

The Barber of Santa Rosa

The Man Who Wasn't There, directed by Joel Coen, written by Joel Coen and Ethan Coen

David Walsh
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The Man Who Wasn't There is the ninth work written and directed by the Coen brothers, Ethan (writer) and Joel (co-writer and director). The film, set in the summer of 1949 and shot in black and white, concerns a barber in a small northern California town. Ed Crane (Billy Bob Thornton) leads a negligible, shadow existence. He is disappointed with his life, cutting hair all day in his brother-in-law's shop. His wife, Doris (Frances McDormand), is conducting an affair with her boss, Big Dave (James Gandolfini). When a self-styled entrepreneur offers to let Ed in on a great investment opportunity—the new and revolutionary “dry cleaning” technique—the latter attempts to raise the necessary capital in a dangerous manner, through blackmail. Mayhem results: two murders, a suicide and more. “I was a ghost,” says Ed, after the worst has happened. As the German writer Fontane once observed, even the most specter-like human beings deserve serious treatment.

The Coen brothers always seem to be of two minds. On the one hand, they clearly want to say something about American life. The source of some of the psychotic behavior that goes on in the US appears to be a particular concern; for example, in *Fargo* (were they suggesting the country had “Far to go,” or was “Too far gone”?). *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, for all its irritating mugging, had things on its mind, about popular culture and popular aspirations, about a peculiar type of American pragmatism and resiliency. On the other hand, the Coens pull themselves up short whenever they come too close to a real insight, undercut and undermine their own more substantial purposes by self-conscious smirking, resist with all their strength anything that smacks of a social critique

(they announced that publicly in the lamentable *Barton Fink*) and generally display a lack of seriousness in regard to the world and their own work.

The new film displays the same tendencies. There are appealing and intriguing aspects to *The Man Who Wasn't There*: the slow and thoughtful pace; the care with which the time and locale are recreated; the attention to physical detail in general; the delight in human oddity and eccentricity, which even at times borders on genuine compassion. One feels in the presence of obvious intelligence and observable skill.

Yet this is such an inadequate work.

Above all, one feels that this is not a film about life, but a film about life filtered through certain cultural references and conceits. The Coens explain that the work is steeped in “the world of James M. Cain,” the hardboiled novelist (*Double Indemnity*, *Mildred Pierce*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*). Cain is Cain, he wrote some excellent things, as well as a good deal of rubbish, but life is life, and more important. If one pointed out that the film has relatively little feel of 1949 to it, a reply would be immediately forthcoming, behind which would lie a host of retrograde ideological assumptions: “Oh, it's impossible to establish the ‘truth’ about history [truth in certain circles is always placed in inverted commas], the best you can do is get the reality of the cultural and ideological responses.”

This is stupid and untrue, and currently hamstringing a great many artists. The lack of spontaneity in *The Man Who Wasn't There* is stifling. The principal concentration here is on getting a “look,” not establishing the reality of certain relationships and dilemmas. One has that unhappy and sinking feeling, so common these days, that the director is trying to

impress on the spectator his virtuosity. Nothing great will occur in the cinema until that feeling is *entirely*, *entirely* absent.

Nor is it particularly encouraging, even taking into account the possibility that one's leg is being pulled, that Joel Coen recounts that the inspiration for the film came from the set of an earlier work, *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994): "We filmed a scene in a barbershop, and there was a poster on the wall showing all the different 1940s-style haircuts. It was a fixture on the set, and we were always looking at it. So we started thinking about the guy who actually did the haircuts, and the story began to take shape. It really evolved from the haircut poster."

If the Coens are ever to become major satirists, something which is theoretically within their grasp, this snobbish and condescending air and the campiness that accompanies it will have to be dispensed with, as the baggage of a middle class adolescence endured in intellectually stagnant times. A film based on a haircut poster! How clever! (And how silly and tedious!)

Cleverness is a curse under certain circumstances, particularly if one is convinced that most of humanity is less clever than oneself.

If one were to give the filmmakers every benefit of the doubt and ignore the film's self-referential quality and its private jokes designed to make the cognoscenti feel good about themselves, how would their work stack up? Let's say, like Fassbinder in *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, the film's creators were absorbed with tracing out certain contemporary social and psychological processes to their roots in the immediate postwar period. Would the film stand up on those terms?

The problem of the unobtrusive, receding American, the human zero who threatens in everyday life to fade into the woodwork, but turns out to contain the most explosive reserves of rage and arrogance, is a legitimate one. The Coens, whether they know it or not, are on to something. The quiet, "democratic" petty bourgeois is quite capable, under certain circumstances, of the most violent conduct. There are moments when Thornton looks out of the corner of his eye and something sinister and murderous is clearly present, something, so to speak, of "world-historical" importance. On two occasions characters angrily demand to know, "What kind of man are you?" It's a legitimate question. But it

largely goes unanswered.

If the aim were to identify and examine a certain social or psychological type, the filmmakers place a great many obstacles in their own and the spectator's path. Very little is carried or worked through to the end in the film. One feels at decisive moments a lack of commitment to the essential human problem. The set design, the arrangement of shadows, the impact of the black and white—these are the elements that truly engage the filmmakers' powers. The rather mannered narrative feels too much like a scaffolding erected around certain optical effects and directorial antics. If the Coens were genuinely serious about the consequences and implications of their story-line—if they only took themselves seriously!—they would not continue to resort to so much cartoonish characterization and so many red herrings.

And there are the implausibilities. It's not that one is insisting on naturalistic fidelity, but within a certain aesthetic and spiritual space, one that the artists themselves have brought into being, consistency plays an objective role. The transformation of Thornton's character from mild-mannered doormat into a scheming blackmailer and more takes place far too quickly and with too little inner commotion. The suicide of his wife is even more unlikely, given everything that we know about her. Elements in the narrative are handled too carelessly, too obviously with the ease and convenience of the director/writer in mind. Psychological truth is too readily sacrificed for the sake of a tidy denouement.

By and large, as evidenced by *The Man Who Wasn't There*, the Coens' targets remain easy ones. But there is other, more serious game to track. What do the filmmakers, for example, have to say about the crowd running Washington at present? There a satirist could have the most savage and satisfying field day. What torrents of stupidity, banality, venality, viciousness!



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