

# *The Man Who Wasn't There*

## Joel & Ethan Coen



*Workshop presenter:*  
Paul Sommer

<http://www.filmsite.org/filmnoir.html>

[http://www.indiewire.com/movies/rev\\_01Cannes\\_010515\\_Man.html](http://www.indiewire.com/movies/rev_01Cannes_010515_Man.html)

<http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/the-man-who-wasn't-there.html>

<http://www.workprint.net/prodnotes/manwasntthereprod.html>

[http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1110075-man\\_who\\_wasn't\\_there/?rtp=1](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1110075-man_who_wasn't_there/?rtp=1)

# *The Man Who Wasn't There*

## Credits

USA Films

Working Title

Director: Joel Coen

Screenwriters: Joel Coen, Ethan Coen

Producer: Ethan Coen

Executive producers: Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner

Director of photography: Roger Deakins

Production designer: Dennis Gassner

Editors: Roderick Jaynes, Tricia Cooke

Costume designer: Mary Zophres

Music: Carter Burwell

## **Cast:**

Ed: Billy Bob Thornton

Doris: Frances McDormand

Big Dave: James Gandolfini

Carcanogues: Adam Alexi-Malle

Frank: Michael Badalucco

Ann Nirdlinger: Katherine Borowitz

Walter Abundas: Richard Jenkins

Birdy Abundas: Scarlett Johansson

Creighton Tolliver: Jon Polito

Freddy Riedenschneider: Tony Shalhoub

Running time -- 116 minutes

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## **Framing**

*Understanding Contexts: Gale Maclachlan and Ian Reid*

### **Intratextuality:**

(Inside the text) the elements of the text, the language of film, techniques and how they contextualise what is being said.

How do the technical elements of the film support and develop the themes/ideas?

### **Intertextuality**

(Between texts) genre, connections with other films and texts, how understanding one text will help you to better understand another.

What references to other texts does this film rely on? Including genre.

### **Circumtextuality**

(Around texts) what are the conditions under which you experienced a text? How did they make you see the text in particular ways?

What elements of presentation might be considered (elements which frame the text without being considered as the text)?

Film/video/DVD. Viewing conditions. Audience expectation. Support material.

### **Extratextuality**

("Outside" the text, but connected to it) what values, themes, stereotypes, connections with social/cultural understandings. How does the text add to these? How to these influence what we are seeing

### **Narrative elements**

Narrative, meta-narrative, narrative point of view, the story (not just the storyline, but the inevitability of the flow of events) the way the story is structured, how one event follows from another.

Who is telling the story? Where is the writer's / director's voice?

How does this point of view shape the story and your response to it?

How are events linked? And what does this say about the themes?

How are events disclosed? Do we discover them at the same time as the characters or are we privileged in some way (dramatic irony)?

**Task:** Explain how the technical elements of the film develop the ideas in the film. In your discussion include close reference to the way the audience is positioned through various narrative techniques.

## *Establishing a context*

### Nowhere Men; Coens Elegantly Craft "Man Who Wasn't There"

by Patrick Z. McGavin

(indieWIRE/05.15.01) -- Tonally sophisticated, formally deft, the elegantly vicious poetic crime movie by **Joel and Ethan Coen**, "**The Man Who Wasn't There**" inhabits a vivid, peculiar place of loss and corruption. Neither pastiche nor parody, the movie suffers from an academic veneer, though it removes the deconstruction of genre and the assorted subdivisions of "post-noir" and "neo-noir" that continuously threaten to render the form irrelevant.

Above all, it is sharp, gorgeous moviemaking; the luminous, beautifully textured black and white cinematography of **Roger Deakins** and the evocative production design of **Dennis Gassner**, carry dense and allusive references to movies (a haunting reminder of the car submerged in the lake from **Charles Laughton's "Night of the Hunter"**), 1940s "detective" stories, and the furious, bleakly stylized first-person novels of **Jim Thompson** ("**The Nowhere Man**," "**A Killer Inside Me**"). The Coen Brothers' first feature, "**Blood Simple**" was steeped in **James Cain's "Double Indemnity"**; their third movie "**Miller's Crossing**" was a variation of **Dashiell Hammett's "Red Harvest"**. "Man Who Wasn't There," however, does not replicate the nasty, visceral edge of Thompson's work, though the dovetailing themes of escape and entrapment, deception and negation, bleed through every frame.

Known in production as "The Barber Project," this new **Cannes** competition work has a sharper focus and greater concentration than their 2000 Depression-era musical, "**O Brother, Where Art Thou**." It is graced by the same free form, open ended narrative, the discursive, off-center rhythms, though here the work is anchored by a melancholy, subdued and quietly sad lead performance from **Billy Bob Thornton**. His first-person narration establishes the movie's wounded, ephemeral voice, tracing the outlines of his character, the resigned, defeated "barber," denied the inherent material comfort and social mobility of immediate post-war American culture. Set in the late 1940s, in the crippling, anonymous small town life of a Sacramento suburb, the movie sketches the surreal consequences and devastating repercussions of his failed extortion plot.

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The movie lacks the speed and intensity of the traditional crime thriller, offering instead a plaintive and trenchant exploration of salvation and grace. Despite the sophisticated visual patterns, the gradations of light and shadow, ambiguity and disruption, "The Man Who Wasn't There" is most impressive for its innovative, novelistic flair -- encompassing a range of perceptions and observations about American life and attitudes. Unlike "O Brother," this movie feels entirely thought through; it has a greater shape and expressive range, and the barely concealed contempt and superiority the filmmakers frequently express has been muted, though not completely suppressed. The consistently entertaining characterizations, from the minor players to Thornton -- not normally a strength for the Coens -- deepen the emotional register, creating a work with a finer, more attuned feeling of human experience.

"The Man Who Wasn't There" is hardly perfect; McDormand's character feels underdeveloped. Some of their recurring visual "stunts," in particular the use of circulate objects and shapes, appears somewhat worn out. But there is finally a greater sense of freedom and possibility. The work is meticulous, but there is not the feeling of coercion and persuasion that inflects their other movies, but a freshness and new way of seeing the world -- a fantastic, invigorating trip if ever one existed.

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### "The Man Who Wasn't There" (U.S.)

By Michael Rechtshaffen

Those genre-tripping, time-traveling Coen brothers are back in Cannes for the second time in as many years, following May 2000's invitee, "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" with a real doozy.

Set in late-1940s small-town California, "The Man Who Wasn't There" is vintage hard-boiled film noir extracted to a fine, James M. Cain-worthy pulp and crafted as an unmistakable, razor-edged valentine to the man whose fatalistic fiction inspired Hollywood to do some of its best work of that decade with the likes of "Double Indemnity" and "The Postman Always Rings Twice."

Technically, it's the Coens' most accomplished work to date, boasting strikingly lustrous black-and-white photography and impeccable period production design, not to mention another swell cast. Yet somehow the picture never completely takes hold.

It's as if there's some kind of invisible barrier in place that allows you to admire the workmanship while prohibiting any real sense of involvement.

A slightly tighter edit might help -- too many scenes tend to linger longer than they should -- but the languid pace alone isn't responsible for the story's ultimate inability to make for a fully satisfying experience.

That still shouldn't hurt its relationship with its loyal fan base domestically and overseas, which should make it one of the stronger Coen boxoffice performers.

Taking its geographical cue from Alfred Hitchcock's "Shadow of a Doubt" (the director's personal favorite), "There" takes place in the quaint Northern California town of Santa Rosa (re-created externally by the city of Orange). There, painfully passive barber Ed Crane (a terrific Billy Bob Thornton) plies his trade.

A man of very few words -- at least when not providing the running voice-over narration -- Ed goes about the business of cutting hair with a stoic resignation. He's stuck in a rut and has no clue how to get out.

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But the big scene-stealer here is the incredible look of the picture. Shot by regular Coen collaborator Roger Deakins on color negative film that was printed in black and white, the images have a stunning depth and beauty. There's a soft lighting gleams off its subjects with the luster of polished chrome.

Factor in Dennis Gassner's evocative production design, Mary Zophres' appropriately stylized costumes and Carter Burwell's quietly menacing score, and the technically brilliant effect is complete. Too bad there couldn't have been more "There" there.

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## Coens pay homage to film noir with 'Man'

*Mary F. Pols*

*Contra Costa Times (Thursday, November 1, 2001)*

Ethan and Joel Coen's chilly black-and-white homage to film noir, "The Man Who Wasn't There," plays out like a creative lark, the kind of experimentation artists indulge in once the bills are paid. With its fantastically cool look and its ironic sense of humor, it's distinctly theirs, but if you compare it to their best work, it feels more like an itch the brothers needed to scratch than, say, a "Fargo." Of course, with talents like the Coens', even an itch is going to be entertaining.

The setting is late 1940s Santa Rosa, although no scenes were shot there. Ed Crane (Billy Bob Thornton) lives with his wife, Doris (Frances McDormand), in a classic middle-class Craftsman bungalow. All the heroes have come back from the war. Ed isn't one. He's just a guy who works at his brother-in-law Frank's (Michael Badalucco) barbershop.

"Yeah, I worked at a barbershop," Ed tells us in a deadpan narrative of noir. "But I never considered myself a barber."

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This is one of those films where the look of it is as important, if not more important, than the story. As the plot drags on, the visuals sustain us. In one scene, Ed has a conversation with Ann Nirdlinger (Katherine Borowitz) on the porch of his bungalow, in which she tells him something quite surprising, involving aliens. But you're more likely to remember the way her veil looks like a cobweb and the way the shadows of the leaves shimmer across the porch. It's the kind of scene that sends you into a reverie about summertime in a warm place, which is lovely, but was this the intention?

This sensation, that we're focusing on the wrong thing, happens time and time again in "The Man Who Wasn't There." When Ed visits Nirdlinger's department store for a crucial scene, you're distracted by the perfection of the place, by the way it really looks the way you'd expect a department store of the late 1940s to look, right down to the way we think people moved.

The Coen's big feat here is in re-creating a mood: not so much a mood of a time, but the mood of the *movies* of that time. If your video store clerk handed you "The Man Who Wasn't There" in a battered box and told you it was a lost classic, an adaptation of a James M. Cain novel that belonged on the shelf with "Double Indemnity," you could accept that. But you'd probably find it somewhat hollow. In that time, it would have been just average, maybe even a bit of a bore.

With the exception of Gandolfini, who just seems like a dumber Tony Soprano, the casting is perfect. Thornton is just the chameleon to play a cipher like Ed. He smokes nonstop, with all the quiet style of a 1940s star, and keeps his features neatly arranged in a look that says nothing. The way he's lit by Roger Deakins, he looks like Humphrey Bogart, and he has that same way of smoking, getting a bit of tobacco stuck on his tongue and removing it with quiet irritation.

He's not brooding, he's just there, emotionally absent and so diffident he barely seems to have blood in his veins. One of the movie's biggest laughs comes when Birdie (Scarlett Johansson), a teen-age piano player Ed has taken an interest in, looks at him thoughtfully and says, "You're an enthusiast." He's the farthest thing from it. Ed is so clueless, it never occurs to him that his interest in Birdie might be unhealthy. When she interprets it as a come-on, he's shocked. He's got all the trappings of a man who we'd expect to be sexual — good looks, a certain style, an essence of cool — but he's sexless.

Are the Coens trying to say something about our heroes of old, our Bogarts and Montgomery Clifts? The joke is that we can't stop expecting more from Ed, the way we always did of those heroes, but the will just isn't there. Leave it to the Coen brothers to both pay homage to film noir and turn it on its end.

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In terms of style, the new film from Joel and Ethan Coen is the opposite of their previous movie, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*. Where that film was ultra-colorful, both in its photography and its acting, *The Man Who Wasn't There* is muted and deadpan (which isn't to say that it is humorless, this is still a Coen brothers film). Both films were shot in color, but *O Brother's* colors were enriched and saturated via digital wizardry. *The Man Who Wasn't There* had its color drained, leaving it resembling a black-and-white film. The absence of vibrancy is important to *The Man Who Wasn't There*, because it's a film about a man who loses everything he has, including, perhaps, his soul.

*The Man Who Wasn't There* utilizes the conventions of film noir more expressly than any Coen brothers film since *Blood Simple*. Most obviously, its black and white palette is manipulated by the technique of chiaroscuro to create foreboding shadows and ribbons of light that intersect the frame in bizarre and unsettling ways, which belie the normalcy of the film's setting. That setting is Santa Rosa, California, in 1949. (The town may be familiar to film buffs as the locale for Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt*.) In this seemingly innocuous, jerkwater burg resides a barber named Ed Crane (played by Billy Bob Thornton, who in black-and-white looks like a cross between Humphrey Bogart and James Mason). "I never thought of myself as a barber," croaks Crane in the film's first line, a deadpan voice-over that accompanies the rest of the movie in a typically fatalistic noir fashion. In the film's opening words we learn what our protagonist is not. Negation is a theme in the film; characters are defined by what they didn't do, effort is revealed to be useless, and introspection and investigation fruitless tasks.

Ed Crane is a man of few words. When he does speak, he takes his time and makes every word count. Naturally, all his acquaintances are motor mouths, their logorrhea a constant hum that overtakes him, and makes him a nonentity in any social situation. His partner at the barbershop is his garrulous brother-in-law Frank (Michael Badalucco), a man for whom no thought is too insignificant to expound upon verbally. Frank's sister, Ed's wife, is as loud and assertive as Ed is quiet and reserved. She is played by Coen brothers stalwart Frances McDormand in a brassy manner that implies sexual freedom, and indeed, she is cheating on Ed with Big Dave Brewster (James Gandolfini), the owner of a local department store with the great name Nirdlingers. Ed is aware of her infidelity, but it's not until a chance encounter with a sweaty, bewigged entrepreneur (Jon Polito) that Ed gets the idea of blackmail into his head.

In most film noir, the protagonist is a basically decent fellow who gets into trouble due either to a checkered past that comes back to haunt him, or a single unwise decision, usually motivated by greed or lust. In Ed's case, it's the latter, and his plan to blackmail Big Dave for \$10,000 goes horribly, inevitably wrong. The disaster is out of proportion to the sin that precipitated it, and hence the noir hero's despairing feeling of the whole world out to get him. The rest of the film follows Ed's attempts to wriggle free from this mess, but like a beast stuck in a tar pit, his actions prove futile. The ineffectuality of action is a recurring theme in the film. Ed's profession as a barber is the primary example. As Ed states, no matter how much hair he cuts, it always grows back. Where does it come from? What mark does he leave on the world? This question is posed in the film's grimly ironic finale, by which time everything Ed has attempted has been nullified by an opposite circumstance. The film gets its title by rendering Ed Crane ultimately as the embodiment of the Superfluous Man, without purpose or direction.

Crane's plans for himself fail in every arena, with every other character in the film. His lawyer, a fast-talking big shot from Sacramento named Freddy Riedenschneider (Tony Shaloub, exhibiting the same barking-loon style that earned Michael Lerner an Oscar Nomination for *Barton Fink*), strains to provide reasonable doubt by applying Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, but he never gets a chance because Ed's brother-in-law shortfuses the trial. Ed's pipe dream of becoming the manager for the singing career of Birdy (Scarlett Johansson, calling to mind Lauren Bacall) is waylaid by her lack of talent, and a beauty of a car accident. The only thing Ed does accomplish is a lot of cigarette smoking. (This film contains the most smoking since *Out of the Past*. In homage to that definitive film noir, the Coens reprise the joke where one character offers another a cigarette and the other responds by holding up the smoke he is already enjoying.)

Smoke looks great in black-and-white of course, and praise must be given to director of photography Roger Deakins, who once again makes the Coen film its year's most distinctive looking. Black-and-white films that have been made in the last few years all look great. [I'm too young to remember when they were the standard, and most of the older black-and-white films have decayed or worn so much that they appear as to be artifacts rather than art (though color fares even worse over time).] This film's clear, untarnished image highlights the repressed passion that courses beneath the impassive exterior of Ed Crane. Its crispness contrasts placidity with angst and defeat. It's a must-see in a dark theater, where the shadows can blend into the black on the screen, and the film's world becomes your world.

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## **Script Excerpts**

"THE MAN WHO WASN'T THERE"

By

Ethan Coen & Joel Coen

Black.

ED (V.O.)

Yeah, I worked in a barbershop. But  
I never considered myself a barber...

We track back from a barber's pole.

ED (V.O.)

...I stumbled into it--well, married  
into it more precisely...

We track back from a shopkeeper's bell triggered by an opening door. The pull back and tilt down show the top of the head of a customer entering in slow motion.

ED (V.O.)

...I wasn't my establishment. Like  
the fella says, I only work here...

We track along a shelf backed by a mirror and holding pomade, aftershave, hair tonic, a whisk brush.

ED (V.O.)

...The dump was 200 feet square,  
with five chairs, or stations as we  
call 'em, even though there were  
only two of us working...

We track in on a big man in a barber's smock scissoring across a lock of hair that he pulls taut between two fingers of one hand. In slow motion, he laughs and chats.

ED (V.O.)

...Frank Raffo, my brother-in-law,  
was the principal barber. And man,  
could he talk...

Another man in a barber's smock is running electric clippers across a child's head. A cigarette between his lips.

ED (V.O.)

...Now maybe if you're eleven or  
twelve years old, Frank's got an  
interesting point of view, but  
sometimes it got on my nerves. Not  
that I'd complain, mind you. Like I  
said, he was the principal barber.  
Frank's father August--they called  
him Guzzi--had worked the heads up  
in Santa Rosa for thirty-five years  
until his ticker stopped in the middle  
of a Junior Flat Top. He left the  
shop to Frankie free and clear. And  
that seemed to satisfy all of Frank's  
ambitions: cutting the hair and

chewing the fat. Me, I don't talk  
much...

He plucks the cigarette from his mouth and taps its ash into  
a tray.

ED (V.O.)  
...I just cut the hair...

#### LATE IN THE DAY

The barbershop is empty of customers. Late sun slants in  
through the front window. The two barbers--the narrator and  
his brother-in-law--sit in two of the barber chairs, idly  
reading magazines.

FRANK  
Says here that the Russians exploded  
an A-bomb and there's not a damn thing  
we can do about it.

ED  
Uh-huh.

FRANK  
How d'ya like them apples?

Beat.

FRANK  
...Ed?

ED  
Huh?

FRANK  
Russians exploded an A-bomb.

ED  
Yeah.

FRANK  
(shaking his head)  
Jesus...

ED (V.O.)  
Now, being a barber is a lot like  
being a barman or a soda-jerk; there's  
not much to it once you've learned  
the basic moves. For the kids there's  
the Butch, or the Heinie...

We cut to examples of the haircuts as they are ticked off:

ED (V.O.)  
...the Flat Top, the Ivy, the Crew,  
the Vanguard, the Junior Contour  
and, occasionally, the Executive  
Contour. Adults get variations on  
the same, along with the Duck Butt,  
the Timberline...

Ed trims the fringe around a balding head.

ED (V.O.)  
...and something we call the Alpine  
Rope Toss.

He snips one long lonely strand of hair and carefully drapes  
it across a bald pate.

ED (V.O.)  
...I lived in a little bungalow on  
Napa Street. The place was OK, I  
guess; it had an electric ice box,  
gas hearth, and a garbage grinder  
build into the sink. You might say I  
had it made.

We float slowly toward a white bungalow on a quiet street as  
a black coupe pulls into the driveway.

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Still gazing up into the shaft of light, Freddy  
Riedenschneider announces:

RIEDENSCHNEIDER  
...They got this guy, in Germany.  
Fritz something-or-other. Or is it.  
Maybe it's Werner. Anyway, he's got  
this theory, you wanna test something,  
you know, scientifically--how the  
planets go round the sun, what  
sunspots are made of, why the water  
comes out of the tap--well, you gotta  
look at it. But sometimes, you look  
at it, your looking \*changes\* it. Ya  
can't know the reality of what  
happened, or what \*would've\* happened  
if you hadden a stuck in your goddamn  
schnozz. So there \*is\* no 'what  
happened.' Not in any sense that we  
can grasp with our puny minds. Because  
our minds... out minds get in the  
way. Looking at something changes  
it. They call it the 'Uncertainty  
Principle.' Sure, it sounds screwy,  
but even Einstein says the guy's on  
to something.

His gaze up at the window breaks. He strolls around the room,  
still smiling.

RIEDENSCHNEIDER  
...Science. Perception. Reality.  
Doubt...

He stops to examine a bur on his fingernail.

RIEDENSCHNEIDER  
...Reasonable doubt. I'm sayin',  
sometimes, the more you look, the  
less you really know. It's a fact. A

proved fact. In a way, it's the only fact there is. This heinie even wrote it out in numbers.

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ED (V.O.)

...And then it was Freddy Riedenschneider's turn.

Riedenschneider rises, paces, begins to talk.

ED (V.O.)

...I gotta hand it to him, he tossed a lot of sand in their eyes. He talked about how I'd lost my place in the universe...

RIEDENSCHNEIDER

...a puny player on the great world's stage...

ED (V.O.)

...how I was too ordinary to be the criminal mastermind the D.A. made me out to be, how there was some greater scheme at work that the state had yet to unravel, and he threw in some of the old truth stuff he hadn't had a chance to trot out for Doris...

RIEDENSCHNEIDER

...who among us is in a position to say...

ED (V.O.)

...He told them to look at me --look at me close. That the closer they looked the less sense it would all make, that I wasn't the kind of guy to kill a guy, that I was the barber, for Christ's sake...

We pan the jury, solemnly listening to Riedenschneider.

ED (V.O.)

...I was just like them, an ordinary man, guilty of living in a world that had no place for me, guilty of wanting to be a dry cleaner, sure, but not of murder...

Riedenschneider is striding energetically into the foreground to point a finger directly at Ed's face.

ED (V.O.)

...He said I \*was\* Modern Man, and if they voted to convict me, well, they'd be practically cinching the noose around their own necks. He told them to look not at the facts but at the meaning of the facts, and then he said the facts \*had\* no

meaning. It was a pretty good speech,  
and even had me going...

A tap on the shoulder turns Ed around.

ED (V.O.)  
...until Frankie interrupted it.

Frank socks Ed, sending him clattering to the floor.

A bailiff immediately restrains him, but Frank looms over  
Ed, bellowing through tears:

FRANK  
What kind of man \*are\* you? What  
kind of man \*are\* you?

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#### DRIVING POINT OF VIEW

We are looking at pedestrians on the sidewalk through the  
windshield of a moving car.

ED (V.O.)  
All going about their business. It  
seemed like I knew a secret--a bigger  
one even then what had really happened  
to Big Dave, something none of them  
knew...

On Ed, driving.

ED (V.O.)  
...Like I had made it to the outside,  
somehow, and they were all still  
struggling, way down below.

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### ***Film Noir***

(Literally 'black film or cinema') was coined by French film critics who noticed the trend of how dark and black the looks and themes were of many American crime and detective films released in France following the war. It is a style of American films that first evolved in the 1940s, became prominent in the post-war era, and lasted in a classic period until about 1960.

Film noir is a distinct branch, sub-genre or offshoot of the crime/gangster sagas from the 1930s (i.e., *Little Caesar* (1930), *Public Enemy* (1931) and *Scarface* (1932)), but different in tone and characterization. The criminal, violence or greed elements in film noir are a metaphoric symptom of society's evils, with a strong undercurrent of moral conflict. Strictly speaking, however, film noir is not a genre, but rather the mood, style or tone of a film.

The themes of noir, derived from sources in Europe, were imported to Hollywood by emigre film-makers. (Noirs were rooted in German Expressionism of the 1920s and 1930s, such as in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) or Fritz Lang's *M* (1931), and in the French sound films of the 30s.) Classic film noir developed during and after World War II, taking advantage of the post-war ambience of anxiety, pessimism, and suspicion.

So-called post-noirs (modern, tech-noirs or neo-noirs) appeared after the classic period with a revival of the themes of classic noir. Tech-noir - referring to a hybrid of high-tech sci-fi and film noirs portraying a decayed, grungy, unpromising, and dystopic future is also termed 'cyberpunk.' The latter term was first popularized by William Gibson's book *Neuromancer*, and best exemplified in the late

70s and 80s, with the following films: *Alien* (1979), *Outland* (1981), *Blade Runner* (1982), *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984), *The Terminator* (1984), *Robocop* (1987), and *Total Recall* (1990).

### **Primary Characteristics and Conventions of Film Noir:**

The primary moods of classic *film noir* are melancholy, alienation, bleakness, disillusionment, disenchantment, pessimism, ambiguity, moral corruption, evil, guilt and paranoia. Heroes (or anti-heroes), corrupt characters and villains include down-and-out, hard-boiled detectives or private eyes, cops, gangsters, government agents, crooks, war veterans, petty criminals, and murderers. These protagonists are often morally-ambiguous low lifes from the dark and gloomy underworld of violent crime and corruption. Distinctively, they are cynical, tarnished, obsessive (sexual or otherwise), brooding, menacing, sinister, sardonic, disillusioned, frightened and insecure loners (usually men), struggling to survive and ultimately losing.

The females in film noir are either of two types - dutiful, reliable, trustworthy and loving women; or *femme fatales* - mysterious, duplicitous, double-crossing, gorgeous, unloving, predatory, tough-sweet, unreliable, irresponsible, manipulative and desperate women. Usually, the male protagonist in film noir has to inevitably choose (or have the fateful choice made for him) between the women - and invariably he picks the *femme fatale* who destructively goads him into committing murder or some other crime of passion.

*Film noir* films (mostly shot in gloomy grays, blacks and whites) show the dark and inhumane side of human nature with cynicism and doomed love, and they emphasize the brutal, unhealthy, seamy, shadowy, dark and sadistic sides of the human experience. An oppressive atmosphere of menace, pessimism, anxiety, suspicion that anything can go wrong, dingy realism, futility, fatalism, defeat and entrapment are stylized characteristics of *film noir*. The protagonists in film noir are normally driven by their past or by human weakness to repeat former mistakes.

*Film noir* is marked by expressionistic lighting, disorienting visual schemes and skewed camera angles, circling cigarette smoke, existential sensibilities, and unbalanced compositions. Settings are often interiors with low-key lighting, venetian-blinded windows, and dark and gloomy appearances. Exteriors are often urban night scenes with deep shadows, wet asphalt, rain-slicked or mean streets, flashing neon lights, and low key lighting. Story locations are often in murky and dark streets, dimly-lit apartments and hotel rooms of big cities. [Often-times, war-time scarcities were the reason for the reduced budgets and shadowy, stark sets of B-pictures and film noirs.]

Narratives are frequently complex and convoluted, typically told with flashbacks (or a series of flashbacks), and/or reflective voice-over narration. Amnesia suffered by the protagonist is a common plot device. Revelations regarding the hero are made to explain/justify the hero's own cynical perspective on life.

The earliest film noirs were detective thrillers, with plots and themes often taken from adaptations of literary works - preferably from best-selling, hard-boiled, pulp novels and crime fiction by Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain or Dashiell Hammett. Very often, a *film noir* story was developed around a male character [e.g., Robert Mitchum, Fred MacMurray, or Humphrey Bogart] who encountered a beautiful but promiscuous and seductive *femme fatale* [e.g., Mary Astor, Veronica Lake, Barbara Stanwyck, or Lana Turner] who used her feminine wiles and sexuality to manipulate him into becoming the fall guy - often following a murder. After a double-cross, she was frequently destroyed as well, often at the cost of the hero's life.

### **The First Film Noirs:**

{PRIVATE "TYPE=PICT;ALT=The Blue Dahlia - 1946" }

One of the first detective films to use the shadowy, nihilistic noir style in a definitive way was the pivotal work of novice director John Huston in the mystery classic *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) from a book by Dashiell Hammett. It was famous for Humphrey Bogart's cool, laconic private eye hero Sam Spade in pursuit of crooks greedy for a jewel-encrusted statue, and Mary Astor as the *femme fatale*. The acting duo of Alan Ladd and Veronica Lake was first teamed in *This Gun For Hire* (1942) with Alan Ladd in a star-making role as a ruthless, cat-loving killer named Raven. Another Hammett book of corruption was adapted for Stuart Heisler's *The Glass Key* (1942) for Paramount Studios - again with Ladd and Lake. The noir couple were brought together again in George Marshall's crime thriller *The Blue Dahlia* (1946), with an Oscar-nominated screenplay by Raymond Chandler (the only work he ever wrote directly for the screen).

Orson Welles' films have significant noir features, such as in his expressionistic *Citizen Kane* (1941), the complex *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948) - with a love triangle between Welles, a manipulative Rita Hayworth - the blonde-haired *femme fatale*, and her husband, and the border-town B-movie classic *Touch of Evil* (1958).

{PRIVATE "TYPE=PICT;ALT=Scarlet Street - 1945" }