The Coy Cult Text: *The Man Who Wasn't There* as Noir SF

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> They got this guy in Germany. Fritz, something-or-other. Or is it? Maybe it's Werner. Anyway, he's got this theory, you want to test something, you know, scientifically – how the planets go around the sun, what sunspots are made of, why the water comes out of the tap – well, you gotta look at it. But sometimes, you look at it, your looking changes it. You can't know the reality of what happened, or what would've happened if you hadn't've stuck in your own goddamn schnozz. So there is no "what happened." Looking at something changes it. They call it "the uncertainty principle." Sure, it sounds screwy, but even Einstein says the guy's onto something. … Sometimes, the more you look, the less you really know.
>
> Freddy Riedenschneider (Tony Shalhoub)
>
> *The Man Who Wasn't There*

Many attempts to define cult movies and to describe their appeal are characterized by notions of doubleness, contradiction, and introjection. For example, J.P. Telotte finds in the "etymological underpinnings of 'cult'" (14) a complex of potential meanings pointing to a dialectical impulse to possess and to be possessed, to express selfhood through surrendering to an external other. Thus, he suggests, the cult movie transgresses norms, enabling the cultist "to fashion a statement of difference" (14), even as it establishes "a stable ground from which to make that assertion, a ground *within* the very boundaries" that are being transgressed (15). Sam Kitt suggests that cult audiences "need to identify with something" external to themselves that is nonetheless "emblematic of their feelings" (qtd in Telotte 15), while

Timothy Corrigan depicts the movie cultist as embracing certain public images and making them part of his or her private space (26). The cultist "wrench[es] representations from their naturalized and centralized positions" and relocates them within a personal and "glorious[ly] incoheren[t]" cultural repertoire (28). Although Corrigan considers this as, specifically, a variety of audience activity, it does resonate with post-structuralist understandings of textuality (albeit retaining a greater sense of agency than normally survives the putative death of the author). Furthermore, it suggests the extent to which the Coen brothers, the partnership responsible for *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001), should themselves be understood not merely as an object of cultist fascination but as cultists themselves.

The Coens' films can also be characterized in doubled terms, most obviously through Joel and Ethan's chiasmically intertwined filmmaker identity. They alternate top-billing on co-authored screenplays, and co-edit their films under the pseudonym Roderick Jaynes. That most of their films credit Joel as sole director and Ethan as sole producer is a consequence of Directors Guild of America rules rather than an accurate representation of the division – or non-division – of their actual labour. They are typically described as "function[ing] interchangeably on the set and work[ing] together throughout every step of the filmmaking process," and as "finish[ing] each other's sentences, laugh[ing] soundlessly at each other's deadpan humor, and reportedly communicat[ing] regularly on a near-telepathic basis" (Russell 2). Indeed, Ronald Bergan's "bi-graphy" (2) of the brothers is so troubled by this sense of the Coens as neither a single person nor quite two people that it starts with a bizarre violent fantasy: he describes Joel shooting Ethan and then himself, leaving behind a suicide note with a quote from Edgar Allan Poe's doppelganger-murder-suicide story "William Wilson" (1839); however, the note turns out to have been written by (the non-existent) Roderick Jaynes (1-2). That such a hagiography should start so aggressively refracts, like its

remorseless punning, what Bergan somehow neglects to describe as the "coentradictions" that distinguish his subjects and their films that have attracted such a staunch cult following.

Two of these contradictory impulses – both of which resonate with the activity of cult fans Corrigan describes – are of concern here. First, I will discuss the Coens' genre proficiency and playfulness. Second, I will consider the ways in which the Coens situate specific objects in their mise-en-scene so as to imbue them with meaningfulness, while simultaneously rendering their meanings ambiguous. These objects function like metaphors (and, indeed, puns), pulling together otherwise distinct conceptual domains so as to create brief, sometimes awkward, moments of playful, energetic semiosis (see Kövecses). Furthermore, the objects in *The Man Who Wasn't There* to which I draw attention combine, in a science-fictional mode, what Stephen J. Greenblatt describes as resonance – "the power of the object displayed to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke … the complex dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which … it may be taken … to stand" – and wonder – the power "to stop the viewer in his tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention" (170; see also Milner 18–21).

Most of the Coens' films are more or less idiosyncratic pastiches of pulp fiction or Hollywood sources: *Blood Simple* (1984) sets a James M. Cain story in a Jim Thompson milieu; *Miller's Crossing* (1990) reworks Dashiel Hammet's *Red Harvest* (1929) as an ethnic gangster movie of the sort made in Hollywood before the Production Code was enforced; *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994) plays like a Frank Capra movie, with a little bit of Preston Sturges in it; *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) takes its title from the unmade film-within-the-film of Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels* (1941) but adapts, or so it claims, Homer's *Odyssey*. *No Country for Old Men* (2007) and *True Grit* (2010) are both adapted from rather literary westerns, the former in the style of a modern-dress thriller, the latter also – like *The Ladykillers* (2004) and the Coens' screenplay for *Gambit* (Hoffman 2012) – reworking an identically-titled earlier

film. In every case, the identity of the Coens' film is formed by the presence within it of another text, and by that other text's absence – just as, for example, in *Barton Fink* (1991), Barton (Jon Turturro) both is and is not playwright Clifford Odets and/or Herman Melville's Bartleby the Scrivener; Jack Lipnick (Michael Lerner) and Bill Mayhew (John Mahoney) both are and are not, respectively, studio boss Louis B. Mayer and novelist William Faulkner; and Charlie Meadows (John Goodman) is also, and not, an hallucination, the serial killer Madman Mundt, and/or an irreal manifestation of the Hotel Earle itself.

Furthermore, as *Barton Fink – Künstlerroman*, horror, noir, buddy comedy, pulp-Adorno Hollywood exposé – also demonstrates, the Coens are drawn to what is problematically known as generic hybrids,[1] especially the crime comedy, as in *Raising Arizona* (1987), *Fargo* (1996), *The Ladykillers*, and the Raymond Chandler-inspired *The Big Lebowksi* (1998), a film variously described as "the only psychowesternoircheechandchonginvietnambuddy genre pic in existence" (Comentale and Jaffe 3), and as a "stitching together" of "the 'bowling noir' film" with "the Busby Berkeley musical, the Vietnam movie, the pornographic movie, the screwball comedy, the buddy film, and the 1960s romantic quest à la *Easy Rider*" (Ashe 55). While *The Man Who Wasn't There* does not aspire to such "genre-mulching" (Raczkowski 101), it nonetheless introduces sf elements into its film noir world. Set in Santa Rosa, the California town where Alfred Hitchcock shot *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), it plays a variation on James M. Cain's murderous love-triangle narrative, borrowing heavily from his novels *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), *Double Indemnity* (1936), and *Mildred Pierce* (1941), and from their mid-1940s film adaptations directed by, respectively, Tay Garnett, Billy Wilder, and Michael Curtiz.

The central figure in *The Man Who Wasn't There* is Ed Crane (Billy Bob Thornton) who works the second chair in the family-owned barbershop run by his brother-in-law Frank (Michael Badalucco). Ed's wife, Doris (Frances McDormand), is the bookkeeper at

Nirdlinger's department store, managed by Big Dave Brewster (James Gandolfini) but owned by his wife's family. The laconic, withdrawn Ed is not particularly bothered by the affair he suspects between Doris and Dave, who has, with her assistance, been embezzling from Nirdlinger's so as to open up his own store, which she will manage. When Creighton Tolliver (Jon Polito), an entrepreneur passing through Santa Rosa in search of $10,000 with which to start up a dry-cleaning chain, tells Ed that he has been let down by a local investor (i.e., Dave) whose capital is now committed to his own business expansion plans, the affectless barber raises the funds himself by anonymously blackmailing Dave. After paying the embezzled money to, he believes, Tolliver, Dave finds out the truth and assaults Ed, but Ed kills him and seems to get away with it. The police, however, uncover evidence of the embezzlement and arrest Doris for Dave's murder. Frank mortgages the family business so that Ed can hire fast-talking lawyer Freddy Riedenschneider to defend Doris. Ed even confesses his own guilt, but Riedenschneider does not believe him. Indeed, Riedenschneider does not remotely care about the truth, just about being able to construct a narrative that will persuade the jury of Doris's innocence – even if it means invoking a little-understood scientific concept, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, to do so. Tolliver, the only person able to corroborate Ed's confession, cannot be found. Doris, pregnant by Dave, commits suicide on the eve of her trial. The noirish narrative convolutions do not end here, though.

During Doris's pre-trial incarceration, Ed became attached to the teenage Rachel "Birdy" Abundas (Scarlett Johansson), whose piano-playing soothes him. He arranges for her to be auditioned by Jacques Carcanogue (Adam Alexi-Malle), but the maestro dismisses her as merely technically competent and refuses to take her on as a student. On the drive back to Santa Rosa, Birdy, unconcerned with thoughts of a musical career, attempts to fellate the unsuspecting Ed to thank him for his thoughtfulness. Horrified by this unsought attention, he crashes the car. When he regains consciousness, he is arrested for murder. It transpires that

Dave had not merely beaten the truth out of Tolliver but killed him, and when Tolliver's body was discovered, so was the partnership contract Ed signed. The voice-over narrative is then revealed as Ed's account of what happened as, on death row, he writes his story for a true-crime magazine. The film ends with Ed in the electric chair. The switch is thrown. Fade to white.

If this was all that happened in *The Man Who Wasn't There*, it would be nothing more than a particularly well-done Cain pastiche, its most remarkable features being its cinematography (shot in color, but digitally converted to black-and-white in post-production) and the effectiveness of Thornton's minimalist performance as the taciturn barber. However, two specific sequences, and a host of related moments, render the film strangely science-fictional. First, when Doris is awaiting trial, Dave's skittish widow, Ann Nirdlinger-Brewster (Katherine Borowitz), turns up late one night on Ed's doorstep, her eyes wide and unblinking, and tells him about a camping trip she and Dave took the previous summer near Eugene, Oregon. There were lights in the sky, she says, and aliens took Dave aboard their spacecraft, but he never told anyone about what happened. Ann implies that the government and other powerful institutions are involved in a cover-up and are perhaps responsible for Dave's death. Second, on the night before his execution, Ed wakes to find his cell door open and wanders out into the prison yard, above which a flying saucer hovers. He nods at it, and returns to his cell.

Anyone concerned with the rigid policing of genre boundaries could easily dismiss Ann's account of alien abduction as a character's hysterical delusion, and various commentators, including sources as authoritative as Wikipedia, describe Ed's UFO sighting as a dream. But what if these scenes are more than just amusing little B-movie, pulp culture riffs? What if, despite their limited duration, they constitute the film's generic dominant? What if they are to be understood as moments akin to the one in *Dark City* (Proyas 1998)

when Murdoch (Rufus Sewell) and Bumstead (William Hurt) break through the wall to discover that the noir city in which they live is an alien construct floating in outer space? What if such moments leave you generically suspended? And what if you choose, as many cultists might, generic indeterminacy?

Carl Freedman maps the relationship between film noir and sf onto the "dialectical tension at the heart of Marxism, which is inflationary and deflationary at once" ("Marxism" 72). The deflationary impulse exemplified by Marx's demystifying critique of capital, and by the tradition of ideology-critique, is matched by noir's "neo-Hobbesian" universe, in which "the most widely and reliably operative human motives turn out to be the most obvious, familiar and selfish ones, mainly greed and lust" (79). Marxism's inflationary impulse – "the positive project of human liberation and self-realisation" (72) found in the post-capitalist future briefly, ambiguously, and only occasionally hinted at in Marx's "mainly deflationary scientific analysis" (74) of capitalism – resembles sf's "impulse to transcend the mundane and to imply a depth and richness of reality … beyond any empirical norm" (70). Freedman also links sf's "inflationary bent" (69) to Ernst Bloch's discussions of the traces of utopian hope found in everyday life. Marxist reality, Bloch argues, consists of "reality plus the future within it" (162). However, one does not need to be a Marxist to develop such a complex sense of current reality. For example, Paul Ricoeur describes the threefold nature of the present moment, which is also composed of the past (memory) and the future (expectation): "not a future time, a past time, and a present time, but … a present of future things, a present of past things, and a present of present things" (*Time*, 60).

Just as the role of Stranger (Sam Elliott), the narrator who also appears as a character, "is to underscore" *The Big Lebowski*'s "combinatorial critical agenda about the shared American genome of the western and detective genres" (Commentale and Jaffe 32), so *The Man Who Wasn't There*'s flying saucers and alien abductions point to the concern film noir

shares with sf about a present moment, heavy with the past yet infiltrated by, and opening out onto, potential futures and future potentials. While sf has a panoply of semantic and syntactic devices – aliens, robots, future cities, time travel, other worlds – with which to articulate this concern, film noir more typically displaces it into its mise-en-scene. For example, *Double Indemnity*, a story told by a dying man to a dumb machine that enables his voice to survive his death, sets Los Angeles architecture and shifting social relations against a pristine, actuarial imaginary: on the one hand, Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck), doubly excluded from material wealth by her gender and her working class origins, who murdered her way into a loveless marriage and a dust-filled house, its décor reeking of an already receding past; on the other, the statistical analysis of masses of people in order to determine probabilities, police human behavior, and rationally predict, in limited ways, the future. Set in 1938, at the end of the Depression, it prefigures the "postwar world in which the manipulation of FIRE (finance, insurance and real estate) increasingly trumps the production of tangible things" (Freedman "End" 70). *White Heat* (Curtiz 1949) commences with Cody Jarrett (James Cagney) and his gang holding up a train as if they are Wild West outlaws, but it quickly gives way to urban settings and the cutting-edge instruments of the state's panoptical apparatus. Vast bureaucracies are brought into play so as to place an undercover cop in Cody's gang, and he himself learns the value of simulation, feigning symptoms of the derangement from which he suffers, becoming a simulacrum of himself so as to bust out of jail. Police use maps and three radio cars to tail Cody's Ma covertly; and as the film approaches its climax a more complex technological and institutional apparatus is brought to bear on the gangster, with multiple vehicles, centrally co-ordinated, triangulating Cody's position and trajectory across the city as he heads towards a chemical plant that looks like an intrusion from some dystopian future or machinic alien world, and to his apocalyptic immolation. *Kiss Me Deadly* (Aldrich 1955), a tale of stolen nuclear materials, ends on a similarly apocalyptic note, culminating in a

radioactive blaze accompanied by what sounds suspiciously like the electronic throbbing of a flying saucer. A key intertext for such sf films as *Repo Man* (Cox 1984), which substitutes Roswell aliens for the nuclear materials, and *Southland Tales* (Kelly 2006), *Kiss Me Deadly* contains further material which is particularly instructive in grasping the science-fictionality of *The Man Who Wasn't There*.

First, consider the sequence in which the hospitalized Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker), slowly regains consciousness. A black screen. Music that sounds halfway between eerie instrumentation and low-key electronica, and thus cannot help but connote science-fictional strangeness. Cut to a low-angle, medium shot, the focus swimming, of two women looking down as if seen from underwater. The woman on the right, the one who is not a nurse, repeats Mike's name, over and again, but her voice sounds far away, unfixed and drifting. Cut to a high-angle shot of Mike, slowly stirring in his hospital bed. The swirling soundtrack – not exactly music, not exactly a sound effect, suggesting a radio dial being turned, searching for but not quite finding a specific frequency – threatens to drown the woman's voice. Mike opens his eyes slightly. A reverse shot reveals a flying saucer, hovering just out of focus. The curious noise is provided with a diegetic source: it is the sound of the alien craft's engines. But the camera immediately racks focus, and the flying saucer becomes just a circular light-fitting, the sound extra-diegetic music. Mike blinks, and turns his head. Another reverse shot shows the two women again, in focus this time. Their presence, however, is far from reassuring. The music rises to a crescendo as they loom over Mike, weird and threatening. Mike recognizes Velda (Maxine Cooper), his secretary and lover, and smiles as he says her name. But again the uncanniness persists. As Velda leans down to kiss Mike, the film cuts to a long shot, sideways on to the full length of the bed, at a Dutch angle, disturbing what should, now that Mike is conscious, be a stable space.

This scene provides a key for unlocking the film's mapping out of the complex temporality of the present moment through architecture and interior design. Mike's swish Wilshire Boulevard apartment – the epitome of the 1950s *Playboy* bachelor pad (see Cohan 267-75) – contains a reel-to-reel telephone answering machine, a television that looks like a cross between a jukebox and Robbie the Robot, and light fittings that resemble UFOs. Its airiness, clean edges and moderne furnishings contrast sharply with the battered tables and chairs found in Harvey Wallace's (Strother Martin) crowded kitchen and Carmen Trivago's (Fortunio Bonanova) cluttered, laundry-strewn room in a Bunker Hill residential hotel – and with their dusty, old-fashioned lampshades that look not at all like flying saucers.

The Coens' mise-en-scene similarly often pays particular attention to the specificity of objects – objects that either belong precisely where they are but which are never otherwise attended to, or – resonating with Corrigan's account of cult fan activity – objects torn from their familiar contexts and inserted into new ones. Edward P. Comentale and Aaron Jaffe argue that such objects are presented in such a way as to heighten "the tension between everyday life and its irrational subtexts" (9). For example, *The Big Lebowski* took shape around "a set of unrelated objects … and the fraternal challenge of putting them all in the same film" (11), and resulted in "a dream of objects, not just a dream that contains objects, but a dream that objects may have, once freed from their practical, everyday use" (12), a "new poetry of common objects" which opens our eyes on to "a world in which each mundane thing is both drained [of] and saturated with meaning – a world stupid, stubborn, mute, and a world vibrant, charged, and ecstatic" (13). Christopher Raczkowski explains such objects in terms of metaphor and metonymy. The hat blown through the woods in *Miller's Crossing*'s title sequence is "an oddly extrinsic figure" (100), mutely metonymic. Like protagonist Tom Regan (Gabriel Byrne), to whom it is connected and whose loquacity is somehow taciturn, it gives nothing away. In contrast, the tumbleweed that blows in from the desert to Santa

Monica Boulevard at the start of *The Big Lebowski* is (excessively) metaphoric, taking on more and more potential meanings as it moves through shifting contexts. In both instances, the object signals its significance but not its meaning, deflecting or endlessly deferring interpretation, suggesting a fantastic surplus of significance. In contrast, Dennis and Susan Grove Hall associate *The Big Lebowski* – and indeed "all cult films" – with metonymy because, they contend, "metaphor [and its] extensions into symbol and allegory … tend to fix meaning" (323). Regardless of this diametrically opposed reading, what remains at stake is the tension between meaningfulness and meaning, between materiality and semiosis – between all that the world could be and what little it seems to be. In the Coens' attention to the specificity of objects, Allen Smithee finds an "underlying nostalgia for wholeness and lost origins, a nostalgia for a past that is not so much accessed through memory as mediated through objects of the material world" and which expresses "desire for that elusive object that might precede the precession of simulacra and subtend the surface level of the mere play of differences" (257-58).

The Man Who Wasn't There, however, is not concerned with the recuperation of the *Heimlich* past but with the utopian futurity implied by the commodity form, and with the barrenness of this promise. The flying saucer that Ed sees at the end of the film is merely the culmination of a series of images of moderne commodities. In Ed's copy of *Life*, an article called "Dry Cleaning: The Wave of the Future" is followed by one about the Roswell flying saucer incident. As with *Kiss Me Deadly*, certain light fittings resemble UFOs: in Nirdlinger's department store, a fleet of flying saucers hovers behind Ed when Dave confesses his affair, and one of them apparently follows Ed to observe his first meeting with Birdy; others hover above the route from his cell to the prison yard and to the death chamber. Echoing the scene in which Mike regains consciousness, when Ed crashes, a mundane circular object transforms into the potential futurity contained within its metallic sheen. The image spins wildly, creating

a circular blur; when it comes to a stop, the car sails gracefully through the air, from left to right, past tall trees. A hubcap bounces through the air and rolls through the grass and trees, recalling the escaped hula hoop in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, the Coens' comedy about the difference between use-value and exchange-value. The hubcap is superimposed over a slowly rotating aerial shot of the unconscious Ed, which then fades out, replaced by blackness, into which the still-spinning hubcap retreats, flips sideways on, to all intents and purposes a flying saucer climbing into the night sky. Cut to a scene – a memory, perhaps – in which Doris returns home, sees off the salesman trying to persuade Ed to upgrade their driveway by resurfacing it with tarmac, pours herself a drink and settles onto the sofa. Ed joins her, but she cuts off his attempt at conversation. The screen again turns to black, and the flying saucer descends. This time, however, when it comes into focus, it is not a hubcap but the dazzlingly-lit mirror on a doctor's headband. His distorted voice, like Velda's, calls the patient back to consciousness.

Consequently, Ed's ambivalent response to the flying saucer that visits his prison (and the placidity with which he approaches and sits in the electric chair, his final gaze taking in not the faces of those who have come to witness his execution but their haircuts) constitutes a rejection of certain varieties of futurity: of those corporate dreams of thoroughly commodified futures familiar from the 1939 World's Fair, of Frank R. Paul's *Amazing Stories* cityscape covers, and of advertising copy; and of the alien salvation that *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Wise 1951) and such early accounts of extraterrestrial visitations as George Adamski and Desmond Leslie's *Flying Saucers Have Landed* (1953) promised.[2] In their place, Ed chooses noir, he chooses death and the quasi-religious transcendence – and a posthumous reunion with Doris – of the sort signaled at the conclusion of such films noir as *You Only Live Once* (Lang US 1937) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.

While flying saucers and their avatars offer one route into comprehending *The Man Who Wasn't There*'s and *Kiss Me Deadly*'s ambivalence about a commodity culture which seems simultaneously be introjected from and to unfurl into all possible futures, both films also draw upon the sf tradition of depicting aliens passing for humans. In *Kiss Me Deadly*, this is a consequence of casting decisions. Consider the awkward acting of Gaby Rodgers, who plays Gabrielle, who pretends to be Lily Carver; of Albert Dekker, whose portentous dialogue as Dr Soberin, international atomic spy, sounds like it has been looped, badly, in post-production, even when it has not; and of Wesley Addy, whose Lt. Pat Murphy somehow manages a stilted drawl and can barely conceal his queer attraction to Meeker's hard-boiled dick. Each of these performances suggests a subject who is so alienated by his or her passage through the world – and by having to pass as someone he or she is not – that they have no real sense of how to be in the world. They come across like alien facsimiles of human beings, as if they really belong not in a Mickey Spillane adaptation but in *Invaders from Mars* (Menzies 1953), *It Came from Outer Space* (Arnold 1953) or *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Siegel 1956).[3] Each of these films uses the alien facsimile as a metaphor to express the stultifying conformity of Eisenhower's placid and alienating decade of corporate culture, consumerism and suburbia.

Two sequences in *The Man Who Wasn't There* depict Ed's viewpoint in this same context, as if he were just such an alien. In the first, shot in slow motion, Ed drives down Main Street, observing the decelerated bustle of the affluent townsfolk. It is as if he occupies some other temporal plane, or can alter the speed of his sensory inputs so as to observe humans more clearly. While the distended duration of their passage lends them the appearance of the dehumanized modern subject that the 1950s aliens-passing-as-humans cycle so dreaded, Ed's voiceover simultaneously implies that he has achieved transcendence *through* alienation: "There they were, all going about their business. It seemed like I knew a

secret, a bigger one even than what had really happened to Big Dave. Something none of them knew. Like I had made it to the outside somehow and they were all still struggling way down below." This sequence is immediately followed by Ann's nocturnal revelation about Dave's alien abduction, which *could* be seen as hinting at something of Ed's own true nature.

In the second sequence, also in slow-motion, Ed walks down Main Street, moving from left to right, with the camera tracking in the same direction, while the vast majority of other pedestrians move from right to left. This disharmony creates the illusion that he moves through the world differently, and at a different pace to, other humans. His voiceover emphasizes his spectrality, his increasingly tenuous connection to the community in which he lives:

> When I walked home it seemed like everyone avoided looking at me. As if I'd caught some disease. This thing with Doris, nobody wanted to talk about it. It was like I was a ghost walking down the street. And when I got home now, the place felt empty. I sat in the house, but there was nobody there. I was a ghost. I didn't see anyone, no-one saw me. I was the barber.

As he enters his house, the film returns to 24fps, but Ed's pace remains glacial. He makes his way to the sofa and sits down, and one is left with the sense that he may well stay perched there all night until it is time to return to work next morning, that the house is just a prop, a cover, for someone who lives among humans but does not comprehend the purpose of a home. In his awkward occupation of this space, Ed resembles the alien who passes as the newlywed Bill Farrell (Tom Tryon) in *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* (Fowler, Jr 1958), a film that plays like the creature-feature version of a melodrama about repressed homosexuality by Douglas Sirk, Vincente Minnelli or Nicholas Ray.[4] Indeed, Ed himself – sexually indifferent to women, his life devoted to male grooming – can be read as queer. Tolliver certainly thinks so, making an awkward pass at him (and just because it is turned

down does not mean that Ed is necessarily straight). The film's reconstruction of a past that was more overtly repressive of queer sexualities and its display of material that could not have been shown on US screens in the year in which the film is set – the contrast between Tolliver's clumsy hesitancy and the clarity with which it is represented – opens up onto a moment of queer futurity, onto the possibility that things might be different. Ed, however, is uninterested in the polymorphous plenitude, the increase in "intensive and extensive pleasure," and "the production of a libidinous, that is, happy environment" that Herbert Marcuse (1970: 19) associates with the utopian drive. Indeed, if Tolliver holds any kind of appeal to Ed it would be associated not with the man himself, but with his toupee.

Ed is, after all, a half-hearted barber. The haircuts he performs – the Butch, the Heinie, the Flat-Top, the Ivy, the Crew, the Vanguard, the Junior Contour, even the Executive Contour – are, for him, not so much distinct styles as a repertoire of moves to keep the uncanny materiality of the world at bay. Hair very simply disturbs him: "Do you ever wonder about it? … how it keeps on coming? It just keeps growing. … it keeps growing. It's part of us, and we cut it off and throw it away. … I'm going to take this hair and throw it out in the dirt. … I'm going to mingle it with common house-dirt." Beyond its distressingly ambiguous nature (is it part of us or not? when does it cease to be human and start to be dirt?), hair also brings Ed into troubling proximity to others. Anyone can come in off the street and require his presence, his touch, his attention. So it is little wonder that Ed is drawn to the aseptic chemical business of – and futurity suggested by – dry-cleaning; as Tolliver explains, "*Dry* cleaning. Wash, without water. No suds, no tumble, no stress on the clothes. It's all done with chemicals." Such a process dangles before the reluctant barber the prospect of a scientific future – inorganic, pristine – in which commodities persist but human contact is minimized, and in which such utter alienation seems like a promise of transcendence.

In the barbershop, when Ed starts to comb Tolliver's hair, the florid entrepreneur interrupts him, peeling off his improbable coiffure, revealing it as a hairpiece that "fools even the experts – one hundred percent human hair, handcrafted by Jacques of San Francisco." Later, when hitting on Ed, Tolliver begins by straightening his toupee, drawing attention to its artifice, its detachability: it is human hair that has finally ceased to grow, and it is not (yet) common house-dirt. It is as close to the future promised by the commodity form that something so human, so organic, so material can get. But it is still not enough. Its sterility – the utopian separation and perfection it promises – is too burdened by its history, and by the inevitability of its decay. It remains liminal. Like so many of the Coens' particular objects, wherever they fall on the metaphoric/metonymic axis, it is a marker of irresolvable in-between-ness, of uncertainty. Hair or hairpiece? Hubcap or UFO? Flying saucer or light-fitting? Film noir or science fiction? The presence or the absence of the man who wasn't there?

Freddy Riedenschneider says, "sometimes, you look at it, your looking changes it," but the Coens' adventures in ambiguous, proliferating semiosis go even further than this. Meaning is made, they instruct us, not fixed; meaning is over-determined, immanent, evanescent; meaning is, indeed, coentradictory. And it is the ludic practice and privilege of the cultist – whether filmmaker, fan, or both – not merely to have it both ways but to have it all ways and every which way.

Notes

1 On the problems with "genre hybridity," see Staiger and Bould.

2 Although the imagery on the cover of the issue of the (fake) magazine *The Unheard-Of* seen in Ed's cell seems more or less authentic to the period – it might not look out of place on the cover of Raymond Palmer's *Other Worlds*/*Flying Saucers, the Magazine of Space Conquest* or EC Comics' *Weird Science* – its cover story, entitled "I was abducted by aliens!" is anachronistic. Alien abduction narratives did not really become widely reported or part of ufological lore until after the 20 October 1975 broadcast of the television movie *The UFO Incident*, adapted from Betty and Barney Hill's account of their September 1961 encounter with a UFO.

3 This is not, of course, to suggest that Spillane's characters in any way resemble human beings. Of these films, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* – with its paranoid entrapment narrative, expressionist lighting and camerawork, and its anxieties about consumer culture, suburban/corporate emasculation and female sexuality – is especially open to recuperation as a film noir. Like *The Man Who Wasn't There*, it opposes (nostalgia for some sense of) authenticity with the alienation of (debased) commodity forms. Compare, for example, the scene in which Miles (Kevin MacCarthy) and Becky (Dana Wynter) discover that a jukebox has replaced the nightclub band with the scene in which Ed first finds Birdy, playing a Beethoven sonata on a baby grand piano – music they both prefer to the swing band at the raucous department store party below.

4 For a queer reading of *I Married a Monster*, see Ostherr 111–118.

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