confront nor its subsequent resolution and, as a result, we are devoid of any points of reference or grounds for logical reasoning. The opening frames challenge the viewers with a setting of the story placed in an indefinite time zone where conventional principles of chronology have been suspended or subverted.

The uncertainty is carefully reinforced by the Coens with multiple anachronisms and time inconsistencies. As Robson (2003) observes, Richard Hornung, the film's costume designer, insists that the choice of the men's clothes tends to reflect the 1930s and 1940s whereas designer Dennis Gassner's inspirations gave the film's architecture a 1920s look. The story, the characters and the style of dialogues are reminiscent of 1930s comedies while the setting and the central motif of the hula-hoop and the Frisbee as Norville Barnes's key ideas are emblems of the 1950s where the events apparently take place although these are clearly the alternative 1950s in which the hula-hoop has not occurred and Barnes is going to be its inventor. For Robson (2003, p. 141) this is a fantasy America of different eras fused into an unrealistic, exaggerated ideal “rooted in nostalgia for a more optimistic, outgoing age.” He invokes Ethan Coen's claim that 1958 was chosen

almost arbitrarily as the year in which the film is set whereas the period is actually indeterminate. The same concerns the place which is nominally New York although it should be perceived in more general terms as an overall vision of Metropolis, a hub of capitalist values presented as a place so neat and sanitized that it becomes virtually sinister. According to Robson (2003, p. 142), in *The Hudsucker Proxy* the directors “literally constructed a fully conceptualized environment” for their ironic re-telling of the American Dream story based on the diverse world-views depicted in a variety of its source films rather than any research into what the 1958 reality was really like.

In my view, the Coens seem to have adopted an approach to the constraints of chronology analogous to many postmodernist writers who, as Linda Hutcheon (1989) suggests, are keen to “de-doxify” even the most obvious and natural limitations. Hence, in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* the narrator overtly accepts errors in chronology in his narrative and inverts the order of events. Moreover, postmodernist narratives tend to be deliberately both historical and contemporary and yet offer no resolution of the ensuing contradictions. The narrator of Rushdie’s *Shame* applies this double coded approach and complicates his narrative by transgressing boundaries between the present and the past and allowing his present knowledge of events to contaminate his representation of the past. Anachronistic intertextual references in Banville’s *Doctor Copernicus* highlight postmodernist literature’s intense self-consciousness about the act of narrating in the present the absent events of the past. The assumption is that although the past did exist, it can be inferred in the present only from its traces so, as Hutcheon (1989, p. 70) states, it “becomes a question of representing, that is, of constructing and interpreting, not of objective recording.”

### 3.2 *The Cognitive Clashes*

*The Hudsucker Proxy* challenges the viewer also by exposing them to an abundance of references, most importantly allusions to Frank Capra’s heartwarming fantasies of ordinary men standing up against the greed and corruption of the rich and powerful and Preston Sturges’ mixture of the screwball comedy and social satire typified by juxtaposing sophisticated quick-fire dialogue with farcical situations. According to Harkness (2000, p. 127), another complication in the process of undisturbed straightforward reception of the film is also the fact that the viewer is faced with an unlikely incongruous clash between Capra’s “romanticism of pure individualism (...) against the grinding power of big money and big politics (...) blind to its own darkest implications that untrammelled individualism is as much a piece of the capitalist monsters as it is of the heroes” and Sturges’ “romantic wise-guy” approach with its focus on bizarre forms of tortured infatuation and his heroes battling with their own limitations against the background of the benevolent

world. These two different perspectives and discordant artistic modes stand in such stark opposition to each other that they are essentially mutually exclusive, generating discomfort, confusion and a sense of inconsistency and improbability among film-goers who realize, more or less consciously, that what they see is simply an unfeasible combination. Thus, Capraesque dreams ultimately become Coenesque nightmares since, as Harkness (2000, p. 127) puts it, “[a] Sturges hero would be eaten alive in Capra’s world (...).”

Another cognitive clash results from the fact that the Coens decided to place a Thirties story and characters in a Fifties setting generating the overwhelming feeling of inconsistency. As Harkness (2000) stresses, comedies in the 1930s relied on a degree of intimacy behind the story and the set, a realistic romantic rationale, the rat-a-tat style of dialogues, the exterior confidence of the stars and the urban smartness provided by New York writers. In the 1950s the acting style changed dramatically and became more introspective and tortured, dialogues switched to a casual drone-like patter and the scope of sets became much broader. The Coens utilize and jam together elements of the two conflicting aesthetics looking for the novelty potential of this puzzling juxtaposition but, sadly, the effect alienated majority of viewers and critics who seemed to share Harkness’s (2000, p. 128) unfavourable opinion that “big empty sets are not conducive to snappy dialogues” and perceived the film merely as an unrewarding stylistic exercise leaving its audiences indifferent about the projected un-reality. Not surprisingly, the Coens’ most expensive film with a budget of approximately 25 million dollars performed disastrously and the proceeds from the American box office were just under \$3 million.

I must agree with Robson (2003, p. 134) that another explanation for this spectacular flop is that audiences are accustomed to watching films that take place in a comprehensibly recognizable environment, either a realistic historical or contemporary setting or a fantastic realm of the Earth in the future or another world of the magical past where realism is not expected and just about anything is possible. By convention, combining the two modes needs to be well-grounded: sometimes distinct fantasy elements, like the presence of a superhero in case of Tim Burton’s *Batman*, justify a skewed image of the contemporary world, otherwise the aesthetic of visual realism is applied to ridiculous and contrived plots in the vein of James Bond movies to validate some unlikely or ludicrous concepts in the script. The Coens break this unspoken agreement and subvert these presuppositions, once again choosing to combine two conflicting aesthetics and make a uniquely flamboyant attempt at disconcerting their viewers by telling a fairly conventional story of a young simpleton striving for success in the world of big business in a stylized manner and in a fantastic setting with little consideration given to realism or credibility. The film’s unrealistic ending involving stoppage of time and an act of angelic intervention provides an ironic signature commentary of the directors to the genres, styles and artistic sensitivities which they have subverted.



## 4 The Coens' America

### 4.1 American Zones

Brian McHale (1987) points at a peculiar phenomenon of a few favored geographical areas recurring as “zones” throughout postmodernist writing, including the low profile state of Ohio, present in Donald Barthelme’s *Up, Aloft in the Air* or Guy Davenport’s *The Invention of Photography in Toledo*, which represents a typically Middle-American average location. McHale (1987, p. 49) claims that numerous 19th-century writers, such as Fenimore Cooper, were fascinated by the American frontier—a prototype of a postmodernist zone, a powerful “ambiguous and liminal space” separating the world of civilization and the wilderness. Writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville or even Edgar Allan Poe used its characteristic features to create a psychological borderline splicing the real and the imaginary. With the disappearance of the frontier and the absorption of the wilderness by civilization American writers had to reimagine and reconceptualize the notion of American space. While texts like William Faulkner’s *The Bear* or Norman Mailer’s *Why Are We in Vietnam?* attempted to recover the frontier, Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz*, whose Hollywood version subsequently acquired a cult status, reopened the frontier in Middle America by projecting “The Land of Oz”—a fantastic self-contained world encompassing several dissimilar realms and located within the state of Kansas. According to McHale (1987, p. 50), the external frontier along with everything it symbolizes in American ideology and mythology was thus relocated into the middle of the American interior and it was exactly this concept that captured the imagination of postmodernist writers for whom Ohio is “the ‘Zone of the Interior’ . Its strangeness and liminality are foregrounded by its being located not on the edges of the continent, but at its center. It is the historical descendant of the frontier zone, transposed to the flat, middling (in every sense) American heartland.” This version of American space is a recurrent theme throughout postmodernist literature alongside other frequently used zones such as Latin America or Africa but its geographical continuity is usually disrupted and remodeled by means of distorted typography, the determination of the projected world by the play of the signifier or an alternative make-up of postmodernist heterotopian America which might be composed as a collection of what McHale (1987, p. 51) refers to as discontinuous and incongruous “enormous solipsisms”, as in the case of Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve* where the country’s inherent multiplicity and internal differences become emphasized.

Similarly, the Coens have so far set their films solely in a number of distinctively American settings. Most of their spaces are strikingly average and local microcosms contributing to the American patchwork, yet they are consciously defamiliarized by highlighting their internal heterogeneity, deranging and reshaping their characteristic features in addition to stressing their mutual incompatibility, for instance by exaggerating the differences in regional dialects. The directors do not seem to be interested in depicting the objective realities of

different parts and regions of the country. Instead, they follow in the footsteps of postmodernist writers who, as McHale (1987, p. 55) puts it, try to reflect “our culture’s ontological landscape, which allots a certain space to an unreal zone”, whether it is New York, Los Angeles, Minnesota, the Deep South, Texas or Arizona.

## 4.2 *Raising Arizona*

Nominally located in Tempe, Arizona, *Raising Arizona* does not aim at providing viewers with an accurate portrayal of life in this particular location. Carolyn R. Russell (2001, p. 44) quotes Ethan Coen claiming: “It’s all made up. It’s an Arizona of the mind.” In an interview conducted by Kevin Sessions (2000) the directors insist that their vision of the Southwest as a milieu for the movie is the result of looking at it as if it was an exotic, foreign culture and it was largely derived from literary portrayals of the area, supplied predominantly by Southern writers. At the same time, the film has a definite cartoonish feel to it and the studiously bad taste of the set and costumes discomfits the viewer. Russell (2001, p. 32) believes that the Coens managed to conjure up a highly subjective film-space embedded in an imaginary geography of “a minimalistic, ultra-stylized, closed universe wherein the earthy tones of the Southwest merge with the cotton candy hues of the fairground (...) which combines the architectural style of a theme park with the contours of a Warner Brothers cartoon. It is pure synthetic postmodern fabulism, a projected world where each image is metaphoric and highly allusive.” Eddie Robson (2003, p. 63) points out that the choice of the suggestive desert backdrop as the location is a powerful, apposite metaphor both for the film’s subtext of the apocalyptic fear and the central theme of infertility since Arizona is as dry and barren as Ed’s uterus. He makes the connection himself in the opening monologue saying that “the doctor explained that her insides were a rocky place where my seed could find no purchase.” According to Robson (2003, p. 65), through the picture’s visual style and the language developed for the characters the directors managed to construct a highly distinctive aesthetic for this stylized comic movie that refuses to take its own fundamentally violent and distressing situations seriously. Hence, *Raising Arizona* creates “an internally consistent world for its story to take place in. (...) Those who do engage with it will appreciate its ability to transport the viewer into a world that seems two steps to the left of reality.”

## 4.3 *Texas in Blood Simple*

The very first film by Joel and Ethan Coen foreshadows the subsequent cinematic zones constructed by the directors. *Blood Simple*’s Texas is a setting conceived and designed to match the film’s theme of deadly passion presented in a story

which, as Joel Coen insists in an interview by Ciment and Niogret (2000a, p. 59), “was supposed to be a slice of life, but still a fiction contrived to fit in an exotic place.” Therefore, the Coens’ Texas is an unrealistic, mythical entity, a projection of the public imagination triggered by similar cases that have occurred in this particular area and preserved in a collection of histories and legends. The opening scenes of *Blood Simple* which present deserted, faded images of rural Texas are not only the establishing shots but also the projected mindscape of Loren Visser—a depraved private detective and the film’s initial narrator. According to Carolyn R. Russell (2001, p. 8), “Visser’s mournfully stark and depopulated landscapes mirror his worldview, enunciated in the guttural slurred speech appropriate to a man who, throughout the film, cannot muster the enthusiasm to keep flies from landing on his head (...) and (...) who (...) will be unable to transcend his limited frame of reference (...)” When Visser tries to justify his ruthless and brutal understanding of what capitalism means, he compares the only environment he is familiar with to his private vision of Russia where “everyone pulls for everyone else.” It is also Russia and the assumption that people there “make only fifty cents a day” that are used by Visser to justify his violent transactions and acts. Marty, on the other hand, invokes and imagines ancient Greece along with its culture to judge himself benevolent by its standards, claiming that “in Greece, they would cut off the head of the messenger who brought bad news.” The fantastic condition of both places they refer to mirrors the similar status of their geography—as Russell aptly remarks (2001, p. 10), “it is a Texan dreamworld, a minimalistic, ultrastylized, synthetic Texas-of-the-mind.”

## 5 Conclusion

Closer scrutiny reveals that the settings in the films of the Coen brothers, despite numerous features concurrent with their real-world counterparts, are actually nonexistent and non-illusionist, alternative realms which mirror McHale’s notion of “zones”. The directors parallel certain literary techniques and sensibilities and, by crossing the ontological borders and constraints of time and geography as well as emphasizing the internal inconsistencies and mutual contradictions of their environments, destabilize and deconstruct standard contextual expectations forcing the viewer to question the established perceptions of American reality, review their understanding of what makes up America and, in broader terms, what constitutes objective reality. Even though the films of the Coen brothers seem to be invariably set in typical American locations, these are historically and physically insecure, fictionalized realms producing a profound sense of ontological instability concurrent with the poetics of contemporary postmodern literature.

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