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Film Studies 111

10/19/2014

Essay One: Double Indemnity (1944)

Professor Louis D. Giannetti states in his book *Understanding Movies*, “one way of understanding better what a film is trying to say is to know how it is saying it” (Giannetti, 8). Being a hardcore film critic and movie buff for several years, I completely agree with Giannetti’s statements and I believe specific cinematic aesthetics like Photography, Mise-en scene, Editing, Story and Ideology are extremely important elements to understand when going in and observing a film. Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity* (1944) is the perfect film to use as a model of such aesthetics because the film encompasses all the major key ingredients that Giannetti explores throughout his book.

Double Indemnity is the quintessential film noir, a thrilling murder story involving despicable characters who clearly only have three things on their mind: Sex, money and murder. They nonchalantly strut through the formula of a routine murder plot, using cold sex play and mannerisms while spurring out tough talk and attitude. “You bet I’ll get out of here, baby. I’ll get out of here but quick.” Who in the real world talks like this? Character’s in a Raymond Chandler story of course. The original story was written in the 1930s by the hard-boiled author James M. Cain, and for years the screenplay was thrown around Hollywood. No one wanted to touch it, especially the Hays Office who labeled it “hardening audience attitudes toward crime.”

The first formal element I want to explore with *Double Indemnity* is 'Photography'. Giannetti describes Photography as the grammar of cinema and that its shots are the film's building blocks that help in presenting its story to the spectator. Giannetti explains that they're two opposing tendencies in the cinema: realism and formalism. *Double Indemnity* obviously seems to fall under formalism as the film constantly conveys an overt exaggeration of manipulation and distortion to the viewer (Giannetti, 2-4). Formalism is an extremely important key element in photography, especially within the genre of a film noir, which goes all the way back to the early days of German Expressionism. Its highly stylized cinematography; high contrast in lighting and shadows and the distorted angles in its shots, *Double Indemnity* presents everything that a realist film would not encompass.

The second formal element is 'Mise-en Scene', which translated from French means "the placing on the stage." Mise-en Scene refers to everything that occurs in foreground, mid-ground and the background of the camera lens and Giannetti presents four broad categories which help break it down: Lighting, Settings, Costumes and Actors (Giannetti, 63-75). In *Double Indemnity* the visual images like shapes, lines, textures and black and white colors that occur on the frame are the similar visual aesthetics that most film-noir movies seem to be composed of. Wet alleyways, foggy streets, shadows and high contrast lighting, are many of the visual planes which can effectively help create such a fatalistic and claustrophobic atmosphere. But it's the constant motion of smoking from almost every single character that immediately stands out between dialogue sequences, as almost every character within *Double Indemnity* seems to be either smoking, lighting up or asking for someone else to light it for them.

I now want to focus on one key sequence within *Double Indemnity* and I will explore and closely pick apart how the two formal elements of Photography and Mise-en scene greatly relate

to the scene I am describing. This sequence is near the end up the film in which Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) finally confronts his so-called lover Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) at her home. When Walter enters Phyllis's home the camera is at a full shot presenting Walter and Phyllis in the mid-ground, both in the same plane together. Walter begins a social distance away from Phyllis but continues to walk closer to her ultimately sitting down in a quarter angle from the camera. His distance and space gets much more personal and quite intimate as the shots become extreme close-ups, ultimately cross-cutting between Walter and Phyllis in completely separate shots.

Walter begins to slowly make his way around Phyllis as she stays sitting in her chair presenting Walter in a higher, intimidating more dominate position than Phyllis. Director Billy Wilder seems to be suggesting that Walter has the upper hand in their current predicament and that Phyllis is the one who looks powerless and trapped. And yet is she? Phyllis is clearly shot in a lower angle, but her casual slouched demeanor while sitting smug in her chair while wearing a slightly intimidating smirk on her face gives off devious and mysterious intentions. The harsh lighting and shadows in the photography distorts this scene as it emphasizes the tense climax of the story creating a closed form environment. High contrast lighting is shown steaming through the blinders of Phyllis's windows reflecting a reflective pattern upon the floor, the walls and even Walter's business suit. Much of the mise-en scene is dimly lit as the frame places partial facial expressions and body movements hidden in the shadows making them extremely difficult to directly make out, except for the light smoke of Phyllis's burning cigarette. The masterful combination of the photography and mise-en scene presents a claustrophobic and expressionistic-like style giving the film a formulistic, manipulative approach to the spectator.

What exactly are these two characters up to? These formal elements present a fatalistic quality to the sequence and we immediately know it isn't going to end well for either of the characters.

The third formal element that Giannetti states in his book "*Understanding Movies*" is of 'Editing' and Giannetti explores the distinction between real time and reel time. He notes that there are three major schools of film editing: Classical cutting, Soviet Montage and Realism. Most of the editing and shots that director Billy Wilder uses in *Double Indemnity* seems to be rooted within Classical cutting, especially when it involves a sequence of fragmentary eye-line matches and brief moments of parallel cuts between two different timelines (Giannetti, 157-159). Since *Double Indemnity* was a studio made picture during the Golden Age of Hollywood most American film director's (besides for Hitchcock, Chaplin or Welles) didn't take too many radical and experimental approaches at that time when presenting a traditional story, and so the story itself remains relatively conventional.

The fourth formal element is 'Story' and Giannetti decides to focus more on Diegesis, Narratology and the story and plot aspects of filmmaking. *Double Indemnity* immediately diverges from a linear storyline, beginning at the end of the story and then flashing back to an earlier part of the story. This formulistic narratology within the storyline, plus the use of diegetic voice-over from the main protagonist is a manipulative aesthetic which is extremely common among film-noir conventions, and I would classify *Double Indemnity* on a realism-classicism-formulism scale. Like most of the conventional movies made during the classical Golden Age of Hollywood, *Double Indemnity* for the most part follows Aristotle's model of the 'classical plot structure' very closely. Most of these movies that follow these classical plot structures will most definitely incorporate key moments like: Exposition, Rising Action, Climax and Closure (Giannetti, 376-378).

I now want to focus on one last key sequence within *Double Indemnity* and I will explore and closely pick apart how the two formal elements of Editing and Story greatly relate to the scene I am describing. This sequence I will describe is in the beginning of the film. The film opens with a car swerving down a road and pulling up right in front of an insurance office building. Most of the editing in this opening sequence involves mostly Classic cutting as salesman Walter Neff gets out of the car with his back facing the camera. They're slight moments of Realism editing as several of the shots are slightly longer takes, especially the tense moment in a elevator when a security guard tries to make small talk to Walter while leading him up to the office. Classical cutting is also presented throughout several dialogue sequences in the film, as specific editing sequences involve fragmentary eye-line matching shots between characters which never disorient or confuse the viewer.

The film rarely presents any Soviet Montage, as most of the shots are edited together in such a specific way to not be jarring and jolting to its audience. Walter slowly makes his way into his friend and colleague Barton Keyes's (Edward G. Robinson) office. Walter is visibly in pain as he sits down at Keyes's desk and slowly begins to audio record a confession into a Dictaphone for his friend. "It all began last May," Walter states as the film finally begins to flash back and begin the narration. Because the film cross-cuts between the present and the past, the film uses a method of parallel editing creating two simultaneous story-lines, while also giving the audience a complete voice-over on the happenings within the story. *Double Indemnity's* dramatic voice-over and unique editing style which manipulates narratology is actually a common plot device that is used throughout many film-noirs, all the while *Double Indemnity's* story is in itself actually quite a conventional model of the 'classical plot structure that was occurring in Hollywood at that time.

The fifth and final element I want to explore is 'Ideology' as *Double Indemnity* seems to explore different classes and social systems within 1940's American culture. Several of the categories that Giannetti presents in his book "*Understanding Movies*" have many similarities to the leftist themes that *Double Indemnity* is lightly exploring, most obviously Democratic vs. Hierarchical and Environment vs. Heredity (Giannetti, 455-456). Phyllis is the ultimate femme-fatale, a cold-blooded gold-digger who only married her wealthy millionaire husband simply because of the money. Walter and Keyes seem to be more hard-working blue-collared business men, who seem to share a similar camaraderie and moral code for their job. Phyllis ultimately comes into the picture and cleverly manipulates and deceives the flawed Walter with her beauty and sexuality. Walter is weak, stupid and ultimately succumbs to his male sexual desires, getting sucked into a calculated murder plot which will in the end up destroying the two supposed lovers.

What makes film noirs such a fascinating genre is the ideological exploration in each character's ethical and moral compass. Most of the characters in *Double Indemnity* are flawed, unlikable or extremely despicable, and the only true ethical character within the story seems to be Phyllis's step-daughter Lola (Gene Heather.) Even Keyes (brilliantly played by Edward G. Robinson) isn't as heroic as he seems, as his only motivation in wanting to catch the murderers is not necessarily because it's the thing to do, but because it's his job. The ideology found all throughout *Double Indemnity* is very explicit as it explores such themes like infidelity, love, corruption, murder, betrayal, sex and the genre of the film-noir.

The reason why *Double Indemnity* is looked at as being one of the greatest American movies is probably because it follows all of Louis D. Giannetti's basic categories of filmmaking to a T. The film was released during the highly controlled Golden Age of Hollywood, at a time

where each specific aesthetic like Photography, Mise-en-scene, Story, Editing and Ideology was strictly put to use for each Hollywood film. *Double Indemnity* remains a perfect example on what happens when every aesthetic element within that construct comes out absolutely flawlessly, which is why the film is constantly shown in film classes all around the country. *Double Indemnity* is the perfect template on the cinematic aesthetics that go into making one of the most brilliantly crafted and masterful American films of all time and I am happy to have written about it.

Work Cited

Giannetti, Louis. *Understanding Movies: Eleventh Edition*. New Jersey: Pearson Hall, 2008. Print.