

**SUBVERSIVE PLEASURES IN
BILLY WILDER'S *DOUBLE INDEMNITY***

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This paper analyses those elements (stylistic and thematic) in Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944) that can be considered dissident variations of the dominant film-making conventions —the Classic Hollywood's basic formulae— subverting the film's intended ideological effect. Poststructuralist theories as well as psychoanalysis and feminism have been used as an analytical framework in order to unveil the hidden strategies of the dominant ideology in the film and show up its fissures and contradictions, thus providing an alternative reading which subverts such cultural hegemony. The two main sections of the paper attempt to show how *Double Indemnity* satisfies Classical Hollywood conventions and how the convergence of polarities within the formal elements contravenes its thematic paradigm, thus creating a pervading ambivalence. The conclusion of this analysis leads us to reject the monolithic assumption that all classical films conform to the predominant ideology enhanced by the pleasure of a realistic mode.

Civic festivals have always been the point of convergence of conservative rituals that regenerate the status quo and subversive currents that threaten ossified hierarchies.

(Robert Stam *Subversive Pleasures* 1989, 95)

This borrowing from Robert Stam's book, *Subversive Pleasures*, is intended to make clear the critical stance of this essay. The term *subversive* in film criticism presupposes both the existence of a predominant ideology and the consideration of films, like any other art form, as products of that ideology. Althusser defines ideology as "a system . . . of representations (images, myths, ideas, or concepts, depending on the case) endowed with a

historical existence and role within a given society” (Ray 1985, 14); and cinema, as a highly representational system, “poses questions about the way the unconscious (formed by the dominant order) structures ways of seeing and pleasure in looking” (Mulvey 1989, 15).

Looking is precisely the essential activity required in cinema. Psychoanalysis has served to give an account of the paradoxical pleasures in looking offered by cinema: scopophilia and identification. In the former, pleasure demands the distancing of the objects controlled by the subject’s gaze. Identification, however, can be of a twofold kind:

Like Metz, Mulvey argues that in this spectator-text relationship, structures of identification may be both narcissistic, in that the spectator’s identification is with his own likeness, and also more specifically voyeuristic to the extent that the spectator’s look stands in for the look of the camera. Mulvey also suggests —like Metz, Oudart and Dayan— that this relation of looking/identification describes the way in which a spectator becomes caught up in the film narrative. (Khun 1982, 60)

Before discussing “pleasures” in the subjective experience of film viewing, it is convenient to take into account the importance of the subject-viewer’s identification and how it works in narrative film. Psychoanalytic theory defines identification as the basic mechanism for the imaginary constitution of the ego and for further psychological processes by which the ego, once constituted, continues differentiating itself (Aumont et al. 1989, 247).

The primordial importance of images for the constitution of subjectivity has given rise to the consideration of Lacan’s mirror phase and Freud’s Oedipus complex as theoretical bases to provide an explanation for identification in film viewing. For Jean-Louis Baudry and other film theoreticians and critics, there is a double identification that corresponds to the Freudian model: a *primary identification* and a *secondary identification*. The *primary identification* implies the identification with the camera, where the viewer is the privileged focus of vision (voyeuristic identification). The *secondary identification* is a diegetic identification, an identification with the represented, with the character (narcissistic identification). The mirror-like screen allows for the viewer’s recognitions/misrecognitions of ideal egos, a phenomenon of fascination that cinema structures to enable “temporal loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing it” (Mulvey 1989, 18). The origin of

this identification is attributed to the analogy of every story with the Oedipal structure: the confrontation with desire and the Law (Aumont et al. 1989, 247-69). However diegetic identification in cinema responds to complex mechanisms; Aumont et al. point out two of the most specific features of this identification:

Primero: la identificación es un efecto de la estructura, una cuestión de lugar más que de psicología. Segundo: la identificación con el personaje no es nunca tan masiva y monolítica, sino, por el contrario, extremadamente fluida, ambivalente y permutable en el curso de la proyección del filme, es decir, de su construcción por el espectador. (1989, 272)

According to Lacan, this fixation of the ego or self-as-subject in place occurs in the Imaginary realm. In the mirror-phase “the other is an imaginary wholeness with which the ego identifies itself in order to define itself as subject, as distinct from the environment around it” (Nichols 1981, 31). In this Imaginary realm, subjects are compelled to seek positive identification with, or antagonistic opposition to, the other. Thus, the definition of entities, of selves as subjects, is ultimately dependent on the other. The centrality of the ego in the Imaginary is displaced in the Symbolic realm, more concerned with sustaining relationships than identities (Nichols 1981, 32-3). In cinema, the images moving in black space and artificial light reproduce many elements encountered in the physical world that help the viewer to recognise meaning and to experience the pleasure yielded in that recognition. The reinforcement of the ego in this viewing experience fulfills an ideological function insofar as the ego of subject is the point where imaginary social relations are anchored. Nichols explains this reinforcement as follows:

It is also ideological in its implication that the surfaces of things are already meaningful, that this meaning is an objective given rather than a social construct. Our acquiescence in this process confirms our way of seeing and the ideology supporting it. Our sense of self-as-subject is given to us by an already meaningful world that subjects us to an imaginary Other whose authority we freely accept in exchange for the pleasure of recognizing the image of ourselves in the world around us (or on the screen before us). (1981, 36)

The patterns of identification of dominant cinema are so well-established in our culture that the general audience would be reluctant to accept any significant departure from the artistic conventions in film making (Ray 1985, 16), an inconceivable risk in the money-making world of cinema. R. B. Ray has clearly expounded the formal and thematic paradigms of the Classic Hollywood artistic conventions. Briefly, the basic formal principle is the subordination of style to narrative with the intention of concealing the decision-based aspect of cinema. The technical devices generally used to achieve this goal are “continuity editing” and a *mise-en-scène* that centres and foregrounds the main objects of interest. The thematic paradigm is the resolution of incompatible values. The opposite values are usually represented by two different characters: the outlaw hero and the official hero; this dichotomy is finally resolved, for instance, by favouring one side of the opposition, the one that the ideology of the film supports (1985, 38-57).

Despite the codified structure of diegetic identification, its ambivalence allows for pleasures and effects that escape the conscious intentions of the film. It is the viewer’s participation in the construction of identification that makes subversive reading possible, providing cinema with the carnival-like aspect mentioned in the opening quotation. However encroaching, the artistic conventions of Classic cinema have always been reappropriated by a less conforming film making practice to produce certain effects that subvert the dominant ideology. Film noir has generally been considered to be an example of this non-conformist film making.

The aim of this paper is to analyse those elements (thematic and stylistic) in Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity* (1944) that can be considered dissident variations of the dominant film making conventions —the Classic Hollywood’s basic formulae— subverting the film’s intended ideological effect. The notion of intentionality used in this paper has nothing to do with the overt intentions of the producer/director of the film, but rather with the outcome of a specific reading. Starting from the poststructuralist theoretical stance that the meaning of a text is not there to be discovered but the result of the reading (viewing) processes as well as of its internal operations, the present interpretation of the film is based on an analysis of those formal features and thematic elements that give rise to a subversive reading of it and includes a consideration of psychoanalytic and feminist theories. My aim is to unveil the hidden strategies of the predominant ideology in the film and show up its fissures and contradictions, thus, providing an alternative reading which subverts such cultural hegemony.

Synopsis

A car runs along a dark Los Angeles street, goes through a stoplight and pulls up abruptly to the kerb in front of the main entrance of an office building. Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) enters the building and takes the lift up to his insurance office where he records a confession in the dictaphone addressed to Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson). The rest of the film is mostly a series of flashbacks of Walter's relating the story of how he met Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) and how both came to murder her husband. The story also includes the investigatory process leading up to the moment of narration. When the flashback comes to an end, we see Keyes listening to Walter's confession. Walter makes a desperate attempt to escape but he slumps in the doorway under Keyes' cool gaze. In the concluding scene, Keyes bends over, tending the mortally wounded Walter.

Conforming to the Dominant

Commercial interests in cinema have established a consensus on the representation of economic, sociological, and political questions: they can only be expressed as personal dilemmas (Ray 1985, 57). Therefore, the analysis of personal dilemmas presented in this film can be conversely extended to a social dimension.

Following the basic thematic procedure, characteristic of Classic Hollywood cinema, the protagonist of *Double Indemnity*, Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray), presents an ambiguous figure trapped between two opposite tensions: the Law, that is, the societal expectations of American males, and the desire to transgress it. This opposition is projected onto two characters: Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck), the signifier of outlaw desires, and Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson), the representative of the Law. Neff transgresses the Law by killing Phyllis' husband, which will lead to the protagonist's inevitable punishment. The narrative resolves the opposition on the side of the Law, the socially acceptable, by Neff killing Phyllis—his rebellious aspect—and by Neff's punishment in the presence of his law-abiding aspect, Keyes. This narrative closure overtly conforms to Hollywood's self-censoring code that stated the compulsory punishment of all criminal acts depicted in the narrative (Bordwell and Thompson 1986, 331). At a superficial level, *Double Indemnity* conforms to Hollywood's reconciliatory pattern.

The two-side characterization of Walter Neff corresponds to a largely extended literary tradition that epitomizes the general pattern of American mythology: "the denial of the necessity for choice" (Ray 1985, 63). R. B. Ray has connected the creation of such characters with what Eric Erikson has described as the fundamental American psychological pattern:

The functioning American, as the heir of a history of extreme contrasts and abrupt changes, bases his final ego identity on some tentative combination of dynamic polarities such as migratory and sedentary, individualistic and standardized, competitive and co-operative, pious and free-thinking, responsible and cynical, etc. . . . To leave his choices open, the American, on the whole, lives with two sets of 'truths'. (quoted in R. B. Ray 1985, 58)

The same divided-self can be seen in the analysis of Neff's identity. The investigative character of the film, a constant element in film noir, suggests an analogy with the self-discovery journey of mythical heroes. As Laura Mulvey has pointed out (1989, 186-9), the hero's investigative immersion in the dark underworld of the city can be interpreted as a psychological journey into his psyche. Thus, narrative images can be considered to be signs and symptoms of the hero's psyche and, extensively, of that of the collective.

Our hero, Walter Neff, an insurance agent, arrives at his office very late at night, badly injured. Under the dim light of his desk lamp, he descends into the "nether world" of the memory of his recent past. He reconstructs a story that goes back to scarcely two months before the moment of narration. From the very beginning, the viewer knows that a murder has been committed and that Neff is the murderer. "I killed Dietrichson —me, Walter Neff— insurance salesman —thirty five years old, no visible scars— till a while ago, that is . . . I killed him for money and for a woman . . . It all began last May . . .". The symbolism of the night and the urban environment together with the disclosure of the plot resolution at the beginning divert the enigma to a psychological/symbolic level.

In the film's psychological interpretation provided by Claire Johnston, the flashback story told by Neff's voice-over and the images reconstructing it are understood as the Oedipal trajectory of the narrator, or rather, his attempt and failure to achieve his quest. Despite the narrator's impossibility to overcome the split between the Imaginary and the Symbolic which structures the text, the Symbolic, the patriarchal order, is restored through Neff's

mediation in the relationship between Nino and Lola. After killing Phyllis and leaving her house, Neff, mortally wounded, meets Nino and gives him a nickel to ring Lola. He also asks Keyes to take care of both of them at the end of his confession. "The 'father' restores the 'daughter' to the Symbolic Order and familial relations" (Johnston 1980, 110). The Symbolic is reinstated for the next generation. As for the present one, that is a different matter. We will return to this point and to the present of the text further on. The intention, here, is to underline the superficial conforming to the patriarchal order, to the Symbolic, to the dominant.

The compulsion to repeat lived experience, itself characteristic of the death drive, confers a Symbolic dimension to the narrative. Like Oedipus, Neff's narration of his story on the dictaphone provides him with a transcendent power and a social function. As Peter Brooks (1984, 99-100) has put it:

An event gains meaning by its repetition, which is both a recall of an earlier moment and a variation on it . . . Repetition creates a return in the text, a doubling back. We cannot say whether this is a return to, or a return of: for instance, a return to origins or a return of the repressed.

The double-circle structure of the film reflects this "doubling back" and calls our attention to the Symbolic meaning attached to it. Both time and space dimensions in the film are loop-like. The flashback story ends when the frame story begins and its ending scene is a replica of its opening one: the same spatial location of the character, Phyllis dressed in white, gestures, framing, etc. In Phyllis' living room, Neff says: "Just like the first time I came here, isn't it?". The circularity of the narrative structure corresponds to the reconciliatory pattern of myth, the return to stasis after the excitement and chaos. However the doubling of the pattern can foster a different interpretation, as will be seen later on.

The narrative resolution, the diffusion of tension, the circularity of the film's narrative, the hero's double-side characterization and the successful completion of the hero's quest—the restoration of the Law, the patriarchal order— correspond to the film's adjustment to the conventions of the dominant mode. As I said before, formally, *Double Indemnity* follows the Classic Hollywood aesthetic conventions of subordinating the style to the narrative's interests (Ray 1985, 32). The frame story is clearly constructed according to classical continuity editing, using match-on-action cuts, for the

presentation of the action from a different point of view, and dissolves to indicate the time-space gaps. The matching of shots is designed to maintain the spatial and temporal continuity of the story action, with the intention of providing the illusion of reality to the viewer. The subjectivity of the flashback story would have allowed for a less realistic presentation; however, the reconstruction of the past events is performed by the narrator's present point of view in an objective manner.

The omniscience of the camera is shown in the scene at Neff's apartment, when Neff and Phyllis are embracing and the camera tracks back. At this point there is an ellipsis and the camera returns to the narrating space and time: Neff's confession on the dictaphone. By doing so, the viewer's attention is directed to Neff's words at that moment, so emphasizing their importance and their relationship with the implicit love scene. Then the camera tracks in to the love scene, after its consummation. This camera movement, together with other stylistic devices discussed below, points to a certain self-awareness of the film as an image construct breaking momentarily the illusion of the camera-as-window. As Claire Johnston has pointed out (1980, 101), the film's tension between the narrator's assumed subjectivity and the "subjectivity" of the camera is one of the important factors underlined by the split of knowledge between the voice-over and the images. Although this split has a specific contrasting function in *Double Indemnity*, the tension between the character's subjectivity and the camera's is, in most cases, undecidable. Some attempts have been made to express subjectivity by means of visual point-of-view shots, such as R. Montgomery's *The Lady in the Lake*, that have proved to be a failure.

Thematically and formally the film satisfies the conventions of the Classic Hollywood mode. However, as the following analysis tries to show, certain formal and stylistic devices, narratively unmotivated, subvert the dominant ideology the narrative sustains and reveal, instead, its contradictions. Those devices also unveil opposition, not only the resistance of the oppressed but the opposition necessary for the Symbolic order to exist.

Transgressing the Dominant

In the title sequence, the first thing we see is the silhouette of a male figure in hat and overcoat on crutches, looming towards the camera. For Claire Johnston the mark of castration is set up, from the beginning, by this

crippled figure (1980, 101). The menacing aspect of this mark is constructed by the approaching movement of the black silhouette on crutches towards the camera and reinforced by a disturbing music. In the next sequence, we see Walter Neff, badly injured, entering the offices of his insurance company where he begins his confession to Keyes. The association between the crippled figure and Walter Neff is immediately established by the continuity of the sequences and reinforced by the same disturbing music although, this time, in a subdued intensity. But there is yet another male character linked to the castration figure, namely Mr. Dietrichson. Once he has signed the accident insurance form—his death sentence—, he leaves the sitting-room. We see him making for the door from a low angle shot, walking wearily, very much like the figure in the title sequence, and with the same eerie music. This is heard again when Neff goes to Mr. Dietrichson's to carry out the plans for his murder; when Mr. Dietrichson climbs down the steps of his garden with a broken leg and gets into the car; and, finally, when Neff carries Dietrichson's corpse to put it on the railway. Both, the disturbing music and the crippled figure, are always associated with these two male characters and, within the film, their repetition confers a specific signification on them. Once Neff takes Dietrichson's place in the train sequence, it is made clear that the film is centred on Walter Neff's anxiety of castration. The shot of Neff's back, occupying nearly the whole frame when he makes for the observation car, reminds the viewer of the figure in the title sequence although, this time, the figure goes away from the camera instead of approaching it.

The flashback story, which occupies the bulk of the film, is a confessional discourse addressed to a diegetic addressee, Keyes, that evolves into dialogue in the frame narrative. The drive to tell one's story has been compared to the dynamics of transference in psychoanalysis. According to Peter Brooks (1984, 227-8) this drive corresponds to the impulses to actualize suppressed desire. The narrative, then, is the result of an attempt to give form to an unnamed meaning—"desire that cannot speak its right name" (Brooks 1984, 58). If the need to tell corresponds to a primary human drive that seeks to seduce and subjugate the listener, this is carried out by implicating him, by taking his position. We can assert that Neff looks inside himself through Keyes' eyes as the voice-over explicitly confirms: "You know how these things are, Keyes", as well as Keyes' point-of-view shot at the end of Neff's confession. It is for us, viewers-listeners, to uncover the meaning from the signs that structure the reality present in the film.

Neff's narrative allow us to analyse his Oedipal trajectory. For Lacan, the castration complex is essential for the entrance to the Symbolic order. The male child's quest in the Oedipal trajectory is to gain access to the Symbolic through the acceptance of the threat of castration; that is, an arrival to a sense of identity through the awareness of sexual difference structured by the Oedipus complex. The split of the unitary self between "I" and "the other" is vital for the institution of desire and the acceptance of the Symbolic (Johnston 1980, 102). For Claire Johnston, the hero's Oedipal process is the central dilemma in this film: "the problem of the knowledge of sexual difference in a patriarchal order" (Johnston 1980, 101).

Taking into account the Lacanian axiom that the Unconscious is structured like a language, the articulation of the narrative in both voice-over and image will provide the material for the discovery of the articulatory pattern of Neff's unconscious. This pattern corresponds to the reenactment of the castration anxiety and regression to the Pre-Oedipal.

The development of the Oedipal process is clearly rendered at the visual level. The evolution of Neff's function—from subject-witness, in the first half, to central object, in the second—can be analysed in filmic terms: *mise-en-scène* and editing. The turning point of the story is formally rendered by a long fade out, just after the climactic moment of the successful completion of the murder and Neff's sudden feeling of failure: "I couldn't hear my footsteps. It was the walk of a dead man". The first half of the film is seen mainly from Neff's point of view, confiding the centre frame to Phyllis and Keyes, as an explicit declaration of his fascination for both of them. They both also appear on the right side of the frame, occupying the same space in relation to Walter.

In the first scene of the flashback, Phyllis Dietrichson is introduced into the narrative from Neff's angle of vision. A sequence of low angle point of view shots of Phyllis at the top of the stairs, covered in a bath towel and the striking whiteness of her figure together with the close-up shot-reverse shot of his lewd face expression set up Neff's fascination for her. His voice-over confirms it immediately after: "I was thinking about that dame upstairs and the way she looked at me. I wanted to see her again . . . Close . . . without that silly staircase between us". As she comes down the stairs, the first thing we see is a close-up of her legs and her flashing anklet. The almost exact repetition of this shot in their second meeting provides these elements—legs and anklet—with symbolic significance. According to L. Mulvey, the anklet bounding a female leg as a fetter symbolises the

phallus, being one of the most effective fetishes in male imagery because it simultaneously “constricts and uplifts” (1989, 8).

From her very first appearance, Phyllis is constructed as a fetishist sign, as a woman icon. During their third meeting at Neff’s apartment, her symbolic significance runs on the same line. The hard light contrast on her figure, the shadows cast on her face, her tight dress, her long blond hair and her close-ups with shallow focus highlight her alluring beauty and mystery—the pleasurable object to look at. A pleasure revived by Neff and one to be enjoyed by the viewer. Phyllis is, of course, central to the narration of Neff’s Oedipal trajectory. Her function in the narrative is to trigger the reenactment of the castration anxiety. But as Laura Mulvey puts it, “the woman icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified” (1989, 21). Phyllis, then, is the female figure implying both the threat of castration and the potentially identifying sexual difference that, paradoxically, Neff disavows by fetishising her and thus reinforcing the threat of castration. Moreover, her married status represents the possibility of a libidinal satisfaction only outside the Symbolic order and the erotic drives she represents must be condemned by the Law and lead to punishment and death.

The accumulation of phallic signs associated with Phyllis—cigarettes, high heels, the anklet, lipstick, her legs, gun, etc.—constitutes her as the medusa-like sign, symbolising castration: an object of voyeurism associated with sadism (Mulvey 1989, 6-13). Through her objectivisation, Neff both depersonalises her, attempting to gain control over her, and transforms her into a fetishist image, which becomes his narcissistic projection. His narcissistic identification with Phyllis is clearly established in the mirror shot, where we see their reflections—both of them looking at themselves and at each other. It is not by chance that at this very moment Phyllis asks about his name, “Neff is the name, isn’t it?”, “Yes, with two fs, like Philadelphia. You know the story”, “What story?”, “Philadelphia story”. It might be too farfetched to provide the letter “f”/“ph” with the symbolic meaning of phallus—the common element of both Phyllis and Neff’s names and identities—but that would not diminish, in any case, the importance of the specularity of the shot. As has been mentioned in the introduction, specular relations are central for the constitution of subjectivity. Narcissistic identifications tend to value solitude and usually imply a confinement of the self and a distancing from the object (Aumont et al. 1989, 258). The voice-over and the images explicitly confirm Neff’s solitude and a progressive distanc-

ing from Phyllis, the object of the narcissist identification. Once Neff and Phyllis decide to murder Phyllis' husband, they have to be cautious in their encounters. After the murder, they seldom see each other, having the supermarket as the only safe meeting place.

The contradictory signification attached to Phyllis, threat and disavowal of the castration anxiety, also occurs in Keyes' narrative function. As Claire Johnston (1980, 102-3) explains, he functions as both the Symbolic father and the Idealised father. Keyes, as Symbolic father and signifier of the patriarchal order, is marked by a lack: his repressed maternal side, "a heart as big as a house", which incites Neff's desire for transgression. The son always attempts against the father to take his place in order to reinforce the Symbolic order in the positive Oedipus. As Neff's Idealised father, Keyes also represents the ideal ego, his narcissistic identification, "I wanted to think with your brains". Narcissism has close connections with homosexuality. Freud asserts that for many people whose libidinal development has suffered some disturbance —among whom he includes homosexuals— the mother as love-object has been supplanted by the self (Freud 1988, 2025). In *Double Indemnity*, this latent homosexual desire is symbolised by Neff's ritual lighting of Keyes' cigar, which is associated with Neff's words "I love you, too", uttered at the first performance of the ritual. At this very moment, a low angle shot emphasises Neff's leaning over Keyes, an implicit homoerotic gesture. According to R. B. Ray (1985, 18), this low angle shot can be considered an aesthetically dissident element since it is not motivated by any of the characters' point of view.

The split between the Symbolic and the Imaginary symbolised in the function of Keyes, as well as in Phyllis', represents Neff's entrapment in a system of opposite tensions —the dual relation to the Other, the bisexuality that characterises the child during the Oedipal process. This tension is also formally visualised in the *mise-en-scène* of a shot in the second half, where we see Neff between Keyes, leaving his apartment to fetch something to relieve his stomach-ache, and Phyllis, hiding behind the apartment door. On the one hand, Neff has to assume castration in testing the Law in order to enter the Symbolic, and, on the other hand, he disavows castration in his narcissistic identifications. Thus, the film's first half can be interpreted as the articulation of Neff's unresolved Oedipus complex; his location in no man's land.

The second half of the film constitutes the investigative process of the narrative. Here Neff occupies the centre frame with a clear inversion of

roles: from subject to object. During this part, Neff fills in gaps of information about Phyllis' past and present movements, confirms Keyes' blind spot and realises his impossibility to enter the Symbolic. At this point, he just wants to escape, to "get out of the whole mess", trying to restore the Symbolic by replacing Phyllis with Lola: the good object for the patriarchal order. The replacement of "woman" is marked at the visual level. In this second part, we see a few shots of Neff and Lola going out to the countryside and eating pleasantly in a restaurant. Although the voice-over tells us that Neff takes her out just to "keep her quiet", the happiness shown in the images contradicts his verbal intention. In the series of shots of their trip to the Hollywood Bowl, just immediately after he has thought of Phyllis as dead, Lola's physical resemblance to Phyllis suggests that she has definitely taken Phyllis' place (Johnston 1980, 109).

Like the Oedipus story, *Double Indemnity* lacks a clear reconciliatory solution. As has been mentioned above, the Symbolic order is restored for the next generation, with Nino and Lola, but the ambiguity in their characterisation casts doubts about their total appropriateness for that order. Moreover, the last scene does not reconcile the tension created by the film's opposite values in a clear way. Once Keyes hands over his function as Symbolic father to the police, he is able to acknowledge his repressed desire by returning Neff's ritual gesture. Neff says: "I know why you couldn't figure this one . . . because the guy you were looking for was too close . . . right across the desk from you". Keyes replies: "Closer than that, Walter" to which Neff answers with his ritual words: "I love you, too". For Claire Johnston, the film problematises "the trouble of castration for the male in patriarchy as it insists in the disjunction between the Symbolic and the Imaginary fathers", that is to say, the internal contradictions of the patriarchal order (1980, 110). The acknowledgement of desires repressed and condemned by the Symbolic order is just the recognition of the other element in a system of oppositions —the other side of a coin—, necessary for its existence. At this final moment, the repressed comes to the fore and the dominant is left behind, but not suppressed (Johnston 1980, 110-1).

The film also ends with the impending death of the hero and, therefore, the triumph of the Symbolic. However, as L. Mulvey points out in relation to the ambiguity of the hero's death in the Oedipus story,

It is as if the presence of death, the ultimate point of timeless stasis that Peter Brooks has shown to be lying behind the drive to

an ending, must be neutralised by the timeless stasis of paternal authority. (1989, 196)

Beyond the ambition and the sexual drives that provide the film's theme and plot lies the death instinct, "the drive to an ending", which can be considered as the ultimate force driving forward the action in the film if we have in mind that sadism, according to Freud, is a displaced instance of "the death instinct at work" (Brooks 1984, 50). If endings make life and story transmittable, Neff seems to reject his own, felt as if it had reached him too quickly. This improper end is provoked by the mistaken erotic object choice. From the very beginning of the film there are constant allusions to speed. In the first establishing shots following the sequence title, we see a car driving too fast and going through a stoplight, which causes an accident at the crossroads. The same allusions are present in the first conversation Walter and Phyllis have:

Phyllis: My husband. You were anxious to talk to him, weren't you?

Walter: Yeah, I was, but I'm sort of getting over the idea —if you know what I mean.

Phyllis: There's a speed limit in this state, Mr. Neff, forty-five miles an hour.

Walter: How fast was I going, officer.

Phyllis: I'd say around ninety.

Once again the voice-over confirms the relentlessness of the film's atmosphere immediately after Walter agrees to help Phyllis to get her husband to sign the insurance policy: "the machinery had started to move and nothing could stop it".

The same ambivalence present in the closure of the film can be recognized in the ambiguous characterisations. The split of the unitary self into the "I" and "the other" in the process of the Oedipus complex necessary for entering the Symbolic is not particular to sex difference: male/female, man/non-man. Through language, the most sophisticated means of symbolic articulation, the Symbolic structures concepts in a system of oppositions: dominant/oppressed, mind/body, culture/nature, etc. The characterisations of Phyllis, Keyes and Lola are constructed with contradictory concepts associated to each of them, which make them appear ambiguous for the viewer. As projections of Neff's psyche, their ambiguous characterisation can be under-

stood as the reflection of Neff's difficulty in establishing the difference between the "I" and "the other", his originary bisexuality and narcissism.

Phyllis is apparently constructed as the signifier of the oppressed —female—, rebelling against her condition and the dominant, the male. Trapped in the cage-like cast shadows of her living room, she confesses to Neff how boring and suffocating her married life is. She is associated, though, with male characteristics: active, intelligent, independent, and also with those proper of the characterisation of the *femme fatale*: negative, private, outside the Law, sensual, exhibitionist, etc. Phyllis' narcissistic exhibitionism is reflected in the *mise-en-scène*, mainly in her appearance (elegant dresses, flashing jewellery, make-up) and her performance in which her movements and gazes show the self-awareness of her beauty. For Freud (1988, 2025-6), narcissism in women is much more complex than in men. For him, these women can only love themselves and with the same intensity as men love them. However, as a result of certain psychological constellations, this type of woman exerts the maximum attraction to men.

According to Marilyn French (1981, 21-31), the feminine principle is identified with nature, with the double aspect of nature: the benevolent one —its regenerating capacity—, and a malevolent one —its destructive capability. Nature creates the necessary elements for the existence of human beings and, at the same time, nature can also destroy them. All human efforts to control nature, to be superior to nature, have been identified with the masculine principle, which is associated with ownership, assertiveness, physical courage, independence and legitimacy. Taking into account Marilyn French's definition of the male and female principles, Phyllis clearly represents the outlaw aspect of the feminine principle. But this apparently clear-cut identification becomes blurred in the last scene of the flashback when Phyllis cannot fire a second shot, so showing her compassion and love for Neff. The camera focuses on her expression of surprise, not on Neff's, giving rise to an ambivalent identification. That moment of truth also identifies Phyllis with the inlaw aspect of the feminine principle. This overlap of the two aspects of the feminine principle on Phyllis' characterisation subverts the patriarchal order, which bases its dominance on the split of the feminine principle. Nevertheless, the choice of showing Phyllis' expression of surprise could also be interpreted as another gesture of male sadism for the viewers to enjoy, rejecting the overlap of the two aspects of the feminine principle on Phyllis. However, this rejection does not annul the possibility

of their convergence. It functions like a negative statement, which always presupposes the existence of a positive one.

The same can be said regarding the other female character, Lola. Visually, she is characterised as Phyllis' counterpart. When she is first introduced, playing Chinese chequers, Lola is dressed in a light coloured dress whereas Phyllis is dressed in black. The voice-over reinforces this first implicit identification of Lola with positive aspects, with the inlaw aspect of the feminine principle, "She was a good kid . . . Better than it sounded". However, she is also capable of taking action. Encouraged by her hatred of Phyllis, she wants to speak up, to destroy her, while her love for Nino induces her to set up an investigation of her own which concludes with Nino as the main suspect of her father's murder. Nino's supposed transgression of the Law does not prevent her from loving him, which leaves open the possibility of Lola's acceptance of transgression. Without reaching the standards of the *femme fatale*, Lola also "exploits", half-innocently, her relationship with Walter, emphasising the exploitative nature of the heterosexual relationships indicated insistently in the film. She coaxes him into a series of favours ranging from a short lift to town to getting Sachetti back to her (Gallagher 1987, 238).

Besides the split between the Symbolic and the Imaginary in Keyes' symbolisation mentioned above, there are other contradictions in his characterisation. As representative of the Law, he is associated with mind and intelligence, but a mind and intelligence that serves the economic interests of the dominant class. A dominant class, represented by Mr. Norton, who does not fare very well in the film. It is money, which is an element belonging to the low side of the polar opposition spiritual/material, that motivates the investigation in the film. Keyes also shares some features with the pre-Oedipal father in the pre-history of the Oedipus story, Laius, —aggressiveness and violence. Those character traits are explicitly revealed in the scene with the truck driver, Mr. Gorlopi. Keyes' explicit misogyny —all women should be investigated— and repressed affection for Neff could also make him share Laius' homosexual tendency (Mulvey 1989, 191).

The point of view and world depicted in the film are no doubt male, but the centrality that the female characters occupy undermines the male power conferred by the privilege of the subjective voice. In the above sections, Phyllis' function in the narrative as the signifier of the repressed by the Symbolic, as the object of sexual desire condemned by the Law and doomed to be suppressed by it, has been pointed out. However, she is

rendered as a dominant character. Despite her being deprived of subjectivity, she exerts a power and control over the discursive subject and disturbs the male discourse of the dominant. At the visual level, she dominates men. This power is not only rendered by means of close-ups, centre frame and hard-contrasted lighting that emphasise her alluring sexuality, but it is also explicitly stated in the mise-en-scène of a low angle shot where she occupies the centre and upper part of the frame over her husband and Walter while they sign the accident insurance forms.

At the narrative level, Phyllis “has plans of her own” that control Neff’s. She breaks the discourse of the Law represented by Keyes and Mr. Norton twice. The first time when she rings Walter at his office, where Keyes is describing his function within the insurance business as “doctor”, “bloodhound”, “cop” and “father confessor”. The second time when she is announced at Mr. Norton’s office as he is saying “There is a largely spread feeling that just because a man has a large office . . . he must be an idiot”. Ironically Keyes proves that to be the truth. The other female character, Lola, also occupies the centre frame and exerts an important influence on Neff and, therefore, on his behaviour and movements, although her presence in the film and her influence on its development is not as powerful as Phyllis’.

The psychoanalytical approach used in the foregoing paragraphs helps us to understand the dynamics of desire in the film and the imaginary relationship between the viewer and the screen. But this study does not intend to fall into any kind of reductionism by neglecting the symbolic exchange of a given culture in a given historical moment. As Bill Nichols puts it:

The film, like other forms of aesthetic experience, is a prospective representation more than a regressive one, that points us, not back toward infancy (though it may well build upon dynamics established there) so much as outward toward the material practices sustaining an ensemble of social relations at a given historical moment. (1981, 169)

Double Indemnity is set in 1938, just before the Second World War, not in the war period when the film was released, 1944. This change in the setting can be understood as a likely attempt to centre the film on the psychological dimension and the issue of sexuality. Deprived of explicit historical references to the war, as in other noir films based on Chandler’s

novels—for instance, *The Blue Dahlia* (1946)—, the film acquires a myth-like universality. However, like most cinematic narratives, the film represents recognisable social situations where certain character types carry out significant social actions, creating specific patterns of social relationships.

The film has subtle references to elements that set it during the war period. The most explicit one is the reference to another popular film, Cukor's *The Philadelphia Story*, released in 1940. This reference to a previous filmic text points at a specific intertextual relationship marked by the similarities and differences between both texts. *The Philadelphia Story*, like other screwball comedies, is characterised by a taste for verbal wit and the expression of incongruities and conflicts of social structures, sexual relationships and identity (Babington and Evans 1989, 1-43). All these elements are present in *Double Indemnity*.

The psychological dislocation of the male character, Walter Neff, that is visually expressed by his very dark cast shadows on the insurance office walls, shows a subject entrapped within the imaginary, seeing in the other what is wanting in the self, a lack to be appropriated or abolished. For Deborah Thomas, the psychological distortions of male characters in many post-war Hollywood films attempt to represent the contradictory expectations imposed on American males during the Second World War and the post-war period:

What was normal during the war—such as close male companionship, sanctioned killing, and “easier” and more casual sexual behaviour, all heightened by the constant possibility of one’s own sudden death—became deviant in the context of post-war calm, though such elements lingered on in the film noir world as the focus both of longing and of dread. (1988, 18-9)

The male internal conflict of his sexual roles, reflected in his contradictions involving sexual difference, is aggravated by the shifts in female roles as a result of the war. The introduction of women into the American labour force during the Second World War widened women’s social roles beyond the family boundaries. Like in *The Philadelphia Story*, women in *Double Indemnity* struggle to become the controllers of their own destinies. In our film, women are represented as active, ambitious, sexually independent, fighting to escape from family constraints. By doing so, women are challenging the patriarchal order that confines them to their homes. In the case of Phyllis, her independent behaviour can be explained by the subjectivity

hinted in her narcissism. According to Janey Place (1980, 47-8), the mirror shot of Phyllis gazing at her own reflection can have two possible meanings. On the one hand, that would imply Phyllis' narcissism and, therefore, her subjectivity, which opposes her objectification. On the other hand, the visual split of her image would imply her duplicitous nature (reinforced in the cast shadows on the living-room walls).

To marry and have a home is supposed to be in the mind of every woman. This assumption conforms to one of the social practices that maintains the relations of production in a given culture. Marriage for economic interest is stressed throughout the film; mainly in Phyllis telling of her reasons for marrying Dietrichson and Keyes' reasons for not marrying. The family life and setting seem oppressive for every member of the Dietrichson family: Phyllis, Lola and Mr. Dietrichson. It is clear that the family presented in the film is not a "true" one. Phyllis helped the former Mrs. Dietrichson to die, marrying Mr. Dietrichson soon after. We can assert that the film does not show any positive attitude towards the family, representative of national unity. This negative attitude towards bourgeois family suppresses one of the basic elements of the dominant ideology.

Sylvia Harvey has pointed out another ideological contradiction in relation to the institution of marriage. As noir lovers, like Neff and Phyllis, are not permitted adultery, they are forced to carry out the destruction of marriage, and by destroying it, the lovers' relationship undergoes such strain outside the moral law, that their relationship becomes war, "the locus of mutual destruction". "In *Double Indemnity* the act of killing the husband serves as the supreme act of violence against family life, and has, in some sense, to be atoned for through the mutual destruction of the lovers in a macabre shoot-out, at the family house, which ends the film" (Harvey 1980, 29). Despite the incompatibility of sexuality and marriage underlined in this scene, the association of desire and death, Eros and Thanatos, in a ritual sacrifice constitutes a carnivalesque element in the film (Stam 1984, 93), whose highly-performed dramatisation and visual strength overwhelm its negative associations.

In the above sections we have seen the economic values the Law incorporates. Profit, big business, is what triggers Keyes' investigative skills. Intelligence is at the service of the privileged groups, showing no sensitivity or support for the poorer individuals. Apart from Keyes' aggressiveness towards Gorlopis, mentioned above, the insurance company does not accept a medical insurance for the elevator man because he has a bad heart. Keyes

is the representative of a new dominant class that holds power not because of his birth, education, good manners and posh accent, but because of his intelligence, hard work, ambition and “integrity”. He embodies the real ruling power class that manipulates, off-stage, the puppet-like figures of the upper-class. If Mr. Norton, the representative of the powerful oligarchy, is the butt for ridicule due to his inflexibility in good manners, Keyes’ “dry” conscientiousness serves to perpetuate the social injustices of a system serving the interests of the powerful.

Like in *The Philadelphia Story*, our film also criticises the figure of the “self-made man” of the American dream. This dream requires radical change, very rapid change, from the space of rags into which such men are thrust by the accident of birth to the space of riches that they intend to inhabit. The achievement of this change has constituted the main theme of a great number of American novels and films, which, in many cases, requires deviance from the Law; more so in moments of economic recession as it is depicted in the film.

Conclusion

The above two sections have shown how *Double Indemnity* satisfies the Classical Hollywood conventions and how the convergence of polarities within the formal elements contravenes its thematic paradigm. The hero’s psychological dislocation, the ambiguous narrative closure and characterisations, the centrality and strength of the female characters within a male discourse and the specific social representation are the narrative elements that create an ambivalence that questions the established order. This ambivalence is produced by the convergence of opposite values within those narrative elements.

Driven by the desire for meaning and captivated by the pleasure found in its recognition, we as viewers of this film are immersed in a world in which values uplifted by capitalist societies are set up in a dialectical tension. The inseparable sexual-symbolic juxtaposition reflected in our main character’s re-enactment of the Oedipus complex symbolises the difficulty to establish the differences between the hierarchical polarity —men/women, mind/body, spiritual/material, dominant/repressed, etc.— that the entry into the Symbolic implies. In *Double Indemnity*, the low side of the opposition is mainly suggested by the rhetorical/stylistic elements that contradict its

high side intended in the film. We could assert that the rhetorical distrusts the narrative.

Adopting Juliet Mitchell's position in relation to the Lacanian division of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, that is, the position that assumes both psychological areas as the "two sides of the same coin" (1988, 428), namely, mutually dependent, we can conclude that *Double Indemnity* acts as a carnival where disruptive elements come into play with the established law, questioning the Symbolic, the patriarchal. As Nietzsche and Eco believed (Stam 1984, 86), this undermining of norms would imply the reinforcement of the Symbolic order—but, surely, a new one, a new law with new values. If the film casts doubts about the new order hoped for a future generation, the bleakness and pessimism of the present one is obvious. The pervading ambiguity of this classical filmic text leads us to reject the monolithic assumption that all classical films conform to the predominant ideology enhanced by the pleasure of a realist mode. *Double Indemnity* creates the pleasure of recognition of meaning, but meanings that both conform to and subvert the dominant, the patriarchal.

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