

**The Humorous View of a Psychotic Break
in *Raising Arizona*, by the Coen Brothers**

Thoughts on the bizarre object.

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Raising Arizona, the second film by the now well known writer/director duo, Joel and Ethan Coen, was released in 1987. Many of the actors in the film were relatively unknown at the time. The young Nicolas Cage had just caught attention starring beside Cher in *Moonstruck*, with a few smaller roles in some feature films before that. Holly Hunter was relatively unknown. Frances McDormand had recognition for her stage acting with one Tony nomination, otherwise a few television series and one feature film, *Blood Simple*, the first Coen brothers film (know that she is married to Joel Coen). John Goodman had been in a few films, but his fame from the TV series *Rosanne* was still ahead of him.

Raising Arizona is a film I know well, first seeing it shortly after it was released, and having re-watched it at least a dozen times since then. The quirky comedy speaks to my sense of humour, and it was an early lesson to me about the art of making film, and of telling a story. Reviewing it more recently from a psychoanalytic perspective has brought me great joy as I was able to discover yet more in this film that I love.

Could this story be told in any other way than a comedy? Certainly a story of a childless couple, devastated by their inability to have a child, kidnapping a baby to try and fill the need, hiding the crime from inquiring friends, and being hunted by police and bounty hunters, might be possible as a drama; but would it be watchable or relatable or on any level believable? I would suggest that the story as a comedy nullifies believability as a concern. And as bizarre as this film is, it entertains while simultaneously touching on some very interesting aspects of deeper psychology. So I make a declaration that underneath the comedic presentation is also a tale of love collapsing, of identity disintegration within a psychotic breakdown, of a reformation of identity and recovery to health.

My explorations have also allowed me to consider the concept of the bizarre object, a challenging theory first put forward by Wilfred Bion. This theory is complicated and I will admit having only tenuous grasp on the idea. As an introduction, I quote a description by Francesca Bion, his second wife, at the Memorial Meeting for Dr. Wilfred Bion:

“In the psychotic personality the intolerance and hatred of reality is so intense that the patient splits up a part of his ego responsible for the hated perceptions – the perceptual apparatus splits it into minute fragments, which he projects with great violence into the object, splitting it in turn. Those fragments of the object, encapsulating a fragment of the ego imbued with hatred, become bizarre objects. What should be the furniture of dreams become concrete, bizarre objects surrounding a weakened and impoverished ego.”

-Memorial Meeting for Dr. Wilfred Bion (International Review of Psychoanalysis, 1981).

So, in other words, the psychotic personality still has aspects of themselves that recognize reality, but has an extreme hatred of this reality. In order to expel this immense hate and the reality, the psychotic must split off aspects of themselves, projecting these outwards into the objects – the relationships – surrounding them. This projected aspect of the self, along with the recognition of reality and hate of it, combines with the object. This amalgam of object, self, and hatred of reality is termed the bizarre object. Subsequently relating to this object is complex for one is not only dealing with the other, but also with a fragment of the self, as well as the imbued hate. I will return to this idea later in the paper.

Raising Arizona begins with a declaration of identity, “My name is H.I. McDunnough. Call me Hi.”. What follows is a very long narration, more than eleven minutes before the credits for the film are shown.

Artistically, this narration is enchanting as well as stylistically creative. It also is important in setting the stage for the rest of the film, while also describing some of the psychodynamics at play. Hi's current reality is that he is a small time crook, partial to holding up convenience stores, and never using a loaded gun so as to not hurt anyone. He is not particularly apt, repeatedly returning to prison as a consequence of his chosen profession. And he does not enjoy the tedium of prison, nor the label of repeat offender. Hi has found a motive to change, the attractive Ed who takes his mugshots, and he begins to feel the "pain of imprisonment". This "imprisonment" need not only be the fact of incarceration, but also his repetition compulsion. The promise of love and a new life makes him willing to give up the life he knows; a new, unknown life, feels safe and desirable in its idealized form.

Very briefly I must make note of Hi's tattoo, essentially the image of Woody Woodpecker. Its importance is much clearer at the end of the film, but it has meaning. Woody Woodpecker was originally a provocateur, a bit of an outlaw, and as such suits Hi's original self-image. Actor Nicholas Cage actually used the cartoon character as inspiration for his portrayal of Hi; in the film, the more stressed Hi is, the more his hair stands on end and resembles the cartoon character.

Briefly Hi experiences this idealized future, a proposal leading to marriage, a starter home, and a job. The salad days. Hi can even manage the new tedium of his factory work knowing he gets an honest paycheque and returns to Ed at the end of the day. Of course to maintain the idealized future, "Having a critter was the next step.... there was too much love and beauty for just the two of us".

Reality interferes with this desired future. Ed is infertile, and they have no hope for adoption given Hi's criminal past. Ed falls into depression, and Hi finds himself tempted to return to his old, familiar identity. The reality is hated for its power to destroy the wished for future. For Hi this is not only circumstance as the situation reaches into his character, that of a criminal, the bad "outlaw". Hi wishes to be a different person and he believes that attaining the trappings of a new life will change who he is. When he notes he is driving by convenience stores that are not on the way home, he is expressing the sense that reality will drive him back to his criminal identity.

The birth of the Arizona Quints to Florence and Nathan Arizona leads to the temptation for the psychotic solution to the current dilemma. Ed comes up with the plan to steal one of the quintuplets, she and Hi reasoning that the Arizona's have been given more than they can handle, so that they can take one without causing real harm; this is a denial of reality. For Hi, this decision is the sword with two edges. His hope is that the baby would restore the idealized future and lead to an idealized self. The paradox is that he must engage in the most serious crime of his life for this to occur, he must split off aspects of reality and himself, in order to maintain the fantasy. How can you achieve a better self when you are not accounting for your entirety and not engaged with reality?

All of what I have said arises from the prologue to the film!

After the credits is the scene of the actual kidnapping. The anxiety is clear as Hi tries to choose the perfect baby to fulfill the fantasy. Reality is already impinging as the right baby does not simply present, and he is challenged with actual babies who are impulsive, temperamental, and mobile. The anxiety nearly serves

its purpose of preventing Hi from enacting, but Ed's own misgivings are not coordinated with his, still suppressed, and Hi cannot heed his internal concern. I posit that this scene is the beginning of the psychotic break for Hi, the point where he will engage the psychotic attempts to shape himself and his future rather than mourn the unattainable future and allow healthier solutions to the couple's dilemma.

Consider the joke, "It's Nathan Jr. ... I think.". In some sense, the baby is never a person in this film. To Hi and Ed he is the wished for solution to their problems, all their hope projected into him. For the Arizonas, he represents what is theirs, but taken from them. For others he is a meal ticket or a bargaining chip, or an object to fill someone else's emptiness in their relationship. Returning home, the idea of a normal, orderly family life is staged as both Hi and Ed predict their future as a family, though the photo Hi takes reveals the chaotic reality. In a moment of relative calm, Hi suggests Jr. Is "a little outlaw", obviously seeking identification with an idealized version of himself as a noble and good rascal. This also reflects one of the archetypes in American culture, the outlaws who stood up to the repressive English monarchy and founded a great nation. Ignored is the reality that many outlaws are dangerous, violent criminals, though Ed hints at this when she insists that no, Nathan Jr. is a good boy.

The first outlaws that appear are Gale and Evelle, escaping from prison in a scene suggestive of a mythic birth, but born anally from excrement; they are a counterpoint to Nathan Jr. (I think), born from a mother and father's love and desire. The brothers are true career criminals, uncouth, unclean, entitled and inconsiderate. Their arrival at the McDunnough household is celebrated by Hi, though it brings greater discord and anxiety into his marriage. The friction between Hi and Ed is counter to the idealized future, the reality Hi hates, and one can imagine that the aspect of the self that contains this hate is split off and projected into Gale and Evelle. Gale regularly seeks to drive a wedge between Hi and Ed, painting her as making undesirable demands of Hi, suggesting he refute these and join the brothers in the old pattern of partying and robbery. As an example of a bizarre object, the aspect of Hi's hate of reality – that fatherhood contains insecurity and demands sacrifice for the good of the family – is split off and projected into the brothers, resonating with their temptations and his own desire to return to his old life. However, the projection also encapsulates the hate, part of which directed at Ed. More importantly, part of that hate is reflected back at Hi, in Gale's attacks on Hi's masculinity; Hi suffers both guilt and humiliation in relation to the others, as a response to the violence of the projection. The brothers and Ed are at odds and in competition for Hi's loyalty, and he feels unable to gain the acceptance of either.

Immediately that night Hi has a dream:

"I drifted off thinking about happiness, birth, and new life... but now I was haunted by a vision of... He was horrible. The lone biker of the apocalypse. A man with all the powers of hell at his command. He could turn day into night and lay waste to everything in his path. He was especially hard on the little things... the helpless and gentle creatures. He left a scorched earth in his wake... befouling even the sweet desert breeze that whipped across his brow. I didn't know where he came from or why. I didn't know if he was a dream or vision but I feared I myself had unleashed him. For he was the fury that would be as soon as Florence Arizona found her little Nathan gone."

Leonard Smalls is first presented as a pure projection of Hi's, suggested by Hi's own words about his

unleashing fury. Hi is not talking about Florence Arizona's fury, as she is devastated, fearing her child may have been taken by aliens, but not furious. He is not talking of Nathan Sr.'s fury, for that fury is the frustration directed at the incompetence of the law enforcement officials, and it steps aside for Nathan promoting his business at the press conference. The fury is his, as the return of the hate for himself in what he has done.

As an audience we may also wonder if Leonard Smalls is strictly a creation of Hi's mind, yet another birth. In several scenes with the biker after the dream he shows up in various locations as he is tracking, the others around nonreactive to his presence. Given this space of uncertainty, we are led to seeing him in the context of Hi's unconscious. Smalls has a tattoo on a shoulder as well, *Mama Didn't Love Me* over a skull; could this be a reference to Hi's upbringing? And Smalls wears a pair of weathered baby shoes which come across more as a hunter's trophy than a nostalgic memento. [I am reminded of Hemingway's words in the shortest story ever written: "For sale: baby shoes, never worn."]. However, Smalls is a real figure, for he does interact with Nathan Sr. and Ed, not only Hi.

We know nothing of Hi's background other than his parents are dead, but it is very safe to assume that his upbringing was troubled, to say the least. It is unlikely that he would have found an identity in being a criminal had he a nurturing upbringing. It is also unlikely that he would hold such an extreme ideal, so removed from reality, in his wished for future. And it is unlikely that he would be prone to seek psychotic solutions to his distress. Extrapolating from those assumptions, we can further suspect that he carries much more hate for the reality of his childhood than the ordinary, neurotic individual.

Psychoanalytically, while Leonard Smalls may not be purely a projection, not an hallucination of psychosis, he certainly is symbolically very much an object open for projection. Smalls is very much a real outlaw, and not the fantastic noble rascal with which Hi would like to identify, or what he sees in Nathan Jr.. He is horrible, cruel, completely lacking empathy, not a nurturing bone in his body. Smalls may represent the projection of the reality of Hi's hated childhood. He certainly could be the reality of an outlaw identity's future. And, again invoking the bizarre object, he contains a huge amount of Hi's hate – reflected back hate so severe that it could kill him (were Smalls purely a projection, and Hi died at his hands, outwardly this would be suicide).

The final example of the bizarre object is in Glen and Dot. While Gale and Evelle are identified with Hi's past identity, and Leonard Smalls embodies one possible future for Hi, Glen, Dot and their children most directly challenge Hi's wished for future. Superficially they have the trappings of the fantasy: married and seemingly committed to each other, concerned parents to their brood of children, Glen a relative success as a boss in Hi's workplace, both enjoying life. The American Dream, so to speak. The reality paints a different picture. Glen is racist, thoughtless, crude and unsophisticated. Dot is shrill, hyper, and unaware that the delivery of her parenting advice is raising the pitch of the anxiety in the new parents. And the children are hellions, out of control, and are a reminder that babies do not stay angelic forever (as if they ever were). Again, Hi hates this reality, and it is projected out, maybe with aspects of the self that would desire success and recognition.

Hi does attempt a healthier solution to his upheaval when he tries to speak to Glen as they walk

through the desert, possibly seeking a caring father who would listen and advise. But Glen will not be this for Hi. While his first words seem to indicate understanding, he and Dot have found a different solution to the burdens of family life; they are swingers. They muddle sex with love in their desire to satisfy libidinal needs rather than delay gratification and work through marital challenges by communicating with each other. And Glen wishes to draw Hi into the same solution. This is where Hi most experiences the hate returned, in this instance seeing Glen as wanting Hi to capitulate, so that Glen can take Ed from him. He experiences Glen – along with Dot and their children – as directly attacking his fantasy of a beautiful future with his family. He also feels that his masculinity is being attacked. Hi boils over and lashes out, striking out at Glen; he has sabotaged his own dream at this point for now he is guaranteed to lose his employment.

Hi is essentially defeated at this point. The attempt to deny reality, to expel the hate within – the psychotic solution – has failed, and he is more and more aware that he will not have the life he fantasized. He will not be the man he thinks he should be. As he shifts from psychosis to depression, he makes one last attempt to quickly regain a sense of himself by seeking to return to his old ways, his previous repetition compulsion; he holds up the convenience store. Of course this goes terribly wrong, though he does avoid capture and is able to keep the package of diapers. Now he has lost his job, he nearly lost his freedom, and he anticipates losing Ed, who is clear she will not live this life of chaos. But psychologically there is a positive side in that Hi can no longer deny reality and he must face everything he may lose. He is thrown into depression.

Late that night his depression reaches its depths as he writes a goodbye letter to Ed and Nathan, and in one sense it comes across as a suicide note.

“I will never be the man you want me to be, the husband and father that you and Nathan deserve...
...that I don't have the strength of character to raise up a family in the manner befitting a
responsible adult. I say this to all my shame.”

There is also a progression in the moment as Hi signs his true name, Herbert. In his despair it no longer matters that he cannot continue as a criminal, doesn't matter that he will never attain the Ozzie and Harriet life. He is simply able to present himself for who he is, the most basic step in regaining his identity.

I do wish to note here that Hi never was completely engulfed by psychosis, nor is this the perfect example of the bizarre object. The baby is also a site for projection, but does not seem to embody any projected hate of reality as we see in the others that can be described as the bizarre object. While some of the babies whine as Hi is deciding which one to take, the one in Nathan Jr.'s spot does not, and after the kidnapping, Nathan Jr. does not cry throughout the rest of the events. In fact, during the film, most adult characters cry or cry out at some point. When a baby is heard crying, it is at a distance, disembodied from the baby itself. In one instance Leonard Smalls has driven up to the McDunnough household at night, and the cry of the baby at that point, with some sound effect treatment, seems to be part of the desert, maybe more a memory of Smalls' than coming from the trailer. For Hi, he wishes to see Nathan Jr. As an “outlaw” in the romanticized sense, a projection of his past identity. Nathan Jr. also represents the wished for future. However, as Hi moves into depression and he witnesses others using the baby for their own ends, Nathan Jr. becomes the focus for Hi moving from despair into action, Hi taking responsibility, with hope that he can be a

good man, and make things right again.

While Hi is done attempting to create the fantasied future, the objects that were in the orbit of his breakdown are not done with him. This is fortunate for Hi as it may have saved him from suicide, rather than being stuck in despair he is driven to action to protect Nathan Jr.. Glen is the first to have figured out the baby's true identity, and rather than reporting the crime to the authorities, he wishes the baby for him and Dot. He is not wanting the baby for love of it, nor to protect it; rather, he wishes to have Nathan as a distraction for Dot, also a fantasy that any baby can keep the couple happy. Gale and Evelle initially take the baby with the intent of seeking a ransom, but Evelle becomes endeared to him and wishes to keep him. Obviously Gale and Evelle have no interest in child rearing, but likely would wish to compensate for their own disturbed childhoods. Leonard Smalls has no compassion at all for the child, to whom Nathan Jr. is just a commodity, either to get a larger reward, or to sell the child on the black market.

Nathan Jr., despite Hi's attempt to fight off Gale, is taken. Hi and Ed take off in pursuit of the brothers. Hi initially declares how he will be a changed man, that Ed was right. However, Ed voices the reality of a potential new future much more aligned with reality: that they need to get Nathan Jr. back safe and sound, but that she doesn't believe she and Hi can continue together as a couple. All the denial and rationalization around their misdeed is evaporated, and Ed declares how having two people seek to satisfy their selfish needs over a greater good is not workable.

Gale and Evelle start out on their crime spree, but soon fall victim to their own incompetence, partly encumbered by taking along the baby, though misplacing him in the end. They are no hurdle for Hi and Ed. But Smalls is. And for Hi, this means dealing with the reality of an outlaw. Not the idealistic view he identifies with, but rather the brutal reality that is the future of an outlaw life. He must also accept the return of all he has projected, particularly the hate of reality he has been suffering.

Hi is surprised that Ed sees Smalls as well. This can, strangely, be interpreted as a kind of insight. I have described Hi's psychotic process of projecting aspects of the self, encapsulating his hate of reality; but Hi also dreamed this, the lone biker of the apocalypse, in the dream able to acknowledge how it is born from him. Now he is faced with the real being, so aware of all he has projected that he would not be surprised if this were just his hallucination. Insight is not the cure, and a working through is required, which is symbolized in the ensuing battle. Hi seems no match for this being, even with Ed's help, as he is beaten sadistically; though Ed is able to rescue Nathan. The high point of the battle is when Hi uncovers the tattoo identical to his own on the chest of Smalls, the point where he truly recognizes himself in the other man, a real future for him should he persist as an outlaw. Dramatically and paradoxically, Hi uses Smalls' own hate – the grenade – to defeat the beast; the grenade was used previously when Hi's voiceover told how this biker was particularly hard on little, gentle creatures. In the aftermath of the explosion, Smalls' boots fall from the sky, followed by the baby shoes he wore as a trophy. These may be symbolic of Hi's life in the moment: the boots as the destruction of the unwanted future, the baby shoes a reference, maybe, to the unwanted past, the seed of that unwanted future. Hi is in this moment in his own shoes, grounded in reality.

Hi and Ed return Nathan Jr. to the Arizona household, where they are discovered by Nathan Sr.,

wielding a gun, though quickly softening seeing that his child is being returned, unharmed. Earlier in the film, Nathan Sr. has been a parody of the entrepreneur, another aspect of the American Dream, a man so bent on success that it overshadows any true connection to family. But in this scene he epitomizes the good father, joyous at having his child returned, and more importantly also a good father to Hi and Ed. Nathan Sr. quickly realizes that this is the couple who took the baby, not Smalls as previously assumed. He witnesses Hi taking sole responsibility, Ed jumping in admitting it was her idea, then Hi protecting her by insisting he is the guilty one as he did the deed. Nathan Sr. notes he will not call the authorities as there is “no harm done”, as such accepting Hi and Ed as imperfect beings who make mistakes, not requiring them to be an idealized expectation of good. He honours their honesty and remorse, their willingness to take responsibility, and their attempt to make things right.

Hi and Ed have seen the worst in each other, and based on that have decided to split up. But Nathan Sr. reminds them of the good they contain, and provides fatherly advice by telling them to reflect on their impulsive decision before choosing to act. The ability to reflect rather than act is, of course, one aspect of health. As he advises, Nathan Sr. muses how he would hate to lose Florence, as he loves her so. In the context of this scene, one can infer that Nathan Sr. is acknowledging that he too is an imperfect man who is accepted, both by the other and by himself, within the loving relationship with his wife. He thus represent a possible alternate future for Hi, a man with whom Hi might identify and thus be able to let go of his previous identification as an outlaw.

That night Hi has another dream. Gale and Evelle return to prison, in part representing Hi's impulsive side being again contained. Glen finally receives consequences for his casual racism and his callousness, possibly Hi's own willingness to impose consequences on himself, that is, to take responsibility. Hi envisions Nathan Jr. succeeding in the future having benefited from his brief experience with the McDunnoughs, representing Hi's selfless aspect as well as his hope for the future. And finally there is the vision of a distant future, “...a land not too far away... where all parents are strong and wise and capable... and all children are happy and beloved.”. Of course this final vision is very idealized, itself a split as the all-good, and in that sense it reflects some of the psychotic processes seen in much more malevolent ways previously. However, it is just a dream, in this instance containing a wish for the future. It contrasts from the nightmare earlier in the film which contained the fear of a different future, a future that risked realization. The nightmare had some roots in Hi's identity as an outlaw, while the dream at the end seems to speak more to an identification with a healthy father.

So one may speculate that Hi's breakdown, the splintering of his ego, was necessary for him to be faced directly with his darkest aspect, the mounds of hate accumulated over his lifetime, deeply repressed but continuously seeping out, and potentially exploding out to cause great harm. Fortunately Hi held on to some of his strengths, particularly his compassion for the helpless and gentle creatures; most directly this was his protectiveness of Nathan Jr., but maybe also compassion for the boy – the potential man – within. Was the splintering of the ego required to provide Hi space? Space to reform himself less bound by narrow internal and external expectations. Space where Hi could move from the paranoid-schizoid position to despair, taking some

first tentative steps toward the depressive position. Space where he could allow a new identification as a good man, offered in the most crucial moment by Nathan Sr..

Finally, I return to more general thoughts and questions about comedy. Earlier I suggested that comedy may allow a greater suspension of disbelief. There are dramatic, quite realistic films that take on very challenging aspects of the human experience. Even in the distance that art provides, we – the audience – can feel too close to such dark themes within ourselves when they are reflected to us on the screen. Such films may be critically lauded, but rarely produce a popular success; people will avoid when these dark themes feel too real. In this film, comedy allows a layer of absurdism that protects as we are never bothered by the question of reality, never directly faced with how such challenging things may be part of our personal experience. The darkness is well hidden in the absurd images and in the jokes. Yet we all might recognize that we have our own lone biker of the apocalypse within us, or that under extreme stress we could break down and risk annihilation.

Does the comedy of this film simply remove us from our darkest impulses and worst fears? Does it simply promote denial? Or does it make something more palatable which otherwise would have to be rejected? Could the absurd symbolization and the softening through the use of humour actually serve to digest the harsh reality, provide us something we can take in? Does comedy give us hope that we may touch on our insecurity, our hate, our despair, and still have a happy ending?

I end with the oft repeated words of wisdom in this film..... Okay then.