The Mark of Cain: *Blood Simple* and *The Man Who Wasn't There*

Paul Coughlin, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

Most of Joel and Ethan Coen's films are based upon original screenplays, but in many cases these scripts are influenced by other, often literary, sources. The Coen brothers' affection for adaptation is illustrated in their loose trilogy of crime fiction based upon the writings of the *roman noir* authors of the 1930s and 1940s. These films -- *Blood Simple* (1984), *Miller's Crossing* (1990) and *The Big Lebowski* (1998) -- revive the "spirit" and "style" of America's lauded trio of hard-boiled authors: James M. Cain, Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, respectively. The recent Coen film, *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001), returns to James M. Cain as a touchstone, reinventing his fiction through the agency of additional influences such as intertextuality, genre conventions, authorship and cultural conditions. The diverse treatment that the Coens afford Cain in both *Blood Simple* and *The Man Who Wasn't There* demonstrates the manner by which adaptations from one source can be re-articulated into widely divergent subsidiary texts. The films of Joel and Ethan Coen bolster the contention that adaptations hold a position relative to their sources that is more reliant on principles of reinterpretation rather than fidelity. James Naremore announces that most analysis of adaptation "stops at the water's edge, as if hesitant to move beyond literary formalism and ask more interesting questions." (Naremore, 2000: 9) Naremore contemplates an adaptation hypothesis which looks past simple issues of fidelity and the transference of narrative units, and instead focuses upon the many and varying influences which dictate the nature and style of the filmic adaptation. Joel and Ethan Coen's *Blood Simple* and *The Man Who Wasn't There*, films that call upon James M. Cain for inspiration, illustrate the innumerable factors which influence the adaptation beyond the primary source material.

Blood Simple forecast the manner by which the Coens would work with well known literary material, extracting the essence of an author's style and re-deploying its elements in original ways. With *Blood Simple*, the Coens declared that they "liked the hard-boiled style, and [they] wanted to write a James M. Cain story and put it in a modern context." (Mottram, 2000: 25) And though the Coens have readily acknowledged Cain as a foundation, *Blood Simple* is informed by a series of inspirations and influenced by a multitude of sources. (Hinson, 2000: 34-35) These stimulants complement and contend with the style of Cain to create a recognisably derivative, but wholly unique text. *The Man Who Wasn't There* also invokes the spirit of Cain but in a notably distinct manner to that which was employed for *Blood Simple*. Although Graham Fuller observes that *The Man Who Wasn't There*, like *Blood Simple*, bears the mark of Cain, suggesting it is "another movie in which Cain is the prime influence," he goes on to contend that it is a "puritanical revision" of the author's work. (Fuller, 2001: 12 and 14) The narrative of a quiet barber who is inextricably drawn into matters of murder, extortion, suicide, and dry-cleaning, owes much of its structure and design to both *Double Indemnity* and *Career in C Major* -- two Cain novellas which explore the congregation of the exceptional with the mundane. Regarding this apparent influence, Joel Coen stated that "Cain was very much in our minds, because he was interested in crime stories that involved people in their everyday lives at work, and not about underworld figures. People who worked in banks, or the insurance business, or restaurants." (Pulver, 2002: 3)

Unlike the contemporary setting of *Blood Simple*, the Coens locate *The Man Who Wasn't There* in a typical Cain milieu, placing the action in a 1940s Californian town. Yet, even though this film contains an apparently more ardent connection to Cain than *Blood Simple*, it ultimately proves to be a more complete departure from his fiction, challenging the primacy of fidelity in adaptation theory.

Fidelity is a flawed measure for the quality or worth of an adaptation. In the introduction to his study on film adaptation, Naremore foregrounds the significance of intertextuality in the art of adaptation, stating we "now live in a media-saturated environment dense with cross-references and filled with borrowings from movies, books, and every other form of representation." (Naremore, 2000: 12-13) The Coen brothers' films clearly exhibit the hallmarks of influences that range from mass entertainment through to high culture. Although unmistakably inspired by the style of James M. Cain, *Blood Simple* also carries the influences of crime fiction conventions, Alfred Hitchcock, and the uncommon landscapes of Texas. While *The Man Who Wasn't There* calls not only upon Cain, but also Albert Camus, *film noir*, and even the Coens' own *Barton Fink* (1991). The issues of genre and intertextuality complicate the matter of fidelity by foregrounding the existence of other inspirations relevant to the adaptation. Genre concerns are central to the structure of *Blood Simple* and *The Man Who Wasn't There*, while intertextuality operates to both define these texts as adaptations and to demonstrate the widely diverse collection of influences that move beyond the ostensible literary precursors. Cataloguing the myriad influences in the construction of an adaptation makes clear the impossibility of an untainted fidelity between source and adaptation. As much as *Blood Simple* and *The Man Who Wasn't There* draw upon Cain, there exist many instances of direct inversion or deliberate subversion that point to the Coens' typical ironic interplay with antecedent material. And the Coens' rampant irony -- reflected in their often contradictory attitudes to the material they are adapting -- suggests they are more than simply pastiche-filmmakers who copy the works of others. *Blood Simple* and *The Man Who Wasn't There* reveal a subversive agenda that leads to a reinterpretation of prior representations as well as a reappraisal of the fidelity principle in the assessment of adaptations.

Fidelity: James M. Cain and Crime Fiction

Joel and Ethan Coen's films negotiate the issue of fidelity by furnishing adaptations which reject a relationship to one model. *Blood Simple* and *The Man Who Wasn't There* are James M. Cain-inspired films without being based on any particular Cain text. Rather, these films engage with Cain's style and concerns. Adaptation theory initially traveled through theoretical territory which valorised the original text and sought to comment exclusively on the ability of the film to attain such levels of "perfection." Naremore defines this approach as "translation," in which studies investigate "how codes move across sign systems" focusing primarily on "textual fidelity." (Naremore, 2000: 7-8) With *Blood Simple* and *The Man Who Wasn't There* there exists no model which the Coens can be faithful to or reproduce. They are not adapting a single text but instead seeking to extract an *essence* of James Cain and represent that in a new context. Though ostensibly based upon the literature of Cain, *Blood Simple* in fact takes its title from a passage in Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*. The passage illustrates the contention that those involved in murder or similar misdeeds often become weak-minded. The Coens' *Blood Simple* draws on crime fiction to develop a narrative which both features and challenges its traditions. Basic conventions of murder, greed, lust and betrayal function throughout the film, while the archetypal characters of private investigator,

adulterous wife, vengeful husband and slick drifter are all present. *The Man Who Wasn't There* also engages with many of the conventions often ascribed to crime fiction. In the course of the narrative there will be clandestine meetings, double-dealing, murder and violence, negotiated within an overarching conception of fatalism. The themes of treachery and desire that define *Blood Simple* and *The Man Who Wasn't There* reinforce the connection to Cain, with James Mottram contending that Cain's works "were not detective mysteries in the Chandler/Hammett vein, but novels concerning crimes of passion, usually centring on the betrayal of a man by a woman he has fallen for." (Mottram, 2000: 26) *Blood Simple* and *The Man Who Wasn't There* both incorporate and undermine the conventions they adopt, at turns grasping onto Cain's style and the tropes of crime fiction for guidance and then letting go to find novel directions in which to take familiar material.

With its cuckolded husband, adulterous wife, and violent killing, *The Man Who Wasn't There* employs the basic geometry of Cain's famous novella *Double Indemnity*. The film also derives from another Cain story -- *Career in C Major* -- the idea of the brow-beaten husband who has lost interest in his wife and his life. At the commencement of *Career in C Major*, the hero, Leonard, arrives home to ruefully find his wife entertaining friends. He confides to the reader: "I could hear them in there as soon as I opened the door, and I let out a damn under my breath, but there was nothing to do but brush my hair back and go in." (Cain, 1986: 188) The protagonist of *The Man Who Wasn't There*, Ed (Billy Bob Thornton), operates at much the same level of indifference towards his wife and her friends. As Ed sits rigidly on an uncomfortable looking couch alone in the living room while his wife receives the dinner guests for the evening, he discloses to the viewer in his typical monotone: "Me, I don't like entertaining." Ed unburdens himself to the viewer throughout the film in the persistently bland voiceover narration. Much of Cain's literature is written in the first person and is characterised by a comparable confessional style. Robert G. Porfirio considers the voiceover technique in film to be expository, allowing a commentary on the visual narrative, and "insofar as the hard-boiled tradition adopts a mode of enunciation that is marked, it contributes to the fatalism inherent in much of that literature." (Porfirio, 1999: 92) The voiceover is a key to *The Man Who Wasn't There*, it provides not only a durable bond to Cain's literature but also works to provide the viewer unprecedented access to the hero of a Coen brothers film.

The structure of James M. Cain's narratives is usually constructed upon elements of tension and suspense that are sustained not by mystery, but by a desire to bear witness to the deterioration of the characters' relationships under the pressures of suspicion and hatred. The eleventh chapter of Cain's novella *Double Indemnity* begins:

> I don't know when I decided to kill Phyllis. It seemed to me that ever since that night, somewhere in the back of my head I had known I would have to kill her, for what she knew about me, and because the world isn't big enough for two people once they've got something like that on each other. (Cain, 1969: 440)

This passage details Walter Huff's abrupt realisation that the woman who he has teamed with to swindle a fortune in insurance benefits is taking him for a ride, the murder of her husband merely one step in an intricate plan of which Huff is only partly apprised. In Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, the hard-bitten central character, Frank Chambers, drifts into the life of Cora Papadakis, assists in the murder of her husband, and then, beset by doubts about her loyalty, denounces her to the authorities. Similarly, doubt and mis-communication

are essentially the driving forces propelling the narrative of *Blood Simple*. When Visser (M. Emmett Walsh) guns down Marty (Dan Hedaya) with Abby's (Frances McDormand) pistol, it is Ray (John Getz) who discovers the body and wrongly matches up all the pieces of the puzzle. The characters are all trapped in private discourses, their inability to find awareness and understanding ultimately proves to be their undoing. Ray, believing Abby is responsible for shooting Marty, is clearly disturbed by what he presumes to be her indifference. Abby, who knows nothing about Marty's murder, begins to suspect the worst of Ray's behaviour; their doubts escalating into an absolute distrust which results in multiple deaths.

Alternatively, Ed's voiceover confessional in *The Man Who Wasn't There* connects more readily to Cain and offers the united perspective of one character. Unlike the private discourses which are calculated to destroy the characters of *Blood Simple*, the first-person narration enabled by the voiceover, and the limiting of perspective to Ed's field of experience, grants the audience a strong emotional connection to the film's hero. Near the beginning of *The Man Who Wasn't There* Ed proclaims: "Me, I don't talk much, I just cut the hair." Yet, Ed rarely stops talking. It is true that in the film's diegetic world Ed is taciturn and reserved, but his voiceover is almost always apparent; he talks to "us," specifying a tortured counterpoint to his quasi-detachment. Despite Ed's apparent coldness, the manner in which the film is subjectively framed offers a greater level of emotional accessibility than is evident in *Blood Simple*.

While *The Man Who Wasn't There* and *Blood Simple* favour different methods of exposition, they are both clearly crime fictions. Yet, each film has an anomalous relationship with the genre. R. Barton Palmer observes that a subversive attitude to genre is not achieved merely through citation and reiteration, arguing that if a "text is repetitive, generic, conventional, then to be 'valuable' it must re-work and transform these inherited elements into something different and oppositional." (Palmer, 1988: 14) Palmer notes that much of the criticism surrounding *Blood Simple* at the time of its release was centred on the Coen brothers' exact attention to convention, implying the Coens lacked originality. Palmer quotes this passage from Kenneth Geist's review of *Blood Simple* in *Films In Review*:

> *Blood Simple* is yet another variation on the situation and characters of James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice...*In this version, however, the illicit lovers' passion is perfunctory rather than torrid, the wife is not perfidious to her lover, and the detective is a murderous rogue. (Palmer, 1988: 13)

Palmer keenly observes the contradictions of Geist's assessment. Geist suggests that *Blood Simple* is *yet another* variation on Cain's basic concerns, proceeding then to catalogue the very specific differences and alterations in character and theme. In noting this Palmer finds these specific alterations and revisions to be particularly interesting to his analysis of *Blood Simple* and its relationship to crime fiction. Geist's error correlates with similar misconceptions often apparent in the analyses of adaptations; analyses which are often based upon the false premise that the "original" model is perfect and untouchable. That which is changed, altered, and varied is just as significant as that which is repeated, reiterated and recreated.

If reproduction or duplication were to exist as the only important estimations of quality in adaptations, then studies would revert to the redundant examination of narrative and character transference between two distinct media. It is the changes in conventions, the reworking of established genres and the dissonance between texts that enables a critical annotation. For

example, Geist in the previous passage has decried the characterisation the Coens have wrought upon the private detective in *Blood Simple*. In crime fiction this character has traditionally represented order and control, exemplified by the insurance investigator Keyes in Cain's *Double Indemnity*. Yet Visser, the private-eye of *Blood Simple*, is the most reprehensible and appalling character in the film. He is a trashy grifter who wears a garish yellow suit which outwardly reflects his gnarled immorality, clearly expressed in his professional ethos: "If the pay's right, I'll do it." Marty associates him with a low-living animal: "If I need you I'll know what rock to turn over." The private investigator who has traditionally been a symbol of morality and justice in crime fiction has undergone a pointed degeneration. In *Blood Simple* the Coens turn the convention on its head and perhaps reflect a new generation's disillusionment with traditional domains of virtue and justice.

It seems apparent that with *The Man Who Wasn't There* the Coens are seeking to overturn the conventions of crime fiction and the traditions of James M. Cain's literature to an even greater degree. While adopting much of the structural geometry of the Cain novel, the Coen brothers have decided to eschew many of the elements which make his literature, and the hard-boiled tradition, so satisfying. *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity* deal bluntly with sexuality, unbridled passion and illicit desire. *The Man Who Wasn't There*, however, undermines these regular traditions, choosing instead to focus on a dispassionate protagonist devoid of desire. Ed is celibate and neutral. A sexual and social void, he has no passion and no desire, he is literally the man who is not there: "It was like I was a ghost walking down the street, and when I got home the place felt empty…I was a ghost, I saw nobody, and nobody saw me…I was the barber." Frank in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* is Ed's antithetical equivalent: "The Frank of Cain's novel…is more the passionate man whose emotions sometimes betray him and whose toughness is defined by the immediacy of his actions and his resignation to their consequences." (Porfirio, 1999: 87) Ed, on the other hand, is as blank as his white barber smock; he gives nothing away.

Ed's resolute passivity prompts at least two rather more impassioned characters -- Frank (Michael Badalucco) and "Big" Dave (James Gandolfini) -- to aggressively inquire: "What kind of man are you?" This question is the central enigma of the film. Ed's voiceover volunteers the only prospect of answering this existential inquiry, forging a fascinating affiliation to Albert Camus' *The Outsider*. Camus' philosophical parable is separated into two conflicting sections; part one detailing Meursault's life as seen and part two detailing these same incidents reflected through Meursault's own interpretation. *The Man Who Wasn't There* also implements two competing discourses; the first organised by the images and the other formed by Ed's own voice as he narrates his experience of this world. Michel Foucault explains the confessional structured narrative is a "literature ordered according to the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which the very form of confession holds out like a shimmering mirage." (Foucault, 1990: 59) Even though the Coen brothers have drained their central character of spirit and passion, and have thus subverted one of the crucial elements of crime fiction and Cain's writing, they have offset this with a voiceover narration, which between the words, offers the viewer the full experience of Ed's world and his attempts to understand just what kind of man he is. Ultimately, *The Man Who Wasn't There* might be described less as a Cain film and more as a postmodern revision of Camus' famous novel.

Joel and Ethan Coen are postmodern artists who employ irony as a means by which to comment on the material they re-deploy within their films. Naremore acknowledges the link between adaptations and postmodernism, declaring that "[a] great many postmodern artists

adopt a similar strategy; more like *bricoleurs* than creators, they make new texts out of borrowed or retro motifs, becoming ironic about their originality." (Naremore, 1999: 21) It is precisely through the reiteration of texts, genre, authors, and styles that a critique is negotiated using such techniques as satire, parody, and irony. Linda Hutcheon verifies the contradictory nature of postmodernism contending its function is to "use and abuse, install and then subvert convention in parodic ways, self-consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and provisionality and, of course, to the critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past." (Hutcheon, 1986-7: 180) There is a proliferation of allusion and quotation throughout the rampantly postmodern films of the Coen brothers. They feed off other texts critically and shrewdly, not in manner of floating quotation but in an ironic inversion and a critical application of the elements of previous texts, genres, settings and intertexts. And this is how the Coens choose to adapt the works of Cain in *Blood Simple* and *The Man Who Wasn't There*, not innocently but with irony.

Film noir and "Anti-*noir*"

Not only will an adaptation engage with its source, but it will be informed also by the generic environment surrounding that primary material. Sarah Berry recognises that "genres organise reading practices as much as they organise texts, by indicating to viewers what kind of experiences to expect." (Berry, 1999: 40) The manner by which a text intertwines with a genre is important to both the text's reception and its construction. This can manifest itself as a faithful assembly of familiar motifs and genre tropes or a subversion of these traditions. John G. Cawelti submits that genres are in a state of flux and their frameworks are modernised when "the elements of a conventional popular genre [are set] in an altered context, thereby making us perceive these traditional forms in new ways." (Cawelti, 1995: 235) *Blood Simple* envisions and reconstructs a loose neo-*noir* structure and style, while *The Man Who Wasn't There* owes its design to a more rigid conception of the classical *film noir*; but in both cases the Coen brothers explore the boundaries of these genres. James Cain's literature was a crucial influence in the emergence of the *film noir* movement as well as providing many of the aesthetic elements that would characterise its design. As such, the Coens' subversion of genre in *Blood Simple* and *The Man Who Wasn't There* represents a further movement away from a faithful representation of Cain.

The Coen brothers' films readily engage with identifiable genres as a means of disrupting their usual formalities and seeking out new and fresh expressions within well-worn frameworks. *Blood Simple* is a modern *film noir*, or more precisely a neo-*noir*. Popular throughout the 1980s neo-*noir* represents a modernisation of the conventions of *film noir*, evident in such texts as *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981), *Body Heat* (1981), and *Against All Odds* (1984). Lawrence Kasdan's *Body Heat* is a salient example that shares with *Blood Simple* a strong derivation with past representations, as well as Cain's novels. John Orr proposes that *Body Heat* is an indirect reworking of Cain's writing, appropriately capturing the flavour of his literature. Yet, Orr also acknowledges the influence of genre, contending "Kasdan's highly erotic movie has self-conscious echoes of the whole noir history and uncannily evokes the forties at every juncture." (Orr, 1992: 6) And *Blood Simple* solicits many of the semantic components of *film noir* with its dark and seedy setting, nefarious activities, explicit violence and low-life characters. The film's reception as an adaptation is heavily influenced by the expectations that Cain's literature and its generic framework encourage within the audience. However, *Blood Simple* abides by the conventions of New

Hollywood modernism as a text that is self-conscious and interpretive particularly in respect to issues of genre.

Regarding *Blood Simple*, Palmer points out the contradictory nature of re-workings, suggesting "the particular kinds of stylisation emphasized by [Joel] Coen are profoundly metafictional, for they, in a limited sense, answer to the conventions of film noir even as they often exceed (and comment upon?) those conventions." (Palmer, 1988: 10) As such it is arguable that compared to *Blood Simple*, *The Man Who Wasn't There* engages rather more specifically with the *film noir* tradition. Moreover, akin to *The Man Who Wasn't There*'s relationship to Cain, the closer it seems to interlace with *noir*'s conventions the more profound are the eventual deviations. This paradoxical relationship is not unlike Freddy Riedenschneider's (Tony Shalhoub) conceptual mangling of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle: "The more you look, the less you really know; it's maybe the only fact." With *The Man Who Wasn't There* the viewer is encouraged to embrace the superficial touchstones of *noir*: themes of cynicism and disillusionment, complemented by a succession of doom-laden visual compositions, expressionistic lighting schemes and stark black and white photography. Yet, as much as the viewer is encouraged to perceive this Coen brothers' text as *film noir* by providing its basic elements, this reading is ultimately undermined by a subversion of many of *noir*'s more traditional conditions. Palmer's contention that the Coens install generic traditions in order to exceed them is apparent in *The Man Who Wasn't There* in which they create their own Riedenschneider-like illusion by summoning the conventions of *film noir* and then nullifying their typical function.

The fatalism which saturates much of Cain's literature is a crucial element of the narrative design in Joel and Ethan Coen's *The Man Who Wasn't There*. Fatalism is also a key component of *film noir*; a tradition harking back to *Detour* (1945) in which the doomed anti-hero, beset by all manner of predestined adversity, maintains in voiceover: "That's life. Whichever way you turn, fate sticks out a foot to trip you." Paul Schrader remarks that voiceover narration in *film noir* contributes to this sense of inevitability: "the narration creates a mood of *temps perdu:* an irretrievable past, a predetermined fate, and an all enveloping hopelessness." (Schrader, 1986: 176) Ed, in *The Man Who Wasn't There*, pessimistically remarks of his irreclaimable future: "It was my only chance. I guess that meant I never had a chance," going on to bemoan: "Life has dealt me some bum cards, or maybe, I haven't played 'em right, I don't know." The hand dealt to Ed comes in the form of Creighton Tolliver (Jon Polito), an entrepreneur who fatefully enters the barber shop after closing with a well-oiled spiel extolling the revolutionary virtues of a new technology: dry-cleaning. It is this meeting and the opportunity for investment that initiates Ed's foolish scheme which will ultimately lead to the deaths of four people. Like Jerry Lundegaard's (William H. Macy) muddled extortion stratagem in the Coen brothers' *Fargo* (1996), no sooner is the plan deployed than it is out of control.

Blood Simple draws on many aspects of the *film noir* tradition but it also seeks in several ways to transform the genre by challenging its conventions. The Coens' film shuns the traditional characterisation of the femme fatale intrinsic to *film noir* and also apparent in many Cain novels. In *Blood Simple*, Frances McDormand's Abby is an innocent bystander to the crooked scheming which takes place. In comparison to Cora (Lana Turner) of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) and Phyllis (Barbara Stanwyck) of *Double Indemnity* (1944), McDormand's character is notably bland. *Film noir* established the femme fatale character as an expression of the emasculation of post-war America. *Blood Simple* is the product of another time in which such cultural factors are less evident, perhaps best reflected

in the largely passionless relationship between Abby and Ray. Brian McFarlane astutely observes that a "film is not merely (perhaps not even primarily) an adaptation; it is also a film of its time and this fact will bear on the kind of adaptation it is." (McFarlane, 1996: 200) With *Blood Simple* the Coen brothers draw on the generic conventions not as a simple re-rendering of pre-existing material, but rather as complex reworking of these established paradigms.

Like *Blood Simple*, *The Man Who Wasn't There* is also concerned with transgressing many of *film noir*'s most important conventions. The turbulent desire and robust sexuality of Cain's writing pervaded early *noir* films beginning with direct Cain adaptations, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity*, through to *Laura* (1944), *Gilda* (1946) and Orson Welles' *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948). In each of these examples the narrative is driven by desire; a desire so intense that it succeeds in disabling the characters' capacity to reason. Yet, with *The Man Who Wasn't There* the Coens have chosen to eliminate all emotion from their protagonist, making him as dispassionate and detached as possible and prompting Graham Fuller to categorise the film "anti-*noir*." (Fuller, 2001: 14) Passion is central to *film noir*, whether it is Frank's (John Garfield) desire for Cora in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* or Neff's (Fred MacMurray) desire to crack the unbreakable system in *Double Indemnity*; these are the obsessions which beckon the *noir* hero. Ed, however, has no such desire, no such passion. He is asexual. Twice in the film he is propositioned by other characters, in both cases he is resolute in denying them. His marriage, we learn, is premised on a two-week courtship in which his taciturnity proved acceptable to Doris (Frances McDormand), so much so that she thought it may be convenient if they were to be wed. E. Ann Kaplan maintains that women are central to the *noir* universe as objects of lust, they are "defined by their sexuality, which is presented as desirable but dangerous to men, the women function as the obstacle to the male quest." (Kaplan, 1980: 3) And though Doris has more sass and sexual spark than *Blood Simple*'s Abby, she is still incapable of fulfilling the role of the femme fatale. Ed's lack of desire for her and his sexual detachment renders any aspiration to manipulate him ineffectual. Even Birdy (Scarlett Johansson), a neighbour's daughter by whom Ed is implacably entranced, is unable to pique any sexual interest from him. It is perhaps no surprise that Ed discovers such solace in Birdy's piano playing given her style is prosaic and mechanical, the indifference that characterises her music accurately reflecting Ed's paucity of passion. Without these crucial elements -- passion, desire, sexuality -- *The Man Who Wasn't There* undermines the genre that frames it. *Blood Simple* too negates many of the conventions of neo-*noir*, generating a text which subverts its own primary inspiration and generic tradition. Both films are adaptations of Cain's style cast within a *noir* world but the Coens break out of these constraints to take each film into novel territory.

Intertextuality: Hitchcock, Texas and *Barton Fink*

Intertextuality is a further factor which unsettles the orderly relationship between the adaptation and its prior model. Intertexts can range from films, novels, television series, to actors, genres, choreographers and styles. Leo Braudy acknowledges that in understanding a remake (a useful theoretical variation on adaptation), one must venture beyond the simple comparison of the new text with the older model and acknowledge that "the remake can exist anywhere on an intertextual continuum from allusions in specific lines, individual scenes, and camera style to explicit patterning of an entire film on a previous exemplar." (Braudy, 1998: 327) Adaptations can also sustain a position of referring to a model (as is the case with the

Coens' allusions to Cain). However, it is not enough to recognise only those primary references without incorporating the wider circuitry of influences and acknowledging the broader arena of the intertextual continuum. Intertexts operate on such an expansive network yet they are always consequential and penetrating in the understanding of the patterns of repetition and marks of difference which transform and extend a new text in relation to its source.

James M. Cain's novels, like those of Raymond Chandler, most often find their settings somewhere within the state of California. *Film noir*, with few exceptions, is most often set within an urban environment; the narrow streets of *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1950) or the darkened London alleys of *Night and the City* (1950) operate as precise metaphors for the city as urban jungle. The Coens buck both trends by locating *Blood Simple* within the rural regions of a Texas road-side bar and the nearby suburban district. The reasoning, according to Ethan Coen, is "your classic *film noir* has a real urban feel, and we wanted something different." (Hinson, 2000: 35) The Coen brothers' predilection for revisioning and inverting the material they draw upon for inspiration constantly informs the manner of their adaptations. Yet, the use of Texas as a setting works well with Cain's style and concerns. Joyce Carol Oates proposes the moral environment of Cain's novels is such that:

> one understands how barren, how stripped and bizarre this Western landscape has become. It is as if the world extends no farther than the radius of one's desire…To be successful, such narrowly-conceived art must blot out what landscape it cannot cover; hence the blurred surrealistic backgrounds of the successful Cain novels. (Oates, 1968: 111-12)

With *Blood Simple* Joel and Ethan Coen develop a similarly surreal environment, best evident in Ray's long tour through the empty landscape as he seeks a burial place for a not-yet-dead Marty. The entire sequence is played out in a funereal silence, the only audible voice comes from the late-night pontificating of a radio-evangelist. When Ray belatedly realises that Marty is still alive he brings the car to a screeching halt and dashes into the eerily desolate fields by the side of the highway. The Coens accentuate the surrealism of the vista through a visual design that combines several low-level tracking shots with distorted framing. And the darkened plots of land are further made alien by the illuminated advertising hoardings that emphasise the strangeness of the landscape.

The sequence, from the point in which Ray puts Marty into the car to his shovel violently pounding the earth above the latter's entombed body, lasts almost ten screen minutes and plays out in almost complete silence. This visual and aural approach also highlights a further component which informs *Blood Simple*'s intertextual web. The scene bears a striking resemblance to a moment in Alfred Hitchcock's *Torn Curtain* (1966) in which an East German agent is brutally murdered in a similarly silent and drawn out sequence of violence. Stephané Braunschweig notes the connection stating that in both Hitchcock's film and *Blood Simple* the human body proves extremely resistant to the trauma placed upon it (Braunschweig, 2000: 22). Like the East German agent, Marty will not die unless some authentic and terrible violence is wrought upon his body. Both the Coens and Hitchcock convey the brutality and savagery of a murder; each example reverberating with enhanced power when compared to the usually perfunctory treatment afforded death in crime fiction.

The Man Who Wasn't There is set in traditional Cain country -- a modest Californian town named Santa Rosa. It serves as the epitome of small-town America with its close-knit

community, quiet streets and languidly paced lifestyle. Santa Rosa is also, not un-coincidentally, the same town (in name and appearance) found in Hitchcock's 1943 thriller *Shadow of a Doubt*. For both Hitchcock and the Coens the function of Santa Rosa is the representation of exceptional ordinariness. However, Hitchcock sought to infect this archetype of normality with an essence of true corruption, personified by the character of Uncle Charlie (Joseph Cotton), a rampant misogynist and mass murderer. The explanation that Charlie offers his niece (Teresa Wright) as the essence of his malignant mind reflects Hitchcock's own thematic agenda:

What do you know, really? You're just an ordinary little girl, living in an ordinary little town. You wake up every morning of your life and you know perfectly well that there is nothing in the world to trouble you. You go through your ordinary little day, and at night you sleep your untroubled ordinary sleep, filled with peaceful stupid dreams…and I brought you nightmares.

Such a premise of innocence and evil is made redundant in *The Man Who Wasn't There* due to Ed's uncompromising amorality borne upon boundless apathy. What kind of man is he? It is this existential dilemma which concerns the Coens and not the Manichean struggle between righteousness and immorality. In its exploration of a world beyond good and evil in which issues concerning what is right and what is wrong have been overrun by questions of the nature of being, *The Man Who Wasn't There* proves more complex than Hitchcock's macabre tale of vice and virtue. The intertextual connection paradoxically draws the Coen brothers' film back to Cain, his literature exhibiting a similar interest in these existential themes.

Blood Simple is also infused with a series of connections to other texts which inform its reception. M. Emmett Walsh's performance as Earl Frank -- the unmerciful and underhanded parole officer in Ulu Grosbard's criminal-world character study *Straight Time* (1978) -- inspired the character of Visser and the casting of Walsh in the role (Bergan, 2000: 82-83). The use of a specific actor is often as important to the composition of an adaptation as the original source text. The actor can transform the expectations of the audience who rely as much on an understanding of that actor's profile as any awareness of a genre's conventions or the influence of a novelist. Naremore asserts the "actor is already a character in some sense, a 'subject' formed by various codes in the culture, whose stature, accent, physical abilities, and performing habits imply a range of meanings and influence the way he or she will be cast." (Naremore, 1988: 158) With Visser, the Coens effectively remake a previous performance of Walsh's, using it to shape their own vision.

But it is not only possible to draw intertextual cues from the works of others, they are equally valid when they appear from within an artist's own canon. The prime example in *The Man Who Wasn't There* is Freddy Riedenschneider as played by Tony Shalhoub, harking back to Shalhoub's own performance as movie producer Ben Geisler in the Coen brothers' *Barton Fink*. In both films Shalhoub plays a domineering, blustering character whose verbal bluntness hypnotises those to whom he speaks. In each case Shalhoub's character eats lunch with the film's protagonist, systematically shoving food into his mouth as he barks out orders and advice. The idea that a fast-talking Hollywood producer (with an explicit practical agenda) and a smooth-talking Sacramento litigator (more interested in creating illusions than in seeking justice) are two sides of the same coin serves as an appropriate reproach for both fields of endeavour. Joel and Ethan Coen seem concerned not with recreating a realistic depiction of the character, or drawing their ideas from similar characters found in Cain's

work, but rather in a recreation of a notable performance from a previous film. Here the memory of things past informs the reception and interpretation of the present text.

For John Ellis the adaptation "trades upon the memory of the novel, a memory that can derive from actual reading [or from] a general circulated cultural memory." (Ellis, 1982: 3) And this suits the study of Joel and Ethan Coen's films, as they have, with *Blood Simple* and *The Man Who Wasn't There*, recalled the essence of Cain's literature, if not any particular text. The Coens are expert in drawing on this circulated memory and using it to define and refine their narratives and style. Where memory can be persuaded by truth, fiction and the often un-reconciled linking of the two, so too will adaptations, through the agency of intertextuality and other such influences, be drawn in strange and sometimes contrary directions. By revisiting familiar genres in addition to the conscious invocation of prior archetypes, the Coens are looking backwards for inspiration but the manipulation of the material which they summon provides their films a novel and original grounding. The evidence is apparent in the Coens' two widely divergent interpretations of one source: James M. Cain. *Blood Simple* is a contemporary drama of violence and deception set in the rural wastelands of Texas. *The Man Who Wasn't There* is a period piece swathed in existentialist apathy set in the urban environs of small-town America. Yet, these two films are each inextricably drawn to the same source and inspiration. It is a criticism of the Coens' work that their postmodern techniques are merely a subterfuge for the inability to say anything new or original. Yet, it is clear that the films of the Coen brothers, while affected by the novels, films, genres and conventions of an older order, are indeed original in their treatment of those influences. With *Blood Simple* and *The Man Who Wasn't There* the material may be indubitably Cain, but its rendering is purely Coen.

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