

Krzysztof Majer

University of Łódź

“Receive with Simplicity Everything That Happens to You”: Schlemiel (Meta)Physics in the Coens’ *A Serious Man*

ABSTRACT

Before Joel and Ethan Coen’s 2009 production *A Serious Man*, Jewish motifs have consistently appeared in their cinematic output. However, the Jewish characters functioned in an ethnically diverse setting and rarely took centre stage, with the notable exception of the eponymous struggling leftist playwright in *Barton Fink*. Nevertheless, even here the Jewishness seemed to be universalized into “humanity.” Elsewhere, through their accessory characters, the Coens primarily offered a nod to the illustrious and/or notorious Jewish presence in various spheres of American society (e.g., small-time gangster Bernie Bernbaum in *Miller’s Crossing* or movie mogul Jack Lipnick in the aforementioned *Barton Fink*). In addition, steadfast religious observance has been an object of affable ridicule (e.g., store owner Walter Sobchak in *The Big Lebowski*). *A Serious Man*, however, reveals an unprecedented strategy. Described by the Coens as their most autobiographical film to date, it has a predominantly Jewish cast, deals almost exclusively with a Jewish community in the Midwest, and is heavily steeped in themes which have long been the staple of the Jewish literary tradition. Most evident is the familiar figure of the *schlemiel*, the eternal loser, embodied in the protagonist Larry Gopnik, whose seemingly endless predicaments form the spine of the plot. Marketed as a comedy, *A Serious Man* nevertheless consistently exhibits a dark, existential undercurrent, which renders its decidedly grim ending a rather logical payoff. Drawing on the research of seminal scholars on the subject of schlemiel narratives (e.g., Ruth Wisse, Sanford Pinsker), the essay is an attempt to situate the film within this tradition. Furthermore, I argue that the Coens reinvest the figure of the schlemiel with a philosophical charge that it possessed in folk legends and Yiddish literature; at the same time, they adapt the schlemiel to the postmodern condition. This allows them to address the fundamental uncertainty of our age, signalled in the film through the formulae of Heisenberg and Schrödinger.

The main attempt of this essay is to showcase what I consider to be an unusual contemporary use of a figure familiar from Jewish folklore—the schlemiel—in Joel and Ethan Coen’s 2009 film, *A Serious Man*.¹ In sketching a brief portrait of the schlemiel so as to argue the existential and potentially transgressive dimension of the comedy which he engenders, I shall draw on the work of Ruth Wisse, author of the classic study *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero* (1971), in which she traces the fates of that figure in folk legends, Yiddish literature, and the prose of key 1950s and 1960s Jewish-American writers. Subsequently, on the basis of recent research into mainstream American cinema and prime time television series, I wish to demonstrate that, for the most part, the schlemiel has been divested of his ethnicity, while his comedy has lost its metaphysical aspect. Further, after arguing the extraordinary position that *A Serious Man* occupies within the Coens’ cinematic output—due to the film’s intense focus on Jewishness—I wish to analyze the ways in which Joel and Ethan Coen reestablish the schlemiel firmly in his original cultural and religious framework. In order to do so, I intend to focus firstly on the importance of the short fable preceding the narrative proper, and, secondly, on demonstrating how the opening quote (attributed to Rashi) generates the film’s philosophical underpinnings, with particular attention paid to the notion of “receiving.” Among the numerous possible meanings of “receiving” with which the Coens consistently toy in the film, I wish to discuss the paradoxically similar reception (as interpretation) of the world through the lens of science and religion, the prominence of the senses (particularly hearing and sight), and, lastly, the foregrounding of language as one of the obstacles to comprehension.

The most succinct way of introducing the schlemiel is to allude to a definition which, I am told, has been particularly popular in the United States. The schlemiel—the eternal loser—is here paired with the *schlimazl* (in Yiddish the phrase *shlim mazl* means bad luck): the schlemiel spills the soup, which then inevitably falls into the *schlimazl*’s lap. Ruth Wisse asserts that this concise definition captures the fundamentals of the distinction; namely, she argues, “the schlemiel is the active disseminator of bad luck and the *schlimazl* its passive victim” (*Schlemiel* 14). Nevertheless, it is the schlemiel who has attracted the bulk of literary attention. This is hardly surprising, since—as Wisse explains further—while the *schlimazl* only encounters misfortune by chance, “[t]he schlemiel’s misfortune is

¹ I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Jody Myers (California State University, Northridge) and Dr. Alex Ramon (University of Reading) for their careful reading of this article and their valuable comments, which I have incorporated into its final version.

his character. It is not accidental, but essential" (*Schlemiel* 14). Thus, the comedy of his adversities is inevitably existential in nature.

Clearly, then, the agenda of "schlemiel literature" amounts to more than descriptions of soup-spilling, although the comic or even absurd element appears to be requisite; in any case, the schlemiel must always remain irreconcilably at odds with the environment in which he finds himself. Wisse posits that, as in the case of Jewish jokes, schlemiel literature aims "to use [the] comical stance as a stage from which to challenge the political and philosophic status quo" (*Schlemiel* 3). In this way, the scholar emphasizes the figure's inherently transgressive potential; the schlemiel's failure to succeed in a particular environment throws into focus that environment's grotesque nature and asserts the existence of a different, superior moral order. In political terms, a Jew's moral sanity may be demonstrated in the face of the madness of war, as in the joke about Katsenstein being drilled by an Austrian officer:

Officer: "Why does a soldier give up his life for his country?"

Katsenstein: "You're right, Sergeant, why does he?" (Wisse, *Schlemiel* 3)

Couched in religious terms, it may be—to quote from Isaac Bashevis Singer's classic schlemiel tale, "Gimpel the Fool"—faith in a "true world" to come, in which "even Gimpel cannot be deceived" (14). Although the transgressive potential may also undermine the philosophical assumptions of the culture from which the schlemiel himself springs—in which case the narrative borders on or becomes blasphemy—the blade of the humour seems predominantly directed away from what may be conceived as the core of Jewishness, and towards that which threatens it. In that sense, the schlemiel must lose, so that the principles to which he adheres in the face of all adversity may be seen as victorious, if only by the recipient of the tale.

Wisse notes that in the postwar decades schlemiel figures disappeared almost entirely from Yiddish fiction, but simultaneously became very popular in American literature and culture, "highbrow" as well as "low-brow," both Jewish and otherwise (*Schlemiel* 60). As the scholar notes, in the face of the Holocaust the subject of defeat-as-victory, or else of moral triumph in a brutal world, became practically insupportable in Yiddish writing (*Schlemiel* 60). Singer's aforementioned short story, published in 1945 and translated into English in 1953, appears to be a notable exception, but Wisse chooses to interpret the history of its publication in both languages as a symbolic act of transplanting an element of Yiddish folklore onto American soil (*Schlemiel* 60). The simultaneous popularity of the figure in American culture—most notably in novels and short stories by

Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud or Bruce Jay Friedman—may be explained, on the one hand, by mainstream culture’s increased tolerance of all things Jewish in the post-war period, and, on the other hand, by the radical semantic expansion of the very term “schlemiel,” in which process he incorporated, or else was equated with, the “absurd man” and the anti-hero. As regards the increased tolerance, the ever contrary Leslie Fiedler claimed in the mid-1960s that “Jewish writers have discovered their Jewishness to be an eminently marketable commodity, their much vaunted alienation to be their passport to the heart of Gentile American culture” (65). At the same time, the variously oppressed Jewish American, with clear markings of a ne’er-do-well—whether Malamud’s shopkeeper or Bellow’s intellectual—became the contemporary everyman. As Canadian writer and journalist Mordecai Richler sneered in a 1971 review of John Updike’s *Bech: A Book*, “[a]fter the take-over, following Bellow, Mailer, Roth & Co., a mere goy would no longer be archetypal” (111). In the 1970s, the figure also entered popular culture, perhaps most memorably in Woody Allen films such as *Sleeper* (1973) or *Love and Death* (1975). Those, however, visibly emphasized the comical effect of absurdity while downplaying the existential drama (sustained for the most part by the literary works mentioned earlier).

Over the last two decades, film and television researchers, e.g., Carla Johnson, David Gillota, and David Buchbinder, have observed and discussed the centrality of the schlemiel figure to such popular series as *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, both co-scripted by Larry David; also on the radar was the series *Friends*, mainstream comedy feature films (especially those starring Ben Stiller, e.g., *Meet the Parents* or *Along Came Polly*), and even the *American Pie* movies. At least some of the above research suggests a further widening and redefinition of the term, in some cases divesting it altogether of ethnicity while foregrounding other features. For instance, Buchbinder invokes Judith Butler’s theory of performative gender to reinterpret the schlemiel as “the inadequately or incompetently masculine male,” i.e., one who, despite his feverish attempts, fails to “pass” as male (230). Crucially, masculinity perceived as inadequate is indeed one of the central traits of the traditionally understood schlemiel, who, as Sanford Pinsker asserts, is often a cuckold or a henpecked husband (17–18). Nevertheless, ethnicity remains a focus for Gillota’s analysis of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*: the critic argues that in the series the qualities of the schlemiel have been updated to fit twenty-first-century America, but the key traits have been kept intact (Gillota 153). Thus, Larry David’s schlemiel persona (the premise of the show being that the comedian supposedly plays himself) tries to “reassert the seemingly assimilated, successful American Jew as a cultural other” (Gillota 153).

By contrast, the critic endorses Daniel Iskovitz's negative view of the "new schlemiels" of American cinema—typically played by the likes of Ben Stiller, Adam Sandler or Jason Biggs—who "do not challenge the status quo, [but] embody it" (qtd. in Gillota 154).

As can be gathered from this short introduction, although the ties between the schlemiel figure and broadly understood Jewish culture have been loosened, the character has retained at least some of his transgressive potential, albeit narrowed to its social or political dimension. Meanwhile, the association with the religious sphere and what Wisse refers to as "existential comedy" seems to have practically disappeared. All of this makes *A Serious Man*—Joel and Ethan Coen's 2009 contribution to schlemiel narratives—astonishing not only in the context of their own previous efforts, but also as a refreshing return to the figure's origins in Yiddish folklore.

Although critical accusations of cynically mongering style over substance have accompanied the Coen brothers since the days of their first feature film, *Blood Simple* (1984), they have also been labelled as no less than "secular theologians," their cinematic output described as "one of the most sneakily moralistic in recent American cinema" (Seitz qtd. in Falsani 17). Rabbi Allen Secher went so far as to highlight the illustrious source of the brothers' surname (the *Kohanim* were Jewish priests of patrilineal descent from Aaron) and hypothesize, only half in jest, Joel and Ethan's career in theology; he even offered to recommend good rabbinic schools (qtd. in Falsani 8–10). It is true that while the Coens have consistently offered stylish, clever, and highly eloquent riffs on distinctly American genres—e.g., film noir (*Blood Simple*, *The Man Who Wasn't There*), gangster thriller (*Miller's Crossing*), crime thriller (*Fargo*), or screwball comedy (*Raising Arizona*, *The Hudsucker Proxy*)—in most of their works, excepting the all-out comedies, they have essentially used these postmodernist stylistic trappings to tell, again and again, the story of tragic consequences stemming from seemingly minor missteps. Although neither the characters nor the frameworks in which the narratives are realized are visibly religious, the satiric portrayal of a grotesque world in which the odd decent person is surrounded by a host of crooks and hypocrites resembles—I would argue—the Southern Gothic landscape of Flannery O'Connor's fiction. Not impossibly, the arrogance and condescension of which both O'Connor and the Coens have been accused stem from a similar positioning vis-à-vis the dominant culture: a Catholic in Savannah, Georgia, the heart of the Bible Belt; two Jews in the suburbs of the predominantly Christian Minneapolis.

Even in the context of the Coens' previous offerings, *A Serious Man* is an unusual proposition, since neither Jews nor Judaism have ever featured

this prominently in their work. In their earlier films the Jewish characters typically functioned in an ethnically diverse setting and rarely occupied the central position, with the notable exception of the eponymous struggling leftist playwright in *Barton Fink* (1991), played by John Turturro. Even in this isolated case, however, the Jewishness appeared for the most part to be universalized—in the spirit of Malamud or Bellow, perhaps—into “humanity.” Elsewhere, through their accessory characters, the Coens seemed primarily to offer a nod to the illustrious and/or notorious Jewish presence in various spheres of American society: one need only to think of the small-time gangster Bernie Bernbaum (again John Turturro) in *Miller’s Crossing* (1990) or the movie mogul Jack Lipnick (Michael Lerner) in *Barton Fink*, apparently an amalgam of Jack Warner, Harry Cohn, and Louis B. Mayer (Rowell 104). If steadfast religious observance was thematized at all, it became an object of ridicule, as in the portrayal of the store-owner Walter Sobchak (John Goodman) in *The Big Lebowski* (1998). Conversely, *A Serious Man* deals almost exclusively with the Jewish community and takes “ethnic-appropriate” casting to an entirely new level; furthermore, the brothers have described it as their most autobiographical film to date. Although the Coens keep the staples of their acerbic comedy intact, they make their first serious attempt (I imagine this to be one of the numerous meanings suggested by the title) at evaluating their cultural heritage and aligning it with their consistently exhibited philosophical position.²

The film tells the story of Larry Gopnik (Michael Stuhlbarg), a professor of physics, who, by his own admission towards the end, has “had quite a bit of *tsuris* lately” (*Serious Man*). His relatively stable Midwestern, middle-class, suburban life in the late 1960s begins to unravel when his wife Judith (Sari Lennick) informs him that she wants a divorce. She cites problems that the couple have been having and, since she refuses to specify their nature, the viewer may assume sexual impotence on Larry’s part. She also informs her husband that she has been seeing Sy Abelman (Fred Melamed), a rival professor, whose telling surname suggests yet another blow to Larry’s already embattled virility. Problems also begin to mount in Larry’s professional environment: a Korean student named Clive (David Kang) wishes to have his grade changed and may have left a bribe in

² Interestingly, the brothers’ apparently abandoned project, following *A Serious Man* and *True Grit* (2010), promised to continue their intense explorations of Jewishness: the Coens were rumored to be working on an adaptation of Michael Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, an alternate history novel, the Chandleresque plot of which is set in an all-Jewish Alaskan city called Sitka (Purcell). Instead, however, they delivered *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013), which revisited the figure of a ne’er-do-well, but returned to an ethnically homogeneous, universalized narrative.

an envelope; as if this were not enough, someone has also been writing denigrating letters to the committee which is to consider Larry's tenure. As calamities proliferate around him, Larry, despite his self-avowed and repeatedly emphasized rationality, turns to his religion, but finds little or no consolation in the advice of three different rabbis; the failure to obtain an audition with the last and apparently wisest of these, Rabbi Marshak, is a blatant send-up of Kafka's parable "Before the Law."³ The script seems practically to exhaust all its potential for misfortune; in fact, Ethan Coen admitted that "[t]he fun of the story for [him and Joel] was inventing new ways to torture Larry" (Sklar 58). In the course of the narrative—among other things—the protagonist is forced to move out of his house into a motel, pay exorbitant legal fees, cover the costs of his wife's lover Sy Abelman's funeral when the latter is killed in an accident, as well as bail his ill, unemployed brother out of jail. He is disobeyed and jeered at by his own children, pestered by the Korean student and his father, bullied by a WASP neighbour called Mr. Brandt (Peter Breitmayer), and hounded over the phone by a Columbia Record Club salesman. At the end of his tether, both emotionally and financially, he decides to change Clive's grade and keep the bribe, regardless of its source, in order to cover the various legal expenses. No sooner does he put down the new grade in his notebook than his doctor calls to gently inform Larry that his X-ray results are bad enough to merit an immediate face-to-face conversation; notably, in one of the first scenes of the film, Larry refuses a cigarette offered by the same doctor, who then proceeds to speak through clouds of smoke—in the final analysis, however, it is Larry the schlemiel whose lungs turn out to be diseased. The last, deeply ominous scene depicts an approaching tornado, which the protagonist's son Danny and his *cheder* classmates observe in mute, almost religious awe.

As already stated above, I claim that *A Serious Man* is an unusual contemporary take on the schlemiel figure because it returns this highly familiar, conventionalized element of American mainstream humour to its roots in Jewish culture and religion. Those aspects are considerably more pronounced than the above synopsis may suggest; indeed, they already loom large in the short fable which precedes the narrative proper. The action of this stylistically disparate fragment takes place on a winter night in an unidentified *shtetl*. Spoken entirely in subtitled Yiddish and shot

³ It is interesting to note that the same parable is similarly parodied in a scene from Martin Scorsese's grossly underappreciated surreal tale, *After Hours* (1985), which also deals with a schlemiel-like character. In it, the main hero needs to enter a nightclub in order to save himself from one of the multitude of predicaments; however, he is stopped by a bouncer, who launches into a Kafkaesque explanation for denying him entry.

predominantly in warm reddish-brown colours (only the exterior is done in cold blue), the section evokes a world conjured in the stories of Sholom Aleichem and I. B. Singer, the canvases of Chagall, or, as Wisse notices in her review of the film, the linocuts of Solomon Yudovin (“Serious Film” 69). In this prelude, a man named Velvel (Allen Lewis Rickman) invites into his house Traitl Groshkover (Fyvush Finkel), a stranger who has helped him on the way; Velvel’s wife Dora (Yelena Schmuelsenon), however, convinced that the visitor is a demon, a *dybbuk*—to her knowledge, the actual Groshkover died a few years earlier—stabs him. Groshkover stumbles out into the snow, muttering that this is indeed a bizarre way of repaying a *mitzvah* (a good deed), and leaves the couple to argue about whether they have just avoided a curse or incurred one.

In interviews conducted during the production, the Coens claimed that their ambition in the short narrative preceding the main story was merely to suggest a connection with the European past and that, failing to find a readymade tale that would suit their purpose, they invented one. This statement from the cryptic and unresponsive brothers is characteristically unconvincing; if all that was needed was to establish a connection between the New World and the Old, would not the wealth of Yiddish literature have offered a myriad of possibilities? In fact, however, the fable contains distinct and even revelatory ties to the story proper. On the most obvious level, in terms of narrative coherence, the curse supposedly incurred by Dora in the Eastern European *shtetl* may be visited on her American descendant Larry and explain the absurd misfortunes that befall him; this, however, is perhaps the least remarkable aspect, and in any case the Coens omit the couple’s surname, which relegates the family connection with Larry Gopnik to the sphere of speculation.

More interestingly, the episode foreshadows some of the larger story’s crucial themes. The dominant one is Velvel’s fundamental uncertainty about the occurrences: should he remain a “rational man” (*Serious Man*), as Reb Groshkover enjoins him to do, and dismiss his wife’s fears as mere superstition, or should he perhaps trust his wife’s instinct as far as the supernatural is concerned? The ending of the sequence—Groshkover stumbling out into the snow—is ambiguous, punctuated further by the end credits, in which the character played by Fyvush Finkel is listed as “Dybbuk ?” (*Serious Man*). Thus, the little tale initiates the conflict between the physical and the metaphysical, which is then embodied in the struggle of Larry Gopnik, a professor of physics, who demands answers from a reticent *Hashem*. More specifically, Velvel’s hesitation translates in the narrative proper into Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle, which Larry teaches to his students. The claim, suggesting the inseparability of the act

of perception from that which is perceived, has previously been put to interesting use by the Coens and similarly tied to the notion of culpability, albeit in a legal sense: in *The Man Who Wasn't There* it becomes the object of lengthy speculations by the invincible defence attorney Freddy Riedenschneider (Tony Shalhoub) with regard to the protagonist's crime. As for the unresolved question in *A Serious Man*, i.e., whether Groshkover is a dybbuk or not—essentially, whether he is alive or dead when he enters Velvel and Dora's house—it finds its ready counterpart in Schrödinger's Paradox, famously involving a cat that may be alive or dead, and which Larry explains to his uninterested students in the first scene depicting him in the university milieu.

I would argue that one ought also to pay close attention to the opening shot of the preceding fable, and therefore of the entire film: snowdrops falling lazily towards the viewer, against the backdrop of an ink-black sky and Carter Burwell's melancholy yet obsessive music score. Before they are recognized as snowdrops and given further context by the ensuing long shot of a wintry countryside, they resemble a multitude of scattered stars—not unlike those from the opening sequence of any part of the *Star Wars* saga—or perhaps simply a multitude of minute particles. Thus, already the opening image subtly suggests the intertwined ideas of perception, the resulting uncertainty, and the contending physical and metaphysical explanations of worldly phenomena: on the one hand, the totalizing Grand Narrative which governs the life of the *shtetl* and infuses it with moral meaning, on the other the scientific world of random, meaningless atoms.

In her review of the film, Wisse argues that the fable introduces “the gender division between credulous men and sceptical women,” which was typical for Eastern European Jewish society and which the Coens subsequently transplant to late 1960s Minnesota (“Serious Film” 69). I find this claim problematic in that it is difficult to ascertain with any finality which of the spouses is to be seen as credulous and which as sceptical: whereas Velvel may be naïve enough not to recognize a *dybbuk*, Dora is possibly even more gullible because she stands firmly by her belief in *dybbuks* and acts upon it, possibly to the point of murder. It is true that Velvel's effusive, kind-hearted personality readily suggests the nature of a dreamer not unlike Tevye the Dairyman or Menachem Mendel, while Dora has all the markings of the practical, down-to-earth wife such as Golde or Sheyne Sheyndl. Nevertheless, I would suggest, contrary to Wisse, that the verdict on credulousness and scepticism is suspended in this section—and thereafter in the entire film—hinging on the underlying ontological structure of the characters' world, which remains as hidden from us as it is from them. Nevertheless, the conversation between the husband and the wife,

prior to Reb Groshkover's appearance, reveals a power dynamic similar to that which obtains in the Gopniks' Minnesota household. Velvel is shown as rather inept, especially in the financial realm (it seems that he has lost more than he has gained on the transaction that he proudly reports to his wife, and Dora readily points this out), and clearly he is reduced to gentle conciliatory gestures and weak smiles, allowing Dora to impose her will on him. Evidently possessing at least some qualities of the schlemiel, Velvel prepares the viewer for the entrance of Larry Gopnik, the decent but weak and easily manipulated male.

Throughout the narrative, Larry is repeatedly contrasted with other men, especially—as already mentioned—his wife's lover Sy Abelman and the next-door neighbour, Mr. Brandt. Before his death, Sy manages to effectively usurp all of Larry's personal life (his wife, children, and house) and attempts to ruin Larry's career (Larry later finds out from Judith that the letters to the committee had been written by Sy). Plainly, he is a ruthless man who uses the veneer of nauseating affability to achieve his goals. Despite being a dishonest schemer and an adulterer who poses as Larry's friend, he is praised by Rabbi Nachtner during the funeral service as the eponymous "serious man! A *tzadik!* Who knows, maybe even a *lamed-vovnik!*" (*Serious Man*). As Jim Emerson observes, "even the title [of the film] doesn't respect [Larry]," in that it ostensibly refers to Sy Abelman (Emerson).

As for the WASP-ish, almost inarticulate Mr. Brandt, he represents certain other qualities traditionally associated with masculinity which Larry definitely lacks. This can be seen most clearly when Larry returns home at the end of the first narrated day and sees his neighbour with his son Mitch in the backyard. Where Larry's suit hides a flat chest and underdeveloped muscles, Mr. Brandt's T-shirt exposes a brawny torso; while Larry spends his time in offices and classrooms, or else checking blue books and pursuing other intellectual activities into the small hours, Mr. Brandt, unmistakably the outdoor type, plays ball with his son in the backyard, leaves the house at five in the morning to take the boy hunting, and returns with a deer strapped to the roof of his car. Furthermore, the neighbour's low, harsh, military voice contrasts sharply with Larry's high-pitched whimper. Since Larry's character evidently corresponds to the stereotypical image of the emasculated Jewish intellectual, Mr. Brandt's visible hostility is—in all probability—part contempt for the weakling and part racism; it seems to diminish only when Brandt believes that Larry is being pestered by Clive's father, a Korean, whose "otherness" supposedly exceeds Larry's, and Brandt is raring to step in: "Is this man bothering you?" (*Serious Man*). Brandt's flagrant xenophobia is responsible for one of the many nightmares that Larry

experiences, in which his brother Arthur (Richard Kind) and himself are hunted as prey by the neighbour and his boy: "There's another Jew, son!" (*Serious Man*). As is often the case with the Coens' work, the differences between the two men are so pronounced that they become cartoonish; nevertheless, Brandt provides an absurd antithesis to what Buchbinder would doubtless identify as "the inadequately or incompetently masculine male" (230).

The philosophical, and specifically Jewish, context of the narrative proper is underscored by a quote attributed to Rashi, the sagacious French medieval rabbi: "[r]eceive with simplicity everything that happens to you"⁴ (*Serious Man*). On the one hand, through the choice of the word "receive," the phrase seems to emphasize that all events in one's life are essentially gifts, possessing inherent value, even contrary to appearances; on the other hand, these gifts are not only to be received—i.e., accepted—but also accepted "with simplicity," which may suggest a certain passivity or obedience, also in the sense of not questioning the decisions of the giver, not expecting a different outcome. This is precisely the attitude of Singer's most famous schlemiel, Gimpel the Fool, for the most part of that classic narrative, excepting a momentary temptation by the Spirit of Evil. However, what the villagers in Singer's text assume to be foolishness—an essential quality—is in fact repeatedly demonstrated to be a conscious choice on Gimpel's part: to believe unreservedly what one is told even when it beggars belief, and to refrain from taking revenge for others' misdeeds, however outrageous. The opening sentences—"I am Gimpel the fool. I don't think myself a fool" (Singer 3)—already emphasize the character's paradoxically mindful appraisal of his own situation. In *A Serious Man*, the notions of "receiving" and "simplicity" resonate, for instance, in the advice offered to Larry Gopnik by Nachtner, one of the three rabbis whom he consults: "Hashem doesn't owe us an answer, Larry. Hashem doesn't owe us anything. The obligation runs the other way" (*Serious Man*). However, whereas Gimpel may be said to "receive with simplicity everything that happens to him" because he is sustained by a belief in forthcoming Messianic justice, Larry Gopnik's situation is markedly different in that his worldview, to begin with, is fundamentally rational, based on the laws of physics. Religion for him is thus clearly a last resort.

⁴ According to Jordan Hiller, the brothers, pressed for the exact source, were either unable or unwilling to supply it: "I mentioned to the brothers that while Rashi was a prolific commentator on Talmud and Tanach, he is not exactly a figure oft quoted. They—perhaps knowing their bluff had been called—laughed. I asked where they pulled the line from. 'I honestly don't remember,' Joel curiously admitted" (Hiller). I am indebted to Dr. Nathan Abrams for the suggestion that the quote may be inaccurate or indeed spurious.

However, as the opening ambiguous image of snowdrops-as-particles already suggests, throughout the film the Coens consistently dismantle the opposition between science and religion. In the first scenes of the narrative proper, the two are already juxtaposed in that we are offered alternating shots of Larry lecturing physics to university students, and of his teenage son Danny receiving instruction in Hebrew at the *cheder*; notably, the students in both institutions are equally apathetic. Furthermore, the two aforementioned issues which Larry teaches to his students, the Uncertainty Principle and Schrödinger's Cat Paradox, manifestly emphasize not-knowing rather than knowing. The manner in which Larry describes them, respectively, is telling: "The Uncertainty Principle. It proves we can't ever really know what's going on" and "Even I don't understand the dead cat" (*Serious Man*). When he explains to Clive that mathematics, which the student has failed, is essential to physics—"The math is the real thing. The stories I give you in class are just illustrative, like fables, say, to help give you a picture" (*Serious Man*)—the similarity to a rabbi resorting to storytelling to drive a particular point home is unmistakable. Yet another point of connection is the Mentaculus, a mysterious and supposedly monumental work on which Larry's brother Arthur is working, and which the latter describes as "a probability map of the universe" (*Serious Man*). Based on the relationship between the world and numbers, and perhaps functioning (Arthur Gopnik wins a large sum of money gambling in accordance with it), the Mentaculus, when it is finally revealed, contains pages upon pages crowded with arcane symbols and ornate diagrams, resembling a mystical text in the vein of the Zohar more than a scientific work for which the viewer may have initially taken it. The association is deepened further by the dream sequence in which Larry writes the equation for the Uncertainty Principle on a gigantic blackboard, filling all of the available space; when a long shot exposes the incredibly convoluted equation in its entirety, it resembles a page from his brother's Kabbalistic diagrams. Moreover, a close-up of Larry in front of the blackboard reveals, among the mathematical symbols, a string of Hebrew characters.⁵ Reminding the students about the fundamental ambiguity which the Principle encodes, Larry states: "So it shouldn't bother you. Not being able to figure anything out. Although you will be *responsible* for this on the *midterm*" (*Serious Man*). As Robert Sklar succinctly puts it, "Larry's life . . . is one continuous midterm exam on the Uncertainty Principle" (59). Thus, the notion of being responsible for something that is fundamentally unfathomable pervades the entire film, defining the sphere of physics as much as that of metaphysics. When Larry

⁵ I am very grateful to Professor Jody Myers for pointing this detail out to me.

tells Clive that “[a]ctions have consequences! . . . Not just physics—morally!” (*Serious Man*), he unwittingly enunciates this connection between the two realms, and perhaps also the mechanism of the Coens’ brand of cinema.

Thus, I would argue that in *A Serious Man* the “receiving,” with simplicity or otherwise, suggested in the Rashi quote, takes the form of attempting to understand, or at least interpret, the surrounding reality. However, the film is also replete with images alluding to various other kinds of “reception.” For instance, the narrative proper begins in complete darkness, in the middle of which a bright spot appears—echoing the stars / snowflakes / particles image from the preceding fable—and dilates, soon proving to be the ear canal, defamiliarized into a semblance of a tunnel of light. It soon turns out that, instead of following the lesson in the *cheder*, Larry’s son, Danny, is listening on his headphones to Jefferson Airplane’s “Somebody to Love”—the film’s refrain, with the haunting lines “when the truth is found to be lies / and all the joy within you dies” summarizing his father’s plight. At the same time, Larry himself is having his eye examined by his doctor; the two situations are narrated interchangeably. Even as the quiet, sterile, distinctly scientific environment of the doctor’s office is being juxtaposed with the comparatively warm, humanized interior of the *cheder*, filled with the amiable drone of the teacher’s voice, the emphasis is clearly placed on the two primary senses. It is fitting that a work focused to such a large extent on the paradoxical similarity between scientific (rational) thinking and religious (irrational) belief should begin with an area in which most of the disputes between the two originate, namely the field of sensory experience.

The notion of “receiving” is also playfully suggested through the instances in which Larry is being pestered by his son Danny to fix the aerial because the reception of the latter’s favourite program is unsatisfactory: “*F Troop’s* fuzzy!” (*Serious Man*). The scene in which Larry climbs onto the roof to reposition the aerial is realized in a way which suggests (with tongue firmly in cheek) disproportionate profundity. The first shot—framed so that its only elements are the top rung of the ladder and a bright blue sky—inevitably evokes associations with Jacob’s dream, in which “there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven” (*Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, Gen. 28.12). Thanks to Roger Deakins’s masterfully crisp cinematography and Burwell’s haunting music score, a sense of mystery pervades the scene, as we witness Larry’s fumbling with the aerial and hear the babble (or perhaps Babel?) of conflicting voices, among which one can also distinguish the lilting tone of a religious hymn. As a result, the scene aggressively demands a metaphorical interpretation,

along the lines of the revelation which follows Jacob's dream: "Surely the LORD is in this place; and I did not know it" (*Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, Gen. 28.16).

However, the tone soon changes: from his privileged position on the roof, Larry is also able to see much further into the almost monochromatic, tediously homogeneous suburbia which he inhabits.⁶ Thus, he is able to notice for the first time that another neighbour of his, Mrs. Samsky, sunbathes in the nude, which requires Larry to crane his neck so as to get a better look. Curiously, however, this bathetic development fails to entirely undermine the weight of the religious imagery. Soon afterwards, Larry looks into the sun, which momentarily blinds both him and the viewer; the next shot portrays the protagonist with a cold compress held to his forehead. The conclusion seems obvious: the schlemiel that he is, Larry cannot stand on the roof for five minutes without suffering a sunstroke. If, however, one chooses to follow the code of religious images, the sequence may be read as offering a fair warning that "[a]ctions have consequences," indeed—preparatory to the last scene, in which changing Clive's grade seems to "result" in the momentous phone call from the doctor, announcing what must be terminal illness. Thus, by the end of the aerial scene the profundity suggested by its opening shots, seemingly swept aside by a bathetic descent into voyeuristic pursuits, is re-established by means of yet another potent image, leading the viewer to wallow in uncertainty as to whether the sunstroke is to be interpreted as a scientific phenomenon, or else an admonition which needs to be "received with simplicity."

The last aspect of the notion of "receiving" as deployed in *A Serious Man* that I wish to discuss is connected with language, which in the Coens' works is always foregrounded and sometimes thematized. The same words and phrases reappear obsessively in various contexts, travelling from character to character. The language seems to be remarkably (indeed, virally) alive, but at the same time patently artificial in its constructedness, intentionally "cinematic," frequently used as one of the markers of the genre with which the Coens are currently tinkering. Since *A Serious Man* does not lampoon any particular genre—at best, as Lee Weston Sabo argues, it may be seen as "a mockery of the Jewish art film" (Sabo)—the situation is different. Namely, language becomes yet another veil thrown over reality, itself a puzzle, rendering the underlying reality impossible to comprehend.

⁶ David Denby dismisses the scenery of *A Serious Man* as "the suburban nightmare that keeps showing up in ambitious American movies as the banality of evil itself" (Denby). An instance that comes to mind is Tim Burton's surreal rendition of Californian suburbs in *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), where the nightmarish regularity of the houses is nevertheless undermined by the proximity of a looming Gothic castle.

The most poignant example can be found in the scene where Larry accuses Clive, the Korean student, of bribery. Larry admits that although nobody except Clive knows about the latter's actions, he—Larry—is able to interpret the evidence that he possesses. To this, Clive replies in his heavy accent: “Mere surmise, sir,” completely baffling Larry, who repeats uncomprehendingly: “Mere sir, my sir?”; in response, Clive repeats slowly: “Mere—surmise—sir. Very uncertain” (*Serious Man*). Larry's self-proclaimed interpretive skills thus utterly compromised, he admittedly seems an unlikely candidate to puzzle out the mystery of the universe. Ironically, it is Clive's father—as ready to argue that the bribe was a matter of a cultural misunderstanding as he is to sue for defamation if Larry reports it—who claims that Larry ought to stop trying to ascertain the truth and “[a]ccept the mystery” (*Serious Man*), i.e., essentially to live up to the Uncertainty Principle, which he has been teaching but has not embraced as a viable philosophy. The bitter irony also consists in the fact that the wisdom offered by Clive's utterly pragmatic father in effect covers the same ground as Rabbi Nachtner's assertion that “Hashem doesn't owe us the answer” (*Serious Man*).

It has been my ambition to demonstrate that Joel and Ethan Coen reinvest the schlemiel figure with its cultural validity and, in the tradition of Yiddish and Jewish-American fiction, employ it to conduct a philosophical interrogation of the environment in which the schlemiel finds himself. In this case, the environment is no less than the universe; the interrogation, unsurprisingly perhaps, leads to Uncertainty. Nevertheless, I side with Ruth Wisse, who, in her review for *Commentary*, chose to describe the work as “a serious movie in a comic vein, which is good enough to warrant this much attention” (“Serious Film” 70).

WORKS CITED

- Buchbinder, David. “Enter the Schlemiel: The Emergence of Inadequate or Incompetent Masculinities in Recent Film and Television.” *Canadian Review of American Studies / Revue canadienne d'études américaines* 38.2 (2008): 227–45. Print.
- Denby, David. “Gods and Victim.” *New Yorker* 5 Oct. 2009: n. pag. *New Yorker.com*. Web. 8 Nov. 2013.
- Emerson, Jim. “A Serious Man: Kafka in Minneapolis.” Rev. of *A Serious Man*, by Joel and Ethan Coen. *Scanners. RogerEbert.com*. 18 Oct. 2009. Web. 28 Jun. 2014.

- Falsani, Cathleen. *The Dude Abides: The Gospel According to the Coen Brothers*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009. Print.
- Fiedler, Leslie. *Waiting for the End*. Lanham: Stein and Day, 1964. Print.
- Gillota, David. "Negotiating Jewishness: *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and the Schlemiel Tradition." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 38.4 (2010): 152–61. Print.
- Hiller, Jordan. "25 Essential Jewish Films: *A Serious Man*." Rev. of *A Serious Man*, dir. Joel and Ethan Coen. *Bangitout.com*. 27 Sept. 2009. Web. 28 June 2014.
- The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*. *Biblehub.com*. 2001, 2007. Web. 18 June 2014.
- Johnson, Carla. "Luckless in New York: The Schlemiel and the Schlimazel in *Seinfeld*." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 22.3 (1994): 116–24. Print.
- Pinsker, Sanford. *The Schlemiel as Metaphor. Studies in the Yiddish and American Jewish Novel*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1971. Print.
- Purcell, Andrew. "Scott Rudin Is on a Roll." *Guardian*. Guardian, 8 Feb. 2008. Web. 28 June 2014.
- Richler, Mordecai. *Shovelling Trouble*. London: Quartet, 1973. Print.
- Rowell, Erica. *The Brothers Grim: The Films of Ethan and Joel Coen*. Lanham: Scarecrow, 2007. Print.
- Sabo, Lee Weston. 2010. "Serious Joke: The Coen Brothers' Emergence as Jewish Humorists." Rev. of *A Serious Man*, dir. Joel and Ethan Coen. *Brightlightsfilm.com*. *Bright Lights Film Journal* 67 (2010): n. pag. Web. 28 Jun. 2014.
- A Serious Man*. Dir. Joel Coen and Ethan Coen. Focus Features, 2009. Film.
- Singer, Isaac Bashevis. *The Penguin Collected Stories*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982. Print.
- Sklar, Robert. Rev. of *A Serious Man*, dir. Joel and Ethan Coen. *Cineaste* Spring (2010): 58–59. Print.
- Wisse, Ruth R. *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1971. Print.
- . "A Serious Film." Rev. of *A Serious Man*, dir. Joel and Ethan Coen. *Commentary* 1 Dec. 2009: 69–71. Print.