"Bowling Alone" and "The Big Lebowski"

One's about social duty, the other's about The Dude. But do their similarities go beyond the lanes?

BY BRENDAN RADKE
CRUSADER FEATURES EDITOR

It consumes our time like a hungry marmot and it's invaded our vocabularies like a blitzkrieg of nihilists. Yet its unacknowledged ag- gression stands, and we love it. Mind if I do a J? But is there a method behind "The Big Lebowski"? An under- lying theme, a hidden agenda, a massive political statement, perhaps? Probably not, but let's ex- plore the possibility nonetheless. No funny stuff.

For those of you familiar with the Communists school of thought, Robert Putnam's "Bow- ling Alone" should come readily to mind. For those of you who were too busy (watching "Lebowski") to read it, here's a quick synopsis adapted from its author: it's safe to say you know the plot at this point (outside the purposes of this article). There's a lot of ins, a lot of outs, a lot of interested parties, but here it goes: Americans in modern times tend to belong to fewer organizations (the so-called "surgical strike") and are less likely to participate in voluntary associations. Putnam speculated in his mid-90s book/essay, have lost their sense of identity and community. The hustle-bustle, fast-paced lifestyle of many Americans has isolated them in their suburban homes and done away with a social sense of belonging. By its title, Putnam's theory is partially con- structed around the fact that Americans in modern times tend to bowl alone, rather than in teams like they did in the old days. This is our concern, dude.

Onto "The Big Lebowski," a film released in 1998 but set during the Gulf War, a time of rum- pant solo-bowling (it's safe to as- sume Putnam drew much of his data from the early 90s). The ob- vious connection between Putnam's book and his film, of course, "the sport of slobs." After the scene where former activist-hippie (burnout) The Dude's rug is soiled at a bowling alley, we see the character Jackie Treehorn's goons, a long sequence of people bowling rolls along with the opening credits. Most of these characters are in the process of "getting down," to use the parlance of our times, in celebration of a strike. Soon after, The Dude's bowling partner, Vietnam vet Walter, flashes a piece on the lanes because Smokey, a con- ciousness objector, won over the lane. Moreover, Smokey didn't care about the rules. To sum it up, they're on teams, they're into it, and their minds are up, uh, limber.

So we've got happy, team-ori- ented bowlers, the question on all of our minds as we delve the- matically into "The Big Lebowski" is... Johnathon? And what does this have to do with Put- nam?

Note: if you're still reading this, it's safe to say you know the plot of the film, so I won't bother with a synopsis. Calmer than you are.

Although not all of the film's team bowlers are 'normal' (eight- year-olds, dude), we must examine the non-bowlers of the movie to make some contrast. Jeffrey Lebowski (The Big Lebowski), a disabled member of the Square community, steals money from poor little over-achievers. He, as Putnam addresses in his book, is your typical "send-a-check" social participant- he doesn't really care about his cause. He doesn't even use the proper nomenclature for Asian Americans. His wife, Bunny, owes money all over town, and has coitus compulsively, and without pleasure. The police chief of Malibu is a fascist, and Jackie Treehorn treats objects like women. Maude Lebowski, The Dude's lady-friend, wants to raise a child in a single-parent environ- ment. The Dude's just helping her conceive.

These non-bowling characters are a functioning part of modern society in one way or another. They either chat on the phone, or carry their cell phones, and are especially con- cerned with The Money. The Big Lebowski introduces himself as "a very busy man." Jackie Treehorn explains to The Dude his "wave of the future" electronic porno schemes, including the film "Log Jammin,'" of which Bunny is a fan. Maude is a strange modern artist whose work has been com- mended as being very "vaginal." All of these characters are isolated from everyday American life. The Big Lebowski only hangs out with his hockey, Brandt. Maude's only friends are weird artists, while Jackie Treehorn surrounds himself with porn stars at his garden par- ties. The only things that connect these people are The Dude... and The Nihilists. We'll get to them in a minute. They won't care.

The Dude and Walter live in a slower, gentler past. The Dude's stuck in the 60s. He drives a beat up old Dodge, constantly smokes pot, has the occasional acid flash- back, and listens only to Creedence Clearwater Revival. Walter thinks everything is connected to Vietnam, is vehemently concerned with The Money. The Big Lebowski, stars with Bunny in Jackie Treehorn's "Log Jammin,'" and is a former acquaintance of Maude's. To make things even more modern, they're members of the techno-pop group Autobahn. Does nihilism connecting all the modern characters allude to these peoples' apathy towards anything besides money - especially Ameri- ca's declining social capital? Do we have to split hairs here? Am I wrong? It seems fitting, then, that The Dude, Walter, and Donny (the third member of their team) have to battle them at the end of the movie.

So where does this leave us? Perhaps the whole discussion of social decline in America is, like the movie and the Gulf War, anti-climactic. Bunny was never really kid- napped. The Nihilists were never going to cut off The Dude's johnson. The Big Lebowski is probably just showing the hu- morous clash of m o d e r n lifestyles with old ones, not any major prob- lem in America. Perhaps those who see modern evil should, like The Dude, just sit back, focus on the little things (not to say that The Tournament is a little silly), and get caught up in the hustle. The most important thing is not to let these days get you down. But strong men also cry, read- ers. Strong men also cry.

What's his, not getting ripped off by the characters earlier, and drawing a line in the sand - this line you do not cross. You're damn right he's living in the past.

Unfortunately, The Dude and Walter's troubles are all for noth- ing. There was never any ransom money for them to lose. Larry Sellers has never heard of The Money, or Vietnam. The entire movie, they're being jerked around so The Big Lebowski can pin the theft of the money on someone.

The German Nihilists are being jerked around too. Like The Dude, they're connected to the modern characters in one way or another: their leader is trying to get a million dollars from The Big Lebowski, stars with Bunny in Jackie Treehorn's "Log Jammin,'" and is a former acquaintance of Maude's. To make things even more modern, they're members of the techno-pop group Autobahn. Does nihilism connecting all the modern characters allude to these peoples' apathy towards anything besides money - especially Ameri- ca's declining social capital? Do we have to split hairs here? Am I wrong? It seems fitting, then, that The Dude, Walter, and Donny (the third member of their team) have to battle them at the end of the movie.

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