

**Country *and* Western: Postmodern Identity and *The Blues Brothers***

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### Introduction

*"It's 106 miles to Chicago, we got a full tank of gas, half a pack of cigarettes, it's dark... and we're wearing sunglasses."*

*"Hit it."*

The American notion of identity has many more layers than we may think about daily. For instance, there are regional and ethnic identities of all sorts in the US; black, white, northeastern, and midwestern. *The Blues Brothers* (1980) poses us with a new question: In the age of industrialized culture, how much of our identity is innate, and how much is created for us by pop culture? We're raised in certain financial and cultural conditions, but where is the line where the media we consume starts to define who we are? On top of all that, does it matter? Through the postmodernist lens, we can see that the values that culture held in high regard are now more likely to be disregarded than to be taken seriously. Old notions of intrinsic culture in art, music, and literature have found themselves on the wayside, disregarded for the idea of mass interpretation. In a sense, people have been freed from predestined truths, but now have been put to the task of constructing their identities from the pieces of the world that surround them.

However, though many out there are up to that task, there are just as many who wish to enforce still those rules that once defined the boundaries of high and low culture. Whether that be through interpretation by force, popularization of ideas, or the notion of "birds of a feather flock together", the boundaries are asking of us the same thing: stay in your lane. In an age where people can access any kind of culture at any time and any place, those notions are being challenged in ways that not even postmodernists may predict. Where we're seeing the first generations of people that aren't exclusively socialized by their people, but by all people all the time. Where the internet promises to bring the whole world to one's fingertips, the mass

migration of culture finds its roots in access. That access, still in its earliest stages, asks us to pick and choose everything that people have to offer, and that creates identities that have up until now never been known before. However, just because the internet has given us access to these new forms of expression, does not mean that culture shock is anything new. As we will see in our discussion of *The Blues Brothers*, postmodern constructions of identity have allowed new generations of people to express their identity in a society that, even if that society may not allow it, paves the way for new forms of expression. These constructions, in the end, find that no matter who they are or where they are from, people have much more in common with one another across cultures than differences. In this, we can also find how those older notions of identity are personified in those that chase the brothers throughout the film. Through these characters, via a cultural studies lens, we can better understand the suppression of the brothers' constructed identity, and how that identity interacts with other conflicting identities in the film.

### **Literature Review**

Jameson (1988) gives us an effective foundation in some of the aspects of how we will use postmodernism in this essay. He outlines ideas like pastiche, the death of the subject, nostalgia, and various aspects of the aesthetic of consumer society, and how it has affected how people view art. Postmodernism is a reaction to modernism, much like modernism was a reaction to classicism, in a way that looks to dismantle modernism's ideals like the distinction between high and low culture, and the rejection of modernism's "grand narratives". In Jameson's view, postmodernism is the blending of absolutely everything, so much so to the point where art doesn't have the same meaning in popular interpretation because of the colliding of all mediums,

ideas, and artists themselves. This collision takes place because the society which we have produced for ourselves has deemed it profitable.

For a definition of the postmodern idea of identity, Dumitrescu (2001) tells us that trying to nail down a single definition of identity under postmodernism is duplicitous. As modernism looked at identity in a completely subjective manner, postmodernism looks to remove subjectivity from identity entirely.

"The decentered subject is perceived as multifaceted and contradictory, hence identity is no longer viewed as singular and stable, but rather as plural and mutable, and ultimately impossible to grasp through the usual exercise of reason." (Dumitrescu, 2001, p. 12).

Postmodernism denies the homogeneousness and universality of the human experience. That is to say, where modernism says that there is a particular way that people ought to be, postmodernism goes against that "grand narrative", saying that rather than trying to be what a person ought to be, a person should be what *they* ought to be.

Yildirim (2017) paints for us some of the building blocks of the postmodern aspects of *The Blues Brothers*. How they've constructed their identity through the music they perform (and assumably grew up with), propping themselves up not as the typical song-and-dance numbers in the typical American musical film, but as salt-of-the-earth types who sing the music of the downtrodden. How though the brothers end up in jail, they are still who they are because they still have that music that is so concrete to their constructed identities. The brothers position themselves in a society that has given them a bad hand, and they came out of it defying the notions of identity that they set up for themselves. They do this by completely submerging themselves into a culture where normally people of their complexion normally do not feel like they belong, and making their home in that culture.

Rattansi and Phoenix (2005) give us a grounded framework for how youths form their identities in a postmodernist framework. In their essay, they posit that where identities were once more racialized and nationalized, postmodern frameworks have guided youths in more recent generations to form their identities not through national origin but through financial class. Postmodernist frameworks have also formed a new fluidity between racial and national identities, where people in the same group - for instance, Indian People living in the UK, can all identify as both Indian and British, or just Indian or just British. Identities can also be synthesized through intercultural communication, where once such communication would be culturally frowned upon. How, for instance, the Blues Brothers can be ethnically white, but socialized in a way where many aspects of their identity could at once be considered black. Rattansi and Phoenix also go into how the rapid expansion of consumer culture has re-oriented the notion of identity from the collective to the individual, in lockstep with the advancements in neoliberalism in the Reagan administration. However, collective identity construction is not entirely removed from the equation, as class plays a significant role in the socialization of youth.

Althusser (1968) expands on some of these notions of how ideologies that the state may wish to enforce are put into action. Implicitly, through modes such as religion and media, Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) enforce certain ideas, packaged around ideas that are "bigger" than themselves, such as "god" or "the people". Thus, in serving whatever the state requires of them through these ideas, they are implicitly acting as another arm of enforcement of the ideals of the state. The state is more of a floating signifier of any institution of consolidated power. This is opposed to the more practical arm of state ideology enforcement, the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA), as discussed in Bemshoff (2018). RSAs are the typical police, military, neighborhood watch-esque arm that enforces not through ideology itself but through the threat of

physical violence. As we will discuss later in this paper, the Blues brothers come across both forms of state apparatuses throughout the film.

Miller (2001) gives us a baseline to work in a cultural studies framework to help conceptualize where the brothers stand in their world, assumedly a reflection of reality, however distorted it may be in some aspects. In this essay, Miller looks to studies of sub-cultures as a way into looking at how the cultural studies paradigm works. Subcultures have their particular approaches of taking signs from the dominant culture and re-orient their message to say something adjacent or even something completely against what the original meaning was in the dominant culture. In that, cultural studies is a mixture of many different disciplines that look to "... reveal and transform those who control the means of communication and culture, and undertaken with a constant vigilance over one's own *raison d'être* and *modus operandi*." (p. 7). It looks to the intersection of its many disciplines to decipher culture through produced and consumed texts.

### Analysis

#### **Postmodern Identity**

*The Blues Brothers* wastes no time in the establishment of the environmental factors that have come to define many of the aspects that the brothers have adopted. The opening has no music, no people, and hardly much humanity to speak of. We are given views over an industrial landscape, assumedly the den from which the brothers have come. Fire and smoke rise from towers in a manner that nearly blots out the sunrise. It's very clearly a dingy, ugly place. From this, we find our first brother, "Joliet" Jake (John Belushi), being released from prison due to good behavior. We will later find out that Jake held up a gas station to cover a room service tab that the rest of the band failed to cover (Landis, 1980, 47:32). We do not see either of the

brothers' faces until about six and a half minutes into the film. Up until that, we're given their names, Jake and Elwood (Dan Aykroyd), tattooed on the respective brothers' fingers. For the rest of the film, both the brothers wear hats and sunglasses. This obscuring of the brothers' eyes can be both a visual gag and a denial of certain aspects of their identity.

Directly after getting his brother from prison, Elwood takes Jake to go and see "The Penguin" (Kathleen Freeman), the nun at the head of the Catholic orphanage the brothers were raised in. After the Penguin tells the brothers that the orphanage needs \$5,000 to pay the property tax, the brothers reunite with their father figure, Curtis (Cab Calloway). In the meeting with Curtis, we learn about how the brothers were raised on Curtis' singing of Elmore James tunes and playing the harmonica in the basement of the orphanage. Curtis is a central figure in the brothers' socialization, as evidenced by the fact that they dress identically to Curtis, who assumedly only has that suit, hat, and sunglasses to his name (Landis, 1980, 15:46).

Outlining some aspects of the brothers' socialization help make a point about how race and identity have become more fluid in a postmodern society. Rattansi and Phoenix noted (2005) "...the emergence of new syncretic black-white identities involving the borrowing and invention of linguistic, musical and other cultural forms" (p.3) have helped to illustrate how these lines of identity, once held to harder in previous generations, have become different ways to be socialized rather than identities inherent to one culture or another. Biologically, Jake and Elwood Blues are white. However, throughout the film, we find the brothers in, and perfectly comfortable within, black spaces. They participate in black Baptist churches, they live down in the streets of Chicago, depicted in the film as being one of many black spaces, and the music they play is very clearly inspired, if not completely taken, from black artists. This is not to say that these aspects

make them entirely black, but more loans itself to that fluidity of identity that Rattansi and Phoenix are eluding to.

Postmodernism's plurality of narratives is another aspect of it that has allowed the relative anomaly of the Blues Brothers' identity to be constructed in the way that it has. Dumitrescu (2001) talks about how the de-centering of the individual in identity construction has paved the way for newer forms of identity to flourish in the wake of a major shift in the priorities in a given culture. As has been quoted above, that decentralization makes any previous form of identity nearly impossible to pin down. Then, Dumitrescu argues, the absence of that center allows for the contradictions that are burrowed within all people to rise to the surface. The Blues Brothers, for all their biological differences from the culture that they have adopted as their own, are still accepted and still accept themselves as the way they are. In a way, the donning of their sunglasses at all times of day and in any condition seemingly denies their biology, denying the viewers and anybody who meets with the brothers a chance to look into the eyes, a valuable form of connection and identity. The brothers do not want to be defined by that biology but by the content of their actions and mannerisms.

As the brothers' socialization was more than likely after the Second World War, Jameson (1988) would posit that they were subject to the ramifications of a consumer society. These brothers have been driven by the pastiche of how they were raised, in an orphanage basement listening to Cab Calloway and Elmore James, and through Jameson's nostalgia mode, living out that mode through a band that plays those tunes that they grew up with. Jameson's pastiche differentiates itself from the classical notion of parody, where a certain style of an author or form of media is used to criticize. Pastiche is more compilation for compilation's sake. As Jake and Elwood Blues are characters from a *Saturday Night Live* sketch, it would be right to call said



sketch more parody than anything. However, the brothers are depicted in the film as playing it completely straight, and for that, we will have to take their word at it. Their pastiche comes not from a cynical place to capitalize on the recognition of blues music, but more a form of showing respect to the artists that raised them in that basement for so many years. They copy the stylings of a Ray Charles, a Cab Calloway, or an Aretha Franklin not to mock, but to pay homage. This, then, takes us to Jameson's (1988) nostalgia mode. Jameson talks about how this reverting back to a past that wasn't always particularly true. "... we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about the past, which itself forever remains out of reach." (p. 1038). The brothers did not grow up, nor do they still live, in the lap of luxury. They've made their living in the dark and dank corners of society, where poor souls like them are forced into. They found their comfort, like many of us do in watching films that make us reminisce about *our* past, in singing and dancing to the music that got them through their rough childhoods.

In an even broader sense, the brothers defy many aspects of their identity in a meta sense. Yildirim (2017) breaks down many aspects of the classical American musical film in a manner that places the film in contrast to its contemporaries. The most obvious of these is the fact that Jake and Elwood Blues, the main characters of this musical, are not the typical pairing of a romantic couple at the heart of a given musical. The only inkling of romance we get in the film is from Carrie Fisher's character, an unnamed woman who hunts down Jake for abandoning her at the altar. Fisher's character employs explosives and automatic rifles in her attempts to rectify this perceived wrong. The music in the film is not usually sung by the brothers but by the recording artists that sang the original songs, in a winking manner. The film also purports to be a mirror to the society that it was created in, early 1980s America, with its destitute working people, lax

attitudes to hate speech, and the church's influence. Typically, these musicals find their characters riding off into the sunset, "happily ever after". The brothers *do* achieve their goal by the end of the film, but they find their "happily ever after" not in the embrace of those in power, but by their subjugation in the prisons again, amongst the people that accept the brothers for what they are.

### **Life in a Segmented Society**

As the brothers' identity is so central to the plot of the film, it's also important to see how that constructed identity interacts with the world that they inhabit. These interactions between different racial and financial classes, and how these groups seem to enforce their own methods of being, are integral to many of the conflicts in the film. As this is a comedy film, many of the misunderstandings and misdeeds amongst these groups are played for laughs, but these interactions are made out to be jokes in a very specific context. That context, of the late 1970s United States, is one that is unequivocally relevant to the discussion at hand. A time of much economic and racial tension, this decade seemed to be a breaking point for the integration of many cultures. Whether those cultures were always willing to integrate was a different question, but that integration was underway regardless. These moments, of course, come in the wake of the civil rights movement of the late 1960s. Mistrust of authority is, at this time, relatively high, seeing as they had just been through a president who had resigned in disgrace (Nixon), a president nobody voted for (Ford), and now a president who, while well-meaning, could not live up to the lofty goals of his own administration (Carter). Bloodworth (2006) says that Carter's presidency especially was a lightning rod for this kind of mistrust, as his Program for Better Jobs and Income (PBJI) had, as of the making of the film, crashed and burned pretty hard. When a

president's signature policy promise dies in committee within a year, it's hard to call that administration a success.

All this to say that the brothers live in unprecedented times, times where in many instances people looked to their in-groups for support in the wake of the failures of New Deal liberalism. In the film, these anxieties and in-groups can best be represented by who the brothers are running from for most of the film. We will take into consideration the semiological approach as outlined in Bouzida (2014), where a sign is made of the signifier, or literal object, and the signified, or metaphorical object. First, the brothers are stopped by the police for running a stop light (Landis, 1980, 00:25:39), leading to multiple chases throughout the film that lead to much hilarity and property damage. The police represent a more traditional authority that has historically subjugated people of the brothers' persuasion. Evidenced in the film by the historical context, and more literally by the police radio in the film in their approval of the use of "unnecessary violence" in the apprehension of the brothers (Landis, 1980, 02:05:28). On top of the police, the brothers have caught the ire of the American Socialist White People's Party (ASWPP, or Ass-Wipe), by running them off a bridge during a demonstration (Landis, 1980, 00:56:40). This is that logical conclusion to the insular socialization that we discussed earlier, the representation of the racial identifiers that the brothers defy. Finally, toward the middle of the film, the re-formed Blues Brothers Band steal a show from a country-western band at Bob's Country Bunker (Landis, 1980, 1:16:20). Masquerading as the Good Ole Boys, the band plays their gig and ends up \$200 in debt over the beer they drank during the show. The real Good Ole Boys show up after the brothers play, and Jake and Elwood front them the bill and split. In this, the Good Ole Boys represent a similar kind of ethnic identity, a different side to ASWPP's coin, representing how the brothers' ethnicity *should* have been socialized. Through the interactions

the brothers have with these three organizations, we can see how this newly constructed identity may clash with the culture it exists within.

Althusser (1968) brings up this idea of the "Ideological State Apparatus" (ISA), where organizations like the church enforce certain ideologies onto people for the state's benefit. We can find some of that soft enforcement in the Good Ole Boys, and the company they keep. Bob's Country Bunker is a place that expects certain musical fare from their acts. The fare that, despite the brothers' best intentions, has stricter boundaries than one might wish to have when you're a rhythm-and-blues band in a country bar. Despite the brothers and the patrons of that bar sharing much more in common than not, the patrons behave aggressively to the brothers' black-inspired musical act. Althusser implies this in the first thesis of his paper, "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship between individuals to their real conditions of existence." (Althusser, 1968, p. 712). This is in the wake of that governmental distrust that we discussed earlier. Where people like Althusser would posit that the brothers and the patrons of the Bunker have more in common economically, a more important paradigm in Marxist circles, the patrons of the Bunker have been socialized in a way to react violently to forms of art that don't particularly fall within their tastes. Thus, the representation of that violence follows the brothers on their way back to Chicago in the form of the Good Ole Boys band, ironically named for their ill-tempered ways and their violence towards the brothers.

A more extreme version of that divide then exists within ASWPP, the racial lines being laid on so thick that it becomes central to their ideology. How they are representative of people who wish for that same separation of ethnic races not because of socialization, but purely because of the fact that they are different ethnicities. This, however, is also intensely ironic. How, through similar means that the original Nazi party in Germany undertook, ASWPP utilizes

arbitrary symbols and aesthetics to unify people under one racial banner. Quite literally, the first thing we hear at the ASWPP demonstration is about how the swastika, the "sacred and ancient symbol of [the white] race since the beginning of time" (Landis, 1980, 00:54:59). The swastika wasn't used as a shorthand for white people in earnest ever, and it was only popularized in that usage by Nazi Germany during the Second World War, around 2,000 years after the symbol was first utilized as religious fare on the Indian subcontinent. ASWPP wears traditionally Nazi-inspired garb, uses Nazi-inspired symbols, and utilizes Nazi-inspired formations. In essence, they have been socialized in a similar manner to the Blues Brothers, but in the exact opposite direction. Because of that transgression in the eyes of ASWPP - the fact that the Blues Brothers show people that race is not a monolith - ASWPP must destroy what the brothers represent. It can, in some sense, elude to the right-wing shift that America would take in the following years of Reagan and the like. In another, ASWPP bridges the gap between those Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses, as discussed earlier. In an America run by ASWPP, one could imagine them utilizing state power to make their reds meet.

The police, then, pose as that pure force of Repressive State Apparatus (RSA). Benshoff (2016) expands upon, among many other things discussed in this paper, the form that RSAs take in contrast to ISAs. Where ISAs look to enforce ideology through persuasion, RSAs enforce ideology through the threat of violence. RSAs are usually the last line of state ideological defense, as ISAs are much easier to maintain and are more socially acceptable in the West. The police, in relation to the brothers' constructed identity, stands as the ultimate form of the state's repressive power over minorities and the poor, demographics that the brothers either ideologically or literally represent. Police violence is the real driver of the plot, as they have the resources to track down the brothers and separate them from society as a whole. At the end of the

film, as the brothers are taking the \$5,000 to the Chicago City Hall to pay for the orphanage's property taxes, the police use dozens of police cars, hundreds of men, and even the state national guard to apprehend the brothers for their misdeeds. Those misdeeds? A bevy of parking and driving misdemeanors on Elwood's license. It's hardly a proper response. However, this was the reality for many people who were actually living in the ghettos at the time, living through all kinds of police violence as if it were no different than kids playing in the yard. This interacts more with the brothers' black socialization and the systemic racism that plagued America at the time (and still does to this day).

Though this last group - the upper echelons of polite society - isn't literally chasing the brothers across the country, it is relevant to the discussion this last group is brought up. Miller (2001) talks about the importance of how the cultural studies lens crisscrosses many disciplines, so when talking about how identity interacts with the world, it is not only in its outward conflict but also a more insular, polite form of social warfare. When getting the band back together, the brothers find that their old trumpet player, Mr. Fabulous (Alan Rubin), has become the maître d' at a fancy hotel restaurant. The brothers then go to that restaurant and threaten Mr. Fabulous not with violence or robbery, but with their continued presence in the restaurant. Despite being in suits and ties, the brothers do not change their clothes, so one could assume that they do not smell very good at a basic level. This will not fly at this restaurant. Additionally, just as the other patrons of the restaurant look at the brothers with scorn, the brothers meet the looks with scorn of their own, lambasting the people at other tables with offers to purchase their women (Landis, 1980, 00:53:16). The brothers drink loudly from the wrong glasses, throw food around the room, and are all in all very impolite. In this, we can find another aspect of the brothers' identity that is very telling about their character. When they go to talk to Matt "Guitar" Murphy and "Blue Lou"

Marini, they end up in *their* restaurant, a much poorer, arguably "black" -er space. In there, the brothers conduct themselves with relatively more decorum. This, we can argue, tells us more about how much they disrespect high society than anything else we can find in this film.

### **Conclusion**

*The Blues Brothers* was made at a time when the paradigms of identity and the culture surrounding it were shifting in ways that people could've never predicted. As consumer society began to take hold, people were finding that there were going to be new forms of identity through the dismissal of the older modernist mode. Though many people would push back against the notions that the brothers represented, those same brothers would push back on society's outdated notions of what made a person what they were. Even though this film is framed as a comedy, there is still value in pointing out the ridiculousness of the old notions that the world once revolved around. The film came out at just the right time to find the people who grew up in a consumer society becoming a dominant force in both the economic and social spheres of society and told the audiences of then, and even now, that it's not the genes that make the man, but the people you surround yourself with.

If this film had a thesis statement, we could argue that it would be more of a thesis song than a traditional statement. "Everybody Needs Somebody", and especially the monologue by Elwood at the start of the song tells us all we really need to know about the themes of this film. People are much more similar than they are different, and if we want to bridge that gap, we shouldn't do that with hate for people we don't understand but bridge those gaps in ways that we can. At the Country Bunker, the band wins the crowd over by playing the theme to Rawhide. They play at the concert venue to the cops, who seem to very much enjoy what they're hearing if

John Candy's character is anything to be believed. The Nazis may not have reconciled with the brothers, but in the end, they did reconcile with each other. The brothers themselves are personifications of that bridging of the gaps, being white, raised black, playing the music that they know and love, rather than the music that people think they should be playing. The brothers didn't waver in the face of the state, the fascists, and society at large. They stayed true to themselves and in the end, they paid off the property tax and finished their mission from god. They brought people together from all corners of Chicago, whether they wanted to or not, and got the big break that they were looking for. In the end, they *did* end up in prison again. However, the brothers would argue that it's better to be in prison amongst people that love you for who you are than to be on the outside with people who love you for what you should be.

*"No matter who you are and what you do to live, thrive and survive, there're still some things that makes us all the same. You. Me. Them. Everybody."*

*"Everybody, Needs somebody, Everybody, Needs somebody to love!"*



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