

All-American Nihilism

The Ballad of Sheriff Bell

In the opening lines of the Coen Brothers' 2007 adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's novel *No Country for Old Men*, Sheriff Tom Bell reflects, in his thick West Texas drawl, "I was sheriff of this county when I was twenty-five years old. Hard to believe. My grandfather was a lawman. Father too. Me and him was sheriffs at the same time, him up in Plano and me out here. I think he was pretty proud of that. I know I was." As sheriff, Bell embodies the law, not only as a broad social institution but also as a paternal inheritance transferred across generations of his family. He continues,

Some of the old-time sheriffs never even wore a gun. A lot of folks find that hard to believe. Jim Scarborough never carried one. That's the younger Jim. Gaston Boykins wouldn't wear one, up in Comanche County. I always liked to hear about the old-timers. Never missed a chance to do so. You can't help but compare yourself against the old-timers. Can't help but wonder how they'd have operated these times.

When Bell enters the action of the film, he, too, refrains from carrying a gun or, at least, feels little need to do so. After he and his deputy, Wendell (Garret Dillahunt), pursue the assassin Anton Chigurh to the trailer of everyman, Llewellyn Moss (Josh Brolin), Bell instructs the deputy to proceed with his "gun out and up." However, Bell himself does not draw. Instead, when the deputy prods him to follow suit, he humorously quips, "I'm hiding behind you." Bell's refusal to brandish a pistol distances him from the

physical violence sometimes associated with the figure of the Texas lawman, evidencing the specifically symbolic nature of his authority. What defines him as a representative of the law—what Bell inherited from his father, his grandfather, and the others who came before him—is the authority of the badge alone. Appealing to brute violence to enforce it, to the contrary, would compromise the law and, one surmises, his sense of what it is to be a man—exhibiting a disrespectful lack of the trust that he registers in his laughter.

When wondering how the old-timers would have “operated these times,” however, the sheriff betrays a crisis in this confidence in his authority. After recounting the depravity of a killer, whom he helped to capture, try, and execute, Bell reflects,

The crime you see now. It’s hard to even take its measure. It’s not that I’m afraid of it. I always knew you had to be willing to die to even do this job. But I don’t want to push my chips forward and go out and meet something I don’t understand. A man would have to put his soul at hazard. He’d have to say, “Okay, I’ll be part of this world.”

The film is set in a small West Texas town, during the early 1980s, just as the violence of the cross-border drug trade exploded. Ostensibly, it’s a chase film. While pursuing an antelope he’s wounded on a hunting expedition, Moss stumbles upon the carnage of a failed drug deal, tracks down the “last man standing,” and succeeds in procuring a briefcase of two million dollars cash. The corporate American firm involved in the disastrous deal hires Chigurh to recoup its money, and Bell trails Chigurh, who murders a police officer and an oblivious passerby even before he embarks on his pursuit of the stolen briefcase. However, the chase does not play out along conventional lines. Despite indeed facing off against one another, Moss’s flight from Chigurh does not culminate in a decisive, final confrontation that resolves the struggle between pursuer and pursued. Instead, he’s killed—off camera—by a Mexican drug cartel whom the American firm also has put on his trail. And, in stark contrast to the Hollywood cliché of the salt-of-the-earth lawman, who alone has the moral fiber sufficient to bring some novel villainy to justice, Bell despairs his inability to address the violence erupting in his town: repeatedly refusing appeals from the DEA to revisit the scene of the drug deal gone awry, altogether declining to survey the scene of a subsequent shootout, and pursuing Chigurh no more than remotely tracing the wreckage left in his wake. As an echo of his opening reference to his own father and grandfather, however, Bell does his best to defend Moss,

whom he implicitly treats as a son. Specifically, he travels to meet Moss's wife Carla Jean (Kelly MacDonald) in order to offer him protection. And, when Moss gets killed, Bell's despair overtakes him, provoking him to quit the police force—as if Moss's death attested to his ultimate inability to hold open the promise of the future embodied by the young couple.

As much as a personal failure, for Bell, the law itself proves inadequate to address the criminality he confronts, and he sees evidence of its decline everywhere. Looking up from the paper he's reading, in a passing scene, the sheriff remarks to his deputy,

My God, Wendell, it's all-out war. I can't think of any other word for it. Who are these people? Here, last week they found this couple out in California. They rent out rooms to old people, kill 'em, bury 'em in the yard, cash their Social Security checks. Oh, they'd torture 'em first. I don't know why. Maybe their television set was broke.

Beyond the brutality of the couple's crime or even their perverse sadism, what most outrages Bell is the apparent lack of common decency, evidenced by their neighbors' failure to recognize that something was wrong. He reads, "Neighbors were alerted when a man ran from the premises wearing only a dog collar," adding, ". . . that's what it took, you notice, to get somebody's attention. Digging graves in the backyard didn't bring any." While bemoaning his own sense of inadequacy, Bell's melancholy more fundamentally concerns the breakdown in morality suggested, among other ways, by this apathy. And, as much as a sense of personal failure, Bell implicitly complains that the law itself has proven inadequate to sustain him and his sense of the world. Despite idealizing his elders, in fact, Bell's complaint indirectly implicates them for not having made good on their promises. And, in his personal despair, the sheriff gives voice to a deeper and more far-reaching sense of nihilism.

The Film That Wasn't There

Given the absence that riddles their oeuvre, the Coens' films consistently evoke the problem of nihilism, portraying it as a perennial feature of the American landscape. Among other movies, in *The Man Who Wasn't There*, the protagonist Ed Crane betrays an alienated sense that his life holds little or no value. The opening voice-over begins, "Yeah, I worked in a barbershop, but I never considered myself a barber. I stumbled into it, well, married into it

more precisely. It wasn't my establishment. Like the fella says, 'I only work here.'" Ed plays a prescribed role—the barber—without ever fully assuming responsibility for it or anything else in his life. His work consists of mere routines, which he compares to those of a barman or a soda jerk, a series of standard haircuts, distinguished by only minor variations: the butch, the flattop, the ivy, the crew, among others. At best, he's a functionary who goes through the motions required by his job: passing his life as little more than an automaton.

The film is set in 1949 Santa Rosa, California; and Ed's home has all the conveniences of the postwar American suburbs. However, he seems to derive little pleasure from it; in fact, he seems hardly to feel at home at all. He describes it, "The place was okay, I guess. It had an electric icebox, a gas hearth. It had a garbage grinder built into the sink. You might say I had it made. Oh yeah, there was one other thing . . . Doris . . ." As an addendum to his list, Ed introduces his wife almost as an afterthought and literally as "one other *thing*." Consistent with the matter-of-fact instrumentality of the rest of his life, she's an accountant who works at Nirdlingers, a local department store: she likes to know where things stand and seems to derive much of her enjoyment in life from the luxury goods she buys with her ten percent employee discount. While Doris (Frances McDormand) does not share Ed's despondence, nevertheless she reinforces it. "Doris and I went to church once a week," he explains, "usually Tuesday night." It's a gag line. Panning down the figure of Christ on the cross, the camera reveals a priest reading off numbers for a game of bingo. Ed continues, "Doris wasn't big on divine worship, and I doubt if she believed in life everlasting. She'd most likely tell you that our reward is on earth, and bingo is probably the extent of it."

Most emphatically, the Coens present Ed's alienation through his silence. In the narrative unfolding of the film, he says almost nothing. Despite playing the leading role in the movie, in most scenes, he passively listens to other characters, smoking cigarettes while sitting squarely on the couch or standing at his barber station. As if the film primarily were a formal exercise, the Coens pursue Ed's silence with a rigorous insistence: maintaining an almost categorical division between his interior monologue and his outward appearance. What Ed thinks and does remains almost entirely incommensurate with how other people conceive his thoughts and actions. This structural division reaches its apex at the story's turning point. Ed resolves to try to leave behind his role as a barber and pursue a business opportunity. To raise the necessary capital, he blackmails Doris's boss, "Big" Dave Brewster (James Gandolfini), with whom she is having an affair, by threatening to tell Dave's wife about the lovers. At first the scheme succeeds and Ed gets the money,

but eventually Dave learns that Ed is the blackmailer and confronts him. That night, distraught by the blackmailing scheme, Doris is so drunk she's passed out. Laying her down in their bed, Ed begins a story.

I met Doris blind on a double-date with a loudmouth buddy of mine, who was seeing a friend of hers from work. We went to a movie. Doris had a flask. Boy, she could put it away. At the end of the night, she said she liked that I didn't talk much. It was only a-couple-a-weeks later, she suggested we get married . . .

The phone rings and Ed interrupts the story; it's Dave asking him to come down to his office. Ed complies. After first confronting him verbally, Dave physically attacks him. In his defense, Ed reflexively grabs a penknife on Dave's desk and stabs him in the jugular. After watching Dave bleed to death on the floor, Ed lets himself out of the store, drives home, returns to Doris's bedside, and resumes his story.

. . . It was only a-couple-a-weeks later, she suggested we get married. I said, "Don't you want to get to know me more?" She said, "Why? Does it get better?" She looked at me like I was a dope, which I never really minded from her; and she had a point I guess. We knew each other as well then as now. Anyway, well enough.

The sequence lasts seven minutes, and Ed has murdered a man, but it's like he never went anywhere and nothing transpired.

The remainder of the film falls out from this gap between Ed's experience and how his thoughts and actions are registered by others. Because she conspired with Dave to cook the books at Nirdlingers, in order to help him cover the blackmailer's ransom, Doris is accused of Dave's murder instead of Ed. Later, however, Ed is accused of killing his proposed business partner, Creighton Tolliver (Jon Polito), whom Dave has pummeled to death in his effort to unmask the blackmailer. When Ed openly confesses to Dave's murder, he is ignored as if he is only proposing a strategy to disorient the jury at Doris's trial. And, at the end of the film, Ed is put to death for Tolliver's murder, despite his innocence in the case. Indeed, as announced by the movie's title, it's as if he never were there.

The irony of Ed's remark about his relationship with Doris, of course, is that they knew each other as well when they first met as they ever did, because subsequently they never got to know each other any better. Despite

sharing a home and making a life together, they never really knew each other at all. However, this sense of estrangement might equally be extended to all the major characters in the film. If Ed suffers his alienation in antipathetic isolation, nevertheless the other characters in the film share it with him. They all are playing roles that keep them at a remove not only from one another but even from themselves. As Ed would have it, they're all phonies. Beyond the instrumentality of her work and the objectivism of her consumer enjoyments, Doris is dead set on running Nirdlingers: she's a careerist who overidentifies with her job as an accountant and, like so many characters in the Coens' oeuvre, pays credence to the modern fetish of success. Along with betraying her husband, when the blackmailing scheme threatens her impending promotion, she proves willing not only to compromise her professional integrity but also to break the law. Like Ed, she's arrested for a murder she didn't commit; and, when she finds out Dave isn't who she thought he was and realizes that she's pregnant with his child, she hangs herself in jail. It's almost as if she, too, never was there.

"Big" Dave, in turn, boasts incessantly about his military record. He recounts stories about facing the Japanese in the Pacific and belittles Ed for having been passed over in the draft. However, in the run-up to Doris's trial, her lawyer learns that he never went to war. Similarly, he makes a big deal of his job running Nirdlingers, but like Ed, Jerry Lundegaard, the "Big" Jeff Lebowski, and many of the male characters from the Coen Brothers' films—he only enjoys his position at the indulgence of his wife, who is the heiress to the department store chain. As he declares to Ed in a moment of distress, "I serve at the indulgence of god-damned ownership." Like Doris, he betrays his spouse. He's never accused of the murder he commits; and the wrong person is held responsible for his killing. Was he ever there?

This same sense of artifice and self-deception extends even to the minor characters in the film. Ed's brother-in-law Frank (Michael Badalucco), the first chair at the barbershop, is an infantile blowhard who yammers on like an authority on everything. Introducing him, Ed quips, "Maybe if you're eleven or twelve years old, Frank's got an interesting point of view; but sometimes he got on my nerves." Freddy Riedenschneider (Tony Shalhoub), the high-priced lawyer from Sacramento whom Ed hires first to defend Doris and later him, is a self-important sophist. He makes his cases by throwing sand in the jury's eyes, undermining their confidence in the authority of their judgment, and insisting that, in the matter before them, there is no truth to be discerned. And Ed's prospective business partner, Creighton Tolliver (Jon Polito), is a vain con artist who bilks Ed out of ten grand and ends up beaten to death for a blackmailing scheme that he didn't commit. His

killer is never even accused of his murder; and, contradicting any standard of justice, Ed, the victim of his con, pays for the crime.

In the end, *everything* in the film goes down the drain. When Doris is arrested, Frank mortgages the barbershop that their father had worked thirty years to own “free and clear” in order to pay Riedenschneider, who immediately starts spending away their capital on indulgent “incidental” expenses. After Doris hangs herself in jail, Frank falls apart, begins drinking, stops coming to work, and allows his father’s business to go to pot, presumably losing it eventually to the bank. And, when Ed is arrested for Tolliver’s murder, he signs over his house to Riedenschneider to cover the expense of his defense. A disruption in the courtroom leads to a mistrial, but, as Ed explains, “The well ran dry. There was nothing left to mortgage. Riedenschneider went home. And the court-appointed lawyer . . . threw me on the mercy of the court. It was my only chance, he said. I guess I really never had a chance.” In the end, it’s all washed away—the people, the places, the scenario—as if nothing had happened.

Given the sense of alienation that pervades it, critics consistently read *The Man Who Wasn’t There* existentially, as a portrait of the nihilism of the modern world, whose empty objectivism confronts Ed with the nullity of existence, compelling him, for the first time, to assume responsibility for his life in the resolution to pursue a business opportunity. (Apocryphally, when Joel first pitched the part to Billy Bob Thornton, he explained, “It’s about a barber who wants to be in the dry-cleaning business,” and Thornton replied, “I’ll take it!” [Robson, 2003; 255].) Citing the private detective’s opening monologue in *Blood Simple*, Richard Gaughran describes that the Coens’ universe as a world “without value, devoid of meaning, absurd,” adding, “we’re not always specifically in Texas, but we are ‘down here,’ and we are indeed on our own” (Gaughran, 2009; 227). According to Gaughran, Ed confronts an existential dilemma. “In a world without value,” he writes, “humans are nothing, are ‘not there,’ until they create themselves. And, Crane, not self-created, just ‘the barber,’ is a wisp of a man, invisible to others” (Gaughran, 2009; 237). Similarly Palmer describes Ed as suffering “an inchoate, Sartrean disgust” (Palmer, 2009; 280). And, with specific regard to Søren Kierkegaard’s *Sickness Unto Death*, philosopher Karen D. Hoffmann reads *The Man Who Wasn’t There* as a sustained meditation on existential despair. She quotes Kierkegaard, “Surrounded by hordes of men, absorbed in all sorts of secular matters, more and more shrewd about the ways of the world—such a person forgets himself . . . finds it too hazardous to be himself and far easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, a mass man” (Hoffmann, 2009; 245).

The Question of the Meaning of Being

As a philosophical concern, the problem of nihilism is first formulated in Friedrich Jacobi's 1799 "Letter to Fichte." The immediate background for his argument is the transcendental turn in philosophy, accomplished by Immanuel Kant, who argued that a critically rigorous philosophy ought not to make metaphysical claims concerning the essence of things or the foundations of the self but rather should limit itself to expositing the conditions of the possibility of experience as we know it, as defined by the categories of reason. Jacobi denounces Fichte's elaboration of this critical turn in philosophy as nihilistic, insofar as it denies access to anything beyond the ken of subjectivity.¹ He writes, "If the highest upon which I can reflect, what I can contemplate is my empty, pure, naked and mere ego, with its autonomy and freedom: then rational self-contemplation, then rationality is for me a curse—I deplore my existence" (quoted in Critchley, 1997; 4). In keeping with the common reaction against existentialism in the twentieth century, what Jacobi denounces as nihilistic in Fichte's reworking of Kant might better be understood as precisely what Kant was working to *address* in the impasse between rationalism and empiricism. While the empiricist repudiation of metaphysical speculation couldn't be refuted, it also paradoxically denied the ultimate validity of reason's claim to knowledge and reduced ethics to merely pragmatic prescriptions and, what eventually would be conceived as, the hedonistic calculus of quantifiable goods. Rather than formulating a nihilistic philosophy, Kant, and the German Idealists who followed in his wake, thus worked to address the specter of nihilism that haunted the rise of modern science by integrating the failure of speculative metaphysics into their concept of philosophy and trying to accommodate the inherent tendency in reason to undermine its own judgment, which Kant addresses in terms of "the antinomies of reason." However one understands this philosophical history, the roots of the problem of nihilism thus can be traced to the advent of modernity. While the development of a scientific self-consciousness held out the promise of potentially grounding knowledge and morality on rigorously objective grounds, simultaneously it threatened to undermine altogether the projects of epistemology and ethics: not only by displacing the Aristotelian worldview of the Scholastics, which previously had provided the framework for their formulations, but more radically by revealing reason to be rent by contradictions.

As anticipated by philosophical responses to the French Revolution, in the subsequent development of German Idealism and its Marxist aftermath, these problems concerning the theoretical foundations of science and moral-

ity, furthermore, came to be embroiled with the social turmoil of the early modern world and the crises engendered by the rise of industrial capitalism, which not only undermined the agrarian forms of life that had sustained people for centuries but also subjected the modern populous to unprecedented exploitation. While it would be a mistake therefore to collapse the diverse theoretical and social problems of the age into a single, overarching philosophical concern, the problem of nihilism thus recurs throughout the intellectual, cultural, and social history of the nineteenth century, reaching an apex in the catastrophe of the First World War, which marks its end. How would society be restored and sustained? The problem registered in the artistic, philosophical, and political modernism of the early twentieth century was not abstract but rather integral to the project of literally rebuilding the world.

At this juncture in philosophy, the problem of nihilism finds one of its most systematic and enduring formulations in the work of Martin Heidegger, who registers and responds to it as a matter of what he calls *the forgetting of the question of the meaning of Being*. In his 1935 lecture course, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, he writes,

But where is authentic nihilism at work? There, where they cling to familiar beings and believe that is enough, as heretofore, to take beings as beings, since that is after all what they are. But with this they reject the question of Being and treat Being like a nothing (*nihil*), which in a certain way it “is” insofar as it essences (*west*). To cultivate only beings in the forgetfulness of Being—that is nihilism. (Heidegger, 1959; 203)

Heidegger first formulates this problem of the forgetting of the question of the meaning of Being in his early magnum opus, *Being and Time*. While the ontological question was seminal to Western philosophy in its ancient Greek origins, Heidegger argues that it was obscured almost as soon as it appeared, insofar as it was formulated—and so ostensibly answered in advance—with reference to an ontic being. The Greek concept of essence (*ousia*) already has a twofold significance: referring at times to the Being of an entity and at other times to the entity itself. As a result, as early as Parmenides, Being was understood both in a dynamic sense—anticipating Heidegger’s understanding—as “a pure ‘making-present’ of something”; while, at other times, it was equated with the static immediacy of the objectively present (Heidegger, 1962; 26/48). The Scholastic translation of the Greek concept of essence (*ousia*) as substance (*substantia*) further reinforced this tendency to conflate the ontological concept of Being with an ontic being by connoting a stratum

underlying the changing appearances of things. And Heidegger traces the sedimentation of this substantialization, up through the origins of modern philosophy in Descartes's critical turn to the subject, arguing that despite the radicality of his assertion of the *cogito sum*, he failed to interrogate "the meaning of the Being of the 'sum'" (Heidegger, 1962; 24/46).

When addressing the problem of nihilism in terms of this collapse of "the ontological difference" between Being and beings, Heidegger elaborates upon the critique of *objectivism* that his mentor Edmund Husserl first formulates in response to the rise of psychologism. As characteristic of nineteenth-century, ideological positivism—which, of course, still persists in both popular and professional guises—psychologism argues that, because science and logic belong to consciousness, their principles ought to be amenable to empirical explanation as elements of psychology. As an echo of Kant's critique of empiricism, Husserl first argues that psychologism entails a category mistake, which fails to do justice specifically to the objects of logic and mathematics. However, in light of its more far reaching implications concerning the nature of consciousness, Husserl ultimately contends that the problem of psychologism reveals the need for a broader suspension of theoretical presuppositions, which he develops as a methodological "epoché." And he calls for a renewed investigation of experience, in light of this cultivated naïveté, as registered by his famous call "to the things themselves." Specifically, Husserl insists upon suspending the presupposition of "third-person" objectivity as the standard of knowledge. Instead, he proposes analyzing experience from a first-person, phenomenological perspective, which he insists is not merely relative in its subjectivity but rather defined by consistent structures and dynamics. According to Husserl, consciousness is always consciousness *about* something and, in this dynamic relating plays a role in constituting its object. Against the objectivist reification of both subject and object in psychologism, Husserl thus conceives knowledge as a process, which he works to clarify with particular attention to this conscious *intentionality*.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger adopts Husserl's phenomenological method as his own. At the same time, however, he criticizes Husserl's continued emphasis upon disinterested knowledge (Dreyfus, 1991; 46). Accordingly, when working out the methodological approach to his problem, Heidegger proposes addressing the question to "Dasein," as the being for whom "in its very Being, that Being is an issue for it" (Heidegger, 1962; 32). *Dasein* is a vernacular German expression that means "existence" and translates literally as "being" (*sein*) "there" (*da*). Heidegger appeals to the term, not only to bracket the associations evoked by the classical concept of the subject but also to ground his analysis in *lived experience*. Rather than an esoteric

philosophical concern, it is a question raised by everyone, as part and parcel of being alive. Only as such, in fact, might it provide a proper foundation for science as a human pursuit. However, Heidegger's concept of Dasein's "pre-ontological understanding" of Being goes further: Dasein reflects on who it is, and what it is doing, as an integral part of doing what it does. Rather than simply given, the determination of Dasein and its surroundings depends upon a tacit answer to this question of the meaning of being, which is integral to its pursuits. As a further distinction from Husserl, Heidegger thus qualifies his phenomenology as *hermeneutical*—a term originally pertaining to the reception of religious texts—and he formulates his analysis, as a radicalization of the *interpretive* understanding integral to Dasein's everyday being-in-the-world.²

Being-in-the-World

Against the commonplace concepts of the world as an aggregate of empirical objects, or a substantial geometrical foundation—like Descartes's *res extensa* (extended thing)—Heidegger argues that the world is grounded in Dasein's being-in-the-world as the *Da*, the "there," of its being-there. While one might presume that things exist in the world, out there, as factual objects, only secondarily to be taken up within the framework of human pursuits and so attributed significances, Heidegger argues the contrary: things appear first and fundamentally as the things they are, within the framework of their use. The hammer is what it is in nailing—in the solidity of its handle, the weight of its head, the force of its impact. Rather than merely given as an object, it exists in, what Heidegger calls, its "readiness-to-hand." Only secondarily and derivatively is it a mere thing, a brute fact. When its use is somehow interrupted, when it goes missing or breaks, when it is left idle on the floor and gets tripped over: then it appears in the stasis of its presence-at-hand. However, even then, its mere presence remains rooted in its readiness-to-hand, insofar as it is first and foremost unusable.

According to Heidegger, the world thus amounts to a referential context; the hammer exists as such only in relationship to nails, to tool-belts, to two-by-fours. Outside of this network of relationships, these things cease to be what they are. Expositing Heidegger's example, Charles Spinoza explains, "[The craftsman] understands nothing, not even himself, independently of everything else in the shop that has some role in pursuing his occupation, his involved activity" (Spinoza; 2005, 486). However, the world is not thereby exhausted by the network of ready-to-hand things of which it is

comprised, any more than it consists of an aggregate of empirical, present-at-hand objects. As a referential context, the world is held together by Dasein's projects, which implicitly define the relationships between things, in the pursuit of a common end. Beyond the network of tools that comprise it, the worldhood of the world thus lies ultimately in Dasein, insofar as the interpretive understanding integral to its pursuits reveals things for the first time as the things that they are, in the light of its being-there.

While Heidegger's analysis of the worldhood of the world concerns the "there" of Dasein's being-there, he addresses "who" Dasein is, in its everyday involvements, as, what he calls, *das Man*. In common usage, the German expression *das Man* functions most often as an impersonal pronoun, connoting an anonymous generality, as in, "one does, one says . . ." Hubert Dreyfus commends this translation of the term for its normative implications, as if to say, "this is how things are done" (Dreyfus, 1991; 143). By contrast, in their English version of *Being and Time*, John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson translate *das Man* as "the They," which Dreyfus contests as implying that, in Dasein's everydayness, "I" am different from "them." As a further aspect of his departure from the Cartesian concept of subjectivity as an interiority withdrawn from the world, Heidegger argues that Dasein does not exist as an atomized individual who fundamentally stands apart from things and people and only secondarily develops relationships with them. Instead Dasein takes up projects that have long been pursued by others and adopts their ways of doing things. As a result Dasein first understands both itself and the world through this collectivity, as a generic, even anonymous subject. By translating *das Man* as "one," Dreyfus emphasizes Dasein's fundamentally social-historical character. At the same time, however, he risks effacing the fact that, for Heidegger, *das Man* nevertheless is alienating: the inauthentic state of Dasein's existence, predicated upon a blind acceptance of generic conventions. Macquarrie and Robinson's admittedly awkward translation of *das Man* as "the They" thus has its own virtue. Translating the term as "one" takes it in the direction of the first-person plural, as if to connote "this is how *we* do things."³ However, Heidegger does not conceive the collectivity of *das Man* in the first person: as a self-determining social body. Instead, as a form of subjectivity, *das Man* is objectified. In the first person of its self-understanding Dasein originally identifies with *the third-person plural*: the They.

Arguing that Dasein's everyday existence as *das Man* is objectified, of course, is not to argue that Dasein is simply reduced to the brute facticity of a thing. Instead the objectivism of *das Man* is subjective: the alienation of subjectivity into the third-person plural of the cliché, which assumes the form

of an immediate given, and, as such, inhibits Dasein's dynamic engagement with the world, in the stasis of a movement that goes nowhere. In language, this takes the form of, what Heidegger calls, "idle talk." While language, in principle, brings things to light—articulating their qualities and sharing them with others—most of the time making oneself understood requires appealing to an "average intelligibility," whose readily available meanings occlude the critical reflection that gives language its clarity and precision (Heidegger, 1962; 168/212). Similarly Heidegger describes *das Man*'s understanding as "a kind of knowing . . . just in order to have known," and he argues that this "curiosity" privileges the immediacy of sight, insofar as it sanctions moving on to the next thing, and the next, *ad infinitum* (Heidegger, 1962; 172/217). *Das Man* is not indifferent but wants to know if only to be "in the know." However, precisely through this busy activity, curiosity sustains the subject in a state of *distraction*, which paradoxically holds the world at bay. Through this curiosity and its intersection with idle talk, Heidegger accordingly concludes that *das Man* is held in a state of suspended indecision, which he calls "ambiguity." He writes, "When in our everyday being-with-one-another, we encounter the sort of thing which is accessible to everyone, and about which anyone can say anything, it soon becomes impossible to decide what is disclosed in a genuine manner and what is not" (Heidegger, 1962; 217). In the ambiguity of *das Man*, Dasein's circumspective interpretation of the world—and, by extension the world itself—remains formless, indecisive in its very determination, as qualified by, what Heidegger calls, "a non-committal just-surmising-with-someone-else" (Heidegger, 1962; 218).

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As "the barber," Ed has thoroughly objectified his subjectivity, reducing his thoughts and actions to a series of routine functions. He has rendered his subjectivity generic, assuming a role that veils him from the world, others, and, perhaps most importantly, from himself. He's anonymous and at least in this one sense isn't "there." During Ed's trial, Riedenschneider inadvertently makes the point in one of his characteristic attempts to undermine the jury's confidence in their authority to judge. Ed recounts, "He told them that I was modern man. And if they decided to convict me, well, they'd be practically cinching the noose around their own necks." For all of its perversity, the argument attests to the scope of the Coens' portrait. In Ed, they are addressing the modern condition as such. His alienation isn't eccentric but rather characteristic of modern society as a whole. At the same time, the

argument attests to the nature of Ed's alienation. In his ordinariness, he is indeed just like them. In fact, precisely in their anonymous collectivity, he is "them": a mass-subject, the "They," *das Man*.

In another earlier scene, following Doris's suicide, the Coens make the point visually. As he walks home from work, Ed imagines that the other people on the street are trying not to look at him. He remarks, "It was like I was ghost." Most immediately, Ed thinks they aren't looking at him because they don't want to acknowledge Doris's death, and his growing sense of isolation is characteristic of the deepening despair that might be understood as setting him apart from the crowd. Visually, however, the Coens present Ed not as isolated but rather as surrounded by other people, also on their way home from work, similarly dressed and similarly cast in the grays and whites of the film. They, too, are utterly anonymous, not "there," ghosts to one another. Ed doesn't disappear from the crowd; he disappears into the crowd.

In *Burn After Reading*, the Coen Brothers update this critique of the nihilism of the modern world through a scathing satire of American culture at the turn of the millennium, with particular emphasis on the narcissism of health clubs, plastic surgery, fucking-machines, and anonymous sex. The film begins with a satellite image of the United States, which captures the rationalization of modern life, as subjected to exhaustive scientific scrutiny from a vantage ostensibly "outside" the world. Beyond reinforcing the critique of objectivism leveled by Heidegger in *Being and Time*, *Burn After Reading* thus anticipates Heidegger's later account of modernity as the age of the world picture. Whereas in *Being and Time* Heidegger argues that Descartes's concept of the *cogito* falls prey to objectivism as a sedimented holdover from Scholasticism resulting from his failure to interrogate the ontology of the subject as substance, in his later work, Heidegger conceives modernity as radicalizing the objectivism integral to the tradition. He writes, "the world picture does not change from an earlier medieval one into a modern one, but rather the fact that the world becomes a picture at all is what distinguishes the essence of the modern age" (Heidegger, 1977a; 130). The world appears as a picture from the vantage of the subject withdrawn from it, like the satellite hovering over the earth in *Burn After Reading*. The "world picture" is characteristic of the reduction of truth to representation, which Heidegger describes as "making-stand-over-against, an objectifying that goes forward and masters" (Heidegger, 1977a; 150). Whether understood as scientifically objective or pluralistically relative, the concept of experience as comprised of worldviews thus complements Heidegger's theory of "technology" as the metaphysical essence of modernity, which he characterizes as constituting all

life as “standing reserve”—as if, in the end, it amounted to nothing more than stockpiled resources ready for exploitation (Heidegger, 1977b; 117).

In keeping with the macrocosmic depiction of this instrumentalization, in *Burn After Reading*'s opening shot, the introduction of Linda Litzke to the film brings the same phenomenon to bear upon the microcosm of the individual's body. Linda plans to “reinvent” herself through a battery of plastic surgery operations, marrying the objectivism of modern science and the mass media: a combination perhaps more common than typically imagined. Linda complains to Ted (Richard Jenkins), her manager at Hardbodies gym, about the refusal of their insurance plan to cover the cost of the elective procedures. Ted is soft on Linda and, in response to her desperation, he reassuringly compliments her, “You're a beautiful, woman.” Linda protests, “I've gone just about as far as I can go with this body.” Modestly, he insists, “I think it's a . . . it's not a phony-baloney, Hollywood body.” But that's exactly what Linda wants. She scoffs, “That's right Ted, I would be laughed out of Hollywood. I have very limited breasts, a ginormous ass, and I've got this gut that swings back and forth in front of me like a bent wheel.”⁴ Linda's aspirations are those of the modern subject, not as an anonymous face in the urban crowd but rather as a consumer in the age of the Internet, when computer dating first emerged as a prevalent—if not the predominant—form of romance.

Along with resolving to make herself over with plastic surgery, in an attempt to invigorate her love life Linda has begun to date through the website BeWithMeDC.com, whose name almost literally parodies Heidegger's concept of *das Man*, as Dasein's everyday being-with (*Mitsein*). As characteristic of *das Man*'s “idle talk,” the social networks of the Internet have rendered commonplace the “personals” that, before its invention, were tucked away in the classified ads at the back newspapers and largely considered the terrain only of desperately lonely people and perverts. In this vein, jealously questioning Linda about Harry Pfarrer (George Clooney), a guy she later meets through BewithmeDC.com, Ted remarks, “What do you really know about this guy? . . . I mean he could be one of these guys who cruises the Internet.” Linda lights up enthusiastically, “Yeah, so am I!” By rendering the personals mainstream, the Internet has established their objectifying categories as a commonplace vocabulary for evaluating one's self and others. Correlative to the breadth of their distribution, as an “open call” for romantic intimacy, the personals required one to identify oneself with easily recognizable clichés, in a limited number of characters, extending the abstract taxonomies of the bureaucratic form to personal life. “Professional SWM, 37, seeks SF, 20–40, likes Chinese noodles and long walks on the beach.” Describing her

Internet profile to Chad, Linda captures the contemporary version of this phenomenon: “What turns me on. What turns me off. I’m really looking for a guy with a sense of humor.”

In a marginal scene, the Coens’ further depict this objectification of subjectivity in the reduction of language to, what Heidegger calls, “idle talk.” Trying to secure her insurance company’s approval for her plastic surgery, Linda is on the telephone, speaking with a machine. The robot prompts her, “If you’re an English speaker, please say ‘yes,’ or ‘English.’”

“Yes,” she enters.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t understand what you said. If you’re an English speaker . . .”

Linda interrupts, “English.”

“Would you like to speak to the billing department or an agent?”

Again the robot fails to comprehend her entry, “I’m sorry, I didn’t understand what you said.”

“Agent. A-Gent.” The machine’s prompt, “if you are an English speaker,” reflexively calls attention to the language of the exchange. While Linda indeed speaks English, the machine doesn’t understand her. Not only is her speech limited to responding to mechanical prompts, her pronunciation must conform to the machine’s parameters. In the end, she sounds as much or more like a robot than the robot itself, a point brought home not only by the mechanical repetition of Linda’s final response but also by evoking subjectivity with the word itself: “Agent. A-Gent.”

Finally, the objectivism of the Internet is captured in the standard with which Linda and Chad evaluate potential suitors. As she scrolls through candidates on the computer screen, she dismisses them in short succession, “Loser . . . loser . . . loser. They should call this ‘mr.loser.com.’” All considerations of character are reduced to a uniform standard, in terms of which Linda also clearly evaluates herself. As evidenced in Chad’s dismissive laughter at the men’s pictures, eccentricity is precluded as aberrant. And the singular dynamics of intersubjective relationships, which one might argue are essential to their value, are altogether denied. When Linda later goes to meet with a man who—despite his stupid-looking glasses—Chad suggests “might not be a loser” because he’s wearing “a Brioni suit,” the alienation of the Internet is echoed in her experience of the public. All life now seems to be mediated directly or indirectly by the zeros and ones of the computer. As she walks through the park, she spies numerous men sitting alone on benches. Each of them looks like a potential suitor, waiting for a stranger to take to a movie, dinner, and bed. Linda’s date has precisely this routine sense about it: she and her suitor sit in silence at the cinema, don’t talk over dinner,

but nevertheless go to bed together and screw without any evidence of pleasure or passion—he keeps on his stupid-looking glasses—simply because its perfunctory.⁵

Yo' Ass!

In *Intolerable Cruelty*, the Coens explore this instrumentalization of sex and social life with particular regard to one of the modern institutions in which one otherwise might hope to find refuge from such exploitation: marriage. The film begins with the image of a rich television producer driving home in his convertible to catch his wife *in flagrante* with the pool boy—and they don't have a pool! A fight erupts in which he draws a gun from the bedside table and his wife stabs him in the rear end with his Daytime Television Lifetime Achievement Award before both she and the pool boy flee the scene. As the TV producer stands on the balcony outside their bedroom, screaming after them and firing his gun, he also takes Polaroid pictures of the incident—the pool boy's van, his wife driving away in his Jaguar, and the stab wounds on his backside—proclaiming, “Explain this away darling!”

Miles Massey (George Clooney), a divorce lawyer, and Marylin Rexroth (Catherine Zeta-Jones), a gold-digging divorcée, are the film's protagonists, and, in it, the Coens approach marriage *through the institution of divorce*. In this light, they reductively present marital relations as sustained, not by love, but rather by sex (for men) and money (for women). After he has been caught literally with his pants down, Marylin's husband, Rex Rexroth (Edward Herrmann) explains to Miles, his lawyer, “When I first met Marylin, we were crazy about each other. Not emotionally, of course. Just, we couldn't keep our hands off each other.” But if sex is the lure that initially leads men into marriages, in *Intolerable Cruelty*, it also inevitably leads them astray. Miles completes the thought, “But then . . . Time marches on. Ardor cools.” And the women in the film not only anticipate but even hope for the philandering that follows, as the key to a generous divorce settlement. One of Marylin's friends remarks, “I've been trying to nail George's ass for years, but he's so careful.” Women in the film marry for money, not so they can enjoy it with their husbands but rather so they can enjoy it after they leave them. While utterly farcical, *Intolerable Cruelty* thus entertains a critical hypothesis that in modern America might very well carry sociological validity: divorce is the dominant paradigm of romantic, familial relationships. As a messenger from his wife's law firm tells Harry, in *Burn After Reading*, when he's distraught about the fact that she's leaving him, “Grow up, man. It happens to *everybody*.”

Divorce does not serve to dissolve failed marriages; marriage temporarily postpones all-but inevitable divorces. And marital relationships are accordingly characterized by mutually exploitative antagonism.

In *Intolerable Cruelty* this antagonism is captured in a slogan: "I'm gonna nail your ass!" Gus Petch (Cedric the Entertainer), a private detective and self-described "Ass Nailer" who works both sides of the war between the sexes, introduces the expression and repeats it most incessantly. Chasing Marylin's husband and his date half-naked around their motel room with his video camera, Gus barks at them, "Yeah, I'm gonna nail your ass! I'm gonna nail your ass! Oh, I'm gonna nail your ass!! Yo' ass! I'm gonna nail your ass!" After he shows the video to Marylin, and she explains what she intends to do with it, he remarks, "Sounds to me like you're gonna nail his ass." The expression thus first positions women in the Coens' depiction of the antagonism of modern marriage, for whom it primarily means to catch one's spouse transgressing so that one can sue for divorce with the dominant hand. But an exchange between Miles and Marylin reveals that this expression also explains the position of men in their relationships to women. Over an early dinner (which Miles has arranged to distract Marylin so that Gus can raid her house while she's out), Marylin remarks, "I've invested five good years in my marriage to Rex, and I've nailed his ass fair and square. Now I'm going to have it stuffed and mounted . . . and have my lady friends come over and throw darts at it." When she subsequently asks, "What are you after Miles?" He explains, "Well, I'm a lot like you. Just looking for an ass to mount." Marylin replies, "Well, don't look at mine." If, for the women, "I'm gonna nail your ass!" means to take their husband's assets, for the men the meaning is explicitly sexual. In *Intolerable Cruelty*, despite the difference in the respective positions of men and women within it, marriage is thus presented as an institution forged by mutual ass-nailing.

This nihilistic depiction of romantic relationships is presented as characteristic of a culture defined by vanity and consumption. As emblematic of his narcissism and ruthless aggression, Miles chronically checks his teeth in the mirror. While comparing their schedules to make plans, Marylin's friends are all too preoccupied with their body wraps, Botox, and butt fat to make time for one another. The film is set amid the opulence of Beverly Hills: fine restaurants, high fashion, sports cars, and swimming pools. At stake in the divorce proceedings are mansions, summer homes, and whole companies; and, if the women size up the men in terms of their possessions, the sex pursued by the men is itself presented, in familiar terms, as another consumable: nameless blond bimbos bouncing on a bed. While the social

critique in *Intolerable Cruelty* might be dismissed as superficial in its caricature of consumer culture, what is at stake for Marylin in all this opulence and objectification is a defining modern value: *autonomy*. She explains to Gus, “This is going to be my passport to wealth, independence, and freedom.” But independence itself is presented as having a dark side: lonely, antisocial, isolation. Marylin’s best friend, Sarah Sorkin (Julia Duffy), has achieved what Marylin herself wants, “Three fine settlements. More money than she could ever hope to spend . . . Her vaunted independence . . .” But the result is contrary than expected. When she complains about pain from an ulcer (she can’t take her medicine before elective surgery), Marylin expresses concern, “You shouldn’t be living here alone, Sarah.”

She replies, “My goddamn husbands gave me the ulcer.”

“But a bottle of Bromo can’t love you back.” Beyond the vain consumerism of contemporary culture, in the Coens’ film, atomization and the instrumentalization of social relations are thus presented as the truth of liberal democratic autonomy. (What political philosopher Isaiah Berlin famously defines as “negative freedom.”) When one stands as a rational calculating subject over and against the world as an objective field, subject to one’s instrumental manipulation, one stands alone, at odds with others in a world devoid of value.

Anxiety Has No Object

What wrenches Dasein from this fallenness into the everyday objectivism of *das Man* is, according to Heidegger, anxiety. Whereas fear pertains to something potentially detrimental, Heidegger argues that *anxiety has no object*. What provokes anxiety is indeterminate. It’s hard to pin down, seemingly emanating from everywhere and nowhere in particular. Anecdotally, Heidegger recounts, in the wake of an anxiety attack, “we are accustomed to say, ‘it was really nothing’” (Heidegger, 1962; 187/231). Still further, Heidegger contends, anxiety renders things in the world and even other people momentarily inconsequential. Any gesture or object offered as a palliative is dismissed. Nothing suffices to calm one’s nerves.

While initially formulated privatively, Heidegger affirms this lack of any definitive object as a positive, existential determination of anxiety. “What oppresses us,” he writes, “is not this or that . . . it is the world itself” (Heidegger, 1962; 187/231). Asserting this, of course, Heidegger does not contend that anxiety brings Dasein face-to-face with the world as a brute,

physical fact. After all, for Heidegger, the world is not at thing but rather a potentiality integral to Dasein. Accordingly, he contends that the void revealed in the nothing and nowhere of anxiety is the defining horizon of this potentiality: the nullity that circumscribes the world in Dasein's projective understanding. And he concludes that, by disclosing the world as world, anxiety throws the subject back upon *itself*. Heidegger writes,

In anxiety, what is environmentally ready-at-hand sinks away and so, in general, do entities within the world. The "world" can offer nothing more, and neither can the Dasein-with of others. Anxiety thus takes away from Dasein the possibility of understanding itself as it falls, in terms of the world and the way things have been publicly interpreted. (Heidegger, 1962; 188/232)

Interrupted in its everyday immersion in the world, Heidegger contends that Dasein experiences the uncanniness of its existence: the unfathomable groundlessness of its being at all. The German word *unheimlich* translates into English literally as "not at home." And, for Heidegger, this, too, is a further, positive determination of anxiety's indeterminacy as an experience of nothing, nowhere. Anxiety renders Dasein "not-at-home," by interrupting its everyday existence, bringing it face to face with itself in its potentiality as being-in-the-world, and so opening up the possibility of assuming responsibility for its existence authentically.

In *The Man Who Wasn't There*, Ed generally suffers not from anxiety but rather from a malaise, in which the nullity of existence is manifested in the meaninglessness of his listless indifference. However, Ed's experience also is punctuated by attacks of anxiety. Standing at his station in the barbershop, Ed stares at the back of a child client's head, suddenly dumbfounded. He mutters to Frank, "This hair, you ever wonder about it, how it keeps on coming? It just keeps growing . . . It's part of us and we cut it off and throw it away." Baffled by Ed's remarks, Frank chides him, "Come on, Ed, you're gonna scare the kid." All at once, Ed's role as the barber no longer fits him comfortably. The hair he works on every day appears foreign, disturbing his very sense of the commonplace. He continues, "I'm gonna to take this hair and throw it out in the dirt . . . I'm gonna mingle it with common house dirt."

In *Intolerable Cruelty*, Miles similarly suffers from a general sense of despondence, which gives way to a paralyzing fit of anxiety. Like the melancholy of Marilyn's friend Sarah Sorokin, Miles's despair paradoxically culminates in the accomplishment of what he imagines he wants: victory, which, in one