FROM *BARTON FINK* TO *HAIL, CAESAR!*: HOLLYWOOD'S GHOSTS OF MARXIST PAST

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Barton Fink and *Hail, Caesar!* take place in the distant past, the former in 1942 and the latter in 1951. In both films, Hollywood is portrayed not as a breezy dream factory, but as a toxic environment where filmmakers are locked into a perpetual battle with studio tycoons — and capitalism itself. It is a space where art is molded and even censored by the interests of marketization and profiteering. In short, these films depict the tumultuous marriage between art and business. They are cautionary tales about ghosts — or nightmares rather — of Hollywood's Marxist past. To discuss Marxist dimensions of this unique pair of films in the Coen brothers' oeuvre we explore four questions, including: (1) What is the social condition (depicted in these films)? (2) What is an alternative (to this condition)? (3) How do people struggle to challenge this system? And (4) What is the outcome (of their actions)? While the two films may be enjoyed as comedies they may also be enjoyed as sharp social criticism — and their critique is not only relevant for understanding the Hollywood of yesteryear, it is also relevant for today.

WHAT IS THE SOCIAL CONDITION?

Barton Fink and *Hail, Caesar!* depict Hollywood as an unhealthy capitalist landscape. It is a studio system dominated by elitism, where artists are seen and treated as chattel. It is a marketplace where profiteering runs rampant, the image of stars is one of illusion and artists are commodified and dehumanized. In short, it is a community fueled by capitalism.

Within this Hollywood, power rests in the hands of a select few wealthy men who own the major studios — and they see films as a product. Jack Lipnik, the head of Capital Pictures (where Barton is hired as a salaried writer) has all the power of a king and the temperament of a spoiled child. He issues commands and barks out threats at a breakneck

speed to instill fear and humiliation in those around him. When studio gofer Lou annoys Lipnik by questioning Barton, Lipnik explodes: "Get down on your knees, you sonofabitch! Get down on your knees and kiss this man's feet!"[1] Terrified of losing his job, Lou complies. After all, Lipnik hires and fires people with the casual care of picking lint off one's jacket. In the penultimate scene of the film, the tycoon takes to wearing an elaborate colonel's uniform — which only makes him look like a dictator. Dismissing Barton from his office, he chides "Now get lost. We've got a war on."[2]

Hail, Caesar! depicts a similar system of capitalist despotism. Throughout the film, studio owner Mr. Schenk exists as a mysterious God-like voice on the telephone, persistently conveying orders from his office in New York to his prince regent — the ever loyal yet overworked fixer Eddie Mannix. Like Lipnik, Schenk makes all the big decisions, and commands complete obedience. The conversation between Schenk and Mannix on the idea of casting ex-rodeo star Hobie Doyle in a "serious" drama illustrates Schenk's power. Initially, Mannix asks his superior: "Do you really think so? After all he's – he's a dust actor!"[3] Although we only hear Mannix's side of the conversation it is quite clear that Schenk persists with his idea. When Mannix realizes that he cannot sway his boss he soon shifts from mild disagreement to full support. In closing the conversation, he assures his boss: "Hobie is a very promising idea."[4] In a system where power is held by elite studio tycoons, employees are like royal subjects who dare not challenge their king.

In the studio system portrayed in the Coen brothers' two films, workers are seen and treated as chattel to be owned, traded, or even loaned out from one studio to another. From members of a crew to writers to directors to actors, these artists are kept like property, and they are told *what* to create, *when* to create, and sometimes even *how* to create. When tasking Barton to write a wrestling picture, Lipnik says: "OK, the hell with the story. Wallace Beery is a wrestler. I wanna know his hopes, his dreams. Naturally, he'll have to get mixed up with a bad element. And a romantic interest. You know the drill."[5] For Lipnik filmmaking is exactly that — a drill. And Audrey — who shadow writes for the burned-out novelist, W. P. Mayhew — concurs. When offering advice, she tells Barton: "Look it's really just a formula. You don't have to type your soul into it. We'll invent some names and a new setting. I'll help you and it won't take any time at all."[6]

Yet filmmaking in the studio system is also a matter of product, supply, and demand — and the films that artists collectively create, the fruits of their labor, belong to the studio. As Herman — the spokesperson for the Communist "study group" in *Hail, Caesar!*

— tells Baird Whitlock (the hunky yet naïve abducted star): "All of us here are writers. The pictures originated with us, they're our ideas, but they're owned by the studio. I'm not saying only writers are being exploited — I mean, look at yourself, Baird."[7] Summing up the unfairness of the situation, Herman informs his abductee: "just because the studio owns the means of production, why should it be able to take the money – our money, the value created by our labor — and dole out what it pleases? That's not right."[8] Ironically, Lipnik agrees with Herman's point. When chiding Lou about his treatment of Barton, Lipnik yells: "This man creates for a living! He puts the food on your table and on mine!"[9] Of course, while Lipnik may *agree* with Hermon's idea that doesn't mean he shares very much of his own wealth. In short, this is a world where great wealth is accumulated but little is shared.

Capital shapes everything across this Hollywood landscape. It makes the studio boss a powerful elite. Projected profit margins dictate which scripts get commissioned, which get filmed, and which languish on the shelf. Potential profitability prompts studios to create, prop up, and maintain the images of stars. In fact, a star's image forms a key part of a studio's money-making efforts. After all, a film's ability to attract and sustain a box office audience week-in and week-out depends on the image of its stars.

Because image is so crucial in this landscape, studio fixer Eddie Mannix spends the bulk of this time and energy *not* on solving artistic challenges but rather on quashing potential scandals. At the crack of dawn, he begins his busy day by bribing two police officers who raid a studio where a famous (and rather naïve) actress is posing for illicit photographs. Later in the day he convinces an unwed expecting actress to engage in one of two possible cover up schemes: (1) marry a "temporary" husband, have the child and then divorce the "temporary" husband, or (2) go "into hiding" for a while, have the baby, give the baby up for adoption, then adopt the baby. When soothing the actress, Mannix reasons: "The marriage doesn't have to last forever. But DeeAnna, having a child without a father would present a public relations problem for the studio. The aquatic pictures do very nicely for us … And it's a tribute to you: the public loves you because they know how innocent you are."[10] Of course, DeeAnna isn't innocent at all. Later in the film, Hobie Doyle is told *who* to date as well as *when* and *where* to date. Within this system Hollywood stars become objects to be owned, molded, polished, and ordered around. For an actor, it is a dehumanizing and perhaps depressing proposition.

In the Hollywood of *Barton Fink* and *Hail, Caesar!* people are objectified and commodified — as though they are valuable "tools" to be manipulated. The studio is a sort of factory and the films produced in this system are not the personal vision of an artist, but rather the hodgepodge product of an assembly line. Of course, such a system subdues the artist's voice. It is a mechanical process where stories are written and rewritten by a long line of writers — and each task is broken down into precise steps. A film script may well be developed by multiple "specialist" writers who (re)write specific scenes — as though Frederick Winslow Taylor's principles of scientific management were applied to creative writing.[11]

Studio boss Lipnik eludes to this mechanized creative process numerous times in his brief conversations with Barton. When the young writer first enters Lipnik's lavish office, the mogul tells the writer: "The important thing is we all want it [your script] to have that Barton Fink feeling … Seriously, Bart, I like you. We're off to a good start. Dammit, if all our writers were like you I wouldn't have to get so godamn involved. I'd like to see something by the end of the week."[12] Unfortunately for Barton, the script he later submits displeases Lipnik, and the studio boss peppers his response with expletives, and homophobic slurs: "We don't put Wallace Beery in some fruity movie about suffering."[13] When Barton informs his boss that he was trying to show something about the human condition, Lipnik explodes: "You arrogant sonofabitch! You think you're the only writer who can give me that Barton Fink feeling?! I got twenty writers under contract that I can ask for a Fink-type thing from."[14] In effect, Lipnik is telling Barton that (1) he failed as an artist and employee because he didn't follow orders, and (2) he is replaceable.

Barton does not have a voice as an artist. His voice is muffled by the more powerful interests of his employer, and Lipnik's interests are based on profitability, not artistic quality. It is a Hollywood where control over artists is tight. And although *Hail, Caesar!* is set nearly a decade later, the "study group" of writers live in the same world. The clique of writers would love to address social issues of classism, poverty, and oppression in their film scripts — but such direct "Marxist" messaging would never get past the censorship and surveillance of Hollywood's lengthy, top-down creative process. So, they must limit themselves to increasingly obscure social messages.

In the Hollywood portrayed in *Barton Fink* and *Hail, Caesar!* workers are treated unfairly and are overpowered — even those who are obedient. Studio fixer Eddie Mannix is content with his pay, his position as a middle manager, and the status his role affords

him. He has a nice home. Yet Mannix's never-ending work of solving crisis after crisis takes him out of his home at all hours. He is a caring but absent father. Mannix clearly *tries* to be a part of the lives of his wife and children but his constant work takes him away — in body *and* mind. After promising to call his son's baseball coach, for instance, Mannix completely forgets. Chastising himself for forgetting, he later says to his wife: "Gosh, I never called the coach! Eddie played shortstop?"[15] It is ironic that a man with a job and tremendous skills in "fixing" things at the studio does not have the time or energy to fix things for his own family. Although Mannix is happy to continue his tiring work for studio boss, Mr. Schenk, he and his family are paying a great personal price.

In Boal's view, "Capitalism is fundamentally immoral because the search for profit, which is its essence, is incompatible with its official morality, which preaches superior human values, justice, etc."[16] The Hollywood we see in *Barton Fink* and *Hail, Caesar!* demonstrates this sort of unhealthy capitalist social condition. Clearly, the controlling, hyper-competitive system that dominates the landscape of these films is a toxic one. Yet the question remains: What is the alternative?

WHAT IS THE ALTERNATIVE?

In the previous segment, we surveyed the Hollywood landscape presented in *Barton Fink* and *Hail, Caesar!* As we have seen, it is a market economy where capital is power and power is held by an elite few. Moreover, the few who hold power base their decisions on economics rather than artistic quality or social good. Exhibiting an extreme case of Orwellian doublethink, mogul Lipnik tells Barton Fink to write a wrestling story then assures him: "Now people're gonna tell you, wrestling, Wallace Beery, it's a B picture. You tell them, bullshit. We don't make B pictures at Capital."[17] Somehow, Lipnik believes (or perhaps *wants* to believe) that every film venture of his studio has artistic value.

Yet this is a Hollywood of image and profit over substance. It is the sort of place would ex-rodeo star Hobie Doyle gets thrown into a "serious" drama directed by the Laurence Laurentz. The sole reason for this is the actor's potential at the box office. When Laurentz finds out he is saddled with Hobie he pleads: "But this is drama, Mannix — real drama, an adaption of a Broadway smash! It requires the skills of a skilled thespian, not a rodeo clown. I begged you for Lunt."[18] What Laurentz doesn't realize is that Mannix

agrees with him but has strict orders from the head of the studio. In this social landscape, artists are not free to create what they want, and they are treated as chattel by their employers (or "owners"). It is not the sort of dynamic that is conductive to art.

Art, in a Marxist dynamic, is designed to serve a social purpose. As Freedland summarizes: "One of the classic conceptions attributed to Marx was that it's not only important to understand the world, you must also change it."[19] In the capitalist system — like the one that dominates *Barton Fink* and *Hail, Caesar!* — art is designed for profit. Consequently, the message of the films produced by Capital Pictures is immaterial — providing there even is one. In a capitalist system films are produced to make money. This line of thinking prompts Lipnik to recruit Barton to write a wrestling picture.[20] After the star Baird Whitlock is converted to Marxism, he tells Mannix: "I mean, we might tell ourselves we're 'creating' something of artistic value, that there's some kina spiritual dimension to the picture business, but what it is, is this fat cat Nick Schenk out in New York running a factory that makes these lollypops."[21]

In Marx' view, consciousness is key, and we need to wake "it from its dream about itself, in explaining to it the meaning of its own actions"[22] From such a perspective, people would create art to serve a larger social purpose. Here, stories would depict the human condition without offering any sense of resolution at their conclusion. So, unlike Aristotelian drama — which offers audiences a spectacle and cathartic experience (where emotions are always purged) — Marxists films would end without any sense of resolving the larger issues that hound the setting and characters of the story. As Boal notes: "Aristotle formulated a very powerful purgative system, the objective of which is to eliminate all that is not commonly accepted, including the revolution, before it takes place. His system appears in disguised form on television, in the movies, in the circus, in the theaters. It appears in many and varied shapes and media. But it's essence does not change: it is designed to bridle the individual, to adjust him to what pre-exists."[23]

When artists take a Marxist approach, their art strives to foster a deeper sense of awareness of the social landscape. After all, in an oppressive world there is no happy purging of emotions. There is only (1) oppression, (2) the need to raise awareness, and (3) the need to foster change. And consciousness is key. Those who *are* aware of the social condition, in Marx's view, have a responsibility "to bring [wider] consciousness to full clarity."[24] As such, within a Marxist dynamic, to use the words of Baird Whitlock, films should not be "lollypops" for the masses.

While Barton Fink never describes himself as a Marxist, he could be described as a "fellow traveler." In America, a "fellow traveler" was someone who upheld the values of Marxism and acted as such — without labeling him/herself as a Marxist.[25] As Barton proudly informs Charlie: "Strange as it may seem, Charlie, I guess I write about people like you. The average working stiff. The common man."[26] He later elaborates: "There's a few people in New York — hopefully our numbers are growing — who feel we have an opportunity now to forge something real out of everyday experience, create a theater for the masses that's based on a few simple truths."[27] Criticizing "high theater," Barton asks: "Who cares about the Fifth Earl of Bastrop and Lady Higginbottom and — and — and who killed Nigel Grinch-Gibbons?"[28] Instead of "high theater," he writes about the everyday struggles of working class people, such as Lil and Maury, the fishmonger protagonists of his hit play *'Bare Ruined Choirs*. When in Hollywood Barton takes residence in a cheap hotel rather than a lavish one, and he endeavors to write a humane story about a wrestler who is fighting to survive.

Unlike Barton, the writers in *Hail, Caesar!* identify themselves as Marxists and they believe that they have a responsibility to not only raise awareness about oppression — but to communicate Marxist messages in their scripts. Some of the writers speak directly about this when conversing with their abducted star. As Herman tells Baird: "Now, until quite recently … We concentrated on getting Communist content into motion pictures."[29] These writers hold that films should be designed to (1) depict issues classism and oppression, and (2) shed light on the system that fosters those social ills. While one might argue that these writers that are constricting themselves by focusing on social messaging, they might counter that capitalist art itself is constricted by the drive to create something that is profitable.[30]

From a Marxist perspective, artists should be free to bring social meaning into their work — and that includes critiquing the economic system (and oppressive nature) of society. Yet in the Hollywood that Barton and the "study group" inhabit, screenwriters are not free to do so. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the Dias Committee investigated possible Marxist content in film and theater. Tim Robbins explores this period in depicting the demise of the Federal Theater Project in his 1999 film, *Cradle Will Rock*.[31] Although Barton was not involved in the Federal Theater Project he was linked to another movement. In the words of Ethan Coen, he was: "a serious playwright, honest, politically engaged, and rather naïve. It seemed natural that he came from Group Theater and the

thirties."[32] While Marxism was not an issue during the US-Soviet alliance of WWII, by the late 1940s and early 1950s — after the Soviet Union had once again become an enemy — being a Communist became blemish, something to be ferreted out and eradicated.[33] And it was at that point that the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) formed and sent out its infamous "pink slips," calling on suspected Marxists to testify at their hearings. Ironically, being a Marxist or Communist was never illegal in the US — it just *felt* illegal.[34]

Marxism is presented as an alternative to the unhealthy social condition that permeates *Barton Fink* and *Hail, Caesar!* In this alternative (1) art would *not* be created for profit but rather to say something about social justice, (2) artists would be free to speak about oppression in their art, (3) theatre would democratize rather than perpetuate social inequities, and (4) artists would be freed from their status as chattel.

HOW DO PEOPLE STRUGGLE TO CHALLENGE THE SYSTEM?

How can the writers in *Barton Fink* and *Hail, Caesar!* challenge the system that fuels Hollywood's oppressive landscape? To address the problematic social condition that pervades the two films, a dramatist needs to do three things, namely: (1) understand the condition, (2) take action, and (3) foster change. After all, as Boal notes: "The theater is a weapon, and it is the people who should wield it."[35]

Yet to use the theater as a weapon, the writer needs to be aware of the social condition, and "see" the larger system for what it is. Oppression is not a phenomenon of nature — it is a system, and both Barton and the "study group" understand this. As Barton cuttingly tells one of his New York investors after the success of his play's opening: "I'm glad it'll do well for you, Derek."[36] In *Hail, Caesar!* Professor Marcuse explains to Baird: "Our understanding of the true workings of history gives us access to the levers of power. Your studio, for instance, is a pure instrument of capitalism."[37] Of course, for one to develop a deep understanding of the social condition, one needs to dialogue with others.

Dialogue, in Freire's view, "is the encounter between men, mediated by the world in order to name the world […] [it] is the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized."[38] Time and time again, Barton fails to dialogue with others. Overwhelmed

by Lipnik's brusque demeanor Barton barely speaks whenever the two meet. At his hotel Barton leads a solitary life, typing and daydreaming. Although he meets his neighbor — door to door salesman, Charlie Meadows (later revealed to be the murderer Karl Mundt) — their conversations are one-sided. Simply put, Barton prefers to spout his own ideas about trailblazing a new "theatre of the common man" to conversation. When Charlie offers to share some of his own life stories, Barton cuts him off, lecturing: "And that's the point, that we all have stories. The hopes and dreams of the common man are as noble as those of any king. It's the stuff of life — why shouldn't it be the stuff of theater? Goddamnit, why should that be a hard pill to swallow? Don't call it *new* theater, Charlie; call it *real* theater."[39]

The writers in *Hail, Caesar!* fare better than Barton in this regard. They form a group and have regular conversations. Because of the threatening nature of the Red Scare, they meet in secret — but they *do* meet and they *do* dialogue. They have their regular meetings and fiercely stick together. Of course, in the hostile climate of McCarthyism, (where the FBI surveil real and suspected Communists), these Marxist writers are prudent to meet in secret. While the "study group" dialogues in a rather insular way they are open to change. When the group is joined by the grandfatherly Professor Marcuse (a de facto leader of sorts), they shift their tactics from pure subversion (through their writing), to direct action. As Herman tells Baird: "Dr. Marcuse came down from Stanford, joined the study group. And started teaching us about direct action. Praxis. Action."[40] Following Marcuse's advice, the group kidnaps and ransoms studio star Baird Whitlock for $100 000.

As a "fellow traveler," Barton takes action through his art — without directly speaking to Marxist principles. His writing aims to raise his audience's awareness of the oppressive social conditions within which they are immersed. From what we see of his play, *'Bare Ruined Choirs*, Barton depicts oppression but does not offer a solution. Reading a pompous *Herald* review of the play, investor Derek proudly notes: "The find of the evening was the author of this drama about simple folk — fishmongers, in fact — whose brute struggle for existence cannot quite quell their longing for something higher. The playwright finds nobility in the most squalid corners and poetry in the most calloused speech."[41] In short, Barton writes plays and scripts that (1) push beyond an elitist style and subject matter (because they deal with regular folks struggling with their day to day lives), and (2) move beyond catharsis (because they depict social oppression without offering resolution).

Like Barton, the "study group" uses its art as a way of taking action. Yet unlike the playwright, they live under the threat of the revamped HUAC. By the late 1940s and early 1950s, the USSR had become the enemy of the US — and with the witch-hunting of McCarthyism, where Hollywood was prominently on the radar, messaging could not be direct. So, it went underground. Struggling with this dilemma, the "study group" is far more aware of their situation than the blissfully ignorant and self-important Barton Fink. When conversing with their abductee Baird Whitlock, the writers proudly brag about the small ways in which they have smuggled Marxist messages into their scripts. While the Coen brothers play this for comedy — and, as comedy it works — the task of smuggling Marxist messages into films during the Red Scare was not an easy one. Yet to affect change, clarity is key. On the topic of subversion, Marx and Engels wrote: "The Communists distain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions."[42] (500). In this regard, the "study group" fails as their hidden messages seem to be indecipherable. Perhaps the group's frustration with their obscure messaging leads them to embrace direction action, or praxis.

Engaging in direct action, the writers drug and abduct movie star Baird Whitlock, and ransom him for $100 000 in an elaborate scheme carried out by some nervous film extras. When studio fixer Eddie Mannix easily procures the money from petty cash and pays the kidnappers, they promptly lose the money while meeting with a Soviet sub off the coast of California. While both Barton and the "study group" persistently attempt to disrupt the capitalist system, they fail to do so. Although the screenwriters temporarily recruit Baird (winning him over to Marxist ideas), this is fleeting. After Baird returns to Mannix and excitedly tells him about the glories of Marxism, the middle manager violently smacks the actor in the face, reducing the star to tears — and through this act of violence, the impressionable Baird returns to his previous lull of political despondence.

WHAT IS THE OUTCOME?

Barton Fink and *Hail, Caesar!* present 1940s-1950s Hollywood as a corrupt, oppressive system firmly grounded in capitalism — and they depict Marxism as a *possible* alternative

to this condition. Along with the bickering writers in the "study group," Barton strives to foster a greater sense of awareness and inspire social change.

Yet Barton fails to challenge the dominant system he inhabits. Although he understands that working people (i.e., the protagonists of his writing) are oppressed in capitalist America, he does not seem to grasp the pervasive capitalist nature of Hollywood. Simply put, despite the warnings of people like Lipnik, Audrey, and (studio executive) Geisler, Barton expects to write the stories he wants, and present in the way he wants. As a contract writer at Capital Pictures he attempts to challenge capitalism from within the system, but is unsuccessful. While he writes a story that acts as a window into the social condition (*Hell Ten Feet Square*), studio boss Lipnik dismisses Barton's work and condemns it to languish in storage. By the end of the film he is given a harsh sentence by Lipnik. As the angry studio boss shouts: "No, you're under contract and you're gonna stay that way. Anything you write will be the property of Capital Pictures. And Capital Pictures will not produce anything you write."[43] Barking orders at Lou, Lipnik dismisses Barton as follows: "Get him out of my sight, Lou. Make sure he stays in town, though; he's still under contract. I want you in town, Fink, and out of my sight."[44]

At the end of the film, Barton Fink is a failed, silenced writer. His dream of a new theatre of the common man is finished (or at least paused) as Lipnik will keep him living in Hollywood, toiling over scripts that will go unproduced. Yet Barton's future is unknown. As a "fellow traveler" he is in danger. Although the Dias Committee will close in 1944 (two years after the events in *Barton Fink*), like a phoenix it will be reborn in 1947 — and at that point Barton may receive a dreaded "pink slip" to appear before the committee. We can only wonder what the future holds for poor self-important Barton.[45]

Like Barton, the Communist "study group" is silenced. Living in the Red Scare of the early 1950s, the group smuggles highly obscure Marxist messages into its film scripts. One expects that if these writers are to continue with their strategy of subversion, their messages will get more and more obscure over time. Yet, as previously mentioned, subversion is not their only strategy. Under the guidance of Professor Marcuse, the group embraces direct action and drugs, kidnaps, and ransoms popular star, Baird Whitlock. By this point, the "study group" has become a Communist cell — one that is in communication and collaboration with the Soviet Union. Yet it seems unlikely that this bickering and disorganized group of writers — who snack on finger sandwiches while discussing Marxist ideas — can engage in any sort of fifth column espionage. Rather than

using their ransom money to expand their own work in the US, the group plans to donate the $100 000 to the USSR — as a gesture of good will (and perhaps also an attempt to impress the Soviets, whom they greatly admire). Of course, the group's process of getting the money to the Soviets involves a complicated cloak and dagger ploy, involving a rowboat and a submarine. When a writer's lapdog almost leaps into the water, however, the briefcase filled with cash breaks open and is dropped — and the bills spill into the ocean.

If this "study group" of Marxist writers doesn't get caught (for their kidnapping of Baird Whitlock), and if they don't get called before the HUAC, one wonders what will happen to them. Given the capers of their kidnapping ploy one wonders if they will give up on direct action and return to their previous focus on subversive tactics. One can imagine them continuing to meet on a regular basis to talk about Marxism and social oppression. One can also imagine them continuing to insert obscure Marxist messages into their films. The "study group" is bitter, fractured, disorganized, and ineffective collective. While their concerns with the social condition are well founded and their criticisms of oppression are justified, their self-importance and pettiness is comical. They are just too ridiculous to threaten the system.

DISCUSSION

Barton Fink and *Hail, Caesar!* may be enjoyed on multiple levels. While they are both entertaining comedies, they are also stories that pose important questions about art, freedom, and oppression. On the level of comedy, Barton Fink is a self-important, officious "man on a mission." As he boasts to Charlie: "You know, in a way, I envy you, Charlie. Your daily routine — you know what's expected. You know the drill. My job is to plumb the depths, so to speak, dredge something up from inside, something honest. There's no road map for that territory."[46] Barton is so wrapped up in his personal artistic and political vision, he fails to listen to everyone he encounters — including those who give him advice. Lipnik, a successful studio tycoon, offers advice on writing films. While Lipnik is far too controlling, the advice he puts forward falls on deaf ears. Charlie Meadows, a door-to-door salesman, offers to share his stories as a working man. Later,

Audrey Taylor, who ghost writes for literary legend W. P. Mayhew, tries to give Barton writing and survival tips for life in Hollywood. Yet Barton doesn't listen.

When Charlie goes on a killing spree at the end of the film and Barton asks him: "But, Charlie — why me?" Charlie replies: "Because you DON'T LISTEN."[47] As Charlie points out, Barton could be described as a "Cadillac liberal": "Take a look around this dump. You're a tourist with a typewriter, Barton. I live here."[48] Like a character in a Kafka novel, Barton is given tasks with minimal details and whenever he seeks clear answers to his questions, he comes up empty handed.[49] He is at once a self-important braggart and a helpless fool, overwhelmed by his surroundings — both at the cheap hotel where he lives and the studio where he works.

The luckless writers of *Hail, Caesar!* are angry, desperate, and frustrated — and while they all share the same concerns about social oppression they cannot get along with one another. They live their lives in comfort (eating finger sandwiches and drinking tea at their "meetings") yet they are tremendously unhappy with the social system they inhabit. Like Barton, they live a financially comfortable life and are angry about the poverty of others. In short, they are "Cadillac Liberals."[50] Decades before Cadillacs, Marx and Engels cuttingly described the idea of "Cadillac Liberals" as follows: "Christian Socialism is but the holy water with which the priest consecrates the heart-burnings of the aristocrat."[51]

The Marxist "study group" is thoroughly unsuccessful, as their attempts at subversive messaging seem comical. Proudly explaining their strategy to Baird, Herman says: "until quite recently our study group had a narrow focus. We concentrated on getting Communist content into motion pictures — always in a sub rosa way, of course. And we've been pretty darn successful. You remember, in *Kerner's Corner* — the Town Hall scene, where the aldermen overturn the rotten election and make Gus the mayor?" After Baird absently replies: "Uh-huh", Herman pompously says: "I like to think we've changed a few minds."[52] Watching these angry, nervous writers and their cloak and dagger antics is funny — but their concerns with the Hollywood system are genuine. While Hollywood's capitalist system — and the Marxist pushback it fueled — is great fodder for the Coen brothers' astute comedy, there is another dimension to these films.

On a more serious level, *Barton Fink* and *Hail, Caesar!* may be enjoyed as philosophical comedies. In depicting the "Golden Age" of Hollywood, the Coen brothers raise pesky questions about art, marketization, and freedom. First, the two films portray a world that is firmly rooted in capitalism, where films are produced based on their perceived earning

potential. In this system, art is created for profit, and those who make money are rewarded and perceived to be successful. Here, art is a product to be commissioned, bought, and sold — and an artist's ability to produce box office success is a commodity. In this system, artists are rewarded/punished on a monetary level and they are manipulated by the select few who hold power. It is a system where one's very image is a part of her/his commodity. In a world dominated by illusions, fixers (who work for the studio tycoons) conspire with corrupt police officers and prickly journalists to manage the image for the public to consume. Because profits are barely shared and artists are tightly controlled, it is an unfair system, which is well-equipped to overpower those who oppose it.

In both films the Coen brothers raise important questions about Hollywood's history of Marxism. And while both stories are set in the distant past, the challenges that artists face, because of capitalist forces, have not disappeared. Three key questions that are raised by the Coen brothers have great relevance for filmmakers today, namely: (1) What happens when profit is the root motivator behind art? (2) How does a capitalist system constrain the voice and work of artists — and what can be done about this? (3) What happens when artists challenge the system that constrains them? The questions raised in these films could very easily be applied to numerous Hollywood filmmakers. Pause for a moment and think about the ongoing struggles of such mavericks as Orson Welles, Francis Ford Coppola, and Spike Lee.

Barton Fink and *Hail, Caesar!* are a part of a long tradition of films that depict Hollywood as an unhealthy place for artists. In this tradition are indictments produced by a variety of frustrated auteurs, such as *Stardust Memories* (1980), *The Player* (1992), and *Mulholland Drive* (2001). The unique aspect of the Coen brothers' films, however, is their backdrop of capitalism versus Marxism. Sure, *Barton Fink* and *Hail, Caesar!* are Hollywood parodies set in the past — but they also show us something unsavory about artistic freedom and dehumanization.

Reflecting on loneliness and Hollywood, Martin Scorsese says: "But those … those weeks where there was no one around, it was really, really awful. You could see it in *Barton Fink* when he says, "You can't leave me in Los Angeles!" The poor guy starts crying. He was new in town."[53] Hollywood can be a difficult place and it is one with a long history. While Hollywood has many ghosts of Marxist *past*, the struggle of the artist

in a capitalist system (and with the rise of "blockbuster thinking" we might say that it is now a hyper-capitalist system) is a struggle that endures.

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1. Ethan Coen and Joel Coen, *Collected Screenplays 1: Blood Simple, Raising Arizona, Miller's Crossing, Barton Fink* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2002), 484.

2. *Ibid*., 519. Describing various inspirations for the studio mogul Lipnick, Joel Coen states: "Michael Lerner resembles [Louis B. Mayer] a little, but Lipnick is more of a composite. The incident with the uniform, for instance, came from the life of Jack Warner, who enrolled in the army and asked his wardrobe department to make up a uniform. Lipnick also has the vulgar side of Harry Cohn." See William Rodney Allen (Editor), *The Coen Brothers Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 48. To read more about various elements of parody in *Barton Fink*, see Jeffrey Adams, *The Cinema of the Coen Brothers: Hard-Boiled Entertainers* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2015). Also, see, Ian Nathan, *Masters of Cinema: Ethan and Joel Coen* (London: Phaidon Press, 2012).

3. Coen and Coen, *Hail, Caesar!* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016), 11.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Coen and Coen, *Collected Screenplays 1*, 416.

6. *Ibid*., 469.

7. Coen and Coen, *Hail, Caesar!*, 69.

8. *Ibid*., 70.

9. Coen and Coen, *Collected Screenplays 1*, 483.

10. Coen and Coen, *Hail, Caesar!*, 29.

11. See Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: Cosimo, 2006).

12. Coen and Coen, *Collected Screenplays 1*, 416-417.

13. *Ibid*., 518.

14. *Ibid*., 519.

15. Coen and Coen, *Hail, Caesar!*, 81.

16. Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A. McBride (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985), 45.

17. Coen and Coen, *Collected Screenplays 1*, 415.

18. Coen and Coen, *Hail, Caesar!*, 40.

19. Michael Freedland with Barbra Paskin, *Witch-Hunt in Hollywood: McCarthyism's War on Tinseltown* (London: JR Books, 2009), 8.

20. Having Lipnik recruit Barton to write a "wrestling picture" amused the Coen brothers greatly. Reflecting on the idea, Ethan Coen muses: "We thought it was like a joke … It kind of goes past people: 'Oh yeah, wrestling picture.' We were sort of disappointed that there actually was such a thing. It makes it a little more pedestrian that it really exists." See, Allen, *The Coen Brothers Interviews*, 61.

21. Coen and Coen, *Hail, Caesar!*, 104.

22. This passage is from Karl Marx's doctoral dissertation. See Robert C. Tucker (Editor), *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd edn. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 15.

23. Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed*, 47.

24. This passage is from Karl Marx's work, *The Holy Family*. See Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 135.

25. To read about "fellow travelers" and the dynamics of ferreting out and informing on Marxists (both real and supposed), see Victor S. Navasky, *Naming Names* (New York: Viking Press, 1980).

26. Coen and Coen, *Collected Screenplays 1*, 423.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid*., 424.

29. Coen and Coen, *Hail, Caesar!*, 70.

30. For an unsympathetic, conservative account of the McCarthy era and the idea of Marxist art, see Kenneth Lloyd Billingsley, *Hollywood Party: How Communism Seduced the American Film Industry in the 1930s and 1940s* (Rocklin: Forum, an Imprint of Prima Publishing, 1998).

31. In addition to the film itself, we recommend an informative book tie-in, containing the script as well as an array of supplementary material. See Tim Robbins, *Cradle Will Rock* (New York: Newmarket Press, 1999).

32. Allen, *The Coen Brothers Interviews*, 47.

33. To read a thoughtful analysis of shifting portrayal of Communism in Hollywood films, see Bernard F. Dick, *The Screen is Red: Hollywood, Communism, and the Cold War* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016).

34. See Freedland, *Witch-Hunt in Hollywood*.

35. Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed*, 122.

36. Coen and Coen, *Collected Screenplays 1*, 403.

37. Coen and Coen, *Hail, Caesar!*, 49.

38. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000), 88-89.

39. Coen and Coen, *Collected Screenplays 1*, 424.

40. Coen and Coen, *Hail, Caesar!*, 70.

41. Coen and Coen, *Collected Screenplays 1*, 403.

42. This passage is from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. See Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 500.

43. Coen and Coen, *Collected Screenplays 1*, 519.

44. *Ibid.*

45. Interestingly, over a decade after the events of Barton Fink, Rod Serling struggled in his attempts to explore social issues (such as racism) in television drama firmly rooted in realism. Because realism seemed to be too direct Serling cleverly developed a science fiction venue for exploring these issues — the *Twilight Zone*. See Scott Skelton and Jim Benson, *Rod Serling's Night Gallery: An After Hours Tour* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999).

46. Coen and Coen, *Collected Screenplays 1*, 441.

47. *Ibid.*, 514.

48. *Ibid.*

49. While Barton Fink's predicament *resembles* one out of a Kafka novel, the Coen brothers were not consciously influenced by Kafka when they writing the screenplay and shooting the film. On the topic, Ethan Coen reflects: "With so many journalists wanting us to be inspired by *The Castle*, I've got a newfound desire to discover it for myself." See Allen, *The Coen Brothers Interviews*, 50.

50. See Freedland, *Witch-Hunt in Hollywood* and Billingsley, *Hollywood Party*.

51. This passage is from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. See Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 492.

52. Coen and Coen, *Hail, Caesar!*, 70.

53. Roger Ebert, *Scorsese by Ebert* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 172.