

Diegesis and Perception: Narrative Uncertainty in *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013)

A wandering feline, a creature of myth and intrigue, lingers throughout *Inside Llewyn Davis*. Untethered, this Cat vanishes and reappears at seemingly arbitrary intervals, imprinting its elusiveness onto the film. The Coen Brothers suggest its importance but refrain from attaching any explicit meaning to this orange enigma, yet it remains a constant presence in Llewyn Davis' (Oscar Isaac) life, as we see it unfold. This presence is not one simply of an animal; that is to say, it emerges as a form of calligraphy. Its movements, fluid and unpredictable, are microcosmic of the film itself—in structure, story, and themes. A presence without explanation, it is an entity that weaves itself throughout the film, mirroring the fractured spatio-temporality that is so prominent throughout its runtime.

The Coens create a world so tangible, yet almost entirely shrouded in ambiguity, boasting a narrative characterized by losses and failures. The film produces a fleeting and despairing diegesis, akin to the cat's presence, wherein its sole protagonist, Llewyn Davis, fails to arrive at any meaningful call to action or resolution, and is forced to rehash repetitive moments that feel inevitable yet inconsequential. The protagonist does not undergo any tangible change, nor does he seem to have any agency. Stuck within this menial circularity, Llewyn, along with the audience, is lost in his attempt to try and attach meaning to what is presented to him. The narrative boils down to a long series of events that attempt to placate the absence of order and congruence. One's viewing experience remains just as undefinable and turbulent, and attempts to unite character, story, and the film's constructed reality are rendered futile. As indeterminate the film's narrative becomes, it becomes just as stubborn in its presentation.

“A film is an emotional reality, and that is how the audience receives it—as a second reality.” This quote from Andrei Tarkovsky highlights the importance of subjective viewing and sensory perception when watching a film. Francesco Sticchi, in his *Inside the “Mind” of Llewyn Davis*, points out that in the context of this film, this “second reality” is a psycho-affective dimension that exists within a sphere of unresolved meaning. He purports that the film creates this dimension by clearing a path for the viewer to enter Llewyn’s emotional state.

Drawing on Bordwellian cognitive film theory and broader constructivist perspective, this scene analysis will investigate how *Inside Llewyn Davis* uses careful composition, atmosphere, and symbolism to create an ambiguous diegesis—for both its audience and its protagonist—in order to explore Llewyn’s identity and displaced sense of self. While Sticchi anchors his analysis in psychological dimensions specific to *Inside Llewyn Davis*, David Bordwell explains the broad processes of audience perception. Additionally, Bordwell asserts that his theory “does not have much to say about affect” and that it is tied to delayed fulfillment of expectations. What connects the two is the emotional dimension that lies underneath, in the context of this film. Therefore, this essay will complement this perspective, highlighting emotional resonance and affect in the diegesis of *Inside Llewyn Davis* by focusing on Llewyn’s audition in Chicago and its aftermath. I will illustrate how the Coen Brothers utilize this cognitive process to shape the viewer’s emotional response and perception of Llewyn’s internal state of mind and fractured identity. Later in the essay, I will illuminate the special case of the Cat and how it serves as an anchor amongst the film’s ambiguity, tracing its development from a secondary entity into a prominent character. This will be illustrated through the traditional narrative framework of Joseph Campbell’s ‘Hero’s Journey’

After Llewyn's arduous journey to Chicago, he finally arrives at The Gate of Horn. Convincing Grossman to hear him, the two sit down on an empty stage for the audition. As he begins his heart-wrenching rendition of "The Death of Queen Jane," it becomes apparent that the visual composition of this scene underscores the glaring dissonance between Llewyn and Grossman. Llewyn is framed off-center, in low-key lighting. He is dwarfed by the size and darkness of the room, almost rendered as part of the blackness behind him, highlighting his isolation. In contrast, Grossman is silhouetted with a rim of white light with half of his figure bathed in shadow—detached yet observant. His body dominates the frame in reverse shots as Llewyn performs, standing out as a judgemental and consequential figure. The minimal movement of the camera, just ever so slightly pushing in, along with the routine reverse shots of Grossman, highlights the importance of this moment.

The atmosphere of the space they inhabit is pivotal to the emotional weight of the scene. Consistent with the rest of the film, Llewyn is visually isolated. He sits center stage, while still being the least impressive element within the frame. The light that makes Grossman glow seems to forget that Llewyn is even there. Enveloped by shadows, his scrunched-up body is framed tightly, trapped by the impinging camera as it slowly pushes in. In terms of the spatial diegesis, the minimal set design echoes the lack of warmth and empathy the film seems to have for its protagonist. These spatial characteristics, while striking, are not dissonant from the rest of the film and serve as a reminder that Llewyn's story will be one of seemingly endless dead ends.

In *Narration in the Fiction Film*, film theorist David Bordwell elucidates the spectatorial tendency to construct "a perceptual judgement on the basis of nonconscious *inferences*" He highlights that aesthetic perception and the process of meaning-creation from a narrative derive from a range of psychological processes that—within the ambit of constructivist

perspectives—affect and influence hypotheses that a viewer can formulate from any given information. Bordwell denotes that viewers “make assumptions, erect expectations, and confirm or dis-confirm [these] hypotheses.” Fittingly, this sequence is constructed in a manner in which the viewer expects a payoff of emotional reciprocity—some form of emotional or narrative catharsis. From what we know about our protagonist and his story from context, we are aware that this moment is a decisive one. The slow zoom-in, the look of observation on Grossman’s face, and the built-up anticipation from the preceding road trip, are all key markers of perhaps a positive turn. The scene’s aesthetic profile, too—the dimly lit space, the isolation of Llewyn and his voice, the emotional intensity of the song itself—all play into the framework that suggests a positive conclusion.

That is not what is going to happen.

As Llewyn concludes his performance, he looks to Grossman with subdued hope; this is a direct plea. This effort ends up being futile, though, as Grossman’s dismissive “I don’t see a lot of money here,” followed by a painful pregnant pause, undermines any previously earned hope. Therefore, instead of providing a cathartic moment after all of Llewyn’s hardship, the film instead, as Sticchi denotes, “completes this succession of negative events.” The viewer unconsciously mirrors Llewyn’s appeal, looking to Grossman for a reaction exactly as he does, but ultimately continues on a path of perpetual frustration. There has been a clear “dis-confirmation” of certain expectations here. Sticchi points out that this pivotal moment, along with all of its potential for narrative propulsion, “becomes the moment where the absence of a positive conclusion for the story...staging a failed performance for the viewer.” Coupled with Bordwell’s inference that “narratives may arouse perceivers’ anticipations and lock in mental states before presenting information that undermines those very activities,” this sequence

underscores the idea that *Inside Llewyn Davis* actively *resists* narrative clarity or resolution. More than simply “undermining” inferred information for purposes of tension or suspense, the film bitinglly mocks this very expectation. Moreover, Llewyn’s vehement reluctance to audition for a trio offered later by Grossman, when viewed in retrospect with his rejection of royalties for “Please Mr. Kennedy” earlier in the film, brings to the forefront Llewyn’s active resistance toward change and transformation.

Still, Llewyn is not a character that is unable to change; he just simply isn’t even trying. Clinging to the hope for that ‘big break’, Llewyn is nudged along a path that unconsciously drives him. He is always going somewhere, but never really arrives. In a perpetual transitory state, our protagonist moves through the diegesis like the audience—with no agency and no clear idea of what’s next. He plays no active function in solving his problems or even making things easier for those around him. A key difference between Llewyn and the audience, though, lies in the latent optimism a spectator keeps when watching a film. After each failure, the audience retains a sense of hope, only to be continually struck down by the protagonist who is supposed to help fulfill it. This reinforces the idea that the cyclical nature of both the plot and the character’s actions mirrors the audience’s own oscillation between hope and frustration. Sticchi remarks that this feeling of frustration dwindles as the movie goes on, and that each negative event that Llewyn encounters strengthens our embodiment of “the character’s affective and intellectual state, in which anxiety and uncertainty are mixed with the perception of the hostility of the world.” The narrative essentially resets itself after each failure, chipping away at any sense of narrative promise. Bordwell likens such an idea to a process coined by Meir Sternberg—the “primacy effect”—wherein “initial information establishes a ‘frame of reference’ to which subsequent information [is] subordinated as far as possible.” The term essentially describes how

prior information can affect the viewer's perception and how this framework serves as a lens through which to interpret future events.

Analogously, Llewyn has clearly been established as self-destructive and avoidant, as apparent in his interactions with the people close to him and visible within his dormant grief. So, as a result, the audience moves forward with that perception. This initial judgement ("primacy effect") keeps Llewyn at arm's length from the viewer. Unless the film provides "very strong evidence" toward some form of destruction of this perception, this judgement will prevail throughout the course of the film. Furthermore, these negative emotions and implications of stasis within Llewyn's narrative trajectory never seem to be resolved. After the rejection at the Gate of Horn, we see Llewyn trudging through a desolate parking lot, dwarfed in the frame by every visible entity. He makes his way through the snow pile on the pavement, with two patches of clear road on either side of him. This can be seen as a darkly ironic metaphor for how Llewyn prolongs his struggle, often being the cause of his own despair. He chooses to walk through this rough patch of ice, fruitlessly enduring struggle, hoping to come out the other side successfully. The sustained long shot "synthesizes a metaphorical state of complete misfortune and adversity," where the atmosphere and environment surrounding our protagonist reiterates his persistent decline.

A similar thematic idea emerges later on in this section of the film, when Llewyn is driving back to New York. After a torrid time in Chicago, a potential site for a major life change, Llewyn hitchhikes and drives his way back overnight. The film introduces his journey back mid-drive as we open on an atmospheric shot of the road ahead. The shot relies on subtle atmospheric clues to portray its emotional weight, with much of the frame being dominated by negative space. With almost no clear view of anything ahead, except two cones of dispersed

white light formed by the car's headlights, it becomes clear that we are moving into nothingness. Metaphorically, the shot confirms a poignant emotion that has been a throughline in the film—Llewyn is moving towards nothingness. As Sticchi points out, the absence of visual cues in this instance places the audience in an unfamiliar and disorienting space, which reiterates “an uncomfortable sense of uncertainty associated with the idea of lack of progression.” In his article, Sticchi remains certain of the fact that such repeated instances of narrative failure contribute to an “overall negative mood.” Routinely, we cut to Llewyn's tattered face and languid posture in the driver's seat to communicate his fatigue—one that may just as well be mirrored in the viewer. As tired as Llewyn is of failing, the audience is just as exhausted by watching it.

Nonetheless, this instance in particular gets across a different idea, one that may constitute Llewyn's final, (un)culminating choice. Earlier in the film, Llewyn learned about an ex-girlfriend who had carried his child to term, unbeknownst to him and that she is living in Akron, Ohio. During his car journey home, Llewyn comes across an exit sign for Akron. The sign stands isolated, illuminated against the darkness of the environment, embodying the purpose of a guiding beacon nudging him along its path. It offers him a chance to embark to a new journey. Additionally, the framing in this instance is telling. A point-of-view shot introduces the sign as the camera moves so as to construct a visible ‘fork in the road’—one road toward, and the other away. A seed of doubt and anticipation has been planted in the viewer's mind. *Will* he take it? Diagonal leading lines, manifested as road markings, convey a sense of uncertainty and ambiguity. Coupled with POV shots that project this uncertainty onto Llewyn, the moment inhabits an elusive aura.

Despite its ambiguity, the architecture of the frame and shot movement clearly underscores the choice—he can either ignore the sign and continue driving toward nothingness,

or take the turn to see what change or transformation this new development will bring him. Infuriatingly, Llewyn continues on the straight path. This moment becomes even more agonizing as a car passes by, taking the exit toward Akron, but it seems almost otherworldly in its presentation. Llewyn watches through the rear view mirror as this vehicle, lacking any visible driver, takes the road not taken by him. It assumes an almost phantom-like presence, a haunting projection of what could have been. The absence of clarity and objective viewing of this event, for the audience, signifies an instance wherein Llewyn sits idly by as the life he could inhabit passes by him. Llewyn's decision, though, takes on an ambiguous quality since there had been no active acknowledgement of his child other than one scene with a doctor. The viewer has no idea what he is thinking at this moment, but ultimately all that matters is his inaction.

The surety with which this other car takes that turn, contrasted with Llewyn's internal battle between inaction and possibility, underscores another such moment where he makes choices that can be seen as "controversial...prevent[ing] empathetic participation with him." As the audience, we want him to make the right choice, nay, we need him to. The lack of narrative and emotional closure so far in the film, compounded by his recent rejection in Chicago, has arrived at its climax. Sternberg's 'primacy effect' reaches its limit here, where instead of providing a way for the audience to finally rid themselves of their initial perception of Llewyn's flaws, the film doubles down on it. Instead of redeeming him, the narrative locks him further in its ambiguity. Therein, the film confirms the cyclicity of Llewyn's suffering, and in turn, the narrative. This repeated lack of resolution, not only within story, but within actions, exacerbates *Inside Llewyn Davis'* inherent abstraction. Additionally, this moment seems to encapsulate the atmospheric ambiguity that the Coens have imbued to this film. The world around Llewyn feels real, yet seems to be unaffected by his presence. It is a subtle but affectively charged moment where

Llewyn watches his unrealized potential for change eclipse behind him, and the audience finally reaches a conclusion that maybe a transformation is too much to expect out of him.

This is not the only collision between Llewyn and his decisions that occurs in this scene. Later, presumably hours after we last see him, the film cuts to Llewyn almost dozing off and struggling to keep awake while driving. His confinement in the car becomes more apparent in this instance, strengthened by tight framing. Suddenly, while Llewyn distracts himself with the radio console, a cat lunges in front of his car. Llewyn hits the brakes immediately, and there is a quiet moment where both character and audience sit in uncertainty—*did it get hit?* Stepping out to investigate, Llewyn spots the wounded animal limping into the woods and disappearing.

Where the car that took the turn toward Akron signifies Llewyn's indecision, the Cat emerges as a tangible paradox. A symbolic motif, this Cat can be seen as a reflection of Llewyn. This cat is not the same as the one we start the film with; it is not the Gorgeins' cat. Still, its reframed presence alludes to Llewyn's varying appraisals of his life, and the audience's oscillating perspective on him. A being without a home, lost and cold, the Cat transforms into something more immediate in this moment. This wounding of the entity that has been in lockstep with Llewyn's emotional trajectory throughout finally introduces opposition to the audience's belief in the "impossibility for new events to take place." It represents the Cat's first true moment of consequence, where Llewyn may feel a sliver of remorse or responsibility—emotions he had previously avoided. This signals a rupture in the otherwise cyclical nature of the cat's presence, highlighting the importance of this moment for the audience, and for Llewyn. Finally forced to confront the reality of his situation, he sits back in the car and spends a few seconds gazing into the nothingness he is about to drive into. Unlike his usual passivity and indifference, this moment emits a glimmer of self-reflection. The Cat's damaged state mirrors his dying career. He

may have not put the final nail in the coffin by striking it with his car, but he has certainly wounded it. Similarly, Llewyn's chances for success are not a complete lost cause, but they seem worse off than before. This is a cycle that perpetuates throughout the film. Echoed in the cat, it is lost, then found, then mistaken and misinterpreted, and eventually, abandoned but not yet vanquished. This is yet another instance of Llewyn's self-destructiveness. Gazing into the distance, Llewyn finally has a chance for self-reflection, but instead he drives away to avoid that confrontation.

Sticchi denotes that the repetition of Llewyn's professional and emotional failures supplemented with the constant disappearance and reappearance of the cat, interwoven throughout the narrative as if scrawled along the film reel, link the two together. Their "inadequac[ies] of ~~the~~ character are strongly conveyed" through their similarities. Furthermore, the unclear fate of the wounded cat reverberates within diegetic perception, imprinting on Llewyn, too, this sense of uncertainty. The lack of any confirmation like "a clear vision of [the] animal's body" or whether it lived or died seems to resemble qualities of a decentered narrative. Sticchi writes that the only resolution to this moment is provided off-screen, when Llewyn and the audience learn (at the same time) that the original cat has returned safely to the Gorfeins. In doing so, the film renegotiates Llewyn's primacy within its world and thus, decentering him. This confirms to the audience that he is too, in fact, a spectator of his own story. This can be seen previously signaled during his observation of the phantom-car taking the path he should have. He is relegated to observing his life from the margins, unable to take ownership and regain agency. Llewyn knows he must change, but for some inexplicable reason he feels he cannot even try. The diegesis reinforces this by placing him in similar situations repeatedly, and showcasing how he

resorts to the same self-destruction each time. This observation, then, allows for us to discuss the non-traditional narrative structure of *Inside Llewyn Davis*, viz. character and growth.

Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* outlines his structure for a narrative. This framework primarily hinges on the 'hero' enduring trials and tribulations in order to achieve a form of transformation at the end. The structure relies on the hero answering a call to adventure and crossing a threshold that pushes them toward a journey that 'tests' them and their character, in order to provide an outlet for growth and/or decay. In *Inside Llewyn Davis*, this framework is deliberately subverted. A key moment for this deduction is the moment where Llewyn drives past the Akron exit sign. This moment, one of many in the film, can either be seen as a call to action or a moment where the protagonist crosses a threshold but in this film, Llewyn's refusal to take that call represents a failure in transformation. This motif is recurring throughout the film, another such instance being when he turns down royalties for "Please Mr. Kennedy". These decisions position Llewyn as the anti-Campbellian hero, wherein his varying chances for growth and fulfillment pass him by and he watches on as an aloof observer. His journey is circular, filled with moments of fleeting hope but no tangential junctures that provide any meaningful opportunities for growth. Caught in a cycle of stagnation and emotional stasis, the Coens' protagonist never emerges from adversity because his shifting sense of self sabotages his path forward. In turn, the diegesis reflect this too since Llewyn never *really* leaves his home world to answer a call to action. His journey to Chicago was not a propulsion toward a changed perspective, rather it one born out of desperation and thus, the conclusion mirrors that failure. Each moment of consequence in the film is met with indifference, where the aftermath is either immediately elided or is ignored. *Inside Llewyn Davis*' many climactic moments and potential instances for character growth contrarily reinforce the protagonist's unwillingness to engage with

the opportunities that are presented to him. Whether through his rejection of offers, his emotional detachment, or passive response to pivotal moments, Llewyn's journey is characterized by his inability to evolve. Stuck within his tragic mindscape, Llewyn is not forced to live the same day over and over again, rather he embraces it.

In conclusion, *Inside Llewyn Davis* offers more than a simple narrative of failure and personal despair; it unfolds as a meticulously crafted exploration of the self through its use of visual and auditory symbolism, where grief, identity, and the inescapable cycle of artistic frustration intermingle. By placing Llewyn's rejection within the ambit of a spatially and emotionally ambiguous scene, the Coens construct a cinematic space that reflects not just the protagonist's inner turmoil, but one that also mirrors audience perception. Through the lens of Bordwellian cognitive theory, the film succeeds in using its visual and auditory elements in order to construct layers of meaning for the viewer. Bordwell's key argument relies on the fact that the act of film viewing is an active process of constructing meaning from fragments of information presented. *Inside Llewyn Davis* capitalizes on that process, retooling it in order to evoke further ambiguity rather than answering any questions. The narrative is not presented as being rooted within a comforting character arc or growth process so as to guide the audience, but is rather shown as a series of misfortunes that build upon, as Sticchi denotes, "conflict, harsh contrast, paradoxes and the capacity to reconsider our positions in unexpected ways." Llewyn goes through a journey of dislocation and failure, but never introspection. In doing so, he remains at arm's length from the audience and in turn, the film challenges the audience to ruminate on the futility and inherent ambiguity of human existence. Providing such contrast to the mythical tradition of the Hero's Journey, the Coens successfully craft a narrative born out of what-ifs and could-have-beens.

***Works Cited**

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*FOOTNOTES ARE EXCLUDED IN THIS ESSAY DUE TO FORMATTING
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