

Genre Case Study (CAMF6005)

Intertextuality in *The Man Who Wasn't There*

This essay examines intertextuality in *The Man Who Wasn't There* (Coens, 2001), a neo-noir written, directed, and produced by Joel and Ethan Coen and photographed by Roger Deakins. It starts with an overview of some general principles relating to intertextuality, and a discussion of the Coen Brothers' body of work. It then proceeds to analyse *The Man Who Wasn't There* both in light of the theoretical principles of intertextuality, and in relation to the conventions of film noir and neo-noir. One purpose of this is to examine how intertextual referencing is seen to add value and meaning to the film and, in this respect, it is concerned with the way in which the text is received, rather than how it is produced. However, consideration is also given to the ways in which intertextual referencing is seen to contribute to the creative process.



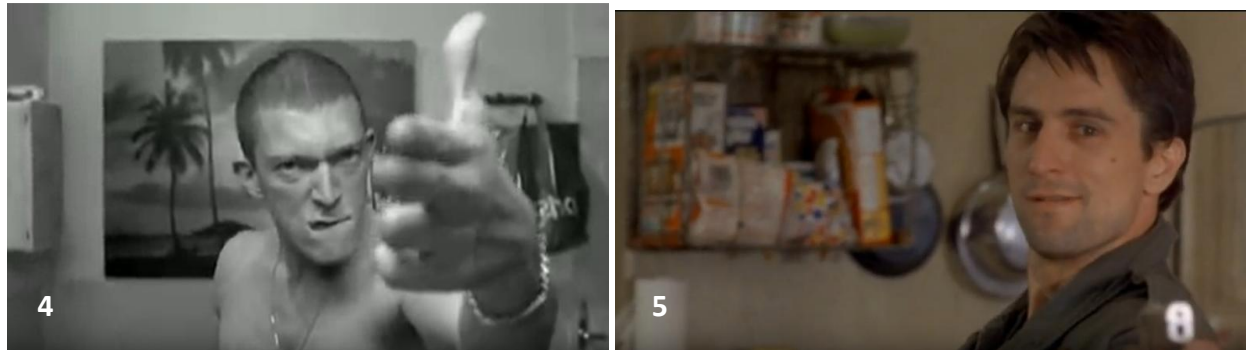
Robert Stam defines intertextuality as 'the effective co-presence of two texts'.¹ This may take the form of a direct reference (or 'quote'), or an indirect reference, that is, an allusion. For example, Mathieu Kassovitz's 1995 French crime drama *La Haine* features an advertisement hoarding which bears the slogan 'Le monde est à vous' ('The World is Yours') (plate 1), a direct

¹ R. Stam, 'Introduction', in *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, ed. by Robert Stam and Alessandro Raengo (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p.27..

reference to a hoarding in Howard Hawks's 1932 gangster film *Scarface* (plate 2). Brian De Palma's 1983 remake of *Scarface* also includes a reference to the slogan, which appears as scrolling text on the side of an airship (plate 3), meaning that the reference in *La Haine* has intertextual connections to both versions of *Scarface*. Meanwhile, the narrative of the television series *Stranger Things* (2016-present), which combines science-fiction and horror and concerns the adventures of a central cast of young, mostly male characters, contains allusions to 1980s Hollywood cinema, for example, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (Spielberg, 1982) and *The Goonies* (Donner, 1985), with the advertising campaign directly referencing film posters for *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Spielberg, 1977), *Alien* (Scott, 1979), and *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven, 1984). Intertextuality also encompasses parody and pastiche. However, this essay focuses upon direct references and allusions in *The Man Who Wasn't There* to film noir and 'hard-boiled' fiction, in particular, to the films noirs *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Garnett, 1946), and to the two 'hard-boiled' novellas by James M. Cain upon which they are based.

We have established that intertextuality involves, amongst other things, the direct and indirect referencing of another text, that is, a 'quote' or an allusion. In addition to this, referencing may take place between texts of the same medium, as with *La Haine* and *Scarface*, between different media, for example, a reference in a film to a novel or vice versa, and between the products of different national cultures and time periods (see also *La Haine* and *Scarface*). It also takes a wide variety of forms, ranging from allusions to cult movies of a particular period, as with *Stranger Things*, to something as specific as camera technique, as with the 'dolly zoom' in *Goodfellas* (Scorsese, 1990) which references Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), to direct

references to entire scenes, as when Vinz (Vincent Cassel) in *La Haine* reprises the scene from *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976) when Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) stares at his own reflection in a mirror and delivers the line 'You talking to me?' ('C'est à moi que tu parles?') (plates 4 and 5).



Furthermore, filmmakers are given to reference their own work in the aforementioned ways. For example, director Howard Hawks and screenwriter Jules Furthman would reference shots, sequences, character types, and plotlines from the Hawks oeuvre. This was so much a part of Hawks's creative process that the novelist and screenwriter William Faulkner said of the referencing of *Red River* (Hawks, 1948) in *Land of the Pharaohs* (Hawks, 1955) '[i]t's *Red River* all over again ... but the thing about Howard is, he knows it's the same movie, and he knows how to make it'.² This aspect of intertextuality is particularly relevant to the Coen Brothers, who are also given to reference their own oeuvre. Besides their film work as writers, directors and producers, they are also the executive producers of the television series *Fargo* (2014-present), which references their 1996 film of the same name in a number of imaginative and innovative ways, as discussed in the concluding section of the essay.

The Man Who Wasn't there is representative both of neo-noir and the work of the Coen

² P. Wollen, 'Introduction', in *Howard Hawks: American Artist*, ed. by Jim Hillier and Peter Wollen (London: British Film Institute, 1996), p.2.

Brothers in that it refers back to the original genre cycle of film noir, which, it is generally agreed, started in 1941 with John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* and ended in 1958 with Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil*. However, the intertextual referencing in their films is rich and complex. Their 1994 film *The Big Lebowski* (Coens, 1994) as well as referencing the original noir cycle, also contains references to a 'revisionist' noir, Robert Altman's adaptation of Chandler's *The Long Goodbye* (Altman, 1973). This includes allusions to Altman's 'laid-back', countercultural version of private eye Philip Marlowe (Elliot Gould) in the character of 'The Dude' (Jeff Bridges), while the scene where 'The Dude' goes shopping for ingredients for his beloved White Russians is a direct reference to a scene in *The Long Goodbye* where Marlowe shops for cat food.

In addition, the film of the Coen Brothers also reference the 'hard-boiled' crime fiction of Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain, and Raymond Chandler, as well as films noirs based upon their work. Indeed, their use of intertextual referencing is seen to acknowledge their indebtedness to hard-boiled fiction as well as film noir, and thus to 'signpost' the symbiotic relationship between literature and film.

The narrative of their first feature, the neo-noir *Blood Simple* (Coens, 1984) involves an adulterous affair between Ray (John Getz) and Abby (Frances McDormand) leading to the murder of Abby's husband, club owner Julian Marty (Dan Hedaya). The narrative alludes both to the 1946 adaptation of Cain's novella *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and his work in general, while the film's title is attributable to Hammett's novel *Red Harvest* (1929).

It was a conscious decision on behalf of the Coen Brothers to reference hard-boiled fiction, in particular, Cain's version of the mode, which tends to involve a male drifter or flaneur who has

an affair with a married woman then conspires with her to murder her husband, and thus represents crime from the perpetrators' point of view, unlike the 'private eye' novels of Hammett and Chandler. Producer and co-writer Ethan Coen remarks that '[w]hen we did *Blood Simple* we were influenced by the novels of James M. Cain ... They're the same sort of thing: overheated, domestic melodramas'.³ The phrase 'overheated, domestic melodrama' applies equally to *The Man Who Wasn't There*, which, as noted, also recalls Cain's 'story worlds' as well as the films noirs *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Equally revealing of the Coen Brothers' decision-making process during the making of their first major feature is Ethan Coens' comment that Cain's narratives 'seemed tailor-made for something you might be able to do successfully on a small budget, in real practical terms'.⁴ It is interesting to note the way in which creative decisions are informed by economic as well as artistic considerations.

The Coen Brothers use intertextual referencing as a means of 'signposting' the connections between their work and their cultural influences, which, in turn, play a key role in their creative decision-making. Their neo-noir gangster film *Miller's Crossing* (Coens, 1990) alludes to the characters and plot of Hammett's *The Glass Key*, however, Hammett's work *per se* has had an influence upon their filmmaking, and in particular upon their character-driven narratives. Eddie Robson argues that '[t]he prime influence [on *Miller's Crossing*] was Dashiell Hammett, whose work Joel [Coen] says uses the gangster genre as a vehicle to talk about people'.⁵ Director and co-writer Joel Coen observes, '[w]e weren't thinking so much of gangster pictures, just novels ... In Hammett the plot is like a big jigsaw puzzle that can be seen in the background. It may make

³ E. Robson, *Coen Brothers*, Virgin Film Series (London: Virgin Books, 2003), p.13.

⁴ Ibid., p.13.

⁵ Ibid., p.47.

some internal sense, but the momentum of the characters is more important'.⁶

The Coen Brothers' comments regarding *Blood Simple* and *Miller's Crossing* provide valuable insights into the reasons why filmmakers incorporate intertextual referencing into their working method. Identifying intertextual references is one thing, but understanding why they are used is quite another. Where *Blood Simple* is concerned, co-writers Joel and Ethan drew inspiration from Cain's narratives, his hard-boiled tales of love, betrayal and murder, but were also attracted to this simple but brutally effective formula because it 'seemed tailor-made for ... a small budget'. In the case of *Miller's Crossing*, Hammett's work is seen to have a significant influence on the character-driven narratives which characterise the Coen Brothers' body of work. Given also that their work has been influential upon contemporary crime drama – including the influence of *No Country for Old Men* (Coens, 2007) on the television series *Breaking Bad* (Gilligan, 2008-13), as well as their involvement with the *Fargo* television 'franchise' – then, by extension, these contemporary character-driven narratives also bear the imprint of hard-boiled fiction.

It seems to be the case, then, that intertextual referencing is a means by which filmmakers may acknowledge their connections with artistic traditions of the past, including those of literature as well as film. This may also be said of all of the aforementioned films and television series which allude to and directly reference other texts. It seems a fair assumption that the Duffer Brothers are not merely referencing the films of Steven Spielberg in *Stranger Things*, but drawing upon the influence of his work when making creative decisions, for instance, regarding visual style, narrative themes, plot, and characterisation. Interestingly, there are further

⁶ Ibid., p.47.

intertextual connections between *Stranger Things* and commercial fiction, much akin to the links between the Coen Brothers and hard-boiled (or 'pulp') fiction, such as the title, a reference to the Stephen King horror novel *Needful Things* (1991). In addition to the way in which the advertising campaign references cult movie posters, the title design (*plate 6*) is a reference to the cover design of the novel (*plate 7*).



In purely cinematic terms, the influence of Martin Scorsese and films such as *Mean Streets* (Scorsese, 1973) and *Goodfellas* upon Kassovitz's *La Haine* is clearly apparent. Furthermore, the long-take crane shot in *Goodfellas* when Henry (Ray Liotta) and Karen (Lorraine Bracco) enter the nightclub via the service entrance during one of their first dates is seen to be an allusion to the use of the technique in *Citizen Kane* (Welles, 1941).

The textual analysis which follows examines the intertextual relationships between *The Man Who Wasn't There* and its two, main cultural influences, namely film noir and hard-boiled fiction. *The Man Who Wasn't There* is full of intertextual references. These take the form of allusions and direct references in the cinematography, the narrative (including style, structure, character, and plot), and the film's title. While one can watch and comprehend the film without

recognising any of the references, they add additional layers of meaning to the text and at least have the potential to enrich the viewing experience. It also discusses the way in which the Coen Brothers allude to their own body of work, how this has the effect of extending the boundaries of the narrative, or 'story world', of the film to encompass the entire oeuvre.

Taking the cinematography first, and what might appear to be the most obvious allusion to noir, the film is shot in black and white. As it transpires, it was shot in colour and printed in black and white. More significantly, cinematographer Roger Deakins avoided the pronounced tonal contrasts for which film noir is renowned, opting instead for softer lighting and less contrast. As Robson says, 'in the black and white era of Hollywood, cinematographers used to use direct lighting and shoot for contrast', whereas Deakins' approach recalls 'the European method of softer light, used by the likes of Jean Luc Godard'.⁷

This point serves as a reminder that a film depends upon the input of many different contributors, all of whom have their own creative processes and artistic influences. When one refers to the work of the Coen Brothers, one is also referring to the contributions of personnel such as Deakins, the composer Carter Burwell, and of course performers such as Frances McDormand, John Turturro, and George Clooney. Suffice to say that, simply because the writing references film noir, this does not mean that the cinematography must do the same. As Robson notes, Deakins' work suggests the influence of Jean Luc Godard, whereas Carter Burwell opts for a minimalist approach rather than referencing the dramatic scores of 1940s Hollywood, for instance, the work of Miklós Rózsa, who composed the music for *Double Indemnity*. Nonetheless, while the overall visual appearance of the film may recall European cinema of the

⁷ Robson, *Coen Brothers*, p.257.

1960s, the cinematography does indeed include a number of direct references to 1940s Hollywood and classic films noirs.



The film opens on the barber shop where the protagonist Ed Crane (Billy Bob Thornton) works alongside the owner and principal barber, Frank Raffo (Michael Badalucco). Ed is married to Frank's sister, Doris Crane (Frances McDormand), who is having an affair with her boss, 'Big Dave' Brewster (James Gandolfini). More specifically, it opens on the sign above the door of the barber shop – a barber's pole (*plate 8*). The 1946 adaptation of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* also opens on a sign outside the Twin Oaks Diner which bears the legend 'Man Wanted' (*plate 9*). This double entendre hints surreptitiously at the marital problems which Cora Smith (Lana Turner) and her husband Nick (Cecil Kellaway) are experiencing. It also foreshadows the arrival of Frank Chambers (John Garfield), the ensuing affair between Frank and Cora, and the grizzly fates which await Frank, who narrates the tale from the condemned cell, Cora, who dies in a car accident, and Cora's husband Nick, the Twin Oaks' proprietor whom the adulterous couple murder. It might be going too far to say that, in light of the intertextual connection, the barber's pole can be seen to signify danger, but it is a possible interpretation, nonetheless.

The narrative of *The Man Who Wasn't There* refracts rather than reflects the narratives of both

Postman and *Double Indemnity*, reconfiguring the characters and events and establishing an intricate network of intertextual relationships. For example, the 'Man Wanted' double entendre in the MGM adaptation, as noted, is a sly reference to the fact that Cora and her husband are not physically intimate. In the reconfigured Coen Brothers text, while husband and wife Ed and Doris are not enjoying sexual relations either, it is Ed, the husband and cuckold, who murders 'Big Dave', his wife's lover. In other respects, Ed corresponds with Frank Chambers. Like Frank, he narrates the story while awaiting execution for murder. Further, he is sentenced to death for the murder of Creighton Tolliver (Jon Polito), a crime which he did not commit, just as Frank is wrongly convicted of Cora's murder (Tolliver obtains ten thousand dollars from Ed under the auspices of starting a dry-cleaning business, absconds with the cash, and is beaten to death by 'Big Dave'). However, while the story details of the two films may differ, the underlying structure of both narratives is practically identical. In summary, both involve an outwardly calm but feckless and impulsive male protagonist who gets drawn into an ill-fated 'get-rich-quick' scheme by a confidence trickster, and who kills someone as a consequence but then gets sentenced to death for a murder he did not commit.

Ed provides story details by means of an analeptic (or 'flashback'), first-person voice-over narration, typical of film noir, but also hard-boiled fiction, particularly Cain's early novellas. In contrast to the verbose Frank, Ed is taciturn, given to short, monosyllabic sentences, and possessed of a cynical, existentially bleak outlook on life. Audiences came to associate this kind of hard-bitten dialogue and matter-of-fact delivery with film noir, as exemplified by Walter Neff (Fred Mac Murray) in *Double Indemnity*, but it is also a defining characteristic of the hard-boiled mode. As David Madden observes of the 'tough-guy' novel in which the hard-boiled mode takes

part, and of which James M. Cain was a prime exponent:

The typical tough-guy novel...presents a vision of life that is cynical, if not pessimistic; the attitude is ironic, dispassionate, neutral; the tone is hard-boiled, having no cultural pretensions, expressing few tender emotions. The first-person point of view is used almost exclusively ... the imagery is stark, rarely lyrical.⁸

The influence of James M. Cain, transmuted via films noirs such as *Double Indemnity* and *Postman*, is thus clearly apparent upon the 'cynical', 'ironic', 'dispassionate' and 'hard-boiled' tone of Ed Crane's first-person, 'flashback' narration, which remains devoid of 'cultural pretensions' and 'tender emotions' for the duration of the film.

Interpreted in a literal way, the film's title can be understood to mean that Ed Crane is something of a bystander, whether in the barber shop, where he just cuts hair while his brother-in-law, the owner, takes centre stage, or in his own marriage, where conjugal relations have ceased and his wife has moved on to another man. However, the title is also an allusion to one of the main character tropes of noir, that is, the doomed main protagonist, the ill-starred anti-hero hurtling towards oblivion. Examples include Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity*, Frank Chambers in *Postman*, and many others besides, for instance, Christopher Cross in *Scarlet Street* (Lang, 1945), Ole 'Swede' Andreson in *The Killers* (Siodmak, 1946), and Jeff Bailey in *Out of the Past* (Tourneur, 1947). Furthermore, Ed's voice-over narration contains a direct reference to a voice-over delivered by Walter in *Double Indemnity*. After Doris commits suicide in jail, Ed, who is shunned by the local townsfolk due to the scandal surrounding Dave's murder, delivers the line 'It was like I was a ghost walking down the street'. This is a direct reference to *Double Indemnity* when Walter, his fate dawning upon him, says 'I couldn't hear my own footsteps. It

⁸ D. Madden, *James M. Cain: Hard-boiled Mythmaker* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2011), pp.5-6.

was the walk of a dead man'. If Ed has transitioned from 'bit-player' to pariah, and from an 'invisible man' whom people never notice to an outcast whom people prefer not to see, then Walter has realised (to paraphrase another well known line from the film) that he won't get the money and he won't get the girl. Both scenes involve an equilibrium shift, after which the fortunes of the protagonists deteriorate rapidly.

As noted, the character trope of the 'dead man walking', which is informed by Cain's trademark fatalism, became one of the main narrative conventions of film noir, recurring in films such as *D.O.A.* (Maté, 1950) and another of Wilder's noirs, *Sunset Boulevard*. However, it has its roots in Weimar cinema, most notably in *Man, der seinen Mörder sucht* ('The Man in Search of his Murderer') (Siodmak, 1931), a film directed by Robert Siodmak and co-written by Billy Wilder. *Der Mann* is a comedy involving a main protagonist who wishes to commit suicide but who finds he is unable to go through with it, hires a contract killer to perform the job instead, then, having rediscovered the will to live, has to hunt down the assassin to prevent him from carrying out the 'hit'. It is important to note the influence of Weimar cinema upon film noir, and its indirect influence on neo-noir. While the texts themselves can be seen to reflect the social conditions of a given time and place, as noted above, intertextual relationships transcend national borders and transmute artistic influence from one time period to another.

The doomed hero, better known as the 'male victim', is the counterpart of one of the more well-known character tropes of film noir, that is, the 'femme fatale'. Originating once again in early cinema and hard-boiled fiction, the 'femme fatale' is a stereotypical female character that preys upon the 'male victim', using her sexuality to manipulate him into doing her bidding,

which normally involves criminal activity such as financial fraud, murder, or both. *Double Indemnity* was instrumental in establishing the stereotype in 1940s Hollywood cinema and in the film noir genre in particular through the character of Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck), although a 'femme fatale' also features in another genre-defining noir, Siodmak's *Phantom Lady* (Siodmak, 1944), which was released seven months before Wilder's film in January 1944, and which, as discussed below, is also referenced in *The Man Who Wasn't There*.

There are certain representational conventions which complement the narrative function of the character trope. For instance, the 'femme fatale' is associated with dark interior spaces, such as diners, like Cora Smith, bars, like Kitty March (Joan Bennett) in *Scarlet Street* and Kathie Moffat (Jane Greer) in *Out of the Past*, and nightclubs, like Kitty Collins (Ava Gardner) in *The Killers*. In terms of how this relates to the narrative function, the dark interiors help to visualise the 'shadiness' of the 'femme fatale'. Related to the 'shady' interior settings are elements of the mise-en-scene, for instance, cosmetics, items of jewellery, and fashionable, alluring, often dark, items of clothing. The onus is upon the sexualisation of the female form. Rather than being a rounded character, the 'femme fatale' is a mere cipher, at one and the same time the embodiment of male sexual fantasy and oedipal castration anxiety.

Intertextuality is a means of establishing connections with artistic tradition and paying homage to influences. However, genre texts such as classical films noirs are 'of their time', that is, they reflect the social conditions and attitudes of a given period, in this case, the 1940s and 50s. Contemporary filmmakers do not simply reference the films of the past. The referencing can be a critique of, or commentary upon, the film(s) concerned. Called 'metatextuality', or 'writing

back', this is defined by Stam as 'the critical relationship between one text and another'.⁹ The representation of gender in *The Man Who Wasn't There*, particularly of the main female protagonist, Doris, is seen to be an instance of metatextuality, given that there is a critical relationship between her character and the 'femmes fatales' of noir, with the Coen Brothers seen to critique the stereotypical representation of female identity.

Broadly speaking, Ed Crane has a lot in common with Walter Neff. Despite his nonchalant cynicism and his calm exterior, he is shown to be a weak, fundamentally gullible character who falls under the influence of others and gets drawn into a web of intrigue, leading to disastrous consequences. Ed gets swindled out of ten thousand dollars by 'huckster' Creighton Tolliver, money he himself obtains by blackmailing 'Big Dave' over his affair with Doris, whom he kills in self-defence when Dave finds out about the blackmail and attempts to strangle him. Like the 'male victims' of noir, he is nonetheless a likeable character, despite his weaknesses, or perhaps because they make him seem more human. They certainly make him more rounded. However, the important point to note here regarding the metatextual reference to the representation of gender in *Double Indemnity* is that Ed is the 'victim' of Creighton, not Doris, who, far from being involved in his misdeeds, has no knowledge of them whatsoever.

The other main difference between Doris and Phyllis Dietrichson is that she is a rounded character, rather than a cipher or a projection of male fantasy. She is unfaithful to her husband and has a drink problem, but, as with Ed, these character details make her appear human, rather than monstrous, as with the representation of the 'femme fatale'. There are definite cues in the visuals, intertextual references which suggest a connection with Phyllis. For

⁹ Stam, 'Introduction', *Literature and Film*, p.28.

example, when we first see Doris (the name is itself reminiscent of Phyllis), a slow, lingering zoom shows her in her boudoir in a state of semi-undress, with a dressing-table mirror in the background (*plate 10*). The shot not only sexualises the female form, but, in addition, the mirror is one of the visual motifs of film noir, used to connote duplicity and untrustworthiness. This is followed by a montage and voice-over narration which informs the audience about Doris's penchant for nylon stockings, make-up and perfume, much in keeping with the 'femme fatale', with Doris applying perfume at the dressing table, her image reflected in the mirror (*plate 11*).



These visuals contain a number of intertextual references to *Double Indemnity* and to the moment where we first meet Phyllis, who appears to Walter on the landing of the Dietrichson home, also in a state of dishabille, dressed only in a bath towel. As with *The Man Who Wasn't There*, this is followed by a sequence where Phyllis is shown seated at a mirror, applying lipstick rather than perfume (*plate 12*). Both sequences trivialise female identity and sexualise the female form, while the visual motifs in the mise-en-scene concretise the narrative theme, indeed, the ideological position, that women are duplicitous, predatory, and manipulative.

These terms apply to Phyllis and the stereotypical 'femme fatale'. However, while Doris is duplicitous, she is neither predatory nor manipulative. Indeed, Doris Crane is representative of a recurring character type in the work of the Coen Brothers, that is, a strong, independent

woman, who, in a reversal of the narrative conventions of film noir, is counterpointed with a weak, scheming, manipulative male. As Georg Seesslen observes of the 'meta-narrative' of the Coen Brothers' films, their approach to writing involves 'a methodical revision of fundamental ... narrative models'.¹⁰ The revisionism which pervades their work has enabled a concerted and deliberate critique of the representation of gender in the Hollywood genre film. Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand) in *Fargo* provides a fine example of the Coens' approach, given that she deals deftly and efficiently with the scheming and duplicitous car salesman Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy) who, like Ed Crane, resorts to nefarious means to obtain money, in Jerry's case, by having his own wife kidnapped and demanding ransom money from his wealthy father-in-law, Wade Gustafson (Harve Presnell).

Furthermore, this continuity of theme and treatment can also be discussed in terms of the way in which the Coen Brothers reference their own work. As with the relationship between *The Man Who Wasn't There* and *Fargo*, this involves similarities between characters and plot, and, on a more fundamental level, a revisionist approach to the representation of gender. Besides the relationships with film noir and hard-boiled fiction, as noted, *The Man Who Wasn't There* also has intertextual connections with *Blood Simple*. The complex network of intertextual connections within their body of work enables the viewer to read and interpret the content of each individual film in the context of the entire oeuvre. Thus, a familiarity with the films of the Coen Brothers, as well as with the films of the past, enriches the viewing experience, adding value and meaning to the narrative as the 'story world' becomes a 'story universe'.

Indeed, the story of the Coen Brothers and intertextuality does not end here. The *Fargo*

¹⁰ Georg Seesslen in P. Körte and G. Seesslen, *Joel and Ethan Coen* (London: Titan Books, 1999), p.235.

television series, written by series creator Noah Hawley, produced by the Coen Brothers, and loosely based on the 1996 film, has pushed the boundaries even further. Most of the action in Season One takes place in 2006. However, Episode Four contains a 'flashback' to 1987 which shows that the 'Supermarket King' of Duluth, Stavros Milos (Oliver Platt) found the money he used to start his supermarket business buried in the snow somewhere in Minnesota. This is a direct reference to the narrative of *Fargo*. Those familiar with the film will know that kidnapper Carl Showalter (Steve Buscemi) buries the ransom money that he obtained from Wade Gustafson, amounting to approximately one million dollars, in the snow during the winter of 1987. This innovative and imaginative use of intertextual referencing thus implies that Stavros discovered the money shortly afterwards. It also establishes a continuity between the two 'story worlds'. The technique is used to similar effect in the work of Elmore Leonard, where characters from one narrative, for instance, the psychic Reverend Dawn Navarro from *Riding the Rap* (1995) reappears in *Road Dogs* (2009). It is therefore the case that intertextual referencing in both contemporary film and literature to enables novelists and filmmakers alike to add extra dimensions to the narrative.

Before concluding, it is worth mentioning several other intertextual references in *The Man Who Wasn't There* which 'signpost' connections, not just with *Double Indemnity* and *Postman*, but also with *Phantom Lady*. Where the links with the former are concerned, the department store where Phyllis works is called Nirdlingers. As previously noted, Phyllis's surname in Cain's novel is Nirdlinger. Similarly, the county examiner who informs Ed that his wife was pregnant when she committed suicide is called Dietrichson – Phyllis's surname in the film. Further, a shot Ed with his arm in a sling while awaiting trial for the murder of Creighton Tolliver (*plate 13*) is a

direct reference to a shot of Frank Chambers in *Postman* where he is being held on suspicion of murdering Nick Smith, and where he also has his arm in a sling (*plate 14*).



Also, regarding the link to *Phantom Lady*, the jailhouse scene where Doris is shown flanked by the lawyer Freddie Reidenschneider (Tony Shalhoub) and P.I. Burns (Jack McGee) (*plate 15*) is a direct reference to the jailhouse scene from Siodmak's film, where Scott Henderson (Alan Curtis), like Doris, is also awaiting trial for a murder he did not commit, and is flanked by two figures, a prison guard and his secretary Carol Richman (Ella Raines) (*plate 16*).



It is also possible that the ending of *The Man Who Wasn't There*, which shows Ed's execution, is a reference to the famous 'deleted scene' from *Double Indemnity*, as it were, to 'the scene that wasn't there'. Walter's 'flashback' narration in *Double Indemnity* takes the form of a confession to his boss and mentor at the insurance company where he works, Barton Keyes (Edward G.

Robinson). Interestingly, the co-writers of *Double Indemnity*, Billy Wilder and Raymond Chandler, altered the story details (although not the narrative structure) of Cain's novella significantly. In the novella, Walter Huff (renamed Neff in the film) confesses to Keyes from a ship bound for Mexico, he and Phyllis Nirdlinger having escaped justice after murdering Phyllis's husband for an insurance payout. It is clear from Walter's letter that he and Phyllis intend to commit suicide, whereas in the film Walter shoots Phyllis dead, and, having been wounded himself in an exchange of shots, expires in the offices of the Pacific Insurance Building after delivering his confession. Paramount were obliged to amend the ending due to pressure from the Production Code Administration (PCA), the enforcers of the Motion Picture Production Code, who objected to the fact that Walter and Phyllis elude justice in the Cain novella and elect to die by their own hands. However, Billy Wilder did actually film an ending which depicted Walter's execution in the gas chamber although this was vetoed by the PCA.

In summary, this essay has shown how intertextuality is a means of paying homage to the artistic traditions of the past, and of 'signposting' influence. It is concerned both with the critical reception of the text and with the creative processes of the filmmakers concerned. In addition to this, where metatextuality is concerned, referencing can be used to 'write back' to the cultural products of former times, thereby revising genre convention and updating outmoded ideological positions such as those pertaining to the representation of gender. Finally, it can also be used to establish continuity between individual narratives and an extended 'story world', and to enrich the experience of reading books and watching films.

Primary Sources

Films and Television Series

Der Mann, Der Seinen Mörder Sucht (Siodmak, 1931)
Scarface (Hawks, 1932)
Citizen Kane (Welles, 1941)
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