

by George McCartney

Transcendence, Anyone?

Of the many films I've seen recently, including the inoffensive but terminally mild *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, only two require extended comment: Ethan and Joel Coen's *The Man Who Wasn't There* and the re-release of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

The first deals with a barber leading a life of quiet—no, *silent*—desperation in the grimly black-and-white city of Santa Rosa, California, in 1949. The second is an alternately sublime and satiric imagining of the course of human evolution from apes to astronauts. Despite their obvious differences, these films are thematically united: Both focus on human beings turned robotic by social forces they barely comprehend. And, in both films, this state of stunned conformity becomes a prelude to an almost unseemly hunger for transcendence.

The Man Who Wasn't There is a clever, provocative homage to James M. Cain. Character names—Nirdlinger and Die-drickson—have been lifted from *Double Indemnity*, both the novel and its film adaptation. As in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, there are two murders leading to two trials in which a smart-aleck defense attorney cynically parades his contempt for truth. There's just one difference: Cain's protagonists are scheming lowlifes ruthlessly intent on taking their pleasure and profit at the expense of inconvenient husbands. The Coens have entered this story from the other side. Their protagonist is Ed Crane (Billy Bob Thornton in an extraordinarily downbeat performance), the husband who tells himself he doesn't mind being two-timed by his wife and her loutish lover, Big Dave (James Gandolfini). He just wants to escape his fate in general.

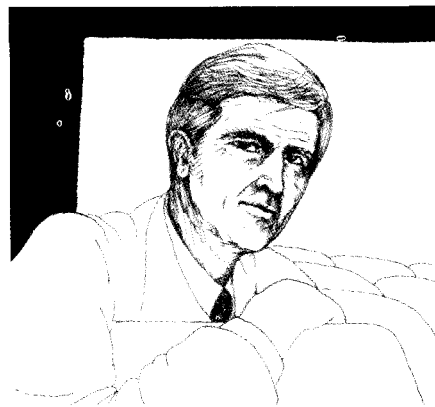
This story begins in a barbershop in Santa Rosa, not incidentally the setting of Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt*. We're on notice. Lurking under the apparently untroubled surface of this corner of small-town America, even the most rabid audience will find enough betrayal, treachery, greed, and homicidal fury to satisfy their bloodlust. Behind the opening credits, we watch a barber pole spinning, its red, white, and blue stripes mockingly rendered in shades of black

and gray, as if to forecast the heartless betrayal of true-blue promise. The camera then dips to show us Ed, solemnly cutting hair as a cigarette dangles from his tightly set lips. In voice-over narration, he explains his situation in his entirely uninflected voice. "I work in a barber shop, but I never consider myself a barber." He has spent his last 15 years toiling in his brother-in-law Frank's shop, resigned to his fate.

Ed wants out, but he has no clue how to make his exit. Then, an escape hatch opens for him in the form of a fat, greasy apparition improbably calling itself Creighton Tolliver (Jon Polito), who bursts into his shop after closing time to demand a trim. But who will trim whom? Tolliver needs \$10,000 to open a chain of dry-cleaning establishments. Although Tolliver wears a hopelessly obvious toupee, speaks in ridiculous clichés, and even makes a bug-eyed pass at Ed, the wan barber unhesitatingly accepts his proposition as the real deal. To raise the money, the cuckold blackmails Dave with an anonymous note threatening to expose his dalliance.

Just as you would expect, Ed's single act of self-assertion triggers an irreversible train of events at once harrowing and hilarious. In no time at all, his placid existence is transformed, and his frozen soul, thawed.

If you are familiar with Cain's sardonic universe, you will have a pretty good idea where all of this is heading, although nothing is as predictable as it first seems. Clearly, the Coens know that Albert Camus got his inspiration for *The Stranger* from Cain's *Postman*, and they have not been able to resist the implications. Accordingly, they've made Ed an existential everyman, a more tepid version of Camus' Meursault, a man whose estrangement from his world may go unnoticed by others but is nevertheless a matter of continual perplexity to him. He can't help wondering about the tomfoolery of it all. "Did you ever think about hair?" he asks Frank one morning, staring down at the vestigial cowlick in a 12-year-old's crewcut. "How it's a part of us? How it keeps on coming, and we just cut it off and throw it away?" For Frank, the prac-



The Man Who Wasn't There

Produced by Working Title Films
Directed by Joel Coen
Screenplay by Joel and Ethan Coen
Released by USA Films

2001: A Space Odyssey

Produced by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
Directed by Stanley Kubrick
Screenplay by Arthur C. Clarke
and Stanley Kubrick
Distributed as a re-release
by Warner Bros.

tical business man, the question has never arisen. He looks at his brother-in-law with a mixture of exasperation and alarm. But in the long, quiet shot of Ed's wondering gaze that follows, we're made to feel that there's no inquiry more important. What in God's name are we doing in our daily routines? With each one of us facing his own death sentence, isn't there something absurd about the way we spend our days? To say nothing of how our hair keeps growing, even after death, as Ed wonderingly observes. It's a marvelous moment, at once delightfully droll and painfully on point.

There are many pleasures in this film, including its sumptuous black-and-white cinematography. It's almost tactile. In close-ups of Thornton's deeply lined face, the photography conveys his weariness with life more palpably than technicolor ever could. Or take the scene in which Ed finds himself being throttled by Big Dave, who slams him into a plate-glass window in his office. In any other movie, the glass would explode in a shower of sparkling fragments. Not here. The night-blackened window slowly spiders into dozens of luminously white fis-

tures behind Ed's back. Not only is this more realistic, it also serves as a visual metaphor of Ed's entrapment. He's caught in a spreading web of deceit and violence.

Then there's Freddy Riedenschneider, the cynical rat-tat-tat defense attorney modeled on Cain's arrogant mouthpiece in *Postman*. Told the truth that would prove his client's innocence, he airily dismisses it. He prefers, instead, to cook up a defense based on Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle—or, as he puts it, snapping his fingers in a vain attempt to remember the physicist's name, a theory "some heinie" came up with. The important thing for Freddie is that the guy proved that "the more you look at something, the less you know. It's a fact; in a way it's the only truth that is." This "truth" certainly applies to the Coens' loving recreation of 1940's film *noir*. After looking at it, you're not quite sure what to make of it. Is it merely deadpan parody or does it walk on its own feet?

Having just seen it, I'm still not sure. Although exquisitely well made, it seems oddly incomplete. Something seems to be missing. Others have called it heart. And, yes, like earlier Coen films, there seems to be an icy self-consciousness about this project, a sense that we're watching very clever film students devising a pastiche of their favorite movies, not so much to entertain as to impress one another.

I wrote much the same regarding the Coens' last film, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* While entertaining enough in its various episodes, the total effect seemed strangely insubstantial. In preparing to write this review, I decided to take another look at *O Brother* on DVD. I was surprised to find how enjoyable and even moving the film was the second time around. I wouldn't be surprised if *The Man Who Wasn't There* improved upon subsequent viewings. After all, just as with a novel or poem, why should we expect to get everything a well-crafted film has to offer the first time around? Isn't that what DVDs are for?

Of course, *2001: A Space Odyssey* may be the exception to DVD arbitration. You really can't judge this film's merits on television. It requires the resources of a well-equipped theater, ideally one graced by a full-sized screen, not one of those multiplex poster-size affairs. So I am happy to report the re-release of Stanley Kubrick's work for a limited run in selected theaters across the nation. This

film remains as astonishing as it was in its initial release 33 years ago.

Kubrick took Arthur C. Clarke's fairly routine science-fiction story about aliens monitoring earthly affairs and transformed its literal-minded narrative into a highly evocative visual poem. Taken as a conventional narrative, it fails miserably. Its characterization is minimal, its conflict diffuse, its climax ambiguously muddled, and its denouement willfully vague. Viewed as a cinematic ode, however, it succeeds spectacularly as a meditation on the human longing for transcendence.

The film begins and ends with the prospect of rebirth. In between, we encounter many ordinary birthdays, all celebrated in a perfunctory manner that suggests how far we have fallen from our original sense of wonder about existence. A NASA scientist calls home from space to talk to his wife and, as an afterthought, wishes his three-year-old happy birthday. An astronaut on his way to Jupiter receives a delayed video transmission from his parents, who sing him birthday wishes as they thrust a candle-bedecked cake toward the camera. He watches with a bored expression, reclining under a sunlamp and wearing shaded glasses. These ceremonies are made to seem merely *pro forma*, but they serve as the ironic foil to some truly startling nativities. The first is the birth of human intelligence among a tribe of primates who wake one morning to discover a 12-foot black monolith outside their cave dwelling. In Clarke's novelization of the screenplay (which he helped Kubrick write), this artifact, along with the others that pop up later on the moon and near Jupiter, is supposed to be the instrument of some superintelligent extraterrestrial beings who have seeded the universe with similar machines. They are designed to locate suitable creatures and promote intelligence in them. In the film, Kubrick provides no such explanation regarding the monoliths' origins and purpose. As such, they are left open to interpretation. Add a little imagination, and they become divine calling cards, moments of grace beckoning us to rise above our earthbound selves and be reborn in renewed wonder and aspiration.

Clearly, Kubrick wanted his film to suggest our civilization's ongoing project to nurture the individual in his search for freedom and meaning in a universe jealous of his secrets. He named his astronaut protagonist David Bowman and subtitled his film *A Space Odyssey* to echo the origins of the West in Greek

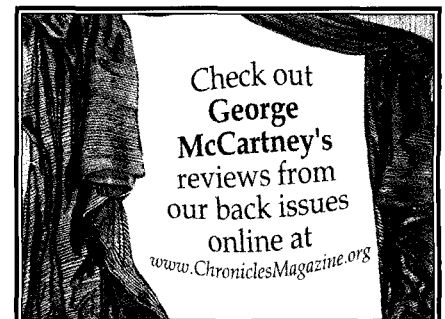
and Hebraic culture. David comes from the house of David, and Bowman recalls Odysseus, the Bowman of Ithaca. David Bowman, then, becomes at once the traditional and advanced guard of Western culture as he pursues the troubling monoliths to Jupiter. As Western man has always done—whether with Mosaic reverence or Promethean arrogance—he is seeking knowledge of the godhead.

What does he find at the end of his journey? Kubrick has been accused of being willfully obscure on this point. In the last phase of his interplanetary quest, Bowman is translated into something resembling an 18th-century suite filled with otherworldly sounds. Here, each time he turns his head, he literally watches himself age from youth to dotage, climaxing in his emergence as a fetus within its embryo.

What does the sequence mean? Seeing it again, this conceit no longer seems so impenetrable. Life is brief. Turn around, and you are 40, then 50. In no time, you're in your 60's, wondering how long your hair will go on sprouting after you're in the grave. And, meanwhile, what have you accomplished? Have you changed anything for the better? Have you achieved enough to justify rebirth?

As I watched *2001* again, I couldn't help thinking of Ed Crane's no-exit existence. The scientists and astronauts we meet in the film's middle episodes move as if they were automatons, their flat voices drained of resonance by the constant hum of electronic machinery. In one scene, an astronaut goes outside his space-born vehicle to inspect a malfunctioning antenna. There, against the infinite reaches of unmapped space, he gropes awkwardly in the confinement of his cumbersome suit, all the while tethered to his ship by a flimsy lifeline. What better image to convey the paradox of man, a creature capable of contemplating the limitless immensity of creation—but only from within the narrowly constricting harness of his physical being?

Transcendence, anyone? c



by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

Crazy Horse

The horse went down on a horizontal stretch of trail where no sound horse had any business stumbling. The quadrupedal rhythm broke suddenly, his near shoulder crumpled, his head sank at the end of the black-maned neck, until the horse seemed to be wanting to kneel and kiss the ground. I let out rein and sat back in the saddle, expecting him to recover himself and get up on all four feet again. Instead, he kept going down, and down, past the recovery point, until I came off like a sheik descending from a camel, only harder, striking a kneecap on a rock, my shapeless felt hat bowling alongside over the ground, keeping up. From the corner of my eye I observed the horse complete a somersault a few feet away, idly calculating whether he was going to fall on me or not. I heard Norma's shout from behind as the horse scrambled to get his legs under him and onto his feet, retrieved the hat from a bed of mountain lupin, and stood up, rubbing the knee with my free hand. The horse shook himself all over under the loosened saddle, gazed reproachfully over his shoulder as if the wreck had been my fault, then turned to graze a clump of the sparse grass.

"Are you all right?" Norma asked anxiously, sitting the mare who had also begun to graze. "I thought you hit your head when you went off."

"Not my head, my knee." The rock had torn a hole in the faded denim where the black blood oozed. "I'm all right," I told her, going for the gelding. "He's history, though. Somebody's been trying to tell me something for years," I added as I reached for the hanging reins. "This afternoon, I finally got the message."

I made it up to the saddle on the third try and started along the trail again, trying not to pressure the throbbing knee. Afternoon clouds gathered above Medicine Bow Peak where fresh snow had been that morning after a night of wind and cold. As the sky darkened toward the September evening, a cold wind sluiced between the angled ridges of the Snowy Range. The gelding stumbled twice more on the ride back to camp without seeming to notice, never watching the trail or his feet but always the dark tree-

line, the freestanding boulders, the blackened stumps of trees, holding rigid and tense, prepared to shy sideways in the trail. I pulled his head in and maintained equal tension on the reins to point him straight in the trail, until the ground really did become rough and he needed freer rein for balance.

"We've been here before," I said, "but that was sixteen years ago. A five-year-old horse can learn something. This one's forgotten everything he ever knew in the last six months."

"You act as if you're scared of him, after all these years," Norma said.

"I'm not scared. He's just a dangerous horse to be on in this country. If I'd had the packs behind, the bedroll up front, and my gun on my shoulder, I wouldn't have come off back there."

"He could have killed you," she said, helpfully.

"Maybe worse. If we were still married, you could've had another Christopher Reeve on your hands for the rest of my life—or yours."

"I'd have known you needed me, then. I wouldn't have divorced you."

"Let's not go into *that* again. Having the future of a horse to decide is more than enough responsibility for one afternoon."

In camp, I picketed the horses above Arrowhead Lake while Norma brought in wood. We met at the campfire for oysters and whisky, seated side by side on a log before the waving flames while the valley darkened rapidly between the opposed granite walls and a final ribbon of sunlight striped the top of the west-facing cliff a thousand feet above the camp.

"You remember in the Absarokas two years ago, he'd been eyeballing the black timber on his left, then spooked in the same direction and went down on his side with my leg underneath him? A sound horse just doesn't do that. And now, in addition to everything else, he doesn't want to be caught—turns his butt to me, and lifts one of his back feet as if he's offering to kick when I come up on him."

"He's always been a different horse," Norma agreed.

"I should have called him Crazy Horse,"



I said, "except that Crazy Horse was a great man. Not someone who deserved to have a knothead horse named after him."

We ate supper while bull elk bugled from the surrounding forest and the bowhunters answered them with their tubes. It didn't take an amorous cow to identify the inexperienced ones, who sounded like cockerels trying to imitate a rooster's crow. We turned in early and stretched ourselves in the bags on the ground, which felt very hard and cold to my swollen knee. I lay awake thinking about the horse, whether his eyesight could be failing or he'd developed arthritis or some neurological problem that affected his balance, until the solid strike of raindrops on the tent roof changed to the scrape of sleet and I fell asleep hearing the restless horses stamp the ground as they shifted around on their tie ropes to stay dry beneath the sheltering firs across the camp.

In the morning, the little snow that had fallen melted after sunup, and my knee felt better, the swelling diminished and some of the stiffness gone out of it. We built up the fire for breakfast and then struck camp, loaded the packs on the horses, and scattered the fire ring in the small clearing.

"Aren't you going to ride?" Norma asked in surprise as I picked up the reins and started off on foot, leading the gelding.

"Nope."

"I can give you a leg-up to save your knee."

"It isn't my knee that's the problem, it's the damn horse. If it wasn't for getting the packs out, I'd shoot him and leave him right here by the lake."

"You're trying to talk yourself into getting rid of him. Aren't you?"

"I don't have to try and talk myself into anything. I made up my mind this morn-