

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*Intolerable Cruelty*]

O Brother

By Steve Sailer

IT'S FASHIONABLE in Hollywood for brothers to team up to make movies, probably because it's a clever way to achieve the artistic integrity of the *auteur* method without its crushing workload and lonely megalomania. The most experienced and consistently delightful "frauteurs" are Joel and Ethan Coen, whose tenth film together is the relentlessly amusing screwball romantic comedy "Intolerable Cruelty." Like the pregnant sheriff played by Joel's wife Frances McDormand in her Oscar role in "Fargo," the brothers, amidst all the weirdness of their movies, just keep getting the job done with good humor and efficiency.

The Coens are to Hollywood what Tom Stoppard, author of "Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead," is to the stage: enormously bright and funny innovators. And like Stoppard, their best efforts (to my mind, "The Hudsucker Proxy," "The Big Lebowski," and "O Brother, Where Art Thou?") are subversively cheerful.

This drives many critics to dismiss both Stoppard and the Coens as emotionally shallow. Psychologist Peter D. Kramer, author of *Listening to Prozac*, has pointed out that because so many artists are depressives (especially manic-depressives), our culture tends not to take seriously creative individuals who strike us as, well, depressingly happy and healthy. We stereotype them

as inauthentic because they aren't suffering mightily enough for our edification.

Unfortunately, though, the Coens haven't been laughing all the way to the bank. It's always been a struggle for them to find a big enough audience to justify their almost unique arrangement in which they enjoy studio financing without studio control. Their nine movies have in total grossed only \$134 million domestically, which is what the Wachowski brothers' "Matrix Reloaded" earned during its first four days.

Like Stoppard's plays, the Coens' movies have often been too complex to be enjoyed on a first viewing. "O Brother" languished in limited release for months before its wonderful soundtrack of 1930s country music made it a modest hit. "Lebowski" never caught on until it came out on video. And "Hudsucker," which is one of the few recent movies actually to deserve the adjective Capraesque, remains rarely seen.

The Coens keep costs low by storyboarding each shot ahead of time, like Alfred Hitchcock, which lets them methodically zip through their shooting schedules. Still, their budget desires have grown over the years, and they

Perhaps in response, "Intolerable Cruelty" is their most commercial movie. George Clooney plays Beverly Hills' most ruthless divorce attorney, but he meets his match in Catherine Zeta-Jones, who collects and discards rich husbands. The story is reasonably predictable. After all, how can the two most glamorous-looking of modern stars not wind up together?

The profit logic of romantic comedies is obvious—you don't need to blow up Tokyo. But movies have stumbled into a comedic dry spell in recent years, perhaps because most of the joke-writing talent got sucked into television during the sitcom boom back in the nineties. So the Coens have turned their extravagant fertility of invention to punching up the jokes in a script begun by others. They went more for quantity than quality (although there's one climactic sight gag that will make all the highlight reels). Still, there are simply so many jokes that it would be churlish to complain too much that they aren't as original as in "Lebowski."

Zeta-Jones is so beautiful that women have trouble identifying with her, so she's best cast as a bad girl, like Elizabeth Hurley, only with acting talent.

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recently endured a sizable setback when their long-planned production of "To the White Sea" went under. Brad Pitt was to have played a WWII tailgunner shot down during the firebombing of Japan. There would have been almost no dialogue as he tried to elude capture. Ultimately, this combination of unusual style with massive special effects proved too risky to secure adequate backing.

Clooney was a late bloomer. In the 1980s, when Sean Penn was already acclaimed the acting prodigy of his generation, Clooney was stuck with minor roles in such films as "Return of the Killer Tomatoes: The Sequel." Yet, he's now the more intriguing talent. As strong as Penn's performance is in Clint Eastwood's new "Mystic River," he's just doing The Sean Penn Role again—the

fierce but slightly defective-looking tough guy in torment.

In contrast, with Clooney these days, you never know what you'll get. The Coens highlighted his resemblance to Clark Gable in "O Brother," and here they have him channeling a mildly cartoonish Cary Grant. Imagine the devious Walter Burns from "His Girl Friday," only popeyed with unrequited love. It's not fair to measure any actor against Grant, who was arguably the greatest movie star ever, but for the ability to be sexy and funny simultaneously, Clooney can stand the comparison as well as anybody. ■

Rated PG-13 for sexual content, language, and brief violence.

Steve Sailer is TAC's film critic and a reporter for UPI.

BOOKS

[*Wealth, Poverty, and Human Destiny*, Doug Bandow and David L. Schindler, eds., ISI Books, 538 pages]

The Christian Moral Economy

By Cicero Bruce

Under the auspices of the John Temple Foundation and the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, editors Doug Bandow and David L. Schindler have brought together in *Wealth, Poverty, and Human Destiny* a dozen interrelated essays on the moral, spiritual, and religious implications of the global economy. Both the essayists and the editors are earnest espousers of traditional doctrinal Christianity who are mutually concerned about issues related to the book's title. But their thinking about the world's poorest and the object of life in relation to the new economic order divides, quite surprisingly, into two very different points of view.

One is articulated by Bandow and his six contributors, who contend that, in terms of absolute poverty, the poorest segments of countries that have liberated their markets, encouraged international trade, and welcomed foreign investment within their borders are economically far better off than their counterparts living in countries where markets are closed or governmentally restricted.

They further point out that discussions of relative poverty, or economic inequality, tell us nothing about the creation of wealth, upon which depends the (physical) well-being of the poor. Removing barriers to free trade and allowing more migration from poor to rich countries is the most practicable way, they insist, of insuring that the poorest among us are not only fed and clothed, but also presented with possibilities to lift themselves out of the ravages of poverty.

Bandow's eminent contenders are Father Richard John Neuhaus and lay theologian Michael Novak. Neuhaus builds a plausible case for economic liberalism by presenting Pope John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus* as an implicit affirmation of America's "liberal tradition." From the same encyclical, Novak infers a justification for an expanding global economy committed to "universal opportunity." Notwithstanding his otherwise considerable defense of the neoconservative position, Novak verges on absurdity where he implicitly likens human interaction within the multinational corporation to a communion on a globally grand scale.

Neuhaus also invites criticism. Insofar as he defines Catholicism as a form of liberalism, his logic relies upon a semantically false premise. Catholicism, in spite of Neuhaus's intriguing argument to the contrary, is the very antithesis of liberalism properly understood. In contradistinction to Catholicism, liberalism, as it derives from state of nature scenarios conjured up in the minds of Enlightenment thinkers, imagines men to be subject to no authority other than individuated intelligences and, as

Schindler insightfully points out in his editor's response, "invests rights in [individuals] independent of [their] relations to family" and abstracted from the ordering creaturehood of God.

Bandow's most surprising contributor is Jennifer Roback Morse, whose essay seems to be included as a bridge between the book's opposing views. She reminds us that we are all, late or soon, dependent on others, be it in infancy or in sickness or in palsied old age. Despite this certainty, many of us, she observes, celebrate self-reliance to a fault and mistakenly associate dependency with weakness, denying ourselves the one thing the world truly needs—namely, the needy. Besides institutionalizing the elderly and expecting the government to support the disabled, we place our offspring in supposedly beneficent day-care centers, transforming the care of children into "one more commodity, another household expense," and obscuring the reality of "just how profound our initial helplessness is."

There is nothing objectionable in Morse's suggesting that we humanize society "by embracing those who are legitimately dependent on us." There is nothing wrong with encouraging us to take personal care of our offspring, "so they know they are loved and the world is worth being part of and contributing to." There is nothing morally repugnant about calling us to take personal care of our disabled or elderly relatives, so they know "they are loved, and their lives have meaning and value." Indeed, we ought to commit ourselves to doing all of this, "so that we have an opportunity," as Morse writes, "to take a vacation from the world of exchange and live in the world of gift at least some of the time." But, as contributor David Crawford observes, to insist on the priority of gift only "with respect to family relations" and not "with respect to the public [economic] order" is to settle "for an incoherent anthropology."

In other words, Morse ignores the fact that self-interest, in which she heartily trusts, cannot be reconciled with selflessness, the anthropological crux of