

REWIND & RECLAIM

# THE HUDSUCKER PROXY

The Film That Loved the Past Too Much for Its Own Present

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# Contents

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Introduction: The Apartment on Crescent Heights

1. Chapter 1: The Script

2. Chapter 2: The Making

3. Chapter 3: The Cast

4. Chapter 4: The Influences and What They Mean

5. Chapter 5: The Score

6. Chapter 6: The Story

7. Chapter 7: The Disaster

8. Chapter 8: The Reclamation

9. Chapter 9: What It Is

10. Chapter 10: The Enduring Circle

## Introduction: The Apartment on Crescent Heights

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In 1984, the Coen brothers had just finished *Blood Simple*, their noir debut, and were trying to find a distributor willing to release it. While they searched, they were sleeping on Sam Raimi's floor.

More precisely, they were sleeping in Raimi's one-bedroom apartment on Crescent Heights Boulevard in Los Angeles, along with Joel's then-girlfriend Frances McDormand, all of them crammed into a space designed for one. Raimi had given Joel Coen his first professional film job three years earlier, hiring him as an assistant editor on *The Evil Dead*, and the friendship that grew from that connection had developed, across the preceding years, into a creative partnership of a very specific kind: three filmmakers who shared a love of the same movies, talking through the night about what those movies had been and what films built in that tradition might do now.

The script they were working on in that apartment was called *The Hudsucker Proxy: An Industrial Fantasy*. It was a screwball comedy set in the corporate world of 1958, built as an explicit tribute to the films of Frank Capra and Preston Sturges and Howard Hawks, full of the rapid-fire dialogue and the naive protagonist and the fast-talking reporter and the big-city machinery eating small-town decency that those films had perfected in the 1930s and 1940s. It was joyful and elaborate and would require, when it was finally made, twenty-seven craftsmen spending three months building a model of 1950s New York City from scratch.

It was also, by every practical measure of the film industry in 1984, completely unmakeable. The budget it required was far beyond what two filmmakers with one low-budget debut could

attract. So the script went into a drawer, and the Coens went on to make *Raising Arizona* and *Miller's Crossing* and *Barton Fink*, building a filmography and a reputation that would eventually give them the leverage to pull the drawer open again.

It took a decade. The film it produced opened to mixed reviews and a \$11 million domestic gross against a \$25 million budget, and critics positioned between the films that preceded it and the films that followed it found it cold, artificial, and disconnected. It was, in 1994, the wrong kind of film for the wrong kind of moment.

It is also one of the most purely pleasurable studio films of its decade, and the argument for it has been gathering force ever since the decade ended.

## **Chapter 1: The Script**

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The origins of *The Hudsucker Proxy* go back further than the Crescent Heights apartment. The specific seed was planted in 1981, when Joel Coen was working as a lowly assistant editor on Raimi's *The Evil Dead* and the two of them were discovering that they had grown up watching the same films and loving them for the same reasons.

What they had both loved, and what the Coens had been loving since childhood in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, was a specific and briefly flourishing tradition of American comedy filmmaking that had reached its peak in the 1930s and 1940s and was now available only in revival houses and on the emerging home-video market. Preston Sturges, who had written and directed a run of comedies between 1940 and 1944 that were unlike anything before or since. Frank Capra, whose films about decent men

overwhelmed by corrupt systems had given the Depression-era audience something it badly needed and that subsequent decades had made to look sentimental without diminishing the craft. Howard Hawks, whose *His Girl Friday* had set a standard for verbal comedy timing so high that most subsequent films attempting the form had simply given up.

These were films built on a very specific set of formal principles: dialogue delivered at a pace that required the audience to pay attention rather than wait for the punchline, a faith that the audience's intelligence was equal to the film's, a genuine warmth toward characters who were also being satirized, and an architectural relationship between verbal comedy and visual comedy in which neither was ever quite where you expected it to be.

The Coens and Raimi wrote *The Hudsucker Proxy* as their version of what that tradition might produce in a new decade, and they wrote it with the conscientiousness of people who loved the source material enough to want to do it justice. They cited their influences openly: Capra's *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) and *Meet John Doe* (1941) for the naive protagonist finding himself in positions of prominence. Hawks' *His Girl Friday* (1940) for the fast-talking reporter and the comedy of speech. Sturges for the general proposition that American commercial culture was available as the setting for comedy of genuine satirical intelligence.

They also, characteristically, added ingredients that no Capra or Sturges film had included. There was a magical realist subplot involving a maintenance man who might or might not be an angel. There was the specific comedy of the hula hoop, which the film uses as the accidental proof that corporate America cannot

successfully distinguish the genius from the idiot, because corporate America was never in the business of distinguishing between them. There was Paul Newman, playing the company's villainous vice president with the gusto of an actor who had spent decades playing heroes and was thoroughly enjoying the holiday.

The script finished in 1985. The films that needed to be made before it could be made numbered four. In the meantime, it waited.

## Chapter 2: The Making

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By 1991, the Coens had made *Blood Simple*, *Raising Arizona*, *Miller's Crossing*, and *Barton Fink*, which had won the Palme d'Or, the Best Director prize, and the Best Actor prize at Cannes, the top three awards at the world's most prestigious film festival. This was a track record sufficient to attract the attention of Joel Silver, the producer behind the *Lethal Weapon* series, the *Die Hard* series, and *Predator*, a man who operated at the scale of the mainstream Hollywood industry and who had been following the Coens' work since *Blood Simple* with the specific admiration of someone who recognized craft regardless of budget.

Silver bought the *Hudsucker* script for his production company, Silver Pictures, and took it to Warner Bros., pitching it in the terms that studios understood: this was the film that would break the Coens into the mainstream. The studio would get a film critically acclaimed directors were passionate about, with a budget large enough to give it the scale it required. They agreed, with the condition that Silver assemble a cast recognizable enough to open the film. Silver had promised to protect the Coens from studio interference, and he delivered on that promise: the brothers retained final cut.

The budget settled at \$25 million, the largest the Coens had worked with, and the scale of the production design it funded was extraordinary. Production designer Dennis Gassner, who had previously worked with the Coens on *Miller's Crossing* and *Barton Fink*, was given the brief of building a fantasy version of 1950s New York that would look like the Art Deco dreams of that city rather than any photographic reality of it. Twenty-seven craftsmen spent three months constructing a detailed scale model of the

city's skyline for the opening and closing aerial sequences, fourteen skyscrapers built from scratch and photographed with the same care that Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* had brought to its own architectural fantasy.

Filming ran from November 1992 to March 1993 at Carolco Studios in Wilmington, North Carolina, with location work in Chicago where the Merchandise Mart served as the exterior of the Hudsucker Building and the Blackstone Hotel hosted the Christmas dance sequence. Roger Deakins, on his third Coen brothers film, was given sets of extraordinary visual ambition to light and photograph, and his solutions, the golden glow of the lobby against the murky haze of the mailroom, the impossible deep-space grey of Mussburger's office, constitute some of the most fully realized cinematographic work of his career.

Sam Raimi, the co-writer and old collaborator, served as second unit director, handling the hula hoop montage and other sequences requiring the kinetic, propulsive energy associated with his own directorial work. The hula hoop sequences carry his fingerprints in their speed and in the specific quality of physical comedy they generate, and the film's rhythm in those passages is noticeably different from the Coens' own, more patient approach to comic timing.

## Chapter 3: The Cast

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Tim Robbins played Norville Barnes, the film's naive protagonist, and the charge that would be leveled against the performance by critics in 1994 was that Robbins was too broad, that the earnestness was overplayed, that the audience was kept at a distance from a character whose appeal was being signaled rather than felt. This charge has not held up.

What Robbins was doing with Norville was something that the screwball tradition required and that contemporary dramatic norms had largely abandoned: he was playing a type rather than a psychology, a character whose function in the story was as a moral compass rather than as a rounded individual, whose naivety was the film's argument about what capitalism does to decency rather than a realistic portrait of how any particular person would behave. This is how Capra's Gary Cooper characters worked. This is how Sturges's Joel McCrea characters worked. The audience's job was not to identify with Norville but to root for him, and Robbins provided exactly the quality required for that rooting: an undefended earnestness that the surrounding cynicism could not quite extinguish.

Paul Newman played Sidney J. Mussburger, the film's villain, with a quality of theatrical relish that was the film's most direct acknowledgment of its debt to classical Hollywood. Newman had spent decades playing the principled man, the cool antihero, the figure whose appeal was based on a quality of authentic restraint. Mussburger had no restraint whatsoever, and Newman's decision to go large rather than cool produced one of the more openly enjoyable villain performances of the decade. He understood that the film was a tribute to a tradition of villainy that operated at a

volume that contemporary drama had decided was old-fashioned, and he matched the volume without apology.

Jennifer Jason Leigh played Amy Archer, the fast-talking reporter, and the performance was, in 1994, the film's most divisive element. Leigh had been listening to Katharine Hepburn recordings to prepare for the role, and the result was a vocal performance that operated at the exact frequency of the 1940s screwball heroine, rapid, precise, bright, and slightly removed from naturalistic speech in a way that was clearly intentional and that some critics found irresistible and others found exhausting. The Coens described her approach as imitating Hepburn's vocal mannerisms, and Ethan noted that the script's genre elements were designed to carry exactly that kind of stylized performance.

The film's deeper argument about Jennifer Jason Leigh's performance is this: the criticism that it was too arch, too theatrical, too self-aware of its own generic affiliations was exactly the criticism made of Katharine Hepburn in 1930s screwball comedies when they were new. Those performances now look, to the same critics who dismissed them on first encounter, like the thing that made the films work. Time tends to rehabilitate commitment.

The supporting cast was assembled from character actors of particular texture, with Charles Durning as the doomed Waring Hudsucker, John Mahoney as the newspaper editor, William Cobbs as Moses the custodian, and, in a small role, Bruce Campbell as Amy's colleague Smitty, included because his friendship with the Coens was such that asking him to audition would have been an insult, and the brothers simply cast him without requiring one.

## Chapter 4: The Influences and What They Mean

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The Hudsucker Proxy is a film that wears its influences so openly that critics in 1994 read the transparency as a flaw rather than as a formal choice, and this misreading is the critical problem the film's rehabilitation has had to address most directly.

The Coens were not imitating Capra and Sturges and Hawks because they could not think of anything else to do. They were choosing, consciously and with the enthusiasm of filmmakers who had loved this material their entire professional lives, to work in the tradition those directors had established, in the same way that a jazz musician works in the tradition of bebop or a novelist works in the tradition of the picaresque. The tradition is not a limitation on the work. It is the form the work inhabits, and the intelligence of the filmmaker shows in what they do inside the form rather than in their choice to reject it.

What the Coens did inside the screwball form was to push its structural logic to its furthest implications. The naive hero of Capra's films is usually naive by personality. Norville Barnes is naive by function: the film's entire plot depends on his inability to understand what the people around him are doing to him, and the comedy is generated by the gap between his understanding and the audience's. This is a classical dramatic irony structure pushed to an operatic scale, the whole city of New York knowing something that Norville does not, the audience watching his good-hearted obliviousness produce outcomes that the cynics who surround him have never anticipated.

The hula hoop is the film's central joke and its central thesis simultaneously. Mussburger installs Norville as president specifically because Norville's manifest stupidity will, he believes,

drive the company's stock into the ground. He does not anticipate the possibility that stupidity and genius might be difficult to distinguish from each other, that a man who does not understand the conventions of the business world might, precisely because he does not understand those conventions, produce something that bypasses them entirely. The hula hoop is a circle with no particular function, an object that accomplishes nothing except the experience of using it, and its success is the proof that the market, despite Mussburger's certainty about how it works, does not actually reward the things Mussburger thinks it rewards.

Capra would have ended the film with the victory of decency over cynicism, and the Coens do that too, but they route it through magic realism rather than sentiment: the resolution involves a stopped clock and a maintenance man who may be the ghost of Waring Hudsucker himself, dispensing justice from above the mechanical systems that govern the city below. The Coens loved Capra enough to argue with him, and this is their argument: the victory of decency over cynicism does not happen through the organic mechanisms of democratic goodwill. It requires intervention from outside the system, because the system was designed to prevent exactly that victory.

## Chapter 5: The Score

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Carter Burwell had scored every Coen brothers film from *Blood Simple* in 1984, and his work across that collaboration constitutes one of the more sustained and distinctive composer-director partnerships in American film. For *The Hudsucker Proxy*, the brief required something categorically different from his previous Coen scores: not the spare, atmospheric music of *Blood Simple* or the folksy mournfulness of *Raising Arizona* or the sweeping orchestral darkness of *Miller's Crossing*, but something that matched the film's own relationship to classical Hollywood, a score that honored the tradition of the 1940s studio orchestra while remaining identifiable as the Coens' own.

Burwell attempted to write his own music for the hula hoop montage and the film's opening aerial sequences, the passages that most required a sense of grand, spiraling momentum. He wrote several drafts. None of them worked as well as the piece he kept returning to: the Love Theme from *Spartacus* by the Soviet composer Aram Khachaturian, written in 1960 and possessed of exactly the combination of grandeur and dreaminess that the film's most stylized passages needed. Burwell was candid about the limitation this represented: he worked hard to write something better, he said, and never could. The use of the Khachaturian was not laziness but an honest recognition that the classical orchestra tradition he was working in had already produced the ideal piece for this specific emotional purpose.

For the rest of the film, Burwell wrote original material that matched his usual approach: thematic, melodically inventive, attuned to the emotional subtext of scenes rather than their surface content. The score for the scenes between Norville and

Amy tracks the development of their relationship with a quality of warmth that the dialogue's surface briskness conceals, communicating what neither character is prepared to say directly. The music for Mussburger and the boardroom carries a quality of mechanical authority that is more sinister than the comedy on screen suggests it needs to be, a reminder that the film's laughter is always happening in the presence of something genuinely predatory.

The Coen brothers regular editor, noted in the credits as Roderick Jaynes (a pseudonym the brothers have used since *Miller's Crossing*), cut the film with a rhythmic precision that the score both serves and drives. *The Hudsucker Proxy* is one of the most precisely edited comedies of its era, and the relationship between Burwell's music and the editing is among the more technically accomplished examples of that collaboration in the Coens' filmography.

## Chapter 6: The Story

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The story of *The Hudsucker Proxy* is, on its surface, the oldest story in American popular cinema: an honest man arrives in the big city, is exploited by the powerful, stumbles accidentally into success, is pulled back down by the powerful, and is rescued by a combination of love, luck, and the discovery that decency is its own reward.

This is the Capra story. The Coens knew they were telling the Capra story. They told it anyway, and they told it in a way that made clear they believed the story was worth telling again, that its argument, the argument that the system is designed to grind down the people it claims to serve and that the people it claims to serve keep finding ways to survive it, had not expired simply because the decade it was associated with had.

Norville Barnes arrives in New York City with a business degree from Muncie College of Business Administration and no practical qualifications whatsoever, a pure blank slate on which the film can write its argument about what the city does to the person who arrives without defenses. He gets the only available job, in the mailroom of Hudsucker Industries, because every other job requires experience and he has none, and he is installed as president by Mussburger precisely because his blankness will, Mussburger calculates, communicate to the stock market that the company is rudderless and failing.

The hula hoop is the complication that the scheme does not survive. Norville has been carrying around a hand-drawn circle with a note underneath it, "You know, for kids," which he presents to Mussburger in his job interview as evidence of his creative potential. Mussburger concludes, correctly, that the man has no

idea what he is doing. What he does not conclude, incorrectly, is that this means the idea has no value. The hula hoop becomes a cultural phenomenon, the stock rises, and Norville's presidency is extended past its intended brief duration.

### **The Amy Archer question**

The film's second major plot engine is Amy Archer's investigation of Norville, which begins as a professional assignment to expose the boardroom scandal behind his installation and develops, across the film's middle section, into something the screwball tradition would recognize immediately: the reporter who sets out to destroy the story and finds that the story has destroyed her instead, that the man she was supposed to expose is precisely the person she cannot afford to have feelings about.

The Coens managed the romantic development with more care than critics in 1994 acknowledged. Amy does not simply change her mind about Norville when she falls for him. She changes her understanding of what she has been doing, recognizing that the speed and the cynicism that have made her professionally successful are also the things that have kept her from looking at anything closely enough to see it clearly. Her conversion is not merely romantic but epistemological: she discovers that the tools she has been using to investigate the world are the tools that were preventing her from understanding it.

This is a more sophisticated argument than most screwball comedies made about their fast-talking heroines, and it required Jennifer Jason Leigh to carry a transformation that was also a critique of the performance style she had been hired to deliver. The actress managed it.

## Chapter 7: The Disaster

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The Hudsucker Proxy opened in the United States on March 11, 1994, and the critical establishment received it with the specific kind of hostility that is reserved for films that are good at things the critics do not currently value.

The context was precise. In 1994, the dominant mode of American independent and studio filmmaking was a naturalism that prized the grounded, the unrheterical, and the psychologically individualized over the stylized, the theatrical, and the typical. The influence of Robert Altman's ensemble realism, the emerging style of directors like Richard Linklater, the general direction of critical taste, all of these ran counter to the formal values that The Hudsucker Proxy was working with. A film that wanted to be seen as descended from Capra and Sturges was asking critics to evaluate it by reference to a tradition they had been educated to regard as aesthetically naive, and most of them declined the invitation.

The charges were consistent across the reviews: coldness, artificiality, ironic distance, the characters played as types rather than people, the love story unconvincing, the whole enterprise a technically accomplished exercise in nostalgia that lacked the warmth of its models. Even sympathetic critics found the film easier to admire than to love.

The Coen brothers were, by this point, critically positioned as filmmakers of considerable intelligence and limited humanity, artists more interested in the architecture of genre than in the people inside it. Barton Fink, which had won Cannes, was admired and frequently described as cold. Miller's Crossing, which was by any measure a masterpiece of the crime genre, was celebrated in

some circles and described as chilly by others. The Hudsucker Proxy arrived in this critical climate as the most visually elaborate and most openly sentimental of their films to date, and the critics who had decided the brothers lacked warmth looked at it and found it confirmed.

## **The box office**

The film grossed \$2.8 million in its opening weekend. The domestic total was \$11 million, less than half the production budget. The budget figure most commonly cited is \$25 million, which Wikipedia confirms, though some sources report the figure as high as \$30 million due to additional post-production and marketing expenditure. Either way, the film was a clear financial loss for Warner Bros., and its position in the Coen brothers' filmography became that of the misfire between the triumph of *Barton Fink* and the triumphs that were coming: *Fargo* in 1996, *The Big Lebowski* in 1998, and what would eventually constitute the most consistently acclaimed filmography of any American directing team of their generation.

The irony of *The Hudsucker Proxy's* position is visible in hindsight. It was the film made just before the critical consensus about the Coens shifted permanently in their favor, and its failure contributed to that consensus by being the evidence that they were capable of missing their audience entirely when they tried for the mainstream. *Fargo*, which arrived two years later and won two Academy Awards, was made more independently, on a smaller budget, and with a different understanding of where the brothers' strengths lay. The lesson taken from *Hudsucker's* failure was not that the script was wrong or the direction was wrong or the performances were wrong, but that the attempt to meet the

mainstream on its own terms had been a mistake.

## Chapter 8: The Reclamation

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The rehabilitation of *The Hudsucker Proxy* has been gradual and is incomplete in the sense that it has not produced the full critical reversal that the film deserves. What it has produced is a steady accumulation of advocates, in the specific communities that value the things the film values, whose arguments have shifted the perception of the film from misfire to hidden gem to something approaching a minor classic.

The home-video release allowed viewers to encounter the film in conditions that the theatrical experience, with its framing as a disappointment, had not permitted. On a screen in a living room, *The Hudsucker Proxy* was not a failed Coen brothers film. It was a very funny, very beautiful, very precisely made comedy that asked the viewer to meet it at the level of its own formal intelligence, and viewers who made that meeting found that the reward was considerable.

The specific community that responded most enthusiastically was the cinephile community with a knowledge of classical Hollywood, people who came to the film already fluent in the Capra and Sturges and Hawks references and who experienced the Coens' use of those references not as cold pastiche but as genuine love. For those viewers, the film's transparency about its influences was not a failure of originality but a pleasure: watching people who loved these films as deeply as they did paying tribute to them with the resources of the contemporary studio system.

The Coens' subsequent career did the film's reputation no harm. *Fargo*, *The Big Lebowski*, *O Brother Where Art Thou*, *No Country for Old Men*, *True Grit*, *Inside Llewyn Davis*: the decade and a half after *Hudsucker* added title after title to a filmography

that made it impossible to dismiss the brothers as cold technicians without warmth for their characters. As that warmth became undeniable in their later work, critics and viewers returned to earlier films and found it there too, including in the film that had been the primary evidence for its absence.

## **The re-evaluation**

The specific arguments that have accumulated in *The Hudsucker Proxy*'s favor over the three decades since its release converge on a single point: the critics who found the film cold and artificial were measuring a formal comedy against the standards of psychological naturalism, and the measurement was the wrong tool.

A screwball comedy is not supposed to be psychologically naturalistic. Its characters are not supposed to feel like people you could have met. They are supposed to feel like people you have always known, types that carry the recognizable energy of their function in the story, moving through a world whose stylization is itself the argument. The Coens built exactly that world, with more technical sophistication and more visual invention than any screwball comedy of the classical era had had access to, and they filled it with performances that were stylized in precisely the right registers.

The film's problem in 1994 was not that it was doing the wrong things. It was that the audience and the critics had forgotten what the right things for this kind of film looked like, and the reminder required time to land.

## Chapter 9: What It Is

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The *Hudsucker Proxy* is the most openly joyful film the Coen brothers have made, and that joy is both its defining quality and the source of the resistance it encountered.

The Coens' reputation, in 1994, was built on irony: the sense that their films maintained a cool aesthetic distance from their subjects, that their affection for genre was always shadowed by an awareness of genre's conventions, that the warmth in their work was always a little chilled by the intelligence of the filmmakers. This reputation was not entirely unfair. *Blood Simple* is a noir that knows it is a noir and finds that knowledge comic. *Raising Arizona* loves its characters and also finds them slightly absurd. Even *Barton Fink*, the film that won Cannes and established the brothers as artists of the first order, is a cold film, a chamber of horrors in which the horror is partly aesthetic: the horror of a certain kind of American intellectual self-regard.

The *Hudsucker Proxy* has none of this. It loves the thing it is, without qualification and without irony. It loves the hula hoop. It loves the mailroom. It loves the 1950s New York skyline and the Khachaturian strings and the fast-talking reporter and the naive hero and the scene in which the hula hoop is demonstrated to a doubtful child on a street corner and the child takes it and gives it one hip-rotation and the whole universe tilts in favor of decency. The Coens are not watching this story with their arms folded. They are inside it, fully committed, and the commitment is the film's greatest gift.

The critics who found the film cold were looking for the irony and finding its absence. What they were actually encountering was a different quality of sophistication: the sophistication of knowing

the tradition so well that you could work inside it without needing to be smarter than it, without needing to put distance between yourself and the thing you were making because you were afraid of being seen to mean it.

The Coens meant it. That was always the film.

## Chapter 10: The Enduring Circle

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The hula hoop was invented in 1958, which is when the film is set, and it sold twenty-five million units in four months, which the Wham-O corporation had not anticipated and could not initially explain. The product did nothing. It accomplished nothing. You put it on your hips and you rotated and it stayed up or it fell down and either outcome was sufficient to make you want to try again. The experience was the entire point.

The Hudsucker Proxy is a bit like that. It does not advance the Coen brothers' career in any obvious direction. It does not make any argument about American life that their other films make more elegantly. It does not provide the kind of dark epiphany or moral weight that their most celebrated work provides. What it does is give you the experience of watching people who love movies make a movie, with all the craft and all the joy and all the undefended enthusiasm that love produces when it is set to work without shame.

The people who have found it, in the three decades since its theatrical failure, have mostly found it the same way: by accident, or by the recommendation of someone who insisted on their behalf, and have emerged from the experience wondering why nobody told them about this sooner. The film's reputation in 2024 is considerably healthier than its reputation in 1994, not because the culture has become more sympathetic to what it was doing, but because the people who experienced what it was doing were specific enough about their experience to make it communicable.

You know. For kids.

## **Appendices: The Numbers, the Names, and the Circle**

### **Appendix A: The Box Office Record**

The Hudsucker Proxy's financial performance was the decisive data point in the narrative of the Coens' commercial limitations in the period before Fargo. The film is the clearest example in their filmography of a production whose critical position was determined almost entirely by context: a film that might have been received differently had it arrived before or after its actual moment.

The opening weekend figure places it among the lowest-performing studio productions of the year relative to its budget. The Coen brothers' previous film, Barton Fink (1991), had a production budget of approximately \$9 million and grossed \$6.2 million domestically, which was proportionally a better performance. Fargo, released two years later with a budget of \$7 million, grossed \$24.6 million domestically, which established the trajectory for the rest of the brothers' career.

The critical score trajectory:

The Rotten Tomatoes score of 73 percent is deceptive in that it includes a substantial number of reviews written after the film's rehabilitation began. The 1994 review record shows a more divided response, with many notices describing the film as cold, artificial, and hollow.

### **Appendix B: The Script and Its Origins**

The screenplay was completed in its first form in 1985 and in its final shooting draft in 1992. The writing process began in 1981,

when Joel Coen worked as an assistant editor on Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead* and the two men discovered their shared passion for the screwball comedies of the 1930s and 1940s.

Joel Coen, Ethan Coen, and Sam Raimi are the three credited screenwriters, making this the only Coen brothers film on which a third party shares writing credit, and also the only Coen brothers film for which Raimi served as second unit director. The collaboration was a function of the friendship built across the early 1980s in the apartment on Crescent Heights and during the post-production of *Blood Simple*, and the script carries the energy of people writing for the pleasure of writing rather than for the requirement of production: it is, by the Coens' own account, the most playfully conceived and least commercially calculated of their projects.

Stated influences:

The script's subtitle, *An Industrial Fantasy*, is itself a statement of formal intention: this is not a realistic film about industry, it is a fantasy that uses industrial imagery to argue about values.

## **Appendix C: The Cast**

A note on Paul Newman: the casting of Newman as the villain was Warner Bros.' specific requirement, the need for a name sufficient to justify the film's marketing budget. Newman's willingness to go large, to play Mussburger as a theatrical monster without the restraint he brought to his most celebrated roles, was a gift to the film and a demonstration of an actor who understood the form he was working in and declined to apologize for it.

## **Appendix D: The Production Design**

Dennis Gassner's production design for *The Hudsucker Proxy* is, by the consensus of production design scholarship, one of the landmark achievements of the craft in 1990s Hollywood, and its scale and ambition were only possible because the \$25 million budget was among the largest the Coens had ever worked with.

The design principle was stated by Gassner as an exaggerated Art Deco New York that drew on the visual grammar of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and the photography in *New York in the Forties*, a book he and the Coens had consulted extensively in pre-production. The specific ambition was to build a city that could not exist in reality, that was New York squared, every element pushed slightly beyond the photographic into the illustrated.

Key design elements:

The skyline model: Twenty-seven craftsmen, three months of construction, fourteen skyscrapers built to scale for the aerial sequences. The model was photographed by Roger Deakins with a lighting approach designed to make the miniatures read as full-scale, using techniques developed for the film specifically.

The Hudsucker mailroom: A space of Langian scale, the human figures dwarfed by the shelves surrounding them, the room's geometry communicating the mechanization of human labor without a single line of dialogue.

Mussburger's office: What Gassner called an impossible deep-space chamber, grey on grey, no personal objects, a room designed to communicate the absence of human warmth as a physical property of its construction.

The lobby: The counterpoint to Mussburger's office, golden light and warm stone, the face the corporation presents to the

public.

The street corner: The location where the hula hoop is first demonstrated to a child, built on a set in Wilmington with a quality of generic 1950s urban normality specifically designed to contrast with the Hudsucker Building's architectural excess.

Roger Deakins' lighting strategy used the contrast between the building's interior zones as a running visual argument: warmth where the public was shown, cold where power was exercised, and the mailroom's murky haze for the space where labor was performed without recognition.

## **Appendix E: The Score in Full**

Carter Burwell has described the Hudsucker Proxy assignment as among his most challenging and most satisfying, a score that required him to work simultaneously in the tradition of the classical Hollywood studio orchestra and in his own voice, and to make both legible to an audience that might not have been expecting either.

The use of Aram Khachaturian's Love Theme from Spartacus (1960) for the hula hoop montage and opening sequences was a concession Burwell made with acknowledged frustration: he attempted multiple original compositions for those passages and found none of them as effective as the Khachaturian, which had exactly the combination of grandeur and romantic sweep the film required and which Burwell could not improve upon. He and orchestrator Sonny Kompanek arranged the Khachaturian to fit the specific pacing and emotional temperature of the sequences.

Burwell's original score, which covers the remainder of the film, was recorded at The Hit Factory in New York with a full studio

orchestra. The score is notable for the precision of its relationship to the film's editing: Burwell and the Coens worked closely on the timing of musical gestures relative to comic beats, and the result is a score that functions as part of the film's rhythmic structure rather than as an accompaniment to it.

The 1994 Varese Sarabande album collects the principal cues:

Caryn James of the New York Times, in one of the film's more sympathetic 1994 notices, described the score as excessive in just the right way, echoing the overwrought scores of fifty years ago. Burwell considered this accurate and correct: the film called for a score that took its emotional cues from the films it was honoring, and the right scale for that kind of film was one that the contemporary critical establishment would inevitably describe as excessive.

That is not a flaw. That is the form.

*THE END*