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CURRICULUM

This teaching guide has three curriculum objectives:

- To help students and teachers using films and videos in the context of the following secondary school curriculum – English Language Arts, Film and Media Studies, Social Studies, and Visual Arts
- To assist educators who are planning to teach film studies for the first time
- To suggest ways in which traditional literary concepts may be taught using a medium other than printed text

DOUBLE INDEMNITY Billy Wilder, 1944

Based on the novel by James M. Cain, *Double Indemnity* recounts the tale of Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray), an insurance salesman who becomes involved with the beautiful wife of a client. Together Neff and Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) concoct an insurance scam that will get rid of Mr. Dietrichson and allow the two lovers to run off with the proceeds from an insurance policy. Unfortunately, things don't work out, and in one of the film's final sequences Walter and Phyllis are left in a standoff with each other, waiting to see who will blink first.

Questions to think about prior to viewing the film:

1. Perhaps the most famous character in film noir movies is the *femme fatale*. Although you may not have a clear definition of a *femme fatale* in mind, in a few sentences, write down what you know about this kind of character.
2. In film noir, many of the male leads are weak, frustrated men. While you are watching *Double Indemnity*, make a mental note of Walter Neff's characteristics? What kind of man is he? What is his relationship like with women?
3. Film noir literally means "black film." As you are watching the film, keep track of all the elements in the picture that seem dark or depressing. Think about the characters, the setting, and the storyline.

After watching *Double Indemnity*, discuss the following questions:

1. *Double Indemnity* has been called "a film without a single trace of pity or love." Do you agree with this statement? Think about the motivations that lie behind the actions of Walter Neff and Phyllis Dietrichson when you consider your response.
2. In your mind, are there any heroes in *Double Indemnity*? If so, who?
3. Film noir movies are still made in Hollywood today. Can you think of any recent detective films or movies about crime that have a similar look or mood? How do these films compare with *Double Indemnity* (a movie often thought of as the original film noir)?

Note: Classroom activities are provided after each section along with an answer key at the end of the guide. Answers are not provided for all activities as some questions depend on teachers to choose films they are already working with in their classes.

HOLLYWOOD, FILM NOIR, AND THE 1940s

The 1940s were a crossroads for Hollywood. Immediately following World War II, the picture looked bright for the American film industry. During the war, Hollywood studios, filmmakers, and stars had worked alongside the American government to promote the Allied war effort, and so with victory achieved, Hollywood emerged as a stable industry with, in fact, the only major national cinema left unscathed by the war. With newly opened markets throughout Europe and Southeast Asia as well as remarkable box-office returns at home all contributing to Hollywood's strength, American cinema seemed poised for a decade of growth. Just as this rosy picture was beginning to settle in, however, a series of blows befell Hollywood that would forever alter the American cinema.

The Paramount Decrees

To begin with, while Hollywood's domestic audience reached more than 100 million in 1946 (two-thirds of the population in the United States) just two years later, the Hollywood studio system that stood behind these numbers came crashing down. In May of 1948, the American government issued the "Paramount Decrees," which charged that the five major studios (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Paramount, Warner Brothers, Twentieth Century Fox, and RKO) and the three minor studios (Universal, Columbia, and United Artists) had colluded in creating a monopoly over the production, distribution, and exhibition of motion pictures throughout the 1930s and 1940s. That the studios created a monopoly was no surprise to Hollywood observers. That the American government challenged this monopoly was a shock that forced the studios to sell off their lucrative movie theatre chains. Once the theatre chains were gone, Hollywood lost the ability to book new movies into their own theatres for long stretches of time, and as a result, the seemingly automatic box-office returns studios had grown used to were no more.

Inflation

Beyond the Paramount Decrees, Hollywood was also hard hit by postwar inflation, which dramatically increased the costs of film production. On top of this, while Hollywood was initially given free access to national markets in Western and Eastern Europe, this ended in the late 1940s. Italy, Great Britain, and France (among other countries) levied protective taxes on all foreign film profits, severely limiting box-office receipts for American films. Once the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States moved into high gear in 1948, the Eastern European market was also lost. And so by 1950, Hollywood's financial structure seemed to teeter near ruin. But the real trouble was only just beginning.

Television

Perhaps the most damaging development for the American film industry was the arrival of the television in the early 1950s. Television quickly changed the viewing habits of North American audiences. Between 1948 and 1950 Hollywood's box-office receipts dropped in direct proportion to the number of TV sets purchased, suggesting that Hollywood would burn as the vacuum tube phoenix took flight in the American home. Of course this didn't happen. By the late 1950s Hollywood recovered some of its stature in North America as the studios learned how to position films differently from TV. But between the years 1947 and 1958, Hollywood faced a period of adjustment that caused many to question whether America's dream factory would survive at all.

Neorealism

If events affecting the financial structure of Hollywood brought film to a crossroads in the 1940s, transformations in filmmaking emanating from beyond America's shores were also changing Hollywood. With the end of World War II, the European film industries revived, led initially by a remarkable series of movies made in Italy. Between the mid-1940s and the early 1950s, a number of highly regarded and exceptionally influential films emerged from war-torn Italy as part of a movement called neorealism.

The neorealists influenced filmmaking in countries around the world, including the United States, by using non-professionals as actors, shooting movies on location rather than in elaborate studios, and concentrating on social and political issues. Perhaps most importantly, the neorealists also developed a raw, semi-documentary approach to storytelling that helped to capture a world at the end of one great historical moment and the beginning of something wholly new. Some of the most important neorealist films include: Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1946), *Paisà* (1946), and *Germany Year Zero* (1947); and Vittorio De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* (1948) and *Umberto D* (1952).

Certainly neorealists like Rossellini and De Sica evolved a raw, semi-documentary style as a result of the limited resources available to them in the years following World War II. Within this style, however, both filmmakers also found a revealing lens in which to capture the drama of post-war everyday life. The German occupation of much of Europe during World War II prevented many European filmmakers from portraying reality. Following the war, these same filmmakers turned with fascination and shock to the people, settings, and stories that dramatically unfolded before their eyes. This sense of realism would find its way into American noir movies of the late 1940s, including Robert Siodmak's *The Killers* (1946), Jules Dassin's *Brute Force* (1947), and Henry Hathaway's *Kiss of Death* (1947).

Citizen Kane

The last important development that brought film to a crossroads in the 1940s had less to do with political, financial, or technological changes in the motion picture industry and more to do with the impact of one movie on filmmaking itself. Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) was not well received by audiences during its day, but filmmakers and critics recognized the movie as a masterpiece, twenty years ahead of its time. The formal structure of the film as well as the technical innovations in sound and lighting that Welles and his fellow artists developed were to have a tremendous influence on cinema for decades to come.

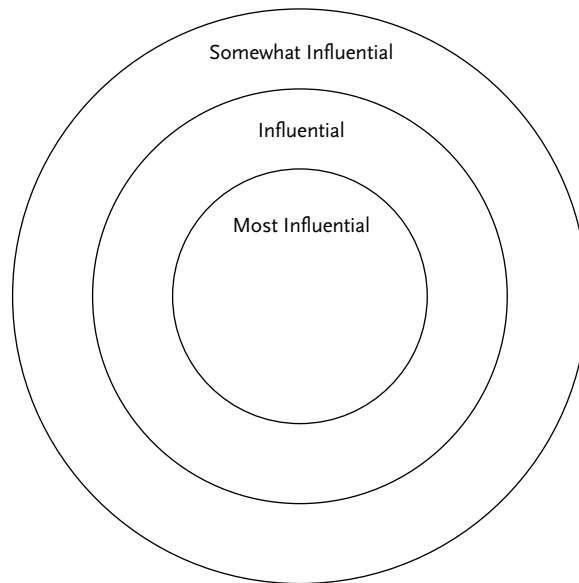
Film Noir

And so as World War II came to a close and the euphoria of the immediate post-war years gave way to difficult social and economic transitions in Hollywood and in America generally, perhaps it's no surprise that this period gave rise to a new, darker kind of film. Labeled film noir by French film critics, these movies drew on the international influence of the Italian neorealists as well as the look and tone of *Citizen Kane*. As we will see, noir films were relatively cheap to make so they were also ideally suited to the changing economic landscape in Hollywood. Beyond all these influences and coincidences, however, film noir also seemed to speak to post-war audiences in America and abroad. Noir films told stories of frustrated, weak, often times broken men who were victimized by scheming women in a world that cared little for the moral and ethical simplicity of earlier Hollywood movies. In this way, the noir cinema fit into and helped articulate a cultural landscape that had become filled with anxiety, uncertainty, and change in the wake of globalized warfare.

HOLLYWOOD, FILM NOIR, AND THE 1940S *continued*

activity 01

Film noir developed as a result of a number of influences and circumstances. Using a series of concentric circles like those below, detail the major influences and circumstances that impacted on the development of film noir as a genre. As you detail the influences and circumstances that impacted on the development of film noir, list the most immediate influences closest to the centre, and then list the remaining influences in degrees of importance.



activity 02

The dissemination of television into North American homes was one of the major developments that brought Hollywood films to a crossroads in the 1940s. TV forced film studios to change the kinds of movies they made and the way movies were targeted at audiences. Once Hollywood learned how to differentiate movies from TV in the late 1950s, the film industry recovered its place with North American audiences, at least for a short time.

Today, television has unquestionably replaced Hollywood movies as the dominant medium of communication, particularly with younger audiences. But now television, too, is facing a challenge; the Internet and the World Wide Web are threatening the status of TV as the dominant media of communication, particularly with younger audiences. Typically, a new medium of communication (for instance, the Internet) will begin to replace an older medium of communication (for instance, the TV) by mimicking the characteristics of the older form of communication. If this is true, in what ways are the Internet and the World Wide Web like TV today? How, for instance, does the World Wide Web look similar to TV? In what ways is our use of the World Wide Web similar to how we use or watch TV? And finally, how are advertisements used similarly on TV and on the World Wide Web?