

# Becoming cult: *The Big Lebowski*, replay culture and male fans

BARBARA KLINGER

After premiering at a number of film festivals, Joel and Ethan Coen's *The Big Lebowski* debuted theatrically in North America in March 1998 as a much anticipated followup to their previous venture *Fargo* (1996). A crime thriller cum regional satire set in North Dakota and Minnesota, *Fargo* had not only quickly become the critics' darling but had grossed three times its \$7 million budget in its initial run. Despite a wider opening in film theatres, *The Big Lebowski*, a comedy noir set in Los Angeles, earned only \$17.5 million in the USA, barely recouping its \$15 million budget. Although the film proceeded to gross an additional \$29 million in film theatres abroad, its reputation as a box-office failure endured.

Unfavourable critical response exacerbated the aura of disappointment surrounding its opening. Of *The Big Lebowski*'s script, one critic wrote, 'It's hard to believe that this is the team that won an Oscar last year for the original screenplay of *Fargo*. The large amount of profanity . . . seems a weak attempt to paper over dialogue gaps.'<sup>1</sup> Another lamented that the Coen brothers were 'more and more taking the lazy-ass David Lynch route by simply throwing weirdness at the screen. [Though] uniquely talented . . . they don't seem capable of learning a damn thing from their previous misfires.'<sup>2</sup> Judged as a box-office flop and a 'massive artistic failure',<sup>3</sup> reviewers blamed what they saw as the film's incoherent plot, bizarre characters and uneven screenplay for its inability to appeal even to the Coen brothers' independent film and arthouse audiences.

Given its inauspicious beginnings, *The Big Lebowski*'s claim on public attention might have ended shortly after it disappeared from the silver screen. But this was far from the case. It became a cult hit in the aftermarket, collecting throngs of die-hard fans worldwide, inspiring

- 1 Peter Howell, 'Coens' latest doesn't hold together', *Toronto Star*, 19 January 1998.
- 2 Paul Tataru, 'Big Lebowski is fun, but won't bowl you over', *CNN Interactive*, 5 March 1998. <<http://www.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/9803/05/review.big.lebowski/>> [accessed 14 November 2009].
- 3 Steve Palopoli, 'The last cult picture show', *Metroactive Movies*, 25 July 2002. <<http://www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/07.25.02/lebowski1-0230.html>> [accessed 14 November 2009].

commentary on scores of internet sites, and begetting its own fan convention (The Lebowski Fest), its own lingo ('This aggression will not stand, man') and even its own religion ('Dudeism').

The film's reputation as a financial and critical failure no doubt helped to confer upon it the counter-mainstream distinction often associated with cult films and fans.<sup>4</sup> However, as one of the most prominent post-theatrical success stories in recent memory, *The Big Lebowski* provides additional insight into how many films today attain cult status in a US context. It belongs to a species of cult cinema produced and/or distributed by a major film studio (Universal Studios and affiliates released *The Big Lebowski*),<sup>5</sup> which may or may not have found box-office success but which attained ritual importance to fans in conventional reissue. While Hollywood has long been linked to cult cinema, diverse titles have of late joined the ranks, including *Scarface* (Brian De Palma, 1983), *Brazil* (Terry Gilliam, 1985), *The Princess Bride* (Rob Reiner, 1987), *The Shawshank Redemption* (Frank Darabont, 1994) and *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001). Acknowledging that routes to cult status vary from film to film, I shall investigate the contributory role that reissues in exhibition venues such as cable and satellite TV and DVD play in materializing conditions of possibility for cult identity to emerge and flourish.

Film historians and critics have frequently treated exhibition as central to defining cult films and audiences. Some regard marginal venues such as midnight movies, independent distribution and mail-order companies specializing in rare or bootlegged videos as vital to the existence and enjoyment of this form of cinema.<sup>6</sup> These outlets often circulate a host of 'disreputable' or obscure films (low-budget horror, for instance) to the fringe taste cultures seen as comprising cult fandoms. Other scholars, recognizing the sheer number and diversity of films considered cult since the 1970s, point to the quantum leap in exhibition windows and media, including cable TV, the VCR, DVDs and the internet, as being responsible for a cult 'boom'.<sup>7</sup> As it provides expansive and intensive exposure to media, this accessibility means that 'any movie today can become a cult film'.<sup>8</sup> More pointedly, since Hollywood films are likely to be subject to insistent, highly visible ancillary rerelease, they are also the prime beneficiaries of a thriving aftermarket, leading to a clear 'mainstreaming' of cult phenomena. In addition, new exhibition modes alter cult fandom's geography, making it 'less dependent on place' and more capable of drawing 'large niche audiences that ... constitute a powerful market force'.<sup>9</sup> This growth may challenge the sense of exclusivity associated with such fandoms and establish them as ripe for industry exploitation. Not necessarily marginal or moored to specific locales such as repertory houses, many cult fans today hail from influential publics, taste cultures and marketable demographics; more mobile and diasporic, they experience cinema and their own collective identity across assorted media outlets.

4 A cult film can gain and retain this reputation even when global markets, home video and time make it financially and critically successful. The distinction of 'marginality', then, is often a convention of cult canonization rather than a reality.

5 Among other companies, Working Title Films, the UK studio PolyGram's label, produced *The Big Lebowski*; Gramercy Pictures, a joint venture of PolyGram and Universal, distributed the film theatrically. In 1999 PolyGram became part of Universal; Universal and affiliates thus currently own and distribute *The Big Lebowski*. When Hollywood cult includes films distributed but not necessarily produced by US film studios, we can recognize the significance of mainstream reissues to a film's attainment of cult status, regardless of its point of origin.

6 This work extends, at least, from J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies* (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1991) to Kevin Heffernan, *Ghoul, Gimmicks and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business, 1953–1968* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

7 For example, Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), pp. 80–98; and Mark Jancovich, Antonio Reboll, Julian Stringer and Andy Willis, 'Introduction', in Jancovich et al. (eds), *Defining Cult Movies: the Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2003), pp. 4–5.

8 Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls*, p. 81.

9 Jancovich et al. (eds), *Defining Cult Movies*, p. 4.

10 Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta E. Pearson (eds), *Cult Television* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p. x.

11 Patrick R. Parsons and Robert M. Frieden, *The Cable and Satellite Television Industries* (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1998), p. 199.

12 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006), pp. 2–3.

My analysis of *The Big Lebowski* pursues further the ramifications of a contemporary ‘booming’ aftermarket for the study of cult cinema and audiences. I explore the film’s modes of ancillary exhibition – what Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta Pearson refer to as among ‘mechanisms’ that render films cult<sup>10</sup> – to analyze both its specific circulation as a cult film and its broader implications for understanding the connections between the aftermarket and fandom in today’s mediascape. Although exhibition is not the only factor involved in creating cult cinema, little research to date has mapped the topography of the contemporary cult film’s circulation in rerelease. What does the current circuitry of cult film exhibition after the theatrical premiere look like? How does the existing flurry of ancillary windows stimulate a film’s transformation into cult, and an audience’s shift into cult fandom? How do these windows affect textual identities, viewing strategies and the constitution of fandoms? Deeply affected by what I call ‘replay culture’, *The Big Lebowski*’s success prompts reflection on the impact of a hyperactive sphere of ancillary exhibition on the contemporary film experience, including the substantial influence of television and the internet on films and their fans.

Replay is neither a new phenomenon in cinema (films have long been rewatched and reissued) nor one consigned solely to this medium (for example, television reruns). Replay culture in the aftermarket today, however, results from a ‘perfect storm’ of developments that has inspired an especially extensive investment in repetition in US media exhibition and viewing. Contemporary replay is produced by media convergence and fostered by the horizontal integration of media companies that gained steam during the emphasis on deregulation in the 1980s; from this era on, corporations increasingly bought businesses across media, including film, television and music companies. These ‘horizontal’ holdings have prompted corporations to repurpose their goods by ‘repackaging’ them ‘for sale in all other forms possible’.<sup>11</sup> As one type of repurposing, the film reissue has developed into a vital, lucrative commodity. When films are rereleased after first-run distribution, they are often showcased for years through exhibition venues that stretch from film theatres to the web. No matter what a film’s box-office fate has been, patterns of rerelease over time can dramatically affect its financial profile, critical reputation and viewership.

Since producers, texts and audiences dwell together in a universe of converging media, reception is now definitively affiliated with multiple platforms of access and the associative intertextualities they inspire. As Henry Jenkins argues, convergence is not simply a feature of corporate enterprise but also applies to consumption, as ‘consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content’, migrating ‘almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want’.<sup>12</sup> New technologies and media involved in film exhibition further enhance replay’s role in reception by enabling home viewers to possess and manipulate texts at will. Having a film on DVD, recording it on a DVR or downloading it onto a computer

subjects it to playback's variables: pausing, rewinding, fast-forwarding, repeat viewing and copying. As a film is domesticated, scenes, characters and dialogue may be burned into the viewer's memory, becoming signature aspects of meaning and pleasure and, possibly, providing common ground for the title's collective appreciation. Moreover, domestication may encourage fans to recycle films themselves via blog reviews or DIY internet parodies, for example.

In the contemporary aftermarket, replay culture is defined, then, by expanding outlets for reissues, convergence-inspired repurposing, the growth of the home market and its playback machines, and consumer activities responsive to this climate. As an interactive ensemble, these factors create and endorse a culture of replay, making the already seen and heard into an emblematic feature of the media business and experience today. The contemporary Hollywood cult film secures its identity and attracts a following in this milieu. Yet, modes of exhibition cannot guarantee cult status; instead, recycling provides favourable *conditions* for 'cultification' to occur. It enhances the odds, through sheer repetition, that a film will attract committed viewers. Ultimately, as Matt Hills remarks, 'audience engagement . . . remains the acid test of the media cult'.<sup>13</sup> Fans must become intensely attached to a film, regarding it as significant in their everyday lives, in personal aesthetics and leisure activities, and in forming bonds with like-minded viewers. When this mode of affect occurs, the reciprocity between replay in media production and consumption is revealed in graphic terms. The establishment of a cult audience inspires the rerelease and marketing of a film as cult to that and other possible audiences, leading to yet more pervasive instances of replay across spheres.

With these issues in mind, my analysis of *The Big Lebowski* begins with an overview of the film, its fandom and types of exhibition that have thus far defined its ancillary circulation, including midnight movies. Since the impact of domestic viewing on creating cult has received little scholarly attention, I then focus on replay culture's role in the home market in fostering the repeat viewings necessary for viewers to fall in love with the film and in otherwise affecting the dynamics of its appropriation. Finally, I examine several windows involved in *The Big Lebowski*'s home recycling – its DVD release, Comedy Central cablecast and presence on message boards and blogs – to consider how synergies between film, television and the web attract a significant segment of the film's cult fandom. This segment – white men ranging in age from their teens to their forties – is highly visible in virtually all representations of this fandom.<sup>14</sup> Media synergies also operate on the film's generic classification (defining it as a slacker/stoner variation of cult) and the authorship of its director/screenwriter duo, Joel and Ethan Coen (portraying their style as a kind of vernacular surrealism). Ultimately, this case illuminates replay culture's role in targeting demographics and building gendered and raced fandoms in the aftermarket. It also permits a view of ordinary dimensions of fandom

13 Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 136.

14 Here I identify a substantial demographic drift within the film's fan base, discovered from a number of sources including my own conversations with fans, *Lebowski Fest* and press reports, and testimonials and pictures across print and visual media. This fandom involves other demographics, but white men were in the vanguard and continue to strongly represent its constituency. I must add that members of the white male demographic, like any other identity category, are neither homogeneous nor do they necessarily share identical motivations as viewers. Yet trends within this kind of fandom are worth considering as they promote reflection on a mode of gendered participation often taken for granted in cult film studies – 'invisible' yet 'dominant' in the discourse. See Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 3.

(related to alcohol and drug consumption) not often addressed in scholarly accounts of participatory audiences.

*The Big Lebowski* concerns the exploits of Jeffrey Lebowski (Jeff Bridges), a character who prefers to be called ‘the Dude’. At the outset, thieves mistake the Dude, a one-time hippie activist now living in a contented state of unemployment, for another Jeffrey Lebowski, a wealthy estate owner (David Huddleston). The Dude insists that he is not the Lebowski they seek, but they attack him anyway and pee on his rug. The quest to find restitution for the rug leads the Dude to the rich ‘Big’ Lebowski, who enlists him to locate his apparently kidnapped trophy wife Bunny (Tara Reid). This job catapults him into a series of picaresque adventures, during which he meets, among others, Maude Lebowski (Julianne Moore), a free-thinking artist and daughter of the Big Lebowski, and a trio of German nihilists (including Peter Stormare). Between the Dude’s brushes with such characters, he bowls with friends Donny (Steve Buscemi) and Walter (John Goodman), the latter an ex-Vietnam vet who helps the Dude to play gumshoe. Throughout the film, the Dude smokes dope, drinks White Russians, hallucinates (sometimes in the style of Busby Berkeley’s musical numbers) when knocked unconscious and, along with others, makes prolific use of the word ‘fuck’ (figures 1 and 2).

The filmmakers’ reputation, their revision of Raymond Chandler’s noir universe, and the film’s star cast were not enough to keep *The Big Lebowski*’s theatrical premiere from being a letdown, but it thereafter gained a significant second life. It appeared in staggered rereleases in the US home market, including reissues on laser disc and DVD in 1998, on VHS and DVD in 1999, and on cable and satellite channel USA beginning in 2000. Showings on cable and satellite channel Comedy Central followed, as well as a 2002 DVD and a 2003 DVD two-pack of *The Big Lebowski* and *Half-Baked* (Tamra Davis, 1998), a stoner film



Fig. 1. The Dude (Jeff Bridges), Walter (John Goodman) and Donnie (Steve Buscemi) at the bowling alley. All images from *The Big Lebowski* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 1998).

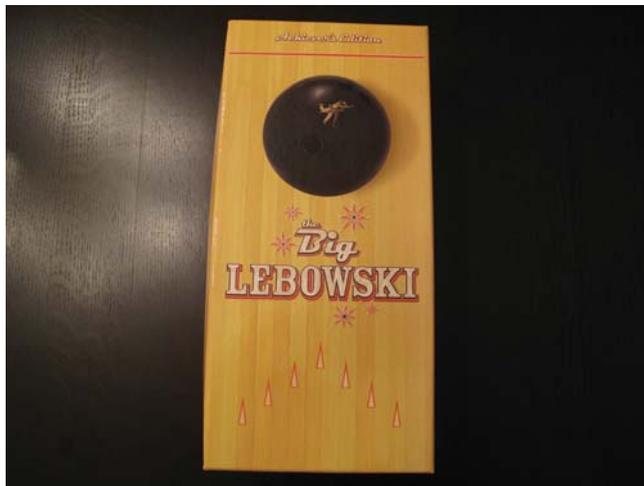
Fig. 2. After his drink is drugged, the Dude has a Berkeley-esque 'dream' with Maude (Julianne Moore) in full Viking regalia and women with bowling-pin headpieces.



starring Dave Chappelle. In 2005 the industry produced yet more DVD versions, including a special Collector's Edition, a Coen Brothers Collection and an Achiever's Edition. By this time the film's cult standing was having a noticeable impact on strategies of reissue. While in 2003 the DVD's back cover emphasized its comedic aspects, two years later Universal exploited the film's cult appeal by distributing it through labels aimed at devotees: the aforementioned Achiever's Edition, named for fans that refer to themselves as Achievers after a running gag in the film, and the Collector's Edition, which along with its 'all-new digitally remastered picture' and 'special features' explicitly referred to the film as 'the Coen brothers' irreverent cult hit' (figure 3).

*The Big Lebowski* has continued to play on television, including on film channels Showtime and Encore. In 2007 it appeared in the

Fig. 3. The 2005 DVD Achiever's Edition boxed set.



short-lived format HD-DVD, and 2008 saw the release of its Tenth Anniversary Edition and Tenth Anniversary Limited Edition on DVD, the latter presented in a faux bowling ball. At the time of writing, the film still awaits Blu-ray release. In terms of legal distribution online, the film is available from services such as Amazon Video on Demand, while clips can be viewed on sites such as Hulu.com. On other repurposing fronts, the film has spawned a merchandise industry with diverse items for sale, including the soundtrack, action figures, bowling shirts, 'Lebowski for President' T-shirts, posters, and bowling games designed for mobile phone download.

During *The Big Lebowski's* persistent rerelease history it amassed 'an obsessive following' that catapulted it to the 'high table of classic cult films'.<sup>15</sup> Although the film attracts viewers outside of this demographic, white men have been largely responsible for its surprise popularity in reissue. According to press reports, these *Lebowski* fans come from different walks of life: 'druggies' and 'non-druggies', students and academics, rock band musicians, sports figures, journalists, businessmen, Vietnam veterans, military personnel and unemployed 'real-life Dudes'. For example, legendary skateboarder Tony Hawk and friends have frequented bowling alleys after competitions to bowl and drink White Russians, 'tossing out references all the way'.<sup>16</sup> As a criterion of rejection or acceptance, a Wall Street professional has referred to lines from the film while conducting job interviews to see if the interviewee 'gets' the quotation, while a military base commander has reported that he and his men 'watch the movie down in the missile silo two or three times a week'.<sup>17</sup>

As hundreds of user comments from The Internet Movie Database reveal, the fandom has gone global, with contingents in Australia and numerous European countries. In Poland, where the film was shown repeatedly on cable TV, bowling alleys sprang up across the nation's cities: Fantasy Park in Krakow, for instance, advertises its bowling alley as a place 'where you can kick back and emulate the skills of the venerable Dude from *The Big Lebowski*'.<sup>18</sup> In Dresden, Germany, The Lebowski-Bar displays a mural of the film's characters and screens the film on an almost continuous loop. Beyond providing evidence of the film's international appeal, such tributes are an indication of how its popularity is manifested in everyday life and how indebted this popularity is, in turn, to the circularity and permeability of private and public realms that replay culture has inspired.

Like the *Star Trek* franchise, the Coens' film has also generated a fan convention and a documentary about its fandom: *The Achievers: the Story of Lebowski Fans* (Dennis Chung, 2009). In fact chronicles of the Lebowski Fest's founding often serve as the origin story of the film's evolution and recognition as cult. In 2002 Will Russell and Scott Shuffitt, men in their late twenties and early thirties at the time, attended a tattoo convention to sell T-shirts. During slow periods they quoted dialogue from *The Big Lebowski* to each other, and soon the other

15 David Edelstein, 'You're entering a world of Lebowski', *New York Times*, 8 August 2004, p. 21; Clark Collis, 'The Dude & I', *Entertainment Weekly*, 21 March 2008, p. 34.

16 Palopoli, 'The last cult picture show'.

17 Edelstein, 'You're entering a world of Lebowski', p. 21.

18 'Fantasy Park', *Cracow-Life*. <[http://www.cracow-life.com/play/entertainment\\_details/38-Fantasy\\_Park](http://www.cracow-life.com/play/entertainment_details/38-Fantasy_Park)> [accessed 1 March 2008].

cessionaires joined in. After this exchange the two men started to think that if a convention could attract tattoo enthusiasts, surely a gathering could be held to celebrate their favourite film. That same year they organized the first Lebowski Fest, held in Louisville, Kentucky with 150 people in attendance. The Fest became an annual event and acquired a website, Lebowskifest.com. With Louisville as the organization's world headquarters, sell-out conventions drawing thousands of fans have spread across cities and nations from Seattle to Edinburgh.

At the Fests, typically held in bowling alleys, fans 'spend hours reciting dialogue, inveighing against each other's Dudeness, and indulging in activities favoured by the film's protagonists'.<sup>19</sup> Besides bowling and drinking White Russians, attendees dress up as characters or objects – central and incidental – from the film. They may appear as the Dude or Walter, in Viking attire like that worn by Maude in one of the Dude's 'dreams', or as bowling pins. Special guest stars (for example, Bridges), contests and sales of paraphernalia such as T-shirts also contribute to the convention's festivities. In 2006 the event gained academic recognition, when the University of Louisville's English Department hosted a symposium on the Lebowski cult (followed by the fifth annual Lebowski Fest) that resulted in the publication of the conference proceedings (figure 4).<sup>20</sup>

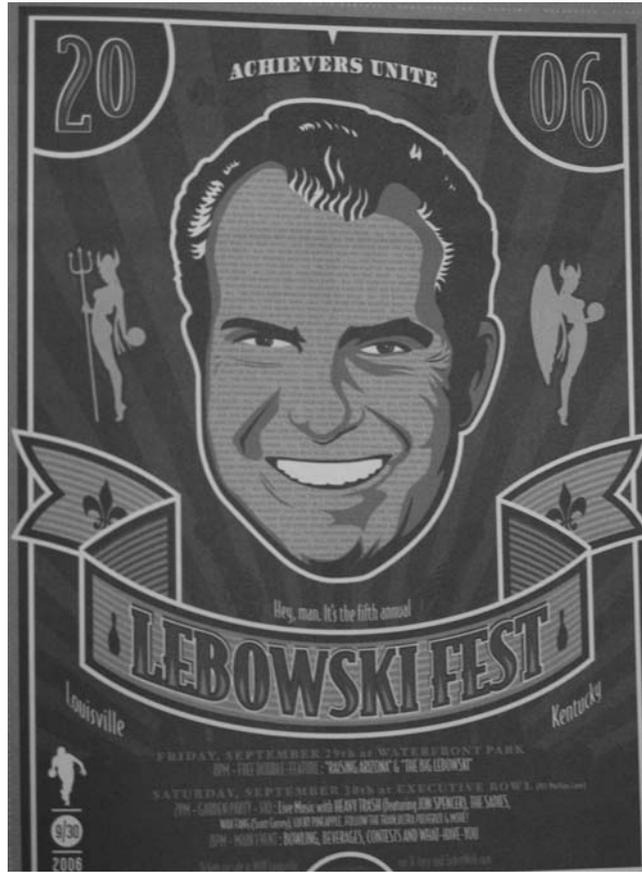
Publicly *The Big Lebowski* has also been exhibited in the classic cult forum of the midnight movie. Repertory and first-run theatres, film festivals, The Lebowski Fest, and other venues have screened the film at the witching hour. With the film's Los Angeles roots and regional appeal, it is not surprising that in 2000 the New Beverly Cinema, an LA revival theatre, held one of the first midnight shows; two years later Santa Cruz's historic Nickelodeon Theatre followed suit. *The Big Lebowski* has continued to be programmed in midnight movie venues nationwide. Among other places, in 2007–08 it appeared at San Francisco's Clay Theatre, Milwaukee's Rosebud Cinema Drafthouse and New York City's Sunshine Cinema. As these showings suggest, the film is part of a sizable contemporary business in cult cinema. The Sunshine and Clay theatres, for example, are part of the Landmark Theatre chain, the largest exhibitor in the USA of independent cinema, Hollywood classics and foreign-language films. Landmark programmes *The Big Lebowski* in midnight series with titles such as, 'Landmark After Dark' and 'Cult Classics Attack'. To demonstrate their conversance with *Lebowski* fans, some theatres serve the Dude's trademark drink and invite viewers to bowl in the aisles.

Through this kind of cult branding, *The Big Lebowski* is associated with a broad range of films with which it might otherwise appear to have little in common. In 2008, for instance, the Clay Theatre's 'Landmark After Dark' series featured the film along with older cult titles such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975) and *A Boy and His Dog* (L.Q. Jones, 1975), and newer entries to the

19 Max Gross, 'Groupies gearing up for Louisville "Lebowski Fest"', *The Jewish Daily Forward*, 18 July 2003. <<http://www.forward.com/articles/7722/>> [accessed 15 November 2009].

20 Edward P. Comentale and Aaron Jaffe (eds), *The Year's Work in Lebowski Studies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009).

**Fig. 4. The 2006 Lebowski Fest Poster, featuring former US President Richard Nixon (inspired by the framed picture of Nixon bowling that hangs in the Dude's house).**



**21** Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson (eds), *Cult Television*, p. xvi.

**22** Julian Ayrs, 'The Big Lebowski . . . fans storm theatre', *The Tattler*, 5 November 2007. <<http://ijulian.blogspot.com/2007/11/big-lebowskifans-storm-theatre-time-for.html>> [accessed 15 November 2009].

canon such as *Scarface* and *Office Space* (Mike Judge, 1999). Despite diverse films and audiences, programming creates affinities under the banner of cult as a 'meta-genre that caters to intense, interpretative audience practices'.<sup>21</sup> Midnight exhibition signals to viewers that these films will deliver the cult experience – the opportunity to participate in exceptional, collective, apparently outside-of-the-mainstream filmgoing. A blogger attending a 2007 midnight show at a Hollywood theatre's 'Insomniac Cinema' series, for example, reports that he could not recall ever 'encountering such a boisterous, rambunctious crowd of filmgoers . . . *The Big Lebowski* topped the "Rocky Horror Show" for all-out enthusiasm'. He adds that the filmgoers, 'a very stoned crowd', had 'caught an infectious bug . . . that compels them to return to each screening [and] scream out the dialogue amid a raucous round of wild guffaws'.<sup>22</sup> The midnight show today recalls behaviours (cannabis-induced hilarity, ritual repeat viewing, interactive quotation) associated with its celebrated early period in the 1970s, while continuing to signify a type of film consumption meant for the hip, die-hard fan.

23 Gregory Waller, 'Midnight movies, 1980–1985: a market study', in J.P. Telotte (ed.), *The Cult Film Experience* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1991), p. 167.

24 On this point, see Mark Jancovich, 'Cult fictions: cult movies, subcultural capital and the production of cultural distinctions', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2002), pp. 306–22.

25 This and other fan comments from <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0118715/usercomments>> [accessed 15 June 2005].

26 Manohla Dargis, 'Coens ask the C.I.A. for a license to laugh', *New York Times*, 12 September 2008, B13; Guy Raz, 'In character: The Dude, a Little Lebowski, alive in all of us', *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, tx. 25 May 2008.

There are, however, differences between the periods. As Gregory Waller observes in his study of midnight movie exhibition in the 1980s, a mere decade after its glory days, a once 'idiosyncratic, ghettoized, alternative form of exhibition' became 'a commonplace, national, industrywide trend'.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, today 'midnight madness' is an institution of exhibition. Multiplexes and other sites programme such screenings to trade off of cult's alternative reputation and thus project its cachet onto first and ancillary runs of films that stretch from the most obscure titles to mammoth blockbusters. Theatre distributors and exhibitors are busy packaging and selling films as cult pleasures to specialized, though not necessarily fringe, audiences. The midnight venue still signifies distinction, bestowing the quality on films, fans and taste formations that circulate in its sphere. Such claims of distinction are, however, a commonplace of contemporary niche marketing and a standard component of cult fan aesthetics.<sup>24</sup>

Of course a large part of *The Big Lebowski*'s circulation as cult has occurred in fan-driven, ad hoc everyday forums. Some viewers celebrate birthdays by having mini-Lebowski fests, at which they show the film alongside other kinds of revelry at home, or stage the event at a bowling alley. At times, the film itself is cause for a fete. As one fan writes: 'This movie defined my college years, as people had "Lebowski parties" with White Russians, etc. and the movie going the whole time. People could not stop re-watching this movie.'<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, YouTube features numerous commemorations, including remixes (such as '*The Big Lebowski*-F\_cking Short Version', composed only of moments where the characters say 'fuck'), fan performances of scenes (such as 'Re-enactment – *The Big Lebowski*'), and parodies (such as 'Spongebob Lebowski'). These various testimonials demonstrate that, beyond the formal settings of fan conventions and midnight movies, viewing communities routinely interject the film into public and private festivities.

As my account of major aspects of *The Big Lebowski*'s ancillary circulation indicates, the film has appeared in diverse venues. Here producers and consumers have engaged in repurposing, through theatrical reissue to reenactment internet videos, and contributed to a multifaceted, immersive world of replay. In the course of reappearing in heterogeneous contexts of exhibition and reception, the film became a cult success. While few critics saw its cult potential during its original theatrical run, when it was considered at best a minor Coen brothers' work, as we have seen, by 2005 DVD special editions openly marketed it as a cult hit. Its increased visibility and status also led to critical reappraisal: for example a *New York Times* reviewer referred to it as the Coens' 'finest film' and National Public Radio enshrined the Dude as an 'indelible American character' along with Willy Loman, Scarlett O'Hara and Bugs Bunny.<sup>26</sup>

Certainly, the New Beverly Cinema's programming of the film as a midnight movie in 2000 is a formative moment in its classification as

27 Bill Green, Ben Peskoe, Will Russell and Scott Shuffitt, *I'm a Lebowski, You're a Lebowski* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2007), pp. 129–30.

28 For more on movie quotation, see my 'Say it again, Sam: movie quotation, performance and masculinity', *Particip@tions: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2008). <[http://www.participations.org/Volume%205/Issue%202/5\\_02\\_klinger.htm](http://www.participations.org/Volume%205/Issue%202/5_02_klinger.htm)> [accessed 15 November 2009].

cult. Fans attending this and the later Nickelodeon Theatre's packed screenings recall that these shows were the first time that they knew they were not alone in their reverence; they also saw that the film elicited collective viewing behaviours linked to cult cinema (with audience members shouting out lines from the film even before it began).<sup>27</sup> The fact that attendees quoted knowledgeably from the film suggests that the seeds of its cult status had already begun to be sown by reissues in home markets in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Through such venues as DVD and cable TV, many fans gained their first opportunity to reappraise the film and engage in activities, such as memorizing dialogue, linked to its becoming cult. *The Big Lebowski's* evolution as cult has intimately involved home replay, as it shaped the film's consumption. Nevertheless, in an era of media replay, when film identities are subject to a liquid transit between multiple exhibition sites and viewing modalities, early home viewing is not so much a single point of origin for cult identity as a potent contributor to its collective realization. Domestic replay thus warrants attention as an influential mechanism of cult.<sup>28</sup>

The Internet Movie Database user comments, for instance, describe how the aftermarket furnished critical opportunities for reassessing *The Big Lebowski*. A fan from Poland writes that 'The film really didn't seem interesting after the first viewing, but when I saw it a second, third time (via repeats on cable TV), everything changed. [I found] brilliant dialogue . . . favorite lines, hidden comic situations that one must really see the film a few times to notice.' A US fan adds in more detail:

Like many other lovers of *The Big Lebowski*, I was baffled by the movie, didn't care for it at all that much (in the theater), and didn't realize what a fantastic work it was until I watched it again late one night on USA network. . . . Despite the edits and commercial interruptions, everything fell into place and I rented it again and again . . . each time finding something new and wonderfully funny. I now own it on DVD and watch it once a month. And it gets funnier each time.

Beyond revealing domestic replay's importance to *The Big Lebowski's* change in aesthetic fortune, these narratives of rediscovery identify repeat screenings as significant sources of pleasure. Repetition, as it calls attention to previously unseen elements, lends the film a coherence and a dimensionality found lacking in the first encounter. In addition, familiarity and discovery afford distinct yet intermingled forms of enjoyment – the former provides pleasure in the known, the latter in the new. The dance between these two dynamics produces a cornerstone of committed fandom in general. For *Lebowski* fans, this dance reveals the inexhaustibility of the film's comedy, as re-viewing discloses already recognized and freshly exposed layers of humour. Since viewers can rewatch the film at will, they are also able to memorize its dialogue and other features – a core aspect of cult fandom (as the 'Memorable Quotes'

29 Associated Press, 'A cult is born: fans flock to "The Big Lebowski" festival', 22 July 2003. <[http://www.lawrence.com/news/2003/jul/22/a\\_cult/?more\\_like\\_this](http://www.lawrence.com/news/2003/jul/22/a_cult/?more_like_this)> [accessed 20 November 2009].

section for *The Big Lebowski* on IMDb.com attests). As some viewers argue that the film 'has a rewatchability that most other films don't',<sup>29</sup> 'replay worthiness' becomes a canonizing trait that rescues a once disparaged film from neglect and provides the conditions for its cult appropriation.

The fan commentaries above also furnish other, more subtle, clues about film consumption in the aftermarket. *The Big Lebowski's* disappointing premiere nonetheless laid the groundwork for subsequent encounters by supplying the semblance of recognition that would become eye-catching on television. With round-the-clock schedules, cable and satellite programming offer increased odds of what perhaps appears to the viewer to be a 'chance meeting', such as the one had by the late-night watcher of the USA channel. In the vast world of multichannel television, prior acquaintance with a film can act as a kind of spectatorial glue, leading channel-surfing viewers to stop and rewatch the film's remaining minutes and, possibly, enter into reevaluation.

Whether encounters with a film are intentional or accidental, fan comments indicate that reengagement precipitates a domino effect, with experience in one ancillary format motivating a search for the film in other formats – the repurposer's dream. For example, those who saw *The Big Lebowski* on Comedy Central or USA viewed a print that was heavily edited for language. One frequent change concerns a scene in which Walter goes on the rampage, destroying a new red Corvette with a crowbar. In unedited prints, while bashing the car he repeatedly cries, 'This is what happens when you fuck a stranger in the ass'. In edited versions, the line morphs into, 'This is what happens when you fight a stranger in the Alps'<sup>30</sup> (figures 5 and 6).

Lamenting the violence done to the original print, a critic would dismiss this cut outright. Yet, *The Big Lebowski's* censored print has been integral to its reception. On the one hand, it offers its own pleasures.

30 'Preposterous TV Censorship: Fight a Stranger in the Alps', YouTube. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LCcKBcZzGdA>> [accessed 20 November 2009].



Fig. 5. 'This is what happens ...

31 'This is what happens when you find a stranger in the Alps', *ClubIGN*, 13 April 2006. <<http://blogs.ign.com/Hil-IGN/2006/04/13/11592/>> [accessed 15 November 2009]. Fans differ on whether they think Walter is actually saying 'find' or 'fight' in this line.

Some fans regard the censored cablecast as heightening the film's comic appeal: as one writes, 'I was flipping channels . . . and came across a basic cable run of *The Big Lebowski*. I love this film *even more* on cable than DVD, because it has some of the worst curse-word re-dubs of all time.'<sup>31</sup> Here, changes like 'when you fight a stranger in the Alps' are humorous because the ham-fistedness of the attempt to mask profane language sends up the broadcast censor, while mismatched dialogue produces the campy effects characteristic of dubbed films more generally. Film wreckage, then, can be deeply amusing. On the other hand, because of the censored print's limitations, viewers engage in repurposing. Just as radio play of a song's 'clean' rendition leads some listeners to look for the unedited parental advisory track, the expurgated cablecast entices viewers to rent or buy a DVD to access the R-rated version. Fan testimonials further suggest that what starts as a linear domino effect may become a 'ping-pong' effect, with viewers tacking back and forth between versions to experience them all. The search for authenticity – the film's truest, most complete form – still motivates viewers; however, in the viral milieu of contemporary rerelease and reception, it is not always the most urgent consideration.

As it promotes repeat viewing, rediscovery and reappraisal, and enables access to a film's multiple versions, home replay culture thus furnishes an infrastructure in which cult identities take root and blossom. At the same time, internet commentary builds an informal collective of fans who share their narratives of discovery and reasons for loving *The Big Lebowski*. A closer look at the film's recycling in the home market reveals yet other aspects of this sphere's role in developing cult fan bases and taste formations.

Although other significant demographics purchase DVDs, studio executives have remarked that 'DVDs are a man's world', with men comprising the main audience for films that do particularly well in this



Fig. 6 . . . when you fuck a stranger in the ass.'

32 David D. Kirkpatrick, 'Action-hungry DVD fans sway Hollywood', *New York Times*, 17 August 2003, pp. 1, 15.

33 Sharon Waxman, 'Studios rush to cash in on DVD Boom', *New York Times*, 20 April 2004, p. B8; Marc Gunther, 'Fox the day after tomorrow', *Fortune Magazine*, 14 May 2006. <[http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune\\_archive/2006/05/29/8378000/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/2006/05/29/8378000/index.htm)> [accessed 15 November 2009].

format. One such group of films, the 'sophomoric comedy', as one critic dubs it, focuses on regressive male characters and adolescent humour.<sup>32</sup> Films in this category that have done extraordinarily well on DVD include *Office Space* and *Old School* (Todd Phillips, 2003) – respectively, a satire of corporate life and a story of men in their thirties who start a fraternity. The former made \$11 million theatrically but proceeded to earn more than \$40 million on DVD, while the latter took in \$143 million on DVD as compared to its \$73 million box-office earnings.<sup>33</sup> The success of these films, like that of *The Big Lebowski*, signals the presence of a large male constituency crucial to DVD's success. Further, the canonical presence in home markets of such titles suggests an interesting alchemy between cinema, television and the internet with respect to male audiences.

Cable and satellite TV, often overshadowed by DVD in scholarly discussions of contemporary film exhibition, are significant arbiters of film taste and driving forces behind creating film fandoms. Two of the channels that programmed *The Big Lebowski*, USA (owned by NBC Universal) and Comedy Central (owned by Viacom), each have almost a hundred million subscribers. Of course not all of their programming is film content; yet they represent potentially formidable film exhibition windows, given their capacity to capture eyeballs and, via reruns, yield repeat viewings. In addition to home video reissues, male-oriented comedies have built audiences through numerous screenings on channels like these. Comedy Central provides a particularly apt case of a demographically specific locus for film circulation in the aftermarket.

Comedy Central has offered such fare as *South Park*, *The Daily Show*, *The Dave Chappelle Show* and *The Man Show*, generally attracting a demographic that is 64% male and 36% female, with a median age of thirty. The channel is also the number-one network in primetime among men aged eighteen to thirty-four and number two among men aged



Fig. 7. Surreal humour: the marmot lands in the Dude's bathtub ...

- 34 Alec Foge, 'Searching for the elusive male', *Mediaweek*, 5 September 2005. <<http://www.aef.com/industry/news/data/2005/3149>> [accessed 20 November 2009]; and 'Comedy Central cable TV advertising', *Time Warner Cable Media Sales* 2007. <<http://www.cablemediasales.com/pages/nets/?cp=nets&sp=info&net=comdy>> [accessed 12 September 2008].
- 35 Mark Hefflinger, 'MTV creates new unit for adult-directed, male-skewing brands', *Digital Media Wire*, 8 December 2006. <<http://www.dmwmedia.com/news/2006/12/08/mtv-creates-new-unit-for-adult-directed-male-skewing-brands>> [accessed 15 November 2009].
- 36 Foge, 'Searching for the elusive male'; and Paul Brownfield, 'Comedy Central rolls out plans for life beyond "South Park"', *Los Angeles Times*, 11 June 1999. <<http://articles.latimes.com/1999/jun11/entertainment/ca-45240>> [accessed 21 September 2008].

eighteen to twenty-four, particularly those with high incomes and internet access.<sup>34</sup> These facts drive programming decisions that lean towards 'adult-directed and male-skewing brands'.<sup>35</sup> Comedy Central has tried to attract different audiences, but as one of its executives remarks, 'young men have always been at the heart of our demographic . . . they're a barometer for us of what will be a successful show'. While not all viewers of the channel are Caucasian men, its niche audience is characterized as 'white males who, despite their real-life jobs, are still feeling nostalgia for the frat house'.<sup>36</sup> The channel's 'all comedy, all the time' format, built-in male audiences, and online selling of films such as *Office Space*, *Old School* and *The Big Lebowski*, thus affect the terms in which these films have circulated. *The Big Lebowski*'s recycling here relates it to a type of male-oriented comedy and recruits or strengthens a male fan base, thus helping to shape its appropriation.

As cult is a metagenre that can encompass a spectrum of film genres, replay culture, as it incessantly circulates cult, reveals the significance of these 'subgenres' to circulation and consumption. Just as the midnight movie, via programming that associates *The Big Lebowski* with *Rocky Horror*, defines the film overtly as cult, Comedy Central situates the Coens' title in relation to media that emphasize other generic affinities frequently allied with cult, namely 'slacker' and 'stoner' variants of comedy. Showing *The Big Lebowski* in the company of *Office Space* and *Old School* helps to classify it as part of the slacker oeuvre, one that features male characters repudiating the work ethic in various ways. Given the Dude's happy state of unemployment and lifestyle focused on bowling with the boys, the Coens' film falls easily into this category. With its former connection to Chappelle, Comedy Central has also featured his film *Half Baked* and sold it online. A DVD two-pack of both films suggests that the Coens' title is kin to the stoner comedy, another kind of male-oriented farce often fused with the slacker film (such as



Fig. 8. . . . and chaos ensues.

*Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle* [Danny Leiner, 2004]). As their name indicates, stoner films feature drug use and/or drinking; they may also include 'trippy' imagery. *The Big Lebowski*'s links to the stoner film are forged from the Dude's frequent consumption of marijuana and White Russians, hallucinations, and bizarre happenings (for example, as he takes a bath and peacefully smokes grass, German nihilists break down the door and toss a marmot into the tub [figures 7 and 8]). Fans often cite dialogue that helps secure the film's place in the stoner/slacker canon (Maude: 'What do you do for recreation?' The Dude: 'Oh, the usual. Bowl, drive around, the occasional acid flashback'). These colloquial genres, in turn, have popular cinematic forebears that give them deeper cultural foundations, from 'head-trip' fare such as *2001: a Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968) and dope-smoking and drinking films such as *Up in Smoke* (Lou Adler, 1978), *Dazed and Confused* (Richard Linklater, 1993) and Kevin Smith's and Adam Sandler's early slacker films.

The Internet Movie Database message boards indicate that *The Big Lebowski* has attracted a fan contingent in the West based on its stoner/slacker credentials, suggesting that these forms of comedy have a measure of international recognition. A UK fan writes, for example, that he finds 'the whole lazy slacker guru who sits around bowling with his buddies while drinking cocktails really appealing'. Another in Australia reports that when watching, he wants 'to grab a glass, pour Kahlua, add milk, and have a slacking good time with the convolutedly and trashy experiences of the odd character "heroes" of L.A.', while a New York viewer comments that the film 'is funny, fluffy, and goes down well with a mind-altering substance of your choice'. A London viewer remarks that fans often play drinking games while watching, 'matching the characters shot for shot with White Russians', a practice called 'The *Lebowski* Challenge' by US college students (figure 9).

Of course, *The Big Lebowski* is also identified with its filmmakers in exhibition strategies and fan commentaries. In a Coen brothers' DVD collection, the film joins *Blood Simple* (1984), *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001) and *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003). Packaging it with the Coens' other works places it squarely in relation to their sensibilities and their penchant for riffing on noir, thus also emphasizing *The Big Lebowski*'s reflexive relation to this genre.<sup>37</sup> The DVD cover describes *The Big Lebowski* as a 'hilarious twisted comedy-thriller' that offers 'a visually unique and entertaining world from the creative minds of the Coen brothers'. It thus promotes the film on the merits of its darkly riveting yet funny storyline, funky artfulness and peerless vision.

Fans write appreciatively of the Coens' brilliance, the quality of their scripts, and their actors' performances. Fans' interpretations of directorial style, however, often vary from more academic readings. Critics J.M. Tyree and Ben Walters identify the Coens' films as marked by 'unexpected collage . . . absurd juxtaposition . . . an idiosyncratic approach to character, dialogue, and . . . technique'. They regard *The Big*

37 J.M. Tyree and Ben Walters discuss the film's play on noir conventions in *The Big Lebowski* (London: British Film Institute, 2007), pp. 40–62.

**Fig. 9. One of the many White Russians or 'Caucasians', as the Dude refers to them, consumed during the course of the film.**



38 Ibid., pp. 15–16, 38.

*Lebowski* as a ‘movie of constantly shifting gears’ where ‘for the first time, incongruity becomes the [picture’s] basic key’. Ultimately it is ‘about pastiche’, about sampling and remixing samples into surprising collages.<sup>38</sup> Fans, too, note the unpredictable juxtapositions, idiosyncrasies and random events; however, they see these postmodern elements through what we might call a vernacular mode of surrealism. A US viewer, for instance, admires the film’s ‘genius’, because of its ‘mastery of dialogue. . . . Nihilists, omnipresent White Russians, smoking a J in a stranger’s house without permission, a dream sequence that rivals Madonna videos and a famous TV writer [living] in an Iron Lung in the ’90s! Wow, you couldn’t find all these things in 1000 movies combined and Joel and Ethan give them to us in one rousing adventure.’ A fan in Mexico concurs: the film has ‘got it all. German nihilists! Androgynous flamenco bowlers! Flying feminist avant-garde painter people! Furry little marmots in harnesses!’ Such features represent both a major source of pleasure for enthusiasts and an idiomatic way of grasping the Coens’ style as surrealist.

Though the film may seem a far cry from early twentieth-century surrealism, its apparently random narrative, bizarre characters and encounters, depictions of altered states of consciousness and taboo-breaking (in its free use of profanity and drugs) recall, in colloquial form, some of this aesthetic’s basic elements. Aspects of the film disparaged in 1998 by the critics, one of whom accused the auteurs of ‘simply throwing weirdness at the screen’, are the very things that the fans value. The Coens’ ability to infuse the film with ‘weirdness’ becomes a signature element of their style and reputation. In fact, some internet critics today hail the Coens as cult auteurs because of their ‘quirky, stylish, bizarre, off-beat’ films – a status that allies them with other luminaries in this category, such as Ed Wood and David Lynch.<sup>39</sup> Authorship itself, of course, has long been a locus of feverish adulation; in contemporary

39 Tim Dirks, ‘Cult films’, *AMC Filmsite*, 3 September 2009. <<http://www.filmsite.org/cultfilms2.html>> [accessed 15 November 2009].

40 R. Barton Palmer writes on the director's postmodern reputation in *Joel and Ethan Coen* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

41 Although I do not address this issue at length, the shifting terms by which the Coen brothers' authorial signature has circulated over time deserve more scrutiny. Their example also points more broadly to the impact of the 'auteur cult' now and in the past to film meaning and pleasure.

42 Collis, 'The Dude & I', p. 37.

43 Harry Benshoff, 'The short-lived life of the Hollywood LSD film', *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 47 (2001), p. 32.

44 See, for example, *Booze Movies: the 100 Proof Film Guide*. <<http://www.boozemovies.com>> [accessed 8 December 2009]; John Hulme and Michael Wexler, *Baked Potatoes: a Pot Smoker's Guide to Film and Video* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1996).

45 Jeffrey Sconce, "'Trashing" the academy: taste, excess, and an emerging politics of cinematic style', *Screen*, vol. 36, no. 4 (1995), p. 375.

iterations the Coens' films have been embraced both through the postmodern arthouse<sup>40</sup> and the 'bizarre film' canon. However, their eccentricities as stylists and storytellers, understood through the lens of cult cinema, strongly define *The Big Lebowski*'s popular circulation and reception.<sup>41</sup>

In terms of genre and authorship, *The Big Lebowski* circulates through a number of generic variants and a particular construction of the Coens' reputation that help to establish and fortify the virtues of its 'off-the-wall' credentials. While replay culture can foreground different aspects of genre and authorship for different audiences (noir collections of the Coens' films for noir aficionados, for example), the film's cultish features have played a pivotal role in attracting its core audiences. These audiences, in turn, elicit consideration of a kind of participatory culture rarely discussed in fan studies. According to a 2003 *Lebowski* Fest attendee, the event attracted 'the drunkest people' he had ever seen 'outside of New Year's Eve in Dublin'.<sup>42</sup> The fans that drink, smoke, bowl, quote, slack, swear and laugh during and after screenings appropriate the film in a highly engaged manner. Yet, their behaviour does not have the same redemptive value in academic contexts that other, ostensibly more creative, grassroots activities such as fan art and fiction have claimed.

*Lebowski* fandom presents a 'street-level' participatory culture that hides in plain sight; scholars know that such a culture exists but few approach it seriously, since it seems a quotidian and debased form of consumption. While the 'head trips' of 1960s viewers can be romanticized as early experiments with consciousness, what Harry Benshoff refers to as 'enhanced cinematic spectatorship'<sup>43</sup> remains a perhaps less enchanting but nonetheless key component of filmgoing today. With sources that classify films according to their alcohol or drug quotients<sup>44</sup> and fan commentary that champions these accompaniments to viewing, *Lebowski* fandom taps into a pervasive way of watching films that has long been a part of cinema's everyday life. Moreover, the film's success is due to viewers who are not minority audiences in North America. White male demographics are important not only to Hollywood's theatrical business but to the ranks of cult film fandom historically.<sup>45</sup> *The Big Lebowski* thus offers a view of the tastes of a contemporary iteration of this fandom, while also exposing how gender-based appeals are fueled in the aftermarket.

In sum, the environment of replay has informed the process by which *The Big Lebowski* became cult in numerous ways. Through repeat screenings after its theatrical premiere in such venues as cable TV, viewers reappraised the film, deeming it as highly replayable – a key element in developing cult film identities and fan sensibilities. We can now see that its replayability rested on more than discovering its many layers of humour; fans' desires to rewatch it were inspired by the spectacle of its surreal and 'random' events, vivid characters, profane and otherwise 'catchy' dialogue, and focus on drinking and drugs. Repeat

screenings provided the means by which audiences could memorize dialogue, while also spurring transmedia rentals and purchases, showing close ties between repurposing and avid fandoms. The film's sectarian appeal was further forged and disseminated by its appearance on sites linked to cult cinema (the midnight movie and the fan convention) and DVDs marketed to its cult base (the Achiever's Edition), as well as by press reports, fans' private festivities and internet commentary.

In the aftermarket, the film's reissue across media channels affected notions of genre and authorship, as well as fan demographics. The film's replay codified its status as cult, while incorporating comic subgenres that support this designation. Its identity as a cult film infused, particularly, with stoner and slacker film conventions has, in turn, informed a fandom's understanding of the Coen brothers' style as vernacular surrealism. Along with these connections, venues such as Comedy Central have shaped the film's appeal to white male viewers, who are important audiences for such fare and who are 'proud to be in this fraternity of Lebowski-ites'.<sup>46</sup> The film has elicited a fervent participatory culture, with fans expressing devotion through such activities as bowling, cosplay (costume roleplay), convention attendance, internet reenactments and partying. Each of the activities I have discussed enhances fans' interaction with the film and with one another, creating both an aesthetic and an alliance of identity-based taste.

Given the aftermarket's vitality, the contemporary Hollywood cult film is not a thing apart. Certain species of cult cinema are not discontinuous from dominant industry or social practices; instead they represent continuity with, even a shining realization of, the dynamics of media circulation today. In this sense, cult is a logical extension of replay culture: it achieves the kind of penetration into viewers' 'hearts and minds' that media convergence and multi-windowed distribution promote; cultish viewing, in turn, represents a particularly dedicated and insistent pursuit of media inspired by replay. At the same time, cult helps to drive replay culture, motivating both media industries to rerelease films and fans to generate events, testimonials and DIY productions that visibly enter into and influence the mix. Reflecting the complex dynamics of today's mediascape, cult is both a product and an engine of replay. Whatever its role, however, cult's mainstreaming, occasioned in part by the expansion of film's place in domestic settings, is of cardinal importance to contemporary media life.

With its white male fan base, the case of *The Big Lebowski* suggests further that cult is an exercise in taste with the power to signal and affirm gender, racial, generational and other identities that are not on the periphery but at the centre. Film exhibition in the aftermarket, as it targets certain populations, figures crucially in creating identity-based taste. Yet, replay culture's sheer reach – the diverse locales, occasions and audiences involved – means not only that cult often cannot be exclusively identified with marginal devotees, but that thriving groups of cult viewers exist beyond white male demographics. De Palma's

*Scarface* is a notable recent example of a film that has attained immense global popularity among black men, especially gangsta rappers and others invested in this sensibility, while *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997) and *Twilight* (Catherine Hardwicke, 2008) are of substantial personal importance to teenage girls and young women. Moreover, while replay culture may promote loose coalitions of identity-based taste, its prolific nature ultimately guarantees that those coalitions will not be homogeneous; others outside of the core demographic (for example, female fans of *The Big Lebowski*) are sure to join the ranks of admirers.

The international circulation of Hollywood films as one type of cult cinema adds yet further layers to this phenomenon, at the very least because of the social specificity of global contexts and the different modes of replay culture that characterize them. Furthermore, unauthorized forms of circulation, such as piracy and underground markets, may enhance the cult status of texts in unexpected ways. Since aftermarket media and modes of consumption can differ so greatly in transnational contexts, beyond the fact of replay's common existence, we cannot universalize the mechanisms by which cult film status is achieved. Replay culture's role in creating cult films and audiences on the global stage thus awaits further research.