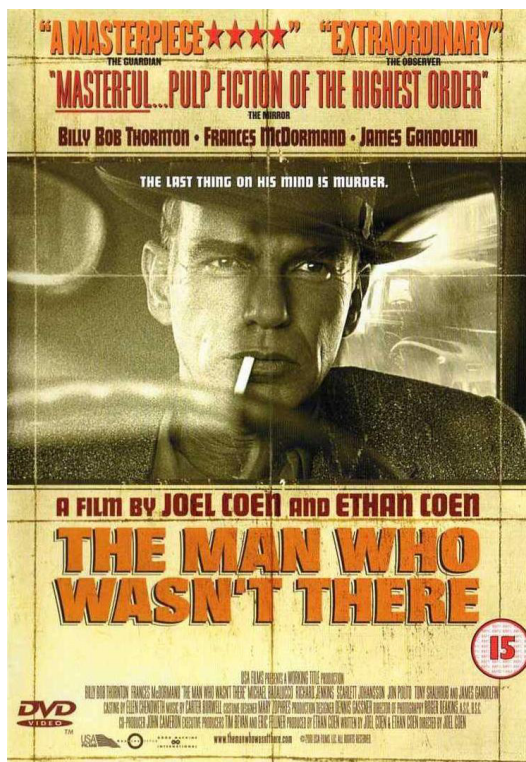


Ciro Discepolo

“The Man Who Was Not There”:
the Importance of Being Able
to Read Reality Correctly

by Ethan and Joel Coen



Ricerca '90 Publisher

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The man who wasn't there, the movie directed by Ethan and Joel Coen

which were awarded the Best Directors at Cannes 2001, and featuring a wonderful Billy Bob Thornton, is quite probably a witty metaphor of myopia (1) or of human mediocrity, or of both.

The film narrates the useless and harmful life of an ordinary man in his forties, the assistant-barber Ed Crane: “a man who wasn't there”, in the sense that nobody ever noticed his presence. The peculiar nuance of the black and white used in the film (photography by Roger Deakins) decidedly veering to grey, highlights the very greyness of its protagonist. Ed Crane hardly ever speaks, he cuts the clients' hair and when he doesn't, he pensively stares at nothing in particular with a frown, framed by a perennial cloud of smoke: he looks like one of those intellectuals who bear on their shoulders the weight of the whole world, but he is just a “prick”.

Ed Crane lives in 1949 Santa Rosa, a small town North-East of San Francisco, as said by his offstage voice that sounds like the virtual ventriloquist of a dumb: he cuts hair from morning until night, he sometimes utters something like a grunt to signal his presence to Frank, his boss and brother-in-law, who suffers from acute and chronic logorrhoea. His life is plain and boring, and Santa Rosa is the barycentre of the whole world which seems to have only two inhabited offshoots: Sacramento, from whence the best in the world comes, and San Francisco which is even another planet.

The protagonist of this wonderful movie (2) by the Coen brothers has a wife, Doris (the excellent Frances McDormand, Oscar prize winner for *Fargo*, as well as Ethan Coen's own wife), who loves alcohol very much, has an affair with her boss, Big Dave Brewster (James Gandolfini), and

dreams of becoming the manager of a lingerie shop.



The protagonist's life seems by now normalized along a well-defined and inescapable path, when he receives the visit of Uranus (who else?) and his life changes dramatically: an improbable businessman, a “pansy”, a gay (this term is purposefully discriminatory as to indicate the prejudices proliferating in that particular context in that particular time), who starts talking about some great investments in dry cleaning, a goldmine to be discovered, a train that shouldn't be missed and that can turn anyone into a very rich man with a investment of only 10.000 dollars. Ed Crane believes he has sniffed out the business of his life and, in order to get the necessary money for the investment, he blackmails his friend Big Dave, warning him that his affair with Mrs Crane has been discovered and that if he doesn't pay 10.000 dollars immediately, it will be publicly exposed. After this, the story becomes dramatic and grotesque at the same time: Ed Crane's plan is revealed by his wife's lover, who gets killed. His wife is accused of the murder and hangs herself in prison. Much later, Ed will be accused of the

murder of the “pansy” who, on the contrary, has been killed by Ed’s victim. After having spent all his money for the legal expenses of a weird lawyer by Sacramento, and after having fallen in love with a Lolita pianist, Ed will “fry” on the electric chair although – in his last days – he will think he has become someone and will write his story for a men’s only magazine, 5 cents a word.



After having watched the film many times, I have read many on line reviews, also by very good film critics. I must say they convinced me very little on the supposed theme of the film: according to most critics the theme is *destiny*, because the Uranus-effect leaves astonished anyone who is not familiar with ephemeris. On the contrary, for those of us who have ephemeris impressed on our minds, it is obvious that Uranus may produce incredible *coups de théâtre*, with or without mournings and/or murders: even changing one’s job or desperately falling in love with a young woman can equally be a striking reflection of the Lord of Aquarius in the life of every human being. No,

I personally believe that, in the directors’ intention, the film’s tragic epilogue was not its topic, but only a story within the story to show, as if it were necessary, how much we can be mistaken when we observe (or when we think we observe) reality.

As I was saying, I think on the contrary that the film’s topics are myopia and human ordinariness, and I will try to prove it to you by claiming that, in this movie, nobody is saved: all the characters look without seeing, or are

completely mistaken. If the authors were two demagogues they would have probably saved at least the female protagonist, in order to please an intellectual trend which requires that women are always victims of male brutality. No, no character is saved here. One might wonder whether Ethan and Joel Coen's is only irony, a fierce irony, or a terrible condemnation, without reserves, of the entire human race.



Let's see.

I don't think there can be any doubt about the "prick" which is Ed Crane. He is always pictured as a thinking man, a thoughtful philosopher constantly absorbed in thousands of existential theories, while he is a stupid who thinks he sees, he only takes big oversights. He only gets philosophical when he thinks of hair: "Frank, I am thinking of hair: it grows and grows, and keeps on growing. They are a part of ourselves and yet we cut it and throw it away in the garbage." [...] "Hair, so I've heard, keeps on growing for a little while after death ...".

But the philosophy of the assistant-barber stops here.

Ed Crane thinks he can make a millionaire business with dry cleaning.

Ed Crane thinks he is able to blackmail people.

Ed Crane thinks he is able to kill.

Ed Crane thinks he can clear his wife of blame by accusing himself of murder.

Ed Crane thinks he has discovered the musical talent of a local girl.

Ed Crane does not get the general picture, “but now all the knots have untangled” and, shortly before being electrocuted, he writes the story of his life five cents a word for a men’s only magazine (this is Coen’s thrust to writers).

As regards Birdy, the Lolita who plays the piano. Ed is so struck when the girl plays Beethoven that he has no doubts: “The girl was talented, that was as clear as the sky... She is an angel... she is a simple, special girl...” He insists to get her interviewed by a famous San Francisco music teacher, prefiguring international tours in which he will be the girl’s manager. Master Carcanov listens to the girls and finally gives his opinion: “She is a very nice girl who plays the piano like a very nice girl: she strums.

She reads b flat and then plays b flat. But there’s no passion. Tic, tac, tic, tac... Yes, she will be a good typist!”. On the way back home, in his car Ed calls the maestro “a fool”, claiming that other more important musicians will appreciate Birdy’s worth. However, she confesses to him that she does not care at all about music; she wants to be a vet and she wishes to show him her gratefulness. She tells him he is a passionate man (sic!) and she dives between his legs while he is driving for a fellatio but, instead, she provokes an incident.



We have talked about his wife: all about alcohol and fantasies of power expressed though the desire of becoming the improbable head clerk of a lingerie shop. She had accepted her husband-to-be's proposal going to the cinema with him with a flask of whisky, only because Ed did not talk much. She was (probably) entertained by listening to her lover's stories about the massacres of "yellow faces" during the Pacific war (but, as it will turn out, all through the war he had hidden in an office in San Diego).

As I have already stated, the woman will hang herself in prison the day before her trial, possibly due to withdrawal symptoms from alcohol.

There would be much to say about Ed's brother in law and on his wife's lover but, after all, they are minor characters in the story.



However, in my opinion Freddy Riedenschneider (Tony Shaloub) deserves special attention. He is the famous Sacramento lawyer who is in charge of the defence of the barber's wife first and then of the barber himself. Quite probably the Coen brothers have belaboured him with excessive strength. It is true that in the States lawyers are generally much hated. But in this case they are even crucified. Freddy Riedenschneider is a "caricature": his fees are crazy, he stays in the *Turandot* suite of the *Metropolitan*, he gorges himself on huge dishes of spaghetti at *Da Vinci*, he employs private eyes and, above all, he gets ready for the "big show" when, rather than presenting a line of defence based on facts, he will try and tell tall tales, hypnotizing the jury and even convincing it of the impossibility to judge and,

therefore, putting in the minds of the members of the jury the *reasonable doubt* that will acquit the accused.

His entire “castle” of defence will be based on an “odd theory” read somewhere: “the principle of indeterminacy of a German guy according to whom it is possible to watch reality without – involuntarily – altering it, precisely because we have observed it” (3). He is certain of the fact that, when the jury will listen to this scientific principle, it will be persuaded that it is not possible to judge the accused (the wife first and then her husband) and will thus be able to instil in them the “reasonable doubt”.

I would say then that, on this occasion, the Coen brothers have even overdone, depicting an improbable and ridiculous character.



During the first trial Freddy Riedenschneider will claim that it had been the most disappointing professional experience of his life (because he could not make his harangue). In the second trial he will obtain the cancellation of the trial but, in the meantime, Ed Crane gets broke and will have to fire the famous lawyer who in the meanwhile has already packed and left his *Turandot* suite.

I believe the film could as well have been titled *A man of consequence* or *To get hold of the wrong end of the stick*. Ed Crane had been sitting on the bench of the accused, but all the characters in the movie, as well as ourselves, have been sitting on the same bench, in the vision of the Coens. With what accusation? Indolence, myopia, stupidity and, above all, mediocrity!

The man who wasn't there is undoubtedly a beautiful movie, a movie that any cinephile will place in the highest ranks of his own chart of the 100 movies of all times and places.

I have presented you with my own view of the film, a vision that – for what I have written so far – could be completely misrepresented, as well as Ethan and Joel

Coen's vision, but they already know it and they warned us precisely through this extraordinary movie.

Ciro Discepolo

Note

(1) In this light we can also highlight a note of the Authors: the wife of one of the characters (Big Dave) convincingly claims that the aliens have killed her husband and that she herself has seen them coming out of a flying saucer.

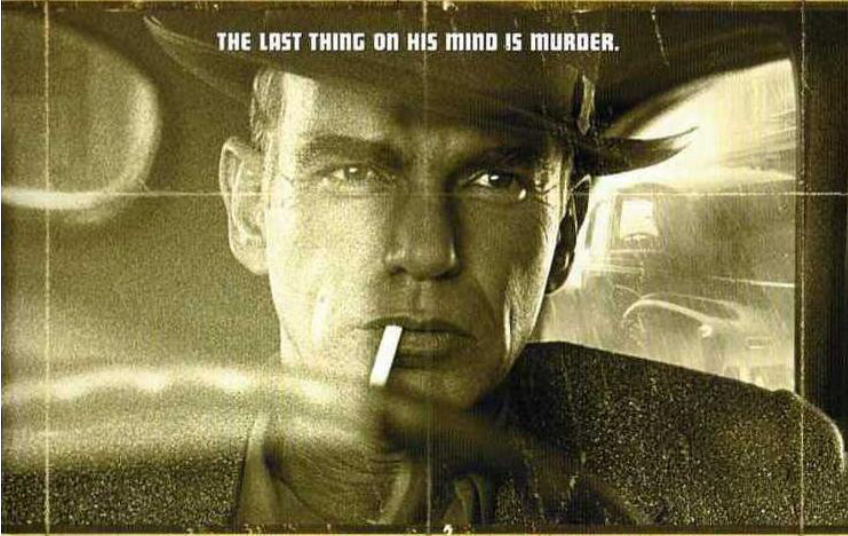
(2) To give you an example of the irony and the brilliant execution of this movie by the Coen brothers (the director is Joel) I wish to bring to your attention a particular scene in which Ed sits besides his drunk wife and his off-stage voice tells about the first time they met: the phone rings, Ed goes to his appointment, he kills his wife's lover, goes back to his seat beside her and the voice resumes the story where it has been left.

(3) In my opinion this, as well, could be another distich or caption illustrating the main topic of the film: the incapacity of human beings to look at reality. As you might guess, the topic is astrological analysis.

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A FILM BY JOEL COEN AND ETHAN COEN

THE MAN WHO WASN'T THERE

15

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Ciro Discepolo, an astrologer, journalist and writer, was born in Naples in 1948 (on the 17th of July, at 5:40 am).

He worked for twenty years at the most popular daily of Naples, Il Mattino, writing articles on science, medicine, informatics, literature and astrology. He always refused to cast the so-called 'horoscopes of the solar signs' for that newspaper and for any other newspaper or magazine.

He worked (at 20 years old) for five years at the CNR (National Research Council) as Researcher Helper and, for two years, as Electronic Measures Laboratory's head in the Istituto Motori of Naples, CNR.

He has been dealing with astrology since 1970. He has written over 70 books, most of them best-sellers in Italy as well as abroad (France, the United States of America, Spain, Germany, Hungary, Slovenia and Russia) and about 250 short Astrology Essays almost all on Google Books. He has published also about 1000 Astrology lessons on YouTube. In 1990 he founded the quarterly Ricerca '90, which he's been directing since then.

He's been doing statistical researches from the very beginning of his interest in astrology.

At the beginning of the '90s, he obtained very brilliant results with researches on astral heredity on a sample of over 75,000 subjects.

He's been holding seminars, courses and lectures in different universities and cultural centres in Italy and abroad.

He particularly deals with Predictive Astrology and Aimed Solar Returns. According to many colleagues he may be considered the greatest living expert of this sector. In fact not only he wrote a dozen of texts on this specific segment of the "Art of Urania" - he can also rely on an experience of more than 20,000 aimed birthdays (covering the years 1970 to 2007) that he suggested, whose outcomes he collected at an interval of one year.

He developed extremely advanced software packages for the study of Predictive Astrology, also projecting an innovative algorithm which is particularly useful for the dating of events within one year for individuals or groups of people.

He is deeply interested in informatics. Astrologically speaking, he followed the school of André Barbault.

He founded the school of the Active Astrology.