

Andrew Young

***Double Indemnity* and the Hollywood Production Code**

Because of its distinct narrative and stylistic technique, Billy Wilder's 1944 *Double Indemnity* is widely considered to be the preeminent example of the *film noir*. As Richard Schickel states in his *Double Indemnity: BFI Film Classics*, the film "not only withstands rigorous scrutiny, but actually improves . . . the more we know about the circumstances of its creation" (9). Reaching beyond the film's narrative and stylistic technique, these historical circumstances are often overlooked when examining its significance and impact on both the film industry and wartime American culture. Regulating this significance and impact was the Hollywood Production Code, which profoundly influenced the production of the film. Discussing this influence, Sheri Chinen Biesen states that *Double Indemnity* "was a pivotal film in the evolution of Production Code Administration (PCA) censorship . . . providing the necessary conditions for the dark style and paranoid thematics of film noir" (41). As will later be discussed, because of these *film noir* thematics and aesthetics, *Double Indemnity* is traditionally praised for faithfully portraying the social milieu of wartime American culture while also subverting Code censorship; however, in light of the film's moralistic ending and treatment of criminality, the accuracy of this portrayal must be reconsidered. Because of the gender roles and power structures the ending upholds through the film's adherence to the Code, *Double Indemnity* ultimately fails to portray the wartime zeitgeist for which it is so often recognized.

Although the setting of *Double Indemnity* occurs in 1938, the film equally responds to the political and social issues that defined American culture during World War II and that marked a period of fragmentation in which society questioned traditional gender roles and power structures. In "Movies and the Renegotiation of Genre," Nicholas Spencer states in his chapter on the American cinema of 1944 that while society shifted toward a postwar environment, "new forms of alliance and tension became apparent in numerous areas of American culture and society" (117). What Spencer describes here is possibly society's disenchantment with those political and social institutions that had previously created the illusion of a unified "culture of the whole" (119). Shifting focus away from society and towards the individual, it is out of this disenchantment that a deeper concern regarding human existence and meaning emerged. This cultural

shift towards the individual marks “an attraction to existentialism borne of a sense of meaninglessness” (Spencer 119). Because of the social fragmentation this wartime period generated, “individuals and groups are brought together by haphazard means” (Spencer 119). Ultimately, this contingency reveals how, in the midst of these existential questions, any order or structure of guidance remained absent. Yet because “American film noir is a product of the 1940s and its issues,” contemporary society may better understand wartime American culture through a film such as *Double Indemnity*, which grapples with this focus on the individual and his or her place in society (Spencer 132).

Beginning with the film’s treatment of gender roles, *Double Indemnity* receives high praise for the character Phyllis Dietrichson and her embodiment of the *femme fatale* or “dangerous woman.” Although the film casts Phyllis into an antagonistic role, what is important to note about the *femme fatale* is that she represents the newly found liberation for women during the war. Because of the threat that is presented by wartime American culture against traditional gender roles and masculine notions of power, both feminine liberation and danger are delicately intertwined. For example, because Mr. Dietrichson keeps her “on a leash so tight [she] can’t breathe,” it comes without surprise that Phyllis circumvents morality in order to emancipate herself from her male oppressor. As Schickel remarks about the women of this period, men struggled to “keep them down on the farm (or behind a suburban picket fence) after they had found work in the rough atmosphere of factories, known the joys of living alone and, for that matter, going to bars alone” (58). It is the inception of this freedom for women that exemplifies social fragmentation and tension between individuals, particularly men and women. While Phyllis Dietrichson refrains from bar-hopping or living alone, she indeed “had been a working woman and she was clearly capable of – putting it mildly – a high degree of self-sufficiency” (Schickel 58). This notion of self-sufficiency becomes apparent throughout the film as Phyllis reveals the agency that she wields over Walter Neff. When Phyllis initially mentions her husband’s life insurance policy, Walter resists involvement. But as the film progresses, he subjects himself to Phyllis and her desires for power and liberation, assuring her that “you’re gonna do it and I’m gonna help you.” In this moment, the film reveals how Phyllis has exerted power over Walter while also maintaining a degree of self-sufficiency.

Through the characters Mr. Dietrichson and Barton Keyes, *Double Indemnity* also confronts the traditional power structures of white masculinity and the opposition that they posed to the individual during this period. As Spencer argues, this opposition illustrates “the considerable extent to which the movie is antithetical to the idea of a culture of the whole” (134). At the beginning of the film, Walter informs his Dictaphone that he killed Mr. Dietrichson “for money and for a woman.” Although he achieves neither of these results, Walter suggests to the audience that, because of his wealth and signifiers of masculinity,

Mr. Dietrichson represents those traditional power structures. Yet through Mr. Dietrichson’s murder, the film contends that within wartime American culture, it is the individual who threatens the continuity of traditional power structures. Because of the violence enacted against Mr. Dietrichson, Spencer argues that the “seemingly random and chaotic unfolding of events in *Double Indemnity* denies the possibility of larger commitments or systems of belief” (133-34). Despite those traditional power structures for which Mr. Dietrichson stands, the film embraces the individual rather than the illusion of social unification.

In the absence of Mr. Dietrichson is Barton Keyes, who works against the subversions of Walter and Phyllis to restore the traditional power structures that have been displaced through crime. While *Double Indemnity* confronts the role of the individual in a fragmented society, Spencer asserts that the “lack of social unity is exacerbated by the absence of authority” (135). Indeed, while Mr. Dietrichson’s murder becomes an insurance investigation rather than a police case, the film bestows upon Keyes moral and judicial authority. Because of this portrayal, it is no mistake that Keyes, like Mr. Dietrichson himself, is an old, white male. According to Biesen, Keyes reaffirms the moral doctrine of the Production Code against which Walter and Phyllis work and is “an obvious attempt to pay obeisance to the PCA’s compensating moral values clause” (47). As this film suggests in its confrontation with these traditional power structures, the individual does not necessarily threaten social unification so much as he or she threatens morality. This reaffirmation of traditional power structures evokes reconsideration of the film’s portrayal of wartime American culture and the merit that its recognition garners. But before reexamining the ways in which the film reverts to traditional gender roles and power structures, the historical context of *Double Indemnity*’s production and the Production Code must be explored.

In 1930, a group of producers and Catholic leaders, guided by Martin Quigley and Daniel A. Lord, furnished the Hollywood Production Code, which was an arrangement to censor the content of films at the production stage of their development. Agreeing that the notion of government censorship was insufficient, Quigley and Lord “believed the only way to make morally and politically acceptable films was to exert influence during their production and thus – if films were made correctly – they would need no censorship” (Black 39). This approach to film censorship evidently created numerous problems regarding creative limitations and disagreements between producers and censors over what constituted films as being “morally acceptable.” As Gregory D. Black states in his *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies*, the reason that producers “would adopt a code that, if interpreted literally, would eliminate important social, political, and economic themes from movies and turn the industry into a defender of the status quo remains a mystery” (42). Schickel hypothesizes that the “movie industry’s acquiescence in censorship was a function of its lust for middle-class respectability” (20). It is this desire for respectability

that possibly explains the formation of the Production Code Administration in 1934, which, under the twenty-year leadership of Joseph Breen, granted exhibitory approval to films that met the requirements of the Code. In regards to these requirements, the PCA wanted Hollywood “to emphasize that the church, the government, and the family were the cornerstones of an orderly society; that success and happiness resulted from respecting and working within this system” (Black 39). However, because of the ways in which *Double Indemnity* seemingly embraces individuality over conformity, the production of the film faced numerous challenges in attaining PCA approval. As mentioned earlier, because of the various *film noir* thematics and aesthetics, the film was able to meet the strict requirements of the Code while also portraying the social milieu of wartime American culture.

Without the censorship of the PCA, it is fair to assume that *Double Indemnity* would never have become such a distinguished example of *film noir*. As Biesen states about the relationship between the film and the Code, “*Double Indemnity* was both influenced by the Production Code, and influenced how the Code was applied (or not applied) to later films” (42). Because the strict requirements of the Code “helped produce the dark visual and narrative qualities which would become identified as film noir,” the influence of the Code on *Double Indemnity* manifests itself through the film’s formal and narrative devices (Biesen 43). However, these devices were necessary because the James M. Cain novel from which the film was adapted was considered to be a “racy crime-and-passion tale” (Biesen 43). In 1935, when the novel was originally considered for production, the PCA rejected the proposition on the grounds that the content of Cain’s novel was inconceivable as a film adaptation. As Schickel mentions, “[W]hen the serial [of the novel] began to appear, the Breen office declared that under no circumstances would it be brought to the screen, and all talk stilled” (24). However, according to Biesen, between 1935 and when production on the film began in 1943, the leading factor that caused the PCA to reconsider the novel was that screenwriters “[Billy] Wilder and [Raymond] Chandler altered Cain’s story to accommodate Breen’s reservations” (44). Although it played a necessary role in the production of the film, this accommodation laid the foundation for *Double Indemnity*’s adherence to the Code and ultimate failure to portray with honesty the social milieu of wartime American culture.

In understanding the PCA’s acceptance of Wilder and Chandler’s screenplay, enough credit can never be given to *Double Indemnity*’s formal and narrative devices that embrace those *film noir* thematics and aesthetics. Praising his creativity, Schickel states that Wilder saw how “this baroque manner would be aesthetically redeeming for Cain’s disturbing matter, giving it richness, a resonance, even, if you will, a touch of class” that the novel lacked (20). If it was truly respectability that Hollywood sought when it initially adopted the Code, then Wilder discovered a way in which disturbing material could reach

the screen while maintaining this respectability. In writing the screenplay, Wilder and Chandler faced the challenge of reworking Cain’s material so that content involving sex or violence was rendered acceptable to the PCA. What they discovered during this time was the capacity of innuendo and witty dialogue to convey the novel’s mature content. Early in the film, Walter visits the Dietrichson home, where he first meets Phyllis and instantly becomes attracted to her. Although he is there merely to sell insurance, Walter uses this opportunity to intrigue Phyllis with his flirtatious charm. “There’s a speed limit in this state, Mr. Neff. Forty-five miles an hour,” warns Phyllis. “How fast was I going, officer?” asks Walter, to which Phyllis responds, “I’d say around ninety.” As Biesen mentions, “Rarely had so little been directly stated in a film, yet so much implied” (46). Because this writing strategy proved so successful in circumventing the restrictions of the Code, it eventually emerged as one of the film’s most outstanding characteristics. More importantly, however, was that Wilder and Chandler discovered that “the Code could be manipulated to their own satisfaction” (Biesen 47).

These nuances of dialogue extend beyond the screenplay and influence the formal technique of the film, which employs numerous instances of *film noir* aesthetics. Because the PCA had approved *Double Indemnity*’s screenplay, Wilder was “thus free to be creative with lighting, photography, and sound to evoke a dark, seedy milieu rife with dark themes and malicious deeds” (Biesen 47-48). What the challenging production of this film ultimately reveals is the Code’s “unexpected ability, not only to accommodate, but to cultivate, the ‘lowtone and sordid flavor’ of *Double Indemnity*” (Biesen 49). However, even this ability of the Code to cultivate a dour environment had its limitations. In the original screenplay, the film’s concluding scene was a depiction of Walter’s execution in a gas chamber, which was excluded from the final version. Although Wilder took the time to shoot the scene, the PCA found it to be unnecessarily gruesome and offered a warning against its inclusion. Schickel argues that this warning “clearly worked on Wilder as he shot the film, and his response to it, as well as to the promptings of his own sensibility, greatly improves the picture he finally placed in release” (56). While credit for *Double Indemnity*’s distinct narrative and style must be given to the film’s cast and crew, the Code itself must also be given recognition for its influence on the overall outcome of the film. However, it is because of this influence that *Double Indemnity* ultimately adheres to the requirements of the Code and distorts its portrayal of wartime American culture.

Although *Double Indemnity* grapples with some of the social and political issues of the wartime period, by punishing Phyllis and Walter for their subversive actions, the film’s ending reverts to upholding traditional gender roles and power structures. While *Double Indemnity* appears to embrace the individual over these traditional roles and structures, by the end of the film, it expresses its sentiments for the individual through Keyes’s words to Walter, “you’re all washed up.” This

is not even to mention that through Phyllis's demonstration of feminine liberation, she is punished and killed. What must be ascertained from this ending is its failure to portray faithfully the social milieu of this culture. In his criticism on the film, Henri-Francoise Rey states that the "cinema is nothing less, in fact, than a mirror that distorts purposefully. And it distorts because of the powers that control it" (28). Because of the history that exists between the production of *Double Indemnity* and the requirements of the Code, it would be fair to consider the PCA as the film's distorting, controlling power. Rey proceeds to argue that *Double Indemnity* assumes a propagandistic role "in order to address . . . the needs of the moment manifested by a public who now wants film noir and nothing but such 'dark' cinema" (28). As Rey suggests, the film employs *film noir* thematics and aesthetics to disguise itself as an instrument of traditional gender roles and power structures that aim at fulfilling the "needs" of the public. Through Walter's line to Keyes, "I love you, too," individuals are encouraged in the final moments of the film to resubmit themselves to those traditional institutions against which they have rebelled. This ending radically redefines *Double Indemnity*'s message, which ultimately embraces conformity and unification, as well as it reveals the distorted and dishonest portrayal of a wartime culture that was severely fragmented and individualistic.

Although *Double Indemnity*, in its response to the social and political issues of the period, fails to reconcile injustices involving traditional gender roles and power structures, responsibility for this failure must be placed on the PCA and its control on Hollywood rather than the film's cast and crew. Discussing this responsibility, Rey states that Wilder and his colleagues were "not at fault, only, and very simply, the spirit that gives Hollywood life and the standing orders that regulate the cinema as an industry" (29). In an instance of poetic justice, Biesen assures us that "*Double Indemnity* functioned as one of the cinematic tugs in the unraveling of the PCA" (42). *Double Indemnity* is undoubtedly a crucial film in the history of American cinema and certainly deserves the recognition that it receives. However, because of the significant impact that the Code and wartime American culture had on the film, *Double Indemnity* must be examined within its historical context in order to ensure that it receives fair and just praise.

Andrew Young is a Junior English major with a concentration in Film Studies at Samford University.

Works Cited

Biesen, Sheri Chinen. "Censorship, Film Noir, And Double Indemnity." *Film & History* 25.1/2 (1995): 40-52. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*. Web. 3 Nov. 2011.

- Black, Gregory D. *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Print.
- Double Indemnity*. Dir. Billy Wilder. Perf. Fred MacMurray, Barbara Stanwyck, Edward G. Robinson. Paramount Pictures, 1944. DVD. 2006.
- Rey, Henri-Francoise. “Hollywood Makes Myth like Ford Makes Cars (last installment): Demonstration by the Absurd: Film Noirs.” *Perspectives on Film Noir*. Ed. R. Barton Palmer. New York: G.K. Hall, 1996. 28-29 Print.
- Schickel, Richard. *Double Indemnity: BFI Film Classics*. London: British Film Institute, 1992. Print.
- Spencer, Nicholas. “Movies and the Renegotiation of Genre.” *American Cinema of the 1940s: Themes and Variations*. Ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006. 117-39. Print.