

**‘May be You and Me  
Could Pool Our Resources’:  
Adaptation, Dudeism And *The Big Lebowski***

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**Abstract:**

Ethan and Joel Coen’s film *The Big Lebowski* (1998), was initially derided by fans and critics alike. However, it has gradually amassed a legion of admirers and even inspired a religion called “Dudeism”. Dudeism, as an adaptation of *The Big Lebowski*, marks a paradigmatic schism when it comes to adaptations: it sidesteps the gradual progression from the “source text-adapted text” dichotomy towards understanding adaptations as “an ongoing dialogical process”, in *Adaptation Studies*. This paper attempts to demonstrate how Dudeism’s placement of *The Big Lebowski* as an element within the larger discourse of a worldview, leads to them partaking in what Allan Smithee calls “collecting-as-narrative”. The first section of this paper looks at fans’ response to *The Big Lebowski* as a phenomenon in Media Convergence and Participatory Culture, and its eventual culmination into Dudeism. The second section analyses Dudeism and *The Big Lebowski* as parts of a larger transmedia discourse: a worldview said to have been in existence since the very beginnings of civilization. The final section discusses Dudeism as fan response to *The Big Lebowski*, taking a poststructuralist stance on adaptation as critique before finally making a case for Dudeism to be analysed as an adaptation of *The Big Lebowski*.

**Keywords:** Adaptation, Discourse, Dudeism, *The Big Lebowski*

**Introduction:**

*The Big Lebowski* was a triumph; the film tripled its budget in the box office, generated a cultural following, a loyal admiring viewership, and even an incredibly slow-growing religion. (Hehl 33)

Deemed to be a disaster upon its initial release in 1998 on the basis of reviews and box-office collections, Joel and Ethan Coen's film *The Big Lebowski* eventually went on to become a cult favourite. The gradual adoration for the film has culminated into a travelling festival called "The Lebowski Fest" that is celebrated in various cities across the U. S. A. and Europe. Given the film's popularity, it isn't very surprising that in 2005, Oliver Benjamin, an American journalist and author based in Los Angeles and Thailand formally set up a religion called "Dudeism". A common misconception about Dudeism is that its followers worship The Dude (the protagonist of *The Big Lebowski*). Dudeists however, contend that "Dudeism is not some new shit that has come to light; it has existed since the dawn of civilization and that *The Big Lebowski* is only its New Testament" (Benjamin 7). Most fan cultures seem to occupy themselves either with offering alternative interpretations and filling up narrative gaps with what is famously known as 'fan theories', or with producing fan-made fiction based on the works that become the subject for much fanfare. Dudeism, however, places *The Big Lebowski* in the larger discourse of a worldview. Reading Dudeism as a phenomenon in fan culture, this paper seeks to corroborate a three-fold hypothesis. The first dimension is that *The Big Lebowski* and the fanfare associated with it are a phenomenon in both: Media Convergence and Participatory Culture (Jenkins 6, 11), and it is precisely this which has culminated into the formation of Dudeism. The second one is that when understood as a worldview that has "existed since the dawn of civilization" (Benjamin 7), Dudeism can be seen as an instance of "transmedia storytelling" (Jenkins 25). The third and final one is that in taking a poststructuralist view of adaptation, Dudeism can be read as an adaptation of *The Big Lebowski*.

The paper is effectually divided into three parts, each dealing with one aspect of the aforementioned tripartite hypothesis.

### **Tracing a Genealogy: From *The Big Lebowski* to Dudeism**

In *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006), Henry Jenkins revisits a couple of important concepts in Media Studies: Media Convergence and Participatory Culture. One can argue that it is by virtue of being embedded in these phenomena that *The Big Lebowski*'s discourse has eventually culminated into Dudeism.

In defining media, Jenkins sticks to historian Lisa Gitelman's definition at two levels which proposes that it is "a technology that enables communication" and "a set of associated "protocols" or social and cultural practices that have grown up around that technology" (20). In this sense, several contemporary practices in fan culture such as fan merchandise, internet memes and trolls as well as fan events, among others, qualify as media. With the advent of several new forms of media, one witnesses what Jenkins calls "convergence" between old and new media: "a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content" (12). In "Another Caucasian: Online Fan Response to Donny and the Stranger", Randall Clark brings out the diversity in the nature of *The Big Lebowski*'s fans' online presence. He discusses fans' responses to the film on several online platforms including IMDb, Sporcle, YouTube, Facebook and Quorain is addition to other websites. While the primary focus of his essay is "the manner in which Lebowski fandom manifests itself online" (18), it also serves to elucidate the variety of media that is at play in the process. Right from extensive lists of quotes from the film and general posts about it (IMDb and Facebook), to various games in the form of interactive media (Sporcle) as well as video montages (YouTube) and internet forums (Quora), there is a diverse range of media that it spans

over. The discourse of *The Big Lebowski* hence, is fluid when it comes to the boundaries of media platforms that it seems to occupy:

By [media] convergence, I mean the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want. (Jenkins 11)

Going by this definition, it is clear that *The Big Lebowski* and the fan discourse associated with it is a prime instance of media convergence.

In “The Dude Goes Digital: *The Big Lebowski*, New Media and Participatory Culture”, Peter C. Kunze surveys “the ways and manners in which *Lebowski* fans have embraced, manipulated and occupied digital spaces” (81). Kunze, in his discussion points out how *The Big Lebowski*’s rise to prominence seems to be paralleled by the rise of the internet. While analyzing one particular clip made by Hugh Sullivan Productions that was shared on YouTube, he makes an important observation: “fans and corporations wrestle over ownership – both within the text (in creating the narrative) and outside of the text (in interpreting and ‘using’ the final product, i.e. distribution and exhibition)”(84). The dynamic shared by the fans and the authors of the ‘original’ texts, in the creation of discourses, can be aptly understood by the concept of “participatory culture” that Jenkins spells out in *Convergence Culture*. He proposes that we “see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands” (12). Just like other fandoms, *The Big Lebowski* has an extremely strong online community with intriguing fan theories. However, to fully understand the *The Big Lebowski*’s discourse as participatory culture, one must go beyond these. An interesting source to understand this parallel is what is famously known as ‘The *Lebowski* Fest’: “a festival that celebrates the Coen brothers’ 1998 cult comedy, *The Big Lebowski*” where the founders

claim to have “seen everything from fans dressed as the queen in her damned undies to the pope shitting in the woods to a Vietnam soldier who died facedown in the muck” and the fans enjoy “drinking of White Russians and participate in trivia, farthest-traveled, highest-bowler, and costume contests”(Green et al. 153). Hence, in celebrating an annual festival to commemorate their adulation for *The Big Lebowski*, the fans partake in a participatory cultural discourse through their alternative interpretations, recreations and reappropriations of several elements within the film. The Lebowski Fest has steadily grown in stature over the years and since the first one that was held in Louisville, Kentucky in October 2002, it has been held in over 30 cities in the U.S. as well as in Edinburgh and London(“Information, Man/ About” n.p.).

Oliver Benjamin, an American journalist based in Los Angeles and Thailand founded “Dudeism” in 2005. The religion is inspired by the Dude, the protagonist of *The Big Lebowski*. In speaking of how Dudeism came into being, Benjamin mentions how finding out that he “was not alone in [his] quasi-religious reverence for this largely underappreciated film”(“The Gospel According To The Dude: How The Big Lebowski Inspired A Religion” 231-32)<sup>1</sup>, was a part of the inspiration to ‘create’ Dudeism.

Given that *The Big Lebowski* has been called “[t]he first cult movie of the internet age”(Jones 228), it comes as little surprise that “[f]or years, Dudeism existed only on the internet and in the minds of people”(GAD 234). With an official website (Dudeism.com) including a forum, in addition to an official Newsletter (the Dudespaper) and a Facebook page among others, Dudeism has been called “an open-source attempt to remake religion that fits with modern times”(Rush n.p.)by Oliver Benjamin. It is hence, not very surprising that Dudeism as well, is media convergent and participatorily cultural.

Consequently, it is by virtue of its media convergent nature that the discourse of *The Big Lebowski* and, by extension, Dudeism is participatorily cultural. And it is the implications of these qualities of *The Big Lebowski* and the related discourse which can be seen as at least partly responsible for the formation of Dudeism.

### **The Transmedia Story of Dudeism**

*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... 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. (Klinger 18-19)

In “Becoming cult: *The Big Lebowski*, Replay Culture and Male Fans”, Barbara Klinger points out that *The Big Lebowski* owes a large part of its coming to cult status to the replay culture. She argues that if it were not for the film to be repeatedly replayed and reviewed across several media platforms, it would not have achieved the cult status it boasts of today. This is something that can hardly be denied, as seen in Jones’ assertion that even film critics seem to agree that “repeated viewing enhances the experience of the film” (229).

Even Benjamin claims to have noticed something during a repeated viewing of the film, pointing out that he had not noticed it even though he had seen it before (GAD 231). Dudeism’s founders call it “the slowest-growing religion in the world. An ancient philosophy that preaches non-preachiness, practices as little as possible...” (“Dudeists Of The World Unite!” n.p.). Being inspired largely by the Dude from *The Big Lebowski*, Dudeism is often mistaken to be a religion that worships him. However,

Dudeists posit that “it’s not based on a movie, but on thousands years old principles aimed at living a simpler, better life flowing around obstacles while enjoying the trip” and that “he’s just an example to show some features of what Dudeism is or might become” (Favro n.p.). In acknowledgement of the fact that the core ideas and the philosophy of Dudeism have existed since long before it formally became a religion, Dudeism has recognized a few people, real and fictional, as “Dudeist prophets and peacemakers” whom they collectively call “Great Dudes in History” (“Great Dudes in History” n.p.). Coupled with this acknowledgement, Dudeism also admits to weaving in several strands from sources such as “*The Big Lebowski*, Taoism, Zen, Humanism and much more” (“Dudeism: The Church of the Latter-Day Dude” n.p.). Given this dimension of Dudeism, in addition to its popular and cultural folklore among masses especially on the internet, as a discourse it is truly “open-source”.

Henry Jenkins, in *Convergence Culture*, puts forward the concept of “transmedia storytelling”:

Transmedia storytelling refers to a new aesthetic that has emerged in response to media convergence—one that places new demands on consumers and depends on the active participation of knowledge communities. Transmedia storytelling is the art of world making. To fully experience any fictional world, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience. (25)

Given Jenkins’ claim that the increase in media convergence has incited the advent of transmedia storytelling, it follows that one could very well expect to chalk out the formative presence of both these

phenomena in a given discourse. The role of traditional ‘consumers’, in a transmedia story is pivotal to the formation of the discourse. The simultaneous creation of discourse across multiple platforms of media is precisely what lends it a unique nature: “A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole” (Jenkins 86). Having marked out the convergent nature of Dudeism across various media platforms, it makes sense to probe into its development as a transmedia story. As an open-source religion, the founders of Dudeism point out that: “we rely on our followers to submit ideas, articles, and events that might help us gather up our rosebuds (and other buds), promote the ethos, and learn to abide” (Benjamin, “A Brief History of Dudeism” 156). The best example of this is seen in Dudeism’s welcoming of inductees to Great Dudes in History. Dudeism’s official newsletter, the Dudespaper, has inducted numerous Great Dudes in history through contributions to the Dudespaper to date, including Gandhi, Nietzsche, Tom Hodgkinson, Charles Darwin and Yoda (“Great Dudes in History” n.p.).

In addition to these, Dudeism also sees discursive creation in the form of merchandise at both The Dudeism Store and the Lebowski Shop (the store at the Lebowski Fest website), “Dudeist literature” across various genres, fan culture and fan theories is related to *The Big Lebowski* and various features of Dudeism’s official website such as Dudeist Memes and The Big Lebowski Haikutomatic (a feature that generates a haiku using lines from the film) amongst several other forms of media. Hence, building on Jenkins’ earlier mentioned observation, one could posit that owing to its discursive production across such a diverse range of media platforms, Dudeism takes on the form of a transmedia discourse that is continually pieced together across these platforms, and that this fluid nature is lent to its creation chiefly by its convergence across numerous media platforms.

### **Dudeism as an adaptation of *The Big Lebowski***

The concept of “adaptation” has gradually evolved over the years. Linda Hutcheon, in the Preface to her book *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006) marks out the three ways in which we engage with stories: by telling, by showing, and by interacting with them (xiv). Hutcheon makes a strong case for the concept to move beyond the confines of fidelity criticism to “a product (as extensive, particular transcoding) and as a process (as creative reinterpretation and palimpsestic intertextuality) (8, 22). The relation between an adaptation and its “source” text then, can be understood, in Mafalda Stasi’s words, as “making and transmitting meaning through collective narrative creation” (Kocic-Zámbó 63). Keeping these notions in mind, it can be argued that Dudeism is an adaptation of *The Big Lebowski* in that the two seem to be engaged in a perpetual interplay of collectively “making and transmitting meaning”. This is best exemplified by the assertion that Dudeism believes in “always being sceptical and always pursuing meaning rather than material” (Benjamin and Eutsey 159). Dudeism qualifies as an adaptation of *The Big Lebowski* by Hutcheon’s framework, since it seems to be a product of the film and its continuous engagement in a sort of “transcoding” with “a way of life, the philosophical rug that really ties the universe together” (Benjamin and Eutsey 12). At the same time, Dudeism is also a “creative reinterpretation” of *The Big Lebowski*, especially the Dude and everything that he does. The best example of this is how it interprets the lines: “Yeah. Well, The Dude abides” (*The Big Lebowski*) in several different ways. While the film’s directors, Joel and Ethan Coen, have never really provided a convincing answer as to what this statement means, it has not stopped fans from trying to offer their own interpretations of it. Given all these possible interpretations, Dudeism largely contends that, just like “nirvana” in Buddhism, it “can mean whatever the person using it wants it to mean” (Eutsey n.p.). It seems then that “creative reinterpretation” is not a mere quality, but a defining feature of Dudeism, evinced by the fact that despite the lack of clarity

towards what “abide” means, it is popularly perceived as a term “befitting the core philosophy of all things Dude” (Bertocci 17).

In addressing the “palimpsestic intertextuality” that underlies the dynamic between Dudeism and *The Big Lebowski*, it is essential to first take a look at how this conception of adaptation has influenced the field of adaptation studies in recent years. The metaphor of a palimpsest was first used in discussions about intertextuality and textual transcendence in *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1982). Here, the term “palimpsestuous reading” was employed to indicate that in reading intertextual elements between texts, one must look for a relational dynamic rather than a hierarchical one:

[O]ne text can become superimposed upon another, which it does not conceal but allows to show through. The hypertext invites us to engage in a relational reading, the flavour of which [. . .] may well be condensed in [. . .] [the expression] palimpsestuous reading. (Genette 398-99)

While Genette employed the adjective “palimpsestuous” to refer to a relation between intertextual discourses, later critics have come to use it in their theorization of adaptation. The first of these was Mafalda Stasi, who in “The Toy Soldiers from Leeds: The Slash Palimpsest” employs “*palimpsest* to indicate a nonhierarchical, rich layering of genres, more or less partially erased and resurfacing, and a rich and complex continuum of themes, techniques, voices, moods, and registers” (119) [emphasis in original].

Through Genette’s framework, Dudeism offers a new way to look at *The Big Lebowski*: as part of a larger, pre-existent worldview. Taking into account Stasi’s metaphor, one must point out that Dudeism as an adaptation does something very unusual. While, usually, it would be the adapted text that would seem to lead to the “resurfacing” of the “continuum of themes, techniques, voices, moods, and registers”, Dudeism flips this notion on its head. Dudeism suggests that Great Dudes

in History, who were imbibed in the Dudeist worldview long before it got formally established as a religion, “merely lounged silently on the fringes of our cultural carpet, waiting patiently for the tides to turn”(Benjamin and Eutsey 8). In this sense, as well as in calling *The Big Lebowski* the “New Testament” of Dudeism, there lies a clear indication that it is in fact the film that is the “resurfacing” of a whole discourse that has been around since a long time.

According to Simone Murray, the “post-structuralist reconceptualization of adaptation as critique... posit[s] culture as a vast web of references and tropes ripe for appropriating, disassembling, and rearranging” (5-6). This serves as another crucial tool to understand Dudeism as an adaptation of *The Big Lebowski*. It is through a critical assessment of the film’s ideological currents that Dudeism seems to revive a marginalized discourse: “down through the ages, this [Dudeist] “rebel shrug” has fortified many successful creeds”(Benjamin and Eutsey 13). In calling Dudeism “a modern version of ancient Chinese Taoism which uses the film *The Big Lebowski* as its primary liturgical vehicle” (Benjamin, *The Tao of the Dude* 3), one seems to “think of [its] narrative adaptation in terms of a story’s fit and its process of mutation or adjustment, through adaptation, to a particular cultural environment” (Hutcheon 32).

The idea of an adaptation as a cultural transmutation of another text is also a notion embedded in post-structuralism (Stam 197). When seen through the lens of Dudeism, *The Big Lebowski* seems like a film with allusions to numerous discourses which have existed since before it. Especially given its allusions to several schools of thought such as Buddhism, Existentialism and Tao, “*The Big Lebowski* therefore instantiates the cultural collection as a strategy for generating postmodern narrative” (Smithee 257).

## **Conclusion**

This paper has sought to point out how Dudeism, as an adaptation of *The Big Lebowski*, seems to completely do away with the hierarchal dichotomy that it would traditionally be expected to share by placing the film as a “New Testament” in a pre-existing worldview. Hence, Dudeism marks a paradigmatic schism when it comes to adaptations: it sidesteps the gradual progression from the “source text-adapted text” dichotomy towards understanding adaptations as “an ongoing dialogical process” in adaptation studies. Whether this discursive rupture is a one-off or the spurring of a trend, however, calls for a separate investigation of its own.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>All further references appear within the text in parenthesis as (GAD).