

## **“Towards an Interrogation of Masculinity’s Commodification: Deleuze’s Control Society & The Big Lebowski”**

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### **Abstract:**

In the Coen brothers’ *The Big Lebowski*, the character of the Dude appears to offer a radical identity that opposes consumerism, but, by examining the film with Deleuze’s theoretical concept of the control society, it is clear that the Dude and other masculine characters are trapped in closed loops of consumption. Examining the commodification of gender, this paper seeks to open up the potentialities of creative and revolutionary subjectivities beyond the confines of late capitalism. Recognizing that such potentialities are routinely sealed off in the interests of capital, it becomes necessary to reflect on the mechanisms that capture and enclose modes of resistance. Therefore, instead of employing economic models and language that frame cultural capital, this analysis embraces culture as creative force.

**Key words:** Masculinities, gender commodification, Deleuze studies, control society, *The Big Lebowski*

## **Erkeklığın Metalaştırılmasını Sorgulamaya Doğru: Deleuze'ün Kontrol Toplumu ve 'The Big Lebowski'**

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### **Özet:**

Coen Kardeşler'in The Big Lebowski adlı filminde, 'Dude' karakteri, tüketimciliğe karşı koyan radikal bir kimlik ortaya koyar gibi görünür. Oysa ki filmi, Deleuze'ün 'kontrol toplumu' kavramı çerçevesinden incelediğimizde, Dude'un ve filmdeki diğer eril karakterlerin kapalı tüketim döngülerinin tuzağına kapılmış oldukları açıktır. Bu makale, toplumsal cinsiyetin metalaştırılmasını inceleyerek, geç kapitalizmin sınırlarının ötesindeki yaratıcı ve devrimci öznellik olanaklarını tartışmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu olanakların, rutin bir biçimde sermayenin çıkarları içinde mühürlü kaldıkları kabul edildiğinde, direnmenin çeşitli biçimlerini el geçirip kuşatan mekanizmalar üzerine düşünmek elzem hale gelir. Bu nedenle, burada sunulan analiz, kültürel sermayeyi çerçeveleyen ekonomik modelleri ve dili işe koşmak yerine, kültürü yaratıcı bir güç olarak ele almaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Erkeklik, toplumsal cinsiyetin metalaşması, Deleuze çalışmaları, kontrol toplumu, The Big Lebowski

This paper examines the commodification of gender, specifically masculinity, in *The Big Lebowski* (Coen and Coen 1998) through Deleuze's concept of the control society. Such an analysis aims to open up the creative potential of culture that is restricted and contained by consumption practices that continuously defer and deny the embodiment of transcendent ideals of gender. These transcendent ideals of gender are formed by a series of representations, such as the hard bodies of the Reagan era (Jeffords 1994), and upheld as the quintessence to aspire towards for a particular group of gendered consumers. Mediated by our visually saturated culture, transcendent ideals of masculinity and femininity are associated with goods and services that individuals consume within ritualistic patterns in attempts to embody their quintessence of a gendered body. Although subjectivities in *The Big Lebowski* (1998) appear to be modes of resistance to the commodification of gender, I will argue that any resistance is reinscribed into consumption practices that suppress the capacity to challenge dominant ideologies and other power structures. What is at stake in such an analysis is the possibility of masculinities, and moreover creative and revolutionary subjectivities, outside of closed loops of consumption that are structured by mechanisms of capitalism. Therefore, as a move towards embracing the potentialities of culture as creative force, we need to further interrogate the ways that capitalism limits and, in turn, feeds off of our imaginative acts of expression.

### **The Commodification of Masculinity**

First, what is commodification of masculinity? As John Beynon defines it, the commodification of masculinity is "the commercial devices whereby masculinity, in all its varieties, is packaged and promoted in advertising, fashion and the media" (159). Initially, commercial masculinity is discussed through the emergence of the "New Man" and the rise in marketing of products to men in the 1980s (Nixon 1996, Edwards 1997, & Benwell 2003), which causes masculinities to be increasingly defined by the purchasing of goods and services. Thus, I

define the commodification of masculinity as the visual idealization of masculinities that create transcendent ideals of gender, or mediated masculinities.<sup>2</sup> In an attempt to embody these mediated masculinities, individuals continuously purchase products and services associated with these ideals. As Helene Shugart argues, “the pervasiveness and even entrenchment of commercial masculinity in contemporary popular culture are undeniable” (282). It is the undeniable pervasiveness of masculinity as represented by commodities that mark an important phenomenon to interrogate because of its association with capitalism and its implications for culture as modes of resistance.

Shugart, in “Managing Masculinities: The Metrosexual Moment”, outlines how the commodification of masculinity initially poses a threat to conventional, normative masculinity and, then, she goes on to argue that metrosexuality functions as an important rhetorical device that negotiates and manages this tension between commercial and normative masculinity. I want to call attention to the ways that such a negotiation adjusts masculinity within the coordinates of commodification, which reframes masculinity through consumption practices as opposed to designating commercial masculinity as a challenge of conventional, normative masculinity (Shugart 295-297). This negotiation has crucial repercussions for the formation of creative and revolutionary subjectivities because such potentialities are doubly enclosed within gender as well as commodification. While critical examinations of gender are ongoing within gender studies discourses<sup>3</sup>, the relationship of gender and commodification remains largely unexamined.

If, as Braidoitt argues, “gender is just a historically contingent mechanism of capture of the multiple potentialities of the body, including generative or reproductive capacities” (98), then, what implications arise for already limited potentialities when further restricted by commodification? In my view, this double capture further limits the body by framing its potentialities within consumption practices. Therefore, gender studies should approach the openness of individualist expression within the coordinates of global capitalism with

caution as the endless availability of identities are themselves restricted by closed loops of consumption. As Braidotti argues,

advanced capitalism is a spinning machine that actively produces differences for the sake of commodification. It is a multiplier of deterritorialized differences, which are packaged and marketed under the labels of 'new, dynamic and negotiable identities' and an endless choice of consumer goods. This logic triggers a proliferation of vampiric consumption of quantitative options (58).

The production of differences appears to open up possibilities for celebration because we now have the ability to be who we want to be, but these new, dynamic, and negotiable identities are means for consumption as opposed to ends in and of themselves. In a society saturated by market logic, our freedom is no longer a choice and, instead, as Shaviro states, "[t]he objective function of the market is that it 'forces us to be free'" (80). Creative and revolutionary subjectivities are stripped of radical potentialities and framed within closed loops of consumption that deliver a ceaseless stream of goods and services that structure these commodified identities. Such a limitation has effects all gendered bodies in our current historical location, but, in this paper, I will focus primarily on the ways in which masculinity is commodified as a way of beginning an interrogation of the implications and consequences.

How can creative and revolutionary subjectivities escape the double capture of gender and commodification? Reeser appears to ask the right questions to begin such a project: "How could masculinity be considered not in reaction to stasis, but as pure becoming? How could masculinity look forward to change and new forms instead of backward to previously articulated definitions created by me and my cultural context?" (46-47). In *Masculinities in Theory*, Reeser goes on to argue that "by employing a framework influenced by the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, masculinity would be defined as a series of possibilities, a series of constant becomings" (47). However, Reeser wants to reterritorialize these potentialities in relation to subjectivities

that he simplifies as “an endless series of different masculinities that never recur” (47), which he frames as “a possible springboard for pleasure in change” (47). While Reeser is posing the questions that open up capacities to collapse the capture of creative and revolutionary subjectivities, his focus remains within the pleasure of consumerism (Casarino 201). Viagra is given as a representative of this new possibility because of its ability to make the non-erect into a once-again-erect (47), but Reeser’s generation of an identity through the consumption of a drug specifically packaged and marketed as a means to access new, dynamic, and negotiable identities fails to escape the coordinates of the spinning machine of capitalism.

Furthermore, a framework influenced by Deleuze and Guattari should not seek the pleasure of consumerism; rather, it should seek “to untie the pseudobond between desire and pleasure as an extrinsic measure” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 171, ATP hereafter). As Deleuze and Guattari state in ATP, “pleasure is in no way something that can be attained only by a detour through suffering; it is something that must be delayed as long as possible because it interrupts the continuous process of positive desire” (171-172). Perhaps Reeser’s discussion is victim to its attempt to oversimplify philosophies of immanence, but, nonetheless, masculinities can never escape into a series of constant becomings if masculinities are something that is to be defined or if these masculinities occur in relation to consumerism. Moreover, masculinity will always exist as the molar line par excellence (ATP 320) and if we want to embrace the creative and revolutionary potentialities of subjectivities then it becomes necessary to disengage these potentialities from the confines of gender and commodification. This disengagement will involve a break from the capture of commodification, but it is to be followed by another break from the restriction of gender so that the mechanisms that formulate identities based on the binary of masculinity/femininity are collapsed.

So, how do we initially break from the closed loops of consumption that are sustained by the commodification masculinity? First, a distinction becomes necessary between pleasure and the

pleasure of consumerism. In the pleasure of consumerism the subject “is caught in a circulation and is forever leaping from commodity to commodity in search of that final commodity which will surely grant the ultimate pleasure” (Casarino 199). Within closed loops of consumption, masculine consumers leap from commodity to commodity, always already searching for that next product or service that will allow them to embody the mediated masculinity that is idealized. I will not critique pleasure as such because pleasure as such “is the fold of desire: it is the immanent point of tangency between our bodies and the force of desire” (Casarino 202). Therefore, instead of seeking what new pleasures may be possible by consuming Viagra, this thinking aims to demonstrate that our pleasures exist in any and every moment in which we embrace the event we find ourselves within as opposed to the next instant of pleasure to come, or the instant that will grant the ultimate pleasure. While closed loops of consumption promise the commodity that will ultimately allow the embodiment of transcendent ideals, this commodity is always already the next commodity to be consumed. Instead, by recognizing the denial and deferral of pleasure in the commodification of masculinity, it becomes apparent that products and service do not construct masculinities; rather, masculinities are always what they are in a moment.

On the one hand, we can pursue the pleasure of consumerism and use a product like Viagra that offers a productive reterritorialization, which continues to seek a pleasure that is always deferred and denied in the instant of the next pleasure to come. On the other hand, we can embrace a deterritorialization of masculinities, which I propose is possible through the recognition that masculinities are merely codes and are no different than the codes of femininities or animalities or technologies. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, “it is as though human alienation through surplus labor were replaced by a generalized ‘machinic enslavement,’ such that one may furnish surplus-value without doing any work (children, the retired, the unemployed, television viewers, etc.)” (ATP 542-543). If we seek to be defined, if we seek commodified identities, then we will no doubt be sold them and given

the bits of deferred pleasure that come along with a Viagra prescription or a weekend spent golfing. Selling is not done all at once and, more often than not, we are not even aware we are buying in. But, even those on the outskirts are slaves to commodification – think of the hippest of countercultures and the regulation of appearance and activities they constantly undergo. If masculinities are to escape definition and enter into a series of constant becomings that realizes creative and revolutionary subjectivities, then we must go beyond Reeser’s goal that is “to focus on what [masculinity] can and does become and how it continues to become something new” (47). Masculinities are already all they can ever become. Masculinity can only become if we define it. When we collect the codes that suit our ideal of who we are and structure them and submit to stratification, then we remain committed to the pleasure of consumerism that flashes briefly in the instant of the next commodity as we maintain the masculinity we have constructed. Even when we add new, dynamic, and negotiable identities and assume we have somehow ceased to represent a hegemonic ideal, the potentialities of our bodies remain doubly captured by gender and commodification. So, how can we escape to spaces outside of this capture? One important move in launching such an escape is to examine the coordinates of the society that controls us.

### **Deleuze’s Control Society and *The Big Lebowski* (1998)**

In my view, it is necessary to take into account the parameters of Deleuze’s control society if what is at stake is the possibility of masculinities, and moreover creative and revolutionary subjectivities, outside of closed loops of consumption that are structured by mechanisms of capitalism. In a late essay, “Postscript on Control Societies”, Deleuze outlines how we have shifted from disciplinary to control societies. This shift creates a society where, as Skott-Myhre states, “no one’s social position is secure and no one knows for sure who they are or how to achieve success within the realm of shifting social expectation” (45-46). A lack of security and certainty is produced



because “[t]he categories of development, such as age, rites of passage, maturity and the entry and exit points into adolescence, middle age and old age become indeterminate” (46). With specific reference to the commodification of masculinity, Deleuze’s concept of the control society allows us to understand how masculinity is continually denied and deferred through the consumption of products and services associated with ideals of masculinity. This uncertainty is evident in the anxieties of the other Jeffrey Lebowski in *The Big Lebowski* (1998). He laments, “Funny – I can look back on a life of achievement, on challenges met, competitors bested, obstacles overcome. I’ve accomplished more than most men, and without the use of my legs. What? What makes a man, Mr. Lebowski?” (*The Big Lebowski*). The indeterminate characteristics of the categories of development that define masculinity and manhood are clear in the other Jeffrey Lebowski’s inability to determine if he has been made a man. He references a life of achievement that should secure, in his view, a position within society: a man, a successful man. However, the other Jeffrey Lebowski remains unclear as to how to achieve success and how to make oneself a man. This scene continues with a relational quality that, for the other Jeffrey Lebowski, used to determine masculinity and make someone a man. He asks the Dude: “Is it being prepared to do the right thing? Whatever the cost? Isn’t that that makes a man?” (*The Big Lebowski*). What the other Jeffrey Lebowski’s uncertainty represents is the erosion of clear categories of development for masculinity and making men, which is a characteristic of Deleuze’s control society.

Without the ability to determine clear categories of development, in a control society the commodification of masculinity captures the potentialities of bodies within closed loops of consumption. It is in a control society, within closed loops of consumption, that “advertising and marketing produce subjectivities that define themselves by what they consume more than what they produce” (Holland 71). Therefore, the result is that a man is never made. The uncertainty expressed by the other Jeffrey Lebowski is characteristic of masculine subjectivities that are never able to completely embody transcendent ideals of gender,

which are continuously deferred and denied, and, as a result, these subjectivities are endlessly redefined through consumption. Thus, on the one hand, we have the other Jeffrey Lebowski's 'trophy wife' Bunny, the wall of awards and achievements purchased through philanthropy, and the mirrored cover of time magazine which epitomizes the inability to hold and maintain the stable identity Lebowski seeks – an idealized version of masculinity associated with successful capitalists and philanthropists. On the other hand, we have the Dude who is unimpressed by the other Lebowski's lifestyle, but, nonetheless, the Dude defines himself equally through what he consumes – bowling and White Russians – as opposed to what he produces.

So, on one level, the Dude's refusal to concern himself with employment and production appear to be a challenge to normative masculinity as the other Jeffrey Lebowski refers to him as a 'bum', but it is apparent within the parameters of a control society that such a challenge does not constitute a creative or revolutionary subjectivity. Despite the logic in Kazecki's argument that "[b]eing a bowler does not require the characteristics needed from a man in the production-orientated modern capitalist society" (156), recognizing the ongoing shift from a disciplinary society to a control society strips the Dude's subjectivity of any radical defiance. Unlike the Cynthia's dog that Walter brings bowling, the Dude is continuously buying beer, bowling shoes, White Russians, marijuana, burgers, and what have you. He may not define himself by a business legacy or philanthropy, but the Dude is captured by a closed loop of consumption suited to his 'new, dynamic, and negotiable' lifestyle. Therefore, Martin-Jones' claim that "[t]he Dude does not adhere to the throwaway ethos of consumerism, as we see in his treatment, or rather in the film's treatment, of his car" (145) is simply not valid when considering the parameters of a control society. Sure, the Dude is not regularly buying a new car, but he is continuously purchasing a set of goods and services that characterize his subjectivity: mainly White Russian ingredients and bowling. Reading the Dude's subjectivity as a rejection of consumerism and as a mode of resistance, like Kazecki's and Martin-Jones' readings, fails to recognize the

consumption practices that structure the Dude's subjectivity.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, such readings support the need for the further examination and interrogation of the economization of everything because it is apparent that sites of resistance are no longer easily carved outside the modes of production or social institutions. Through the recognition of the economization of everything, examining our current historical location exposes the fact, "that we will increasingly lack a space for creative 'resistance'" (Marks 54). Refusing to buy a car is simply a consumer choice as opposed to a mode of resistance because an endless selection of other consumer choices is available to capture the radical potential of any refusal. Even refusing to work is simply choosing to defer an investment of your human capital in the marketplace (Shaviro 78). When everything is commodified, refusing as a mode of resistance becomes increasingly impossible.

The Dude's lack of employment seems to be an enigma in the film. As Wall points out, "one of the mysteries the film leaves us with is precisely what he does to support his bowling and White Russian habits" (122). It is significant that Wall recognizes these pursuits as habits because it reframes the apparent site of resistance, that some believe the Dude occupies, within the coordinates of consumption. Not simply consumption out of necessity, rather, habit that suggests a dependency and ritualistic repeating. Thus, by recognizing the ongoing shift from disciplinary society to control society that is occurring in the historical location of the film – set in the early 1990s when Deleuze is also writing "Postscript on Control Societies" – it is apparent that the revolutionary subjectivities of the disciplinary society are re-inscribed into the developing neoliberal framework. Therefore, the other Jeffrey Lebowski's statement rings ever more true: "Your revolution is over, Mr. Lebowski. Condolences. The bums lost. My advice is to do what your parents did; get a job, sir" (The Big Lebowski). Although, it is evident that the other Jeffrey Lebowski's insistence on employment is unable to provide the stability he assigns to it – recall his lamentation discussed previously – the 'bums' do seem to have lost and what they have lost is the radical potentialities of refusing. Refusing to purchase, to work, and

to participate is increasing sealed off and the modes of resistance once aligned with such creative and revolutionary subjectivities are diluted in White Russians, marijuana, and bowling.

The Dude is far from the only radical 'bum' that no longer exerts revolutionary potentialities. Walter and Donny, the Dude's friends, Smokey, the conscientious objector and pacifist, as well as Marty, the Dude's landlord, and the nihilists all represent diluted radical positions that were once modes of resistance. As Wall observes, "[w]ith these characters the film announces itself as a mediation on the fate of the sixties, its various types and its revolutionary and utopian aspirations" (123). Walter's character signifies the increasing impossibility to define a radical masculinity via violent and military pursuits, which leads Walter searching for conflicts to prove his masculinity and, when ultimately his searching proves impotent, he retires to the bowling alley to drink beer and ponder his past efforts in the Vietnam war. Donny's character signifies a similar impotency through the failed resistance of radical countercultures like surfing. While, no doubt, such countercultures functioned as modes of resistance against the rigid structures of institutions, the current pursuits of surfing, skateboarding, snowboarding, among other radical activities, including parkour, no longer represent a radical opposition. Instead, these pursuits are offered an endless choice of consumer goods that are catered to the formation of new, dynamic, and negotiable identities. Marty, the Dude's landlord, does not consume bowling and beverages like the Dude, Walter, and Donny, and he appears to represent a radical, artistic subjectivity. As Wall notes, Marty is "a performance artist – this aesthetic mode surely has its roots in the happenings of the sixties and seems relevant here for its implicit rejection of the art object's commodification" (133). A major concern of Marty's, however, is the venue where he will perform, which is the first thing he says: "Dude, I finally got the venue I wanted" (*The Big Lebowski*). Perhaps, arguing that Marty privileges a venue, a site purchased for his performance, over the performance itself is reading too much into a minor character and scene in the film. However, considering Wall's point, perhaps such instances should be given more

analysis in relation to the economization of everything. My first reaction to Marty's insistence on a specific venue might be: whatever happened to performing on the street? Then, I quickly recall how even street art today, like the work of Banksy, is quickly cut from buildings and sold to wealthy 'admirers'.

While violence, most obviously, as well as countercultures and art are increasing commodified, especially the identities defined through participation in these once potentially creative or revolutionary pursuits, what about pacifism and nihilism? Without going into specific details of each belief system, it appears either foundation could frame a radical identity opposed to consumerism. Thinking of the general foundations of each philosophy, objection to violence and objection to meaning, there seems to be a foundational opposition to the pursuit of commodified ideals. The Big Lebowski reveals, however, that these belief systems are not guaranteed to be adequate modes of resistance against the commodification of masculinity. If we recall the nihilists from the film that supposedly believe in nothing, it is apparent that this form of nihilism does believe in something: money. This belief is something to be afraid of when encountering these nihilists, despite Walter's reassurance to Donny: "No, Donny, these men are nihilists. There's nothing to be afraid of" (The Big Lebowski). It turns out these nihilists do have a foundational ethos beyond an objection to meaning: the pursuit of money.

The final conflict between Walter and the nihilists, when a ransom is demanded, demonstrates the nihilists' ethos:

WALTER. No, without a hostage, there is no ransom. That's what ransom is. Those are the fucking rules.

NIHILIST #2. His girlfriend gave up her toe!

NIHILIST #3. She thought we'd be getting million dollars!

NIHILIST #2. Its not fair!

WALTER. Fair! Who's the fucking nihilist here! What are you, a bunch of fucking crybabies?

The Coen Brothers, with their keen knack for humorous dialogue, create a comical situation that, within the diegetic space of the film, contributes to the comedy as a whole. Moreover, for the purpose of thinking this film in relation to Deleuze's concept of the control society, this interaction reveals a distinction between a fascist nihilism and a capitalist nihilism (Badiou 158-162). As discussed by Badiou these two nihilisms belong to the same world that "of money, of blind power, of cynical rivalry, of hidden gold of primary resources, of total scorn for peoples' everyday lives, and of the arrogance of a self-certitude based on the void" (158). On the one hand, fascist nihilism commits acts that remain unnamed and the nihilists remain anonymous as well (Badiou 160). On the other hand, capitalist nihilism is "nihilist in its extensive form, the market having become worldwide; nihilist in its fetishization of the formalism of communication; and nihilist in its extreme political poverty, that is to say, in the absence of any project other than its perpetuation" (Badiou 161). Thus, the nihilists from *The Big Lebowski* do not represent a radical subjectivity that functions as a mode of resistance, but, instead, they represent the fundamental basis for the economization of everything: only capital means anything. Sell sex, exploit animals, ignore global warming, and cut off your toe because nothing else matters – ethically, morally, or politically – and everything is a means to acquire money.

It is within this capitalist nihilism that the commodification of masculinity captures the radical potentialities of creative and revolutionary subjectivities and re-inscribes them into consumption practices. Participation in closed loops of consumption seals off any threat from these once-upon-a-time modes of resistance and produces: "Man as shopping" (Badiou 161). All modes of resistance find themselves in the same limbo, or bowling alley, purchasing goods and services that structure their identities. We may feel that we are new, dynamic, and negotiable, but, in actuality, we are all the same. According to Badiou:

As man (or woman) the consumer is the same as everyone else insofar as he or she looks at the same window display...The principle is that anyone who is able to buy –

as a matter of right – anything being sold is the equal of anyone else... However, as we all know, this equality is nothing but frustration and resentment (Badiou 161).

Therefore, the pacifists can take pleasure in consumption together with the militants, which is visible in the relationship between the Dude and Walter because each man defines his character within a separate belief system, but this system is a mere consumer choice, a flavour, in the commodification of masculinity. It seems everyone from Smokey to the Jesus to Walter can pay for a lane and repeatedly knock down some pins. At the same time, the frustration and resentment that Badiou acknowledges as comprising this equality of the consumer is evident in the outbursts of the various characters, such as Walter's constant concern about the rules or the Dudes' persistent irritation due to Walter's Vietnam references. The pleasure of consumerism has no pleasure at all as the pleasure it promises is always deferred and denied. Similarly, the pleasure of transcendent ideals of gender is always deferred and denied. So, what options do we have to escape the capture of commodification?

The frustration and resentment becomes amplified when we attempt to find, within the coordinates of culture, a mode of resistance because we quickly discover, as Shaviro argues, that "[e]ven when we seek to oppose the most outrageous depredations of human livelihoods and of the physical environment, we find ourselves using the language and the presuppositions of cost-benefit analysis, optimization, and so on" (79). We repeat the words of state, of capital, and of media: "this aggression will not stand" (*The Big Lebowski*). Furthermore, we feel ever more inadequate as the aggression continues on. What becomes apparent is that "[w]e no longer have the language to articulate radical demands. We suffer from a failure of imagination" (Shaviro 79). We consume our goods and services with the anticipation of a revolution, a masculinity, a pleasure, or anything that is other than this, but all we find is a deferral or a denial. When faced with the failure of radical endeavours, when the plan proves to be nothing more than a consumer

choice, what do we have left to say but: “Fuck it, Dude, let's go bowling” (The Big Lebowski)?

Recognizing this message in the in film, Douglass and Walls observe how susceptible people are to consumerism within the coordinates of nihilistic capitalism without explicitly articulating it. In their essay “Takin’ ‘er Easy for All Us Sinners,” in *The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers*, Douglass and Walls conclude that life is purposeless and meaningless “[a]ccording to The Big Lebowski...” and “[u]nless we can identify some objective or transcendent source of purpose or meaning, we may be hard pressed to disagree” (160). It is apparent that the functioning of late capitalism offers only dismal lives at best and because of this dull reality we welcome, with open wallets, any product or service that promises a transcendent source of meaning or purpose. In comparison, objective sources seem to be continuously fading. The Big Lebowski demonstrates that categories of development have eroded, which reveals that the meaning of something like masculinity “...is basically impossible to define, rather than some performed abstraction on display” (Sutton and Wogan 90). So, amid our anxiety that stems from an inability to know for sure who we are, direct and devious advertisements solicit lifestyles comprised of products and services that promise a way out through the embodiment of a transcendent ideal of gender. But, even when the shortcomings of such lifestyles are obvious and we search for something that has more value, something that pay-offs in the end, something that is worth earning, we must ask is there meaning and purpose outside of the economization of everything? Can we break free of consumerism and commodification?

Despite the bleak outlook for creative and revolutionary identities that can establish a mode of resistance through culture, in my view, by interrogating the coordinates of our confinement in commodification, or the economization of everything, a line of flight is still possible. In relation to Deleuze’s society of control, Skott-Myhre states that, “by the time a self can be comprised as a site of resistance or challenge, all definitions have shifted to accommodate, enclose and incorporate the insurrected knowledge and radical self identification” (46). As subjects



we are free to move then – for example masculinities are always in fluctuation or ongoing negotiation<sup>5</sup> – but identifying a site of resistance only leads to enclosure within the closed loops we are trying to escape. The potential way out is continuous fluctuation, the embracing of an ongoing negotiation that has no goal to completely negotiate. It is not a bad idea put off job-hunting to go bowling with friends instead; it is an experiment. However, to assume this practice could become a solution in itself is an issue. Then you begin defining yourself through bowling. You say, “Fuck it, dude. Let’s go bowling” (*The Big Lebowski*) and you seek out the pleasure of consumerism found at the bowling alley. You get a new, dynamic, and negotiable identity to replace the old identity that was previously shed. When I state that we should embrace what masculinities have yet to become, I am not talking about trying to be an actual *Big Lebowski* that defines himself through business and philanthropy. I am not talking about smoking a lot of marijuana and drinking a lot of White Russians. I am not talking about achieving high scores, being all that you can be, realizing one’s true potential, or even winning. Why? Because, as Skott-Myhre states, “this is not a transcendent ‘yet’, an idealized, perfected self not yet realized, but the ‘yet’ of nothing. It is the unthought, undone, unspoken, unpracticed ‘yet’ of infinite possibility; the mass of ‘yet’, the horde of ‘yet’, the ‘twinkle’ in the eye of nothing” (48). Instead of working towards transcendent ideals of gender that continually defer and deny embodiment, this thinking proposes that we consider subjectivities as creative force, which resists definition by its capacity to act. Therefore, instead of using an ideal, a model, a solution, this thinking proposes that masculinity, identity, and revolutionary would no longer be concepts, but subjectivities would be always what they have yet to become and already other than what they are.

## Conclusion

Therefore, we need to continue opening up language and thinking that no longer restricts itself within the confines of commodification. This will not occur through the repetition of mediated messages or in closed loops of consumption. Rather than accept the language and possibility we have been given and sold, we need to experiment with a multiplicity of creative and revolutionary subjectivities. We should break from the routines of our capture, which will involve the realization that

A qualitative step forward is necessary if we want subjectivity to escape the regime of commodification that is the trait of our historical era, and experiment with virtual possibilities. We need to become the sorts of subjects who actively desire to reinvent subjectivity as a set of mutant values to draw our pleasure from that, not from perpetuation of familiar regimes (Braidotti 93).

In addition, if we are to move towards embracing the potentialities of culture as creative force, we need to further interrogate the ways that capitalism limits and, in turn, feeds off of our imaginative acts of expression. One need look no further than the after-markets of *The Big Lebowski* that continue to generate profits for an example of this feeding.<sup>6</sup> So, turning away from cultural capital towards culture as creative force will require creativity dedicated to continuously reimagining subjectivities that experiment with “the natural play of haecceities, degrees, intensities, events, and accidents that compose individuations totally different from those of the well-formed subjects that receive them” (ATP 280). Such reimagining rejects the privileging or valuing of a particular identity as radical, and, instead, embraces revolutionary as continuously mutating and reinventing as opposed to celebrating and returning to a once successful resistance. To avoid praising and attempting to repeat past forms of success, we must be diligent in our critiques of the economization of everything because,

within the parameters of a control society, all sites of resistance will eventually become commodified.

In relation to gender, future interrogations of the commodification of masculinity and femininity are necessary to breakdown the limitations imposed on subjectivities through this double capture. The capacity to turn the mechanisms of gender and commodification back on themselves and open up radical potentialities can allow us to collapse both structures. By recognizing and critiquing the apparatuses of commodification that are at work in cultural products we are sold, like films and TV shows, we can uncover the radical lines that are sealed off. In "The Big Lebowski: Bowling, Gender, Temporality, and Other 'What-Have-You's'," Sutton and Wogan ask: "with so many references to previous masculine styles and posturing on display in [The Big Lebowski], echoing through the filter of past movie and TV references, how can any claim to masculinity not ring hollow?" (90). Indeed, as the film demonstrates, all claims to masculinity are hollow. While this detection may create anxiety that motivates the need to solidify our identity, and consumerism is at hand to fill this void with an abundance of products and services that promise meaning and purpose, an alternative is opened up. Rather than responding negatively to this hollow, we should embrace its affirmative capacities. If, by critiquing the commodification of gender in the parameters of a control society, we can reveal that masculinity and femininity are nothing other than hollow, then we can discard them like the shells they are. Once shell-less, we will have the ability to continuously experiment with new modes of resistance in a constant state of becoming other than what we are as we take pleasure in the moment of our creative acts.

## Notes

1. I want to stress that this will not be an extensive analysis of the film itself, but I do believe such a project is necessary. For the paper at hand, the film provides illustrations that highlight the shift from a discipline society to a control society and the outcomes of this shift.

2.I develop this in greater detail in my current project: *Mediated Masculinities: The Commodification of Masculinity in American Cinema, 1995-2005*.

3.I am referring specifically to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), *Bodies That Matter* (1993), and *Undoing Gender* (2004) as well as R. W. Connell's *Gender and Power* (1987), *Masculinities* (1995), *Gender* (2002), and *Confronting Equality: Gender, Knowledge and Global Change* (2011). Moreover, this remains an ongoing concern in the interdisciplinary field of women's and gender studies.

4.The authors do make valid arguments within their own context, but, in light of Deleuze's concept of the control society, they appear to be misconceived.

5.I am referring here to recent research in masculinities and film studies by Barry Keith Grant, *Shadows of Doubt: Negotiations of Masculinity in American Genre Films* (2011), and Philippa Gates, *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film* (2006). Both scholars critique the notion of a crisis in masculinity by revealing, through the analysis of films, that masculinity is always in an ongoing negotiation or in a state of fluctuation. As a result, masculinity has no prior period of stability that a crisis could develop in relation to.

6.Jenny M. Jones gives an extensive overview of these after-markets and the Lebowsky culture industry in *The Big Lebowski: An Illustrated, Annotated History of the Greatest Cult Film of All Time* (2012).

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