The Barber as an Ambivalent Americana Icon in *The Man Who Wasn't There* (Coen, 2001): Crossing the Borders Between Arts and Genres

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As uncharismatic and irrelevant a character he may have seemed in films, the barber remains one of the most emblematic figures of North American cultural history and popular culture. The strong iconicity conveyed by the famous tricolor pole most certainly contributed to building such ubiquity, as it made the barbershop a fixture of streetscapes in American paintings, photographs, and films. Historically, like any other common workers, barbers came to America with the first colonists and took part in the colonization of the west with pioneers, soldiers, and cowboys. They brought their modest contribution to the construction of the Frontier myth, as their recurring presence in Westerns will attest later. In a fast-developing country, barbershops "expanded and prospered, becoming fixtures, like the town square and the village church, in almost every town and city."[1] They were there every step of the way to independence and witnessed the building of a strong national identity that their image contributed to mythologizing in the form of Americana culture as reified by their tricolor pole. Looking conveniently patriotic, it soon became another stereotypical cultural icon that epitomizes the American Way of Life, just like Coca-Cola, drive-ins, diners, apple pies, or bowling alleys. The barbershop and its pole have gone through history unchanged and still make part of American life. Likewise, they have crossed borders between arts and genres, positioning themselves as cultural signifiers particularly in Westerns and film noir, which explains why the Coen brothers chose a barber as the unconventional hero of their neo-noir, *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001).

The two brothers have built their whole filmography on their taste for everything typically American that they enjoy deconstructing. Exploring and reinterpreting the American territory and its myths, its regionalisms, folklores and "fakelores" is one of their main concerns. Their taste for dark humor and irony has led them to create characters and situations that reveal the darkest (and often silliest) aspects of American culture. Avid readers, music fans, and moviegoers, they infuse their encyclopedic knowledge of Americana in their films. When they chose a barber as the lead part for their neo-noir, they sought to exploit the intrinsic ambiguity of this cultural icon who is everyone's confidant but also the one holding a razor over his customers' throat. One of the most underrated films in their

[1] Gladys L. Knight, *Pop Culture Places: An Encyclopedia of Places in American Popular Culture*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2014, 80.

career, *The Man …*'s black-and-white treatment (with a constant play on shadows and light), the narrator's voiceover, the love triangle, the embezzlement, immediately evoke a homage to film noir, inviting us to consider the directors' appropriation and renewal of the conventions of this genre. Previous representations of barbers come to mind, from Fritz Lang's *Fury* (1936) to Sturges's *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral* (1957), simultaneously raising the viewer's expectations and deceiving them.

This paper seeks to reveal how the unconventional choice of the barber as lead character enables the film to cross the borders between arts and genres, thus pushing to the fore its "intericonicity" (derived from Jakobson's "intersemiotic translation"), intertextuality and generic hybridity. I first establish how the visual image of the barber is shaped as a secondary character in American film (Westerns and film noir) and perfected in painting (Hopper's and Rockwell's) to embody contradictory moods, (Hopperian) melancholy and (Rockwellian) all-American positivity, that are both present in the Coens' film. Then I dwell on this ambivalent image to demonstrate how it reflects an identity crisis in Americana culture. Finally, I propose to analyze how the striped motif of the barbershop pole, as part of the global signifier, pervades the whole film, relating the Americana icon to the highly codified noir genre to expose how the barber is used as a vehicle to transcend generic borders.

Images of the Barber and his Shop in American Popular Culture, Building Up a Visual Myth

In Fritz Lang's *Fury* (1936), the barber and his wife seem like a nice, harmless couple until their pernicious gossiping results in the lynching of an innocent man. The whole gossiping sequence at the barbershop could well be the model of one of Norman Rockwell's paintings – incidentally, he will paint a very similar scene entitled *Gossips* in 1948,[2] although a more inoffensive one, depicting this typical small-town-America activity with his traditional kind-heartedness. In *Fury*, crime, albeit by proxy, is associated with the character of the barber through the trust he inspires and the way the whole community chooses to believe the gossips that originate from his shop and spread through town. German-born director Fritz Lang, who had fled the rise of Nazism to start a career in Hollywood, delivered a hard comment on small-town America by exposing the potential danger behind apparently good country people. This early occurrence in the history of American cinema establishes a precedent that will later be amplified by the Coens to debunk the visual myth of Americana. The barber is also known as a regular secondary character in Westerns, typically meek, as in *My Darling Clementine* (Ford 1946). The film featured the conspicuous black-and-white striped pole that could already be interpreted as a signifier heralding a potential danger, in this case the upcoming gunfight. In *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral*, the submissive barber is simply banished from his shop, becoming, quite literally, a "man who *isn't* there," while Doc Holliday (Kirk Douglas) finishes his shave himself. The barber is thus depicted as a weak, almost emasculated character compared to the manly gunfighter. This type of situation will later develop in revisionist and spaghetti Westerns as the barber is simply deprived of his identity and often brutalized. In *Il mio nome è Nessuno/My Name is Nobody* (Tonino Valerii 1973), the barber and his son are both reduced to silence in the most humiliating way, their soap and brush being stuck in their mouths so that the killer can take advantage of the barber's position above Jack Beauregard (Henry Fonda) to try and slit his throat. Another similar example can be found in *High Plains Drifter* (Eastwood 1973), but this time it is the barber's physical appearance that is mocked, and, once again, he is replaced by a killer who ends up dead.

[2] Oil on canvas, private collection, 83.8 x 78.7 cm (33 x 31 inches). Painted for the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post* on March 6, 1948.

In Westerns, the barber is never a criminal, but criminals usurp his identity to commit crimes without arousing suspicions, taking advantage of the innate reliability of the character. He is seen as the ultimate benevolent figure in American culture, as opposed to the European barber-surgeon, diabolized in English folklore in the countless versions of the *Sweeney Todd* story (the most recent being Tim Burton's musical, *Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, 2007). This fluctuating image thus qualifies the barber as a vehicle for crossing generic borders. The Coen brothers might have exploited this discrepancy to create their own barber, who is so trust-worthy that nobody would believe that he can kill. Yet he crosses the border between good and evil, no longer a manipulated but a manipulative character, taking revenge on the lack of consideration generations of barbers have received in film history. The treatment of the barber in crime films is quite similar to what we observed in Westerns. He is a secondary character whose identity is usurped to do evil. In *Scarface* (Hawks 1932), for instance, he is easily manipulated into becoming Tony Camonte's accomplice, warning him when the police arrive and hiding his gun in his laundry basket. Finally, he is an easily corrupted character who accepts any mission for money, but he never becomes the gangster's equal. In Bretaigne Windust's noir *The Enforcer* (1951), the barber is intimidated and manipulated by the gangster who takes his place to murder his enemy. Countless examples could be included here, but a significant evolution of this pattern occurs in Alan Parker's crime drama *Mississippi Burning* (1988), in which the violent cop played by Gene Hackman swiftly replaces the barber during a shave in order to intimidate and molest a murderous deputy. A very intense sequence in which Hackman's character tortures the man by performing too close a shave shows, as was seldom the case in past examples, the vulnerability of the customer sitting in the barber's chair,[3] and the power of the man who is holding the razor, completely reversing the benevolent image of this Americana icon partly shaped visually in painting and photographs.

Although they delivered two strikingly divergent visions of their country, Norman Rockwell and Edward Hopper shared an interest in small-town America. It is not surprising, therefore, that the barber and his shop appear in several of their canvases. Hopper's *Early Sunday Morning,*[4] painted in 1930, and Rockwell's *Walking to Church,*[5] two decades later, represent two exterior scenes in front of a barbershop window. At first glance, the two paintings look very similar in terms of composition of frame and colors: red-brick walls and green-colored storefronts, punctuated with large shop windows compose the two backgrounds. Among the closed shops, the barbershop is easily recognizable by its tricolor pole and each canvas also includes a red fire hydrant, adding to the compositions' symmetry. However, Hopper's street is deserted while on Rockwell's, a family of five is merrily going to church. Although no information concerning a possible connection between the two paintings could be found, Rockwell certainly knew about Hopper's classic work, and consciously or not, might have attempted to transform a melancholy, spleenful, typically Hopperian scene into a more optimistic, idealized vision of America, his trademark. If the inclusion of a barbershop pole in both paintings does not appear to add any narrative value to the scene, it does refer to heartland America and Americana visual culture. Aesthetically, the tricolor object provides a touch of color that draws attention to the right-hand side of the canvases. More significantly, the pole can be seen as a reification of America itself and a way for the

[3] The barber's chair is another important element of the barber's apparatus. It is sometimes used to express a character's pride, or even his megalomania, as in *The Untouchables* (De Palma 1987), when Al Capone is interviewed while being shaved, and in *The Great Dictator* (Chaplin 1940), as Hinkel and Napaloni lift the barber's chair higher and higher to express their superiority.
[4] Oil on canvas, Whitney Museum of American Art, 89.4 cm × 153 cm (35.2 in × 60 in).
[5] 1952, Oil on canvas, 47.6 cm × 45.1 cm (18.75 in × 17.75 in), Private collection, painted for the cover of The Saturday Evening Post on April 4, 1953.

artists to embed their paintings in American cultural history. John Updike describes Hopper's inclusion of the pole as follows: "the barber pole, whose slight tilt, in this intensely rectilinear canvas, has the odd effect of making the street seem to run downhill, left to right."[6] The pole creates a visual effect that attracts the viewers' attention, especially because of the emptiness of the street. Updike then explains how surprising it had been for him to find out that the model used for the scene was New York's 7th Avenue as "the effect of small-town sleepiness was so strong."[7] Powerful signifiers, barbershops have this provincial aura that evokes heartland America regardless of their location. Central to the two canvases, they immediately play on the collective unconscious, suggesting a friendly place where men maintained a civilized,[8] well-groomed appearance, socialized with other respectable men and initiated their boys to manhood by getting them a haircut or their first shave.[9]

Such subjects were explored by Norman Rockwell who was keen on depicting scenes of joyful American everyday life. "The simple pleasures of small-town America"[10] is what he tried to convey through *Shuffleton's Barbershop* (1950).[11] Painted in a hyperrealist style, with great attention to details, Rockwell's painting emphasizes the conviviality of the barbershop, as the place seems like a cocoon, softly lit and warm. This effect is conveyed using warm colors (browns, oranges, greys, and reds) and the subjective point of view – it assumes the position of a bystander looking through the shop window. The scene takes place after a workday; the barbers are playing music together in a merry atmosphere which recalls one of the painter's earlier illustrations, *Barbershop Quartet* (*The Saturday Evening Post*, 26 Sept. 1936). The depth of field reinforces the impression of confidentiality; the spectator is witness to an intimate scene which, unlike the barber's daily activities in front of the customers, is not supposed to be public. Moreover, the dim light and signs of time give a nostalgic turn to the whole painting, placing the barber at the center of American past and traditions. Instead of the usual tricolor pole, in this work, American identity is reified by the flag on the "Remember Pearl Harbor" poster pinned to the wall as a patriotic token. In a completely different style, the general atmosphere of Hopper's *Barber Shop* (1931)[12] is cold, almost clinical, due to the predominance of whites and light blues and the lack of contrast and perspective. The barber himself is seen from the back, he is standing on the extreme right edge of the canvas, so that his arms are off frame; the distinctive Hopperian ray of light crossing the canvas obliquely doesn't enlighten the man entirely, leaving the top of his body in the shade. Although he is supposed to be the main subject of the painting, he is portrayed, like the Coen brothers' barber, as "a man who *isn'*t there." A second character, a woman, seen from the front, appears to be the real focus of the painting: like Doris (Frances McDormand, the barber's wife in the film), she occupies the entire space and draws the viewers' attention.

The two types of barbers are depicted side by side in the Coen brothers' film: Frank (Michael Badalucco) embodies the traditional Rockwellian barber, and Ed (Billy Bob Thornton) is the mute, motionless, almost absent Hopperian barber. The presence of these two models, reinforced by the

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[6] Beth Venn, Adam D. Weinberg and Fraser Kennedy. *Frames of Reference: Looking at American Art, 1900–1950*. New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1999, 177.
[7] Ibid.
[8] It is particularly the case in Westerns and illustrates Turner's myth of the Frontier – the border between civilization and savagery.
[9] Knight, 80
[10] *The Saturday Evening Post* on YouTube, "Rockwell video minute," *Shuffleton's Barbershop*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=797dJssXD_I. (accessed June 2019)
[11] Berkshire Museum, oil on canvas, 117.5 x 109 cm (46.25 x 43 inches). Painted for the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post* published on April 29, 1950.
[12] Neuberger Museum of Art (NY), oil on canvas 152,4 x 198,1 cm (60 x 78 ins).

traditional filmic image of the barber as described earlier, denotes an intericonic process[13] of "resemiotisation"[14] which can be explained as the transfer of two occurrences of an icon from painting to film and the redefinition of what this icon means or evokes in popular culture. The opening credits and sequence focus on the barber's profession and environment as typically American and related to small-town culture. The pole, placed above the entrance, is the main focus of the credits. Shot in a low angle, revolving on its axis, it animates the distinctive stripes to advertise the shop. The pole is what the brothers single out from the beginning, which places the striped motif at the center of the film's aesthetics. Then the camera tilts down and Ed's voice is heard as a customer is coming in: "Yes, I worked in a barbershop, but I never considered myself a barber." Ed positions himself as an outsider in an Americana cliché. An old man comes in and the melancholy music of the opening credits continues, along with Ed's presentation of the context, as the camera slowly moves towards Frank, "the principal barber," cutting a boy's hair while talking continuously. He embodies the Rockwellian barber, disserting on Rockwellian themes, trappers and pelts in this case. The whole sequence looks like a snapshot of the 1940s or a time capsule magnifying the nostalgic atmosphere by use of a subtle, quite poetic, slow-motion effect. But then, the main characteristics of the two barbers seem to be exaggerated in the film; the mute Hopperian barber becomes boring, and the traditional Rockwellian barber becomes annoyingly talkative. These opposite portraits of an Americana icon unnaturally coexist, as if two strikingly divergent paintings had been forced into one single filmic reality, defying the borders between the arts and the genres, comedy and tragedy, and ultimately redefining the icon's meaning.

Frank's Italian origins are also caricatured in a sequence showing a family reunion at the countryside that seems to satirize the supposed vulgarity of the Italian American culture, or is it just heartland American culture? Frank shamelessly takes part in a blueberry-pie-eating contest with a bunch of kids, his hands tied behind his back, covering his whole face with jam; he also rides the family pig, proudly drinking from the distinctive Italian wine bottle in a straw basket, the *fiasco*. His Italian origins participate in making him a burlesque version of the traditional small-town barber. His sister Doris (Frances McDormand), on the contrary, is a self-loathing Italian, who rejects tradition and aspires to a more sophisticated urban life. Ed is in the middle, he just "stumbled into his profession," as he admits, unlike Frank who inherited the barbershop and all the traditions attached to it from his father, Guzzy, who gave his name to the business. Ed is the counterpart of the discrete barber portrayed by Hopper, a mute, expressionless man – recalling a lot of Hopper's similar figures, like the man sweeping the floor in *Pennsylvania Coal Town* (1947)[15] or the one sitting on the wooden floor in front of his shop in *Sunday* (1926),[16] his arms crossed, staring at the floor, a cigar between his lips. He goes through life like a ghost, following his attention-seeking, adulterous wife wherever she drags him to. He is the man no one remembers, not even the salesman, Creighton Tolliver (Jon Polito), who proposed him a partnership in the dry-cleaning business and had forgotten him the day after. As the lawyer, Freddy Riedenschneider (Tony Shalhoub), says after Doris is wrongly accused of murdering her boss and Ed is also suspected, basing his all-defense argument on this simple elementary fact: "He's just a barber," so insignificant that he could not have committed a crime. The Coens play on the usual insignificance of

[13] Evangelos Kourdis and Pirjo Kukkonen, "Semiotics of Translation, Translation in Semiotics", *Punctum*, Volume 1, Issue 2 (2015), 5-10.
[14] Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Bloomington : Indiana University Press 1979.
[15] Stanley Orr, "Razing Cain: Excess Signification in *Blood Simple* and *The Man Who Wasn't There*," *Post Script*, Spring 2008. "The tableau of Ed sweeping up clippings in the shop may even recall a similar modernist homage, Edward Hopper's painting *Pennsylvania Coal Town* (1947), which celebrates a lone sweeper attempting to clean up the urban wasteland." [American art museum Youngstown (Ohio), Oil on canvas, 52 x 75 cm (20.5 x 29. ins)]
[16] The Phillips collection (Washington), oil on canvas, 73.66 x 86.36 cm (29 x 34 ins)

the barber character in films to redefine a convention of the film noir. For that, they need to create a contrast between the two barbers, the Hopperian and the Rockwellian, who seems to have shaped this stock characters in films. They somehow came to question the visual myth of Americana, that is, the visual representation of the American Way of Life that this iconic character stands for.

Debunking an Americana Icon: A Visual Myth in Crisis

Trudy Bolter identified at least three major periods of skepticism about Americana: the 1920s, 1930s, and 1970s.[17] All three correspond to events that raised a doubt about the American model. The *laissez-faire* policy and debauched lifestyle of the 1920s resulted in the 1929 Wall Street crash followed by the Great Depression throughout the 1930s. American decision-makers had to rethink the American system completely, hence the New Deal coalition that transformed American society durably. The 1970s turmoil was the result of a particularly difficult shift in American society between pre-1960 "old" society, what Kennedy defined as "the safe mediocrity of the past" as opposed to his "New Frontier" program and its "fresh air of progress" (see JFK's Acceptance speech, 1960). In the 1920s, essayist H. L. Mencken had already pointed at the mediocrity JFK referred to, targeting the American "booboisie," a contraction of "boob" and "bourgeois," echoing Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* (1922), who denounced the conformism of the small-town middle class, or in Kennedy's words "the stale, dank atmosphere of 'normalcy.'" This "booboisie," these small-town bourgeois people are shown by the Coens in *The Man* … after Doris is put to jail for the murder of her boss, Big Dan (James Gandolfini). Ed, as the film's voiceover, refers to them as "they," these soulless people prone to judge hastily (exemplified by Rockwell's *Gossips*). They are first filmed in slow motion, walking in the street in a lateral tracking shot as Ed is driving his car, observing them; and a second time as Ed is still driving, commenting on the private detective's alleged investigation, as we see the man, still in a slow motion lateral tracking shot, walking under the rain in the opposite direction to the crowd, under Ed's suspicious eye; and a third time as the camera is still slowly tracking laterally, following Ed walking against the stream, explaining how people started avoiding him after Doris committed suicide. "It was like I was a ghost walking down the street." Each of these symmetrical sequences is illustrated by a Beethoven piece (*Moonlight Sonata*) and uses the same aesthetics and composition of frame, each time opposing a stream of smartly dressed, so-called "good people" to the barber driving along or walking against the stream and symbolically rejecting the norm. This series of shots emphasizes the main interest of the film: how an ordinary, docile barber crosses the border between normalcy and criminality. It also exemplifies a recurring process in the Coen brothers' films, the dialogue between the arts, another form of border-crossing that generates implicit meaning and complexifies their reception. The dialogue established between painting and film through the representation of the barber is now enriched by classical music, Beethoven's, which is also a strong signifier as one of the subplots is focused on Ed's sudden and incongruous interest for this music when he hears Birdy (Scarlett Johansson), the judge's daughter, play. Another border is crossed, the one between low and high culture, between small-town America's ignorance (embodied by Ed) and higher-class education (embodied by Birdy). However, it is interesting to notice that both ultimately remain mere embodiments of small-town America and its limitations, as indeed Birdy, whom Ed takes for a music genius, is rejected by a revered instructor from the city.

Mencken had this "fascination with the ridiculous side of the American mentality," so when he

[17] Trudy Bolter, « Le mythe visuel de l'Americana, » in Melvyn Stokes, Reynold Humphries, and Gilles Menegaldo (eds), *Cinéma et mythes*, Poitiers, La Licorne, 2002, 107.

co-founded (with theatre critic George Jean Nathan) *The American Mercury,* which he edited from 1924 to 1933, he made sure to include an "Americana" section that he handled personally, and soon became his sophisticated readers' favorite:

> This department featured a wide assortment of newspaper clippings, wire reports, church bulletins, publicity releases, and other sources which depicted various individuals and organizations – frequently of rural origin – in the throes of some foolish action which Mencken deemed ludicrous enough for its inclusion.[18]

This anti-Rockwellian vision of America is in keeping with how the Coens have been dealing with American foibles in their filmography, using regionalisms, Americana icons and what often looks like local news, to expose the limits of American myths and their staunch supporters (the allusion to Roswell in *The Man …* is a good example). Mencken, like the Coens (although contrary to him, they were never politicized), was a provocative character who enjoyed debunking the myth of superiority conveyed by the American Way of Life.

> Mencken hoped the usage of the word "Americana" would get under the skin of pious readers, for it implied that the feature's contents demonstrated what constituted normal, average Americans. That it was not, of course, never stopped Mencken, whose personal agenda, as his voluminous writings thoroughly demonstrate, was dedicated to the proposition of unsettling early twentieth-century Americans out of their smug, stale, self-satisfied Victorian complacency and forcing them to rethink the values they held dear.[19]

Thus, the term "Americana" used for satirical purposes seems to have emerged in the 1920s and may have resulted in a visual criticism of the American model, or a crisis of visual representation.[20] As the artist Charles Burchfield commented in 1930, discussing Hopper's representation of America:

> Some have read an ironic bias in some of his paintings; but I believe this is caused by the coincidence of his coming to the fore at a time when, in our literature, the small American towns and cities were being lampooned so viciously; so that almost any straightforward and honest representation of the American scene was thought of necessity to be satirical.[21]

Interpreting Hopper's paintings proves challenging yet opposing them to Rockwell's emphasizes the two types of Americans Mencken and later Kennedy mentioned, the ones holding to comfortable, irrevocable traditions and the ones questioning them. These two

[18] Louis Hatchett, *Mencken's Americana*. Macon (Ga.): Mercer University Press, 2002, 1.
[19] Ibid.
[20] The concept of Americana originally emerged after the Civil War and referred to American antique objects related to the first half of the 20th century, when the American Way of Life was mythologized by visual arts and exported worldwide thanks to the development of the mass media, particularly cinema and TV. (For more, see Julie Assouly, *L'Amériques des Frères Coen*, Paris, CNRS, 2015, 90).
[21] Frances K. Pohl, *Framing America. A Social History of American Art*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2002, 404.

concurrent visions coexist in *The Man …*, and in fact have always pervaded American art as they represented two broad political thoughts, namely conservative and liberal.

Various social movements and anti-war/anti-government uprisings in the late 1960s and in the 1970s triggered deeper doubts about the American way. During that period, Rockwell's America had become, more than at any other time in history, outdated and irrelevant. The typical Rockwellian values and icons, including the nice barber, were then satirized by *National Lampoon*, a magazine founded at Harvard which emphasized the political and social transformations America was undergoing at that time and positioned American campuses at the center of a rising counterculture (as was the case in France in May 1968). A first example is the cover of the November 1970 issue, which is the exact replica of the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post* issue published on 10 August 1918, illustrated by Rockwell and entitled *First Haircut*. On the *Lampoon*'s cover, instead of Rockwell's mischievous kid whose hair is being cut by a dutiful barber, under the mother's tearful eyes, as she realizes that her son is becoming a man, we see a placid teenager, with a peace-and-love symbol around his neck, having his head shaved by a dumb-looking barber. In the background, his sniggering father (or an old-fashioned barber) is reading what appears to be the first issue of *Time Magazine* (1923), containing a portrait of J. Cannon, the then leader of the Republican Party and Speaker of the House of Representatives, dragging on a large cigar. The satire seems clear: Rockwell's corny vision of America (e.g., the benevolent barber, conservative family values, and the benefits of capitalism) no longer prevails in the context of the Vietnam War, the Cold War, and on the eve of the Watergate scandal. In the same spirit, a 1979 issue of *National Lampoon*, dedicated to "International communism and terrorism" and subtitled "Giving Uncle Sam a real clipping," shows the world-famous personification of America, and symbol of American supremacy, having his white hair clipped by a proud Brejnev dressed as a barber, in reference to the intervention of Russia in Afghanistan the same year. The barber, as one of the pillars of American culture and a personification of the American Way of Life, is also the perfect instrument for satire and criticism. Visually, his image is easily pastiched and his famous striped tricolor pole bears a different connotation depending on the color or black-and-white treatment of a photograph or a film.

The Barbershop Pole, Tricolor Versus Black-and-White Stripes: Changing Signification

The origin of the striped barbershop pole can be traced back to eleventh-century France, when two corporations of surgeons co-existed: those from the academy of medicine and the barber surgeons. The latter would practice bleedings or use leeches to purify infected blood in their barbershops. After each intervention, the barber would usually hang the bloody bandages outside the shop, as a form of advertising. The bandages were placed on a pike, creating a red-and-white oblique stripe which was the color of the first poles; a metal bowl, in which the leeches were collected, was placed underneath it. Through the decades, the pike became the tricolor pole: the blue stripe representing the veins, the white one, the bandages, and the red one, the blood. As for the metal bowl, it later became a sphere

placed on top of the pole.[22] Although the tradition later died in France, the tricolor pole crossed the Channel to England, and the Atlantic to America, where its popularity increased during the revolutionary era as it recalled the new American flag.[23] Not only painters, but also photographers like Walker Evans,[24] used the emblematic barbershop as a model for *Shop Front,* taken in New Orleans in 1935.[25] This rather awkward picture creates a visual shock due to the overwhelming striped pattern covering the shop front, the lamp, the woman's pullover, and the unmissable pole in the foreground. This proliferation of stripes contradicts the initial appeal of the candy-like tricolor pole, and makes the shop look more grotesque than traditional. But what really strikes the eye is the connotation of the black-and-white stripes that are quite different from the colored ones because they lose their patriotic quality. As explained by historian of colors Michel Pastoureau, the black-and-white stripe is, essentially, a negative sign – unlike the revolutionary stripes of the *sans culottes*, for example.[26] He provides a list of various negative instances, recalling the way in which certain categories of people are historically stigmatized by the striped pattern. Examples such as the buffoon, the Jew (*i.e.,* the vertical stripes of the uniforms in concentration camps), the heretic, the juggler, the leper, the executioner, and the prostitute are part of a long list of ostracized characters, all of whom "disturb or violate the good order; […] [and] are linked with the Devil in one way or another."[27] Pastoureau further argues that the bad reputation of the striped pattern might result from an ambiguous statement in the Old Testament (more precisely, the book of Deuteronomy): "Thou shalt not wear garments of different sorts, as of woollen and linen together," which, he believes, may have been wrongly translated and confused with "two different colors,"[28] thus sealing the fate of the striped pattern for centuries. But it might just as well be a purely visual problem, the stripes making it difficult for someone to distinguish between the figure and the background so that "the structure becomes the figure"[29]; a feature which is particularly striking in Evans' photograph.

The black-and-white stripes immediately refer to convict figures; the striped uniform creates a visual effect which is widely exploited in films such as *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (Mervyn LeRoy 1932) or, in a different way, *Hell's Highway* (Rowland Brown 1932), in which the prisoners are meant to wear a striped target in their backs so they can be easily spotted and punished. In *The Man …*, the black-and-white stripes clearly alter the symbolic meaning of the original tricolor pole, adding a further dimension to the film. The impression of an imminent, undetermined threat is reinforced by the looming presence of the pole above the main entrance, magnified by a low angle shot in the opening credits, somehow heralding the electric chair finale. Watching the film with this idea in mind, the presence of this visual trope is so conspicuous that it seems to structure it aesthetically. Built on a play on light and shadows obtained by a contrast between very dark blacks and very bright whites, the film's aesthetics recalls German Expressionism as well as classic film noir. Very early in the film, the stripes of

[22] Further information on www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/brunel/A885062 (Accessed July 2019).
[23] Incidentally, the figure of the barber was also popular during the revolutionary period in France, figuring in several major works such as Beaumarchais's plays *Le Barbier de Séville/The Barber of Seville* (1773) and *Le Mariage de Figaro*/*The Marriage of Figaro* (1778), and their later operatic versions by Mozart and Rossini. The barber and the servant were both symbols of the rise of democracy.
[24] Walker Evans worked with the Farm Security Administration program launched during the New Deal era to document the rural areas impacted by the droughts (the Dust Bowl) and took an interest in the effect of the Great Depression in the South.
[25] MOMA, 23.6 × 17.7 cm (9 5/16 × 6 15/16 ins).
[26] Michel Pastoureau, *Rayures, une histoire des rayures et des tissus rayés*, Paris: Seuil, 1995, 5.
[27] Ibid. (My translation)
[28] Ibid., 6.
[29] Ibid., 5.

the pole are echoed by a multitude of other images which similarly create the feeling that something wrong is about to happen: the shadow of the Venetian blinds on the floor of the shop, or even on the wall behind the barber, make him look like a virtual prisoner. Incidentally, the shop awning, which is seen both from the inside and the outside, is also striped, recalling the setting of *Shadow of a Doubt* (Alfred Hitchcock 1943), perhaps the most obvious intertextual reference in the Coen brothers' film. Such a claim is substantiated by the two films' identical location, Santa Rosa, Ca., considered by Hitchcock as the archetypal American small town, in which he shows the disruptive potential of a single bad seed embodied by Uncle Charlie (Joseph Cotten). *The Man …* exploits this well-known reference to recreate the atmosphere of a film noir, but follows a different narrative scheme, based on fortuitous criminality and ironic legal mistakes, as opposed to the genre's usual featuring of criminal masterminds. In that respect, the Coens' film owes more to *Spellbound* (1945), in which the suspected killer (Gregory Peck) is traumatized by striped patterns that eventually give him the key to his repressed memories.

In *The Man …* the symbolic jails created by the stripes have a proleptic function and finally materialize when Doris is locked up. From then on, a series of shots in which stripes, formed by the cell bars and their shadows, invade the frame, seem to appeal once again to the spectators' cultural knowledge of film noir, more specifically to the epitome of the genre, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett 1946). Venetian blinds and prison bars are only two examples among many images that highlight the striped pattern, thus positioning this film as a further aesthetic source of inspiration for the Coen brothers, with also many similarities in the narrative. Striped patterns recur throughout the film, subliminally, yet powerfully attracting the viewers' attention, and influencing their judgment in one way or another: the cables of the lift seen in a low angle, the theatre stairs in a high angle, the flying saucepan, the hubcap, the dry-cleaning logo, the hospital pajamas and the pillow underneath the white pillowcase are more subtle variations of the striped pattern that symbolize the characters' inevitable fate; even the electric chair and the long horizontal window from which spectators can watch the execution create stripes on the oddly immaculate white background in the film's final sequence. These multiple examples function as an extension of the original striped barbershop pole, leading the inoffensive and usually insignificant Americana icon to the electric chair, ironically for the wrong crime, but as a just retribution for the sacrifice of his innocent wife's life, thus renewing the codes of a highly codified genre.

Conclusion: Transcending the Codes of the Noir

The Man Who Wasn't There is meant to be a classic film noir, featuring most of its generic codes, but the *femme fatale* is not so fatale and the killer acts in self-defense. Repeatedly referring to classic noir, the film's renewal of the genre relies on the influence of a referential cultural network surrounding the figure of the barber and constructed by American folklore, painting, movies, and stories, thus crossing the borders between these arts. The choice of a barber as the main character and omniscient narrator is unusual, and so was the black-and-white treatment of the film when it came out.[30] Using high contrast, the directors push the noir aesthetics to an extreme, foregrounding the eerily overwhelming striped patterns, deconstructing the codes of the genre in the process. This strategy is reinforced by a series of quirky, typically Coenian elements including the barber's Nabokovian relationship with young

[30] The Coens had to accept to make a color version (that is available on DVD) to get the film funded.

Birdy and his sudden passion for Beethoven; an interaction with Dan's crazy widow who believes her husband was abducted by aliens; an accident involving a flying hubcap which recalls what we later identify as a flying saucer; or a bold homosexual toupee-wearing salesman asking for a haircut and looking for a partner with whom to start a dry-cleaning business. An element that is common to the entire oeuvre of the Coen brothers is the use of dark, offbeat humor, which is usually not in keeping with the admittedly darkly pessimistic and glamorous noir genre. Their peculiar sense of humor is usually expressed through the debunking of Americana icons: wrestlers in *Barton Fink*, bowling in *The Big Lebowski*, the Paul Bunyan fakelore in *Fargo*, the cowboy in *No Country for Old Men*, folk music in *O'Brother*, trailer parks in *Raising Arizona* or Hula Hoop in *The Hudsucker Proxy*. As a result, "the fashionable label of 'postmodernism' is often conveniently attached to the Coen brothers."[31] It is true that the Coen brothers have become masters at manipulating codes and conventions to deceive the audience and at using intertextuality and intericonicity to transcend the borders of arts and genres. In *The Man Who Wasn't There*, they pay tribute to film noir, deconstruct its codes, and thus contribute to its renewal by rehabilitating an eternal secondary character whose ambivalence is magnified by the multiple cultural references with which he is associated.[32]

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[31] Ronald Bergan. *The Coen Brothers*. London: Orion Media, 2000, 25–26.

[32] Strangely enough, the barber has now become a fashion icon due to the rise of the hipster trend that (re)emerged in the US and spread to Europe. Male grooming is no longer an Anglo-American specificity and old-fashioned Americana icons such as the famous striped pole can be seen in every European city.