

*Double Indemnity* is a 1944 film directed by Billy Wilder, based on the 1936 James M. Cain novel of the same name. The film has been categorised as a film noir, which was an influential film movement during the 1940s and 1950s. Film noir is very distinct with its reoccurring stylistic and narrative elements. One of these is the sexually attractive, desirable female character. However, many female characters in film noir have been given the label of a “femme fatale,” which means “deadly women” in French. With reference to *Double Indemnity* and the two main characters in the film, Phyllis Dietrichson and Walter Neff, this essay will argue that although the first impression, or the iconic view, of the female character in film noir, in this case Phyllis, is that of a charming, beautiful and passive object of desire, there are several stylistic techniques used by the filmmaker to connote something completely different. A semiotic analysis of techniques used in *Double Indemnity* such as high-contrast lighting, the frequent use of shadows, close-ups, and point-of-view camera shots, as well as an awareness of the film’s relationship to other texts and social-historical context, allow us to understand the hidden nature of Phyllis and the significance she has in the film.

Semiotic film analysis emerged in the 1960s when film theorists were interested in studying film as a language system. Initially, there was a pessimistic attitude towards semiotic film theory. Lapsley and Westlake claim that semiotics signalled “the end of all traditional aesthetics. Ideas of art as organic unity ... as the communication of inspired vision were discarded and replaced by the supposition that all meanings and aesthetics were explicable in terms of determining structures and mechanisms” (32). In other words, theories of film as a construction of reality or a reflection of a director’s personal vision, were supplanted by the idea that everything within a film could be explained through pre-existing meanings in society and culture.

Ferdinand de Saussure is considered by many as the father of linguistics and semiotics. Saussure was concerned with how words produce meaning and argued that meaning exists within a system. He argued that the sign, or linguistic unit, is a “double entity” made up of two components: a signifier, which is the actual appearance of the sound, word or image, and a signified, which can be defined as the concept or meaning attached to a signifier (Saussure 49-50; Lapsley and Westlake 34). The relationship between the two is arbitrary because there is no actual connection between the two. This is because, as Lacan points out, “there is a continual sliding of signifieds under signifiers” (qtd. in Lapsley and Westlake 37). In other words, signifieds can change meaning when the signifier is used in different contexts.

Christian Metz argues that cinema is different from linguistics because “it lacks the equivalent of the arbitrary linguistic sign ... the relationship between signifier and signified is not arbitrary but

motivated” (Stam et al. 35). Metz also believes that cinema is a language system, not a language: “It is not because the cinema is a language that it can tell such fine stories, but rather it has become a language because it has told such fine stories” (Rayner et al. 12). Leading on from this, Metz states that cinema is coded. In the context of film, a code is a system of conventions used for the selection and combination of units (Stam et al. 31). Codes become familiar to viewers who understand why certain filming techniques are used in certain situations. There are codes of editing, framing, lighting, costumes and facial expressions (Lapsley and Westlake 42). For example, when we watch a particular sequence we could ask ourselves: Why has the filmmaker chosen to use close-up shots instead of long shots?

The paradigm and syntagm are related to Metz’s theory on codes and the importance of combination when constructing film sequences. A paradigm can be thought of as a database of signs whereas a syntagm relates to the ordering of signs (Leotta, Semiotics). In other words, syntagma are constructed through the selection of different paradigms. Lapsley and Westlake refer to Metz when listing eight different types of syntagma (41). These include the simple autonomous shot, parallel syntagma, alternating syntagma, and episodic sequence. Each one varies according to length, spatial continuity, temporal continuity, and symbolic meaning. Metz sums up his arguments when noting: “Although each image is a free creation, the arrangement of images into an intelligible sequence – cutting and montage – brings us to the heart of the semiological dimension of film” (58). Essentially both combination and shot selection are important in filmmaking.

Charles Peirce was another influential figure in the construction of semiotic analysis and the study of signs. Peirce founded the typology of the sign which describes three ways that signs can relate to their objects. Firstly, a sign can have an indexical relationship to its object. In order for this to be true, the sign must, at some stage, exist in the same place or time as the object it signifies (de Saussure 52). In other words, indexical signs are directly influenced by their objects and leave behind a trace of a previous occurrence. Secondly, the iconic sign, according to Lapsley and Westlake, must have some specific quality or property that it shares with the object (35). For example, a photograph or portrait of a person is iconic because it actually looks like what is being represented. Symbols are the third category of signs and arise when an object has a conventional relationship to what it represents (Wollen 65). Its meaning has become naturalised over time.

Roland Barthes argues that there are two orders of signification: denotation and connotation. Denotation refers to the “common sense, obvious meaning of the sign” (Rayner et al. 14). Iconic and indexical signs usually fall under this banner. The idea of denotation is illustrated near the beginning

of *Double Indemnity* when Walter meets Phyllis at her house for the first time. A shot from Walter's perspective shows Phyllis slowly walking forward towards the stair rail. A top light is used to illuminate her body, especially her hair and face. This is effective because it gives us an insight into what Walter is thinking. That is, he is amazed at this beautiful woman he has just seen standing in front of him. Johnston describes Phyllis' next move: "she begins to come down the stairs and we see a close up of her legs and golden anklet" (92). Again, this is reinforcing Walter's psychology. Put simply, the denotation, or iconic vision of Phyllis, is that of a sexually attractive woman.

The connotation, however, refers to the hidden meaning of the sign. According to Metz, "Human intervention ... affects only the level of connotation (lighting, camera angle, 'photographic effects,' and so on)" (57). Metz is implying that the filmmaker cannot alter the denotative message of an image. The idea of connotation is related to Pierce's symbolic sign, as mentioned above, and also the motif filmic device. Thompson and Bordwell define a motif as, "an element of a film that is repeated in a significant way" (68). Expanding on this, a motif can be any formal or stylistic technique, literal or figurative, that has allegorical importance.

Even though the femme fatale takes on the characteristic of being a desirable object for the male protagonist, she goes against the notion of women as being passive and homebound. Place explains this unique nature of women in film noir:

"the dark lady, the spider woman, the evil seductress who tempts man and brings about his destruction ... It gives us one of the few periods in film where women are active ... intelligent and powerful, if destructively so, and derive power, not weakness, from their sexuality" (47).

In other words, the femme fatale goes against the role of women in most other film movements and genres. However, the construction of the femme fatale is not always done explicitly and therefore she can be considered a motif.

The angle of the camera helps to establish certain feelings. Referring back to the earlier example where Walter sees Phyllis for the first time, this scene also carries the connotation of Phyllis' true character. Walter initially turns up at the Dietrichson residence to talk insurance with Mr. Dietrichson. However he is not present and Walter's attention is drawn to Phyllis at the top of the stairs. A medium, low-angle shot is used from Walter's perspective looking up at her. This is significant because low-angle shots are commonly used to create a threatening feeling. The very next shot is a high-angle shot from Phyllis' viewpoint as she looks down on Walter. These types of shots help to create a feeling of vulnerability and offer, as Place and Peterson put it, a "fatalistic angle that

looks down on its helpless victim” (68). Essentially, the camera shots used here are a sign warning the audience of the potential danger that awaits Walter, as well as foreshadowing the control Phyllis will have over him.

Another defining feature of film noir is the frequent use of low-key lighting, which is created by increasing the intensity of the key light relative to the fill light. Also known as the chiaroscuro effect, this lighting technique creates images with high contrast and in turn draws our attention to certain objects. When visiting the Dietrichson residence for the second time, Walter tricks Mr. Dietrichson into signing the life insurance papers by showing him what he believes is the automobile insurance papers. As Mr. Dietrichson signs the second copy, we are presented with a shot of Phyllis where a key light to the left of screen brightly lights up her face. This allows us to understand what Phyllis is thinking. That is, a lack of sympathy for her husband as he essentially signs his life away.

The moment when Walter strangles Mr. Dietrichson in the car that Phyllis is driving combines framing and lighting techniques to serve as a great example of Metz’s theory on paradigm and syntagma. The murder takes place off screen and there is a very important reason for this. Billy Wilder, the director, wants us only to see Phyllis’ reaction while the event takes place. Not only are we presented with a close-up of Phyllis’ face, but low-key lighting is used to place even more emphasis on her reaction as she hears her husband struggling for breath. Phyllis shows no emotion and does not even blink or move her head. So yes, the murder is significant, but by only showing Phyllis’ reaction, Wilder is reinforcing her unsympathetic personality and lack of remorse.

Film noir is well known for its unique use of “rich, black shadows” (Place 53). Telotte adds that light tends to enter the room at odd angles and as a result creates oblique lines (17). In the film’s climax, Phyllis prepares for Walter’s visit and sets a suspenseful mood by turning off all the lights and hiding a gun under her pillow before sitting down. The resulting dark shadows illustrate her evilness and sinister intentions of killing Walter. As Walter enters through the front door and walks towards Phyllis, line shadows created by Venetian blinds appear on him. This functions as a metaphor for the imprisonment that Walter has experienced throughout the film. The dialogue used also reinforces the power Phyllis has over Walter. In his flashback speech, Walter uses phrases such as “the machinery had started to move and nothing could stop it” and “the hook was too strong.” These quotes imply that once Walter became attracted to Phyllis, he found it very difficult to disagree with her murder plan.

Intertextuality can be defined as the process through which certain texts are contextualised. For example, the meaning of a motif in one text can be influenced by a relationship to the same motif and

its use in other texts. In the case of Phyllis in *Double Indemnity*, prior knowledge of women's roles in other film noir films can enhance our viewing pleasure. Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) is another great example of a femme fatale character. Norma's power and control over Joe, the male protagonist, is reinforced through the same techniques used in *Double Indemnity*. For example, in the early moments of Joe's stay at Norma's house, point-of-view camera shots show him scanning across the countless photos of Norma. This foreshadows the power and control she will later have over him. Other famous femme fatales include Brigid O'Shaughnessy in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and Gilda Farrell in *Gilda* (1946). *Double Indemnity* does not make explicit references to these films, but if we are familiar with these characters, we can make well informed judgements and comparisons as to which character serves as the finest example of the femme fatale. In essence, we get more enjoyment from watching films.

It is important to understand the changes in society that were taking place during the 1940s and early 1950s when analysing the role of the female character in film noir. Wager states that film noir is partly a "post-war phenomenon" (73). After World War Two, the United States experienced a period of substantial economic growth while at the same time women's roles in society were changing. Belton builds on Wager's theory:

"The changing status of American women ... challenges male dominance. The entry of women into the workforce ... in leaving the private sphere of the home and family ... Film noir dramatizes the consequences ... transforming women into wilful creatures intent on destroying" (234).

In other words, the proportion of females entering the labour force increased a great deal and this was accompanied by an increase in wages. Women were no longer bound up inside the home but took on a more active role society. Essentially, the femme fatale is a character that resembles real events and concerns. Also, all of these social-historical events are portrayed in film so people can see representations of their lives on the screen and relate these events to their own experiences.

On a final note, it would be safe to claim that the femme fatale contradicts social order. That is, she contradicts traditional roles of women by employing characteristics of men. In the context of film noir, the female character plays a major role in driving the narrative forward. Hayward argues that by the end of a film noir, "she pays for it" (151). For example Phyllis, because of her sexual authority and manipulative personality, eventually gets what she deserves and meets her demise (Hayward 151). Phyllis cannot continue to assert her power over Walter because she threatens male dominance

and works against traditional gender ideologies. There is a logical reason why Phyllis does not survive the film. Ultimately, her demise restores social order.

In conclusion, Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* is a perfect embodiment of the femme fatale and also semiotic film theory. Yes, it is true that on the surface Phyllis is an icon of a beautiful woman and looks like a passive object of desire. But through an analysis of the film's social-historical context and conventional film noir techniques such as low-key lighting, subjective point-of-view camera shots, and heavy use of shadows, the audience is able to understand Phyllis' connotative meaning. Phyllis is evil at heart, a symbol of power, and is very active and effective during the film with regards to trapping Walter into doing something sinister and dragging him further and further into trouble.

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#### Filmography

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- Sunset Boulevard*. Dir. Billy Wilder. Paramount Pictures, 1950. Film.
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