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Film Discussion Group
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Hail, Caesar! (dirs. Joel and Ethan Coen, 2016)

On Camera

Eddie Mannix	Josh Brolin: the Coen Brothers' <i>No Country for Old Men</i> (07), <i>Milk</i> (08)
Baird Whitlock	George Clooney: Three prior Coens, incl <i>O Brother, Where Art Thou?</i> (00)
Hobie Doyle	Alden Ehrenreich: Cate Blanchett's estranged stepson in <i>Blue Jasmine</i> (13)
Laurence Laurentz	Ralph Fiennes: <i>The Grand Budapest Hotel</i> (14), <i>A Bigger Splash</i> (15/16)
DeeAnna Moran	Scarlett Johansson: Coens' <i>The Man Who Wasn't There</i> (01); a new mom
Burt Gurney	Channing Tatum: <i>Magic Mike</i> (12), <i>Foxcatcher</i> (14), <i>The Hateful Eight</i> (15)
Thacker Sisters	Tilda Swinton: Coens' <i>Burn After Reading</i> (08), <i>Grand Budapest Hotel</i> (14)
C.C., the editor	Frances McDormand: eight Coen movies, incl <i>Fargo</i> (96); married to Joel
Joe Silverman	Jonah Hill: <i>Moneyball</i> (11), <i>21 Jump Street</i> (12), <i>The Wolf of Wall Street</i> (13)
Natalie, secretary	Heather Goldenhersh: originated the younger nun role in <i>Doubt</i> on B'way
Head Communist	Max Baker: no signature role, but over 20 TV shows and a dozen films

Off Camera

Director-Writers	Joel and Ethan Coen: their 17th feature; they also work as their own editors
Cinematography	Roger Deakins: 13-time Oscar bridesmaid, most recently for <i>Sicario</i> (15)
Production Design	Jess Gonchor: <i>Devil Wears Prada</i> (06); Coen regular since <i>No Country</i> (07)
Costume Design	Mary Zophres: A Coen staple since <i>Fargo</i> (96); also <i>Interstellar</i> (14)
Original Score	Carter Burwell: every Coen movie except <i>O Brother</i> and <i>Llewyn Davis</i>

Personalities to keep in mind while contemplating *Hail, Caesar!*

Eddie Mannix: The studio fixer and "head of physical production" played by Brolin is based on an actual MGM exec called E.J. Mannix, who earned only one producer credit during his life but helped MGM cover up problems in their stars' lives; an interview with the Coens in *The Daily Telegraph* credits Mannix with hushing up Greta Garbo's same-sex affairs, Clark Gable's and Spencer Tracy's extramarital dalliances, etc. Most controversially he was linked to two suspicious deaths: that of his first wife, and the ostensible "suicide" of the original Superman, George Reeves, who was his second wife's lover; see *Hollywoodland* (2006).

Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons: The twin gossip columnists played by Tilda Swinton are openly modeled on Hollywood's dueling snoops of the 1950s, one of whom Helen Mirren played in the recent *Trumbo* (hence the final twist, scaring Thora about Communist smears)

Herbert Marcuse: The oldest of the Communists hiding out in the Malibu house is said to be this widely-read theorist of worker exploitation and sexual repression (*Eros and Civilization*)

Which Coen movies seem like the clearest connections?

Barton Fink (1991) – Dark satire about a serious Broadway playwright (John Turturro) who gets hauled out to Hollywood to write commercial scripts for “Capitol Pictures,” the same fake studio where Eddie Mannix works in *Hail, Caesar!* Gradually, Barton loses his hold on reality and discovers that his neighbor (John Goodman) is literally the devil personified.

The Big Lebowski (1998) – A virtual flop in its time, but now one of the Coens’ most popular movies, this absurd mystery about a California stoner (Jeff Bridges) features musical dream sequences that in some ways resemble the mermaid and tap-dancing numbers in *HC!*

The Man Who Wasn’t There (2001) – Black-and-white, noir-influenced comedy about a quiet barber (Billy Bob Thornton) who gets increasingly ensnared in a murder plot; shares with *HC!* a quality of spoofing or reprising a familiar genre only to get more abstract as it unfolds

Burn After Reading (2008) – An even broader comedy than *Hail, Caesar!*, albeit marked by a few episodes of gruesome violence; this satire of Washington, DC, suggests that government is a haven for stooges and conspirators, much as Hollywood seems to be in *HC!*

A Serious Man (2009) – A Best Picture nominee and the closest the Coens have come to filming their own childhood milieu in a Jewish suburb in Minnesota; central character, somewhat like Mannix but more hapless, increasingly experiences the challenges in his life as a test of faith

Inside Llewyn Davis (2013) – Eddie is not his own worst enemy, as is amoral and contemptuous folk singer Llewyn Davis (Oscar Isaac), but the music industry in this chilly movie, like Hollywood in *HC!*, sees the efficient production of marketable mediocrity as its primary aim

Bridge of Spies (2015) – The Coens did not direct *Bridge of Spies*, but they heavily rewrote the original script before handing it to Spielberg; both movies center around average men trying to solve other people’s problems; the pall of Cold War militarization hangs over both

Some more trivia about *Hail, Caesar!*

I have not done the research to prove this, but I have read that *Hail, Caesar!* is the first Coen Brothers movie where nobody gets killed. That said, I would not call it their happiest movie. Eddie works in a kind of Sisyphus rut where nobody dies but nothing much ever gets done.

The Coens first conceived of this idea while working with Clooney the first time for *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* He was enjoying playing a dullard for them after so many matinee-idol roles, and they conceived the character of Baird as a way to give him another chance.

Hail, Caesar! unfolds more or less at the same moment as *Trumbo*, amid the crescendo of anti-Communist paranoia within the film industry. This same window saw the rebirth of the Biblical epic (*Quo Vadis?* in 1951, *The Robe* in 1953, *The Ten Commandments* in 1956) as a reliable money-maker. It really was true that the Catholic Church, via the so-called “Legion of Decency,” reviewed Hollywood movies to judge them fit for mass consumption, and that religious themes were encouraged without being too specific to any one faith. This was also the period when color photography gained increasing leverage over black & white, and the widescreen image replaced the boxy frame of prior classics. You see this contrast between Laurence Laurentz’s square-shaped Old Hollywood-style melodrama *Merrily, We Dance* (“would that it twer so simple!”) and Baird Whitlock’s crucifixion epic (wider, in color).

Broad questions about *Hail, Caesar!*

Master Narratives: Humanities scholars often refer to the middle of the 20th century as a moment when religion and Marxism—two great enterprises that had previously explained a chaotic world as, in fact, all part of a larger design—faltered in their cultural prominence. Is it coincidental that over the course of *Hail, Caesar!* we meet rigorous adherents to religion *and* to Marxism, but also see them both subjected to silly parody (the *Hail, Caesar!* film-within-a-film, the slapstick Communist rendezvous at the submarine)? How is Hollywood “replacing” faith or class politics as the dominant way people think about their lives? How important is it not just to Eddie but to the movie that the shadow of nuclear war looms (via that job offer he has from Lockheed Martin), calling everything else into question?

Religion: A related question: the first thing we learn about Eddie is that he is a devout Catholic and compulsive confessor—so much so that the priest hearing his confession feels he comes too often. The movie ends on this fact of Eddie’s character, too, but when he meets with the four clerics, he seems no clearer on Catholic theories of the Holy Trinity than he does on the other faiths being espoused. Is Eddie *really* devout, or is the Church, like Hollywood, a superficial source of comfort from which Eddie actually feels a bit distant? What does it suggest that, as he weighs his job offer, he visits not a real church but the fake set for solace?

Tone: Many of the movie sequences we observe being filmed turn into comic disasters. Hobie can’t get his lines right in the upper-class melodrama. Baird can’t finish his climactic speech in the Biblical epic. The Esther Williams/Busby Berkeley water sequence with Scarlett Johansson also comes apart quite a ways into filming, as DeeAnna’s frozen smile turns to fury and discomfort. The tap-dancing scene (“No Dames”) has the fewest obvious gaffes, but the editing never *quite* rises to the occasion of making the scene as up-tempo or exuberant as it could be. Did you enjoy these movie-within-a-movie spectacles, or did they seem pitiful or sad to you, or some combination? Does *HC!* seem to believe these movies, once finished, will bring joy to the world, or is Eddie overseeing a series of mediocrities?

Sexuality: The farcical secret about Baird Whitlock that Thora and Thessaly Thacker keep threatening to expose (“*On Wings As Eagles!*”) is that he got his first part in Hollywood, directed by Laurence Laurentz (Ralph Fiennes), by sleeping with him. Laurence’s current “protégé” is Burt Gurney (Channing Tatum), the tap-dancing sailor with a blond dye job and a lap dog for whom he’ll risk anything. All three men wind up linked, intentionally or not, to the all-male secret Communist ring. One of the Cold War’s key tactics for smearing gay men was to accuse them of being Communists, traitors, or spies (see: *The Imitation Game*). One of the stereotypes of Communists was that their “secret lives” included sexually deviance. What is *Hail, Caesar!* doing by reprising and/or lampooning this historical linkage—underlined, too, by the comic homoerotics of the sailors’ “No Dames” musical number?

Unseen Elements: We hear and see several times how much *Hail, Caesar!* is straining—in accord with religious *and* studio mandates—to avoid depicting God or Jesus directly. You see this tactic in several old religious movies like *The Robe*, where Jesus’s face and body are always *just* out of sight, even as he carries the cross up to Calvary, or as he dies on it. What connections, comic or not, could we draw to the other conspicuously invisible characters in *HC!*: the studio head, Mr. Skank; Todd, the actor playing Jesus; the Russians; the priest; etc.?

Suggestive moments in *Hail, Caesar!*

Sound/Image: Before we see anything in *Hail, Caesar!*, the first thing we hear is a church choir. When we see our first image, it's a carving of Christ on a cross: a figure of faith *and* of art.

Narration: Michael Gambon, Dumbledore in the later *Harry Potter* movies, plummily narrates the second scene, where Eddie intercepts the starlet Gloria who is posing for mature photos. Gambon narrates the Roman film-within-a-film called *Hail, Caesar!* in the exact same tone, creating a blur between “real” and “reel” life, as if Eddie’s actual experience is also a movie.

Realism?: The film-within-a-film of *Hail, Caesar!* is an odd spectacle by Hollywood standards. When we see footage, it is shot in a bright, buttery light that is hard to square with the harder, sharper colors of actual early-50s Biblical epics. The ratio of the screen is wider than those of 40s Hollywood (which is historically accurate) but is not *as* wide as the Cinemascope photography invented for films like *The Robe*, though George Clooney’s costume is an exact replica of Richard Burton’s in that film. The Coens, then, draw on real examples *and* deviate wildly from them at the same time—just as the swimming sequence, which blatantly depends on several digital effects, both conjures *and* departs from the Esther Williams template.

“Unity in Division, and Division in Unity”: The clerics at the studio, especially the Catholic priest, try to explain how God, the Son, and the Spirit can simultaneously be united and separate. The Coens seem to embark on a similar experiment with their own film, which is simultaneously a series of almost freestanding vignettes and a coherent, “united” narrative.

Star Spoof: Not only did George Clooney turn the “Caesar cut” into a national hair craze in the *ER* years, which makes his casting here a kind of joke in itself, but the idea that his character could be so quickly duped into Communism is a parody of his own hard-lefty public persona.

“Carlotta Valdez”: The Latina starlet whom Hobie takes out on a studio-engineered date shares a name with the enigmatic woman who obsesses Kim Novak’s character in *Vertigo*. From the sound of things, she makes her living in studio musicals, dancing and singing with fruit on her head, like Carmen Miranda. The easygoing woman we meet is neither a mysterious temptress nor a comic figure, as if pointedly rescuing Latina actresses from those stereotypes.

Sound: Skip Lievsay, the sound designer for *Hail, Caesar!*, is widely held to be the best in the business. The Coens repeatedly offer him chances to steal or reshape whole scenes with his sound effects. For example, Hobie’s shoes keep squeaking amid the total silence of Laurence’s set. The sounds of DeeAnna’s “fish ass” being removed and of the maid’s vacuum hitting the door in the Malibu house both precede the images that explain them. At the same time, there is precious little music in *Hail, Caesar!* The silence is often haunting.

C.C. Calhoun: Frances McDormand’s single scene as the *Merrily We Dance* editor recognizes that women had prestigious jobs as Hollywood film editors long before they made inroads in other careers—and yet, she works totally alone. She almost dies and Eddie barely notices.

“Mirthless Chuckle” and “Would That It Were So Simple”: Either could be this film’s title.