

**'I KILLED HIM FOR MONEY': THE AMERICAN DREAM IN BILLY WILDER'S
*DOUBLE INDEMNITY***

By Adam Thomas

'I killed him for money – and a woman - I didn't get the money and I didn't get the woman. Pretty isn't it?' (Wilder 1944). So begins Walter Neff's (Fred MacMurray) confession in Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*, a confession that tells how he fell for femme fatale Phyllis Dietrichson, how he planned and undertook the murder of her husband, and attempted to claim the life insurance he had himself sold to the dead man. The audience also hears that Neff's actions aroused the suspicions of his boss and mentor, Keyes, and led to a shoot out with Phyllis that proves fatal for both. Hence that famous opening line. More than just an example of Raymond Chandler's and Wilder's pithy dialogue, the line encapsulates the film's criticism of the American ideal. Neff's future of upward mobility and a loving wife is gone. Furthermore, in the course of pursuing this dream, he has destroyed a family, attempted to cheat his employer and murdered a typical hard-working citizen. With this statement comes the verbal proof of what the plot goes on to demonstrate: the American Dream is dead.

Double Indemnity is by no means the only film to express such sentiment. In the struggle to define Film Noir, Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton cite 'a specific sense of malaise' (Borde and Chaumeton 2002, 13). This malaise is as vital to the genre as violent death or dangerous women; it is in this structure of Noir that we find its strongest assault on the American promise. In *Double Indemnity* such pessimistic melancholy is almost obscenely abundant. The film reeks of modernist discontent with the direction America was heading, and borrows from that movement the tropes of fragmentation, alienation, non-linear plots and subjective narration to express a similar disdain for modernity (Naremore 1998, 45; Abbott 2002, 2). By the time of the film's release in 1944, creators of the Noir aesthetic like Wilder, Chandler and James M. Cain (who wrote the novel from which the film was adapted) had recently seen recession, war and race riots. They were fast becoming disillusioned with their nation, being faced with what director Joseph Losey called 'the complete unreality of the American Dream' (Anderson 1985, 187). It is how they articulated their disillusionment that I seek to explain.

Few studies thus far have connected Film Noir with criticism of the American Dream. Of those that have, the most notable include Scott Loren's *'Out of the Past': Freedom, Film Noir and the American Dream's Myth of Reinvention* (2007), Paula Rabinowitz's *Black & White & Noir: America's Pulp Modernism* (2002) and Ken Hillis's *Film Noir and the American Dream: The Dark Side of Enlightenment* (2005). Loren sees Noir as a 'moralizing commentary on [the] refashioning and self-invention' at the heart of the American Dream, and there is a great deal of truth in such an assertion (Scott 2007, 371). However, Loren looks more at the trend of self-reinvention of Film Noir characters attempting to escape their pasts, and less at how their actions denote criticism of individual historical components of the Dream. Rabinowitz briefly connects the development of Noir style to a loss of faith in America but a more detailed analysis can be done (Rabinowitz 2002, 111). Hillis curiously chooses to argue that Noir protagonists are faced with a crisis of Enlightenment philosophy that for them diminishes America's promise (Hillis 2005, 3). More tangible elements, such as family, upward mobility, hard work and consumerism should be examined. Furthermore, the trappings of modernist thinking are far more obvious than Enlightenment philosophy in the critique formed in *Double Indemnity*.

To understand how Film Noir disparages the American Dream, a definition of the Dream itself is needed. As has often been pointed out, 'few terms are defined in so many different ways or bandied about more loosely' (Fossum and Roth 1981, 5). While certainly signifying the promise that America offers to its inhabitants, the American Dream remains an amorphous and fluid notion that has constantly been revised according to historical period and thus is not easily pinned down. But there are recognisable tenets. In its earliest phase, puritan settlers defined it as freedom of religion (Wright 1996, 31). The founding fathers gave it its most famous written

description as the ‘unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’ (‘Declaration of Independence’). Jeffersonian republicanism equated it with the individualism and freedom that the self-sufficiency of land-ownership provided (Peterson 1998, 365). In the nineteenth century, middle-class Victorian principles associated the Dream with clear and separate gender spheres (with women as housekeeping mothers and men as home-owning providers), pure family values and strict morality (Van Slyck 1996, 221; Rosenberg 1973, 145). Immigrants seeking a new future in the U.S., and those who already lived there, often dreamt of home-ownership in cities, or unsettled land on Western frontiers (Garb 2005, 5; Turner 1996, 1). Gilded Age industrial capitalism gave rise to the ‘rags-to-riches’ belief in upward social and economic mobility, particularly through hard work (Hilkey 1997, 6). The early twentieth century brought increased wages, mass production and consumer culture that placed emphasis on material evidence, reiterating the importance of home and car ownership (Schlereth 1992, 141; Marchand 1986, 24).

The decade of *Double Indemnity*’s release witnessed the beginning of a reaffirmation among middle-class white Americans of Victorian family values (May 1999, 298). The appearance of the ‘nuclear family’ in the American Dream saw ‘very large numbers of people constructing lives in a relatively new and very specific ideal of family life’ (Nelson 1997, 28). It was an ideal based upon a small family unit consisting only of co-habiting, married parents (with an assumption of the same Victorian separate gender domains) and their children, for whom they were responsible (Murdock 2003, 19). By the time Film Noir was born, all these varied threads had accumulated into a composite mythology that Americans could draw upon in forming their aspirations. Each thread, be it the nuclear family, upward mobility, hard work, or commercial status symbolism, can be traced to particular and varied historical circumstance. *All* these threads are targets of the Film Noir polemic. Every single historical component, and the thus the Dream they constitute, meet pointed criticism.

The sharpest condemnation, and that to which the contemporary audience would have related the most, was fired at the doctrines that seemed especially invalid at the time when Cain wrote the novel in 1935, and also in 1938, the year in which the film was set; these doctrines remained equally invalid when the film was released in 1944. I will argue that both the hardship and celebrity criminality of the Depression era informed Cain’s novel and (by virtue of his own suffering during that time) Chandler’s script. The lack of faith in legal employment and disenchantment with consumer materialism that appear in both the book and the film came from their creators’ experiences during the 1930s. That the time of the movie release date in 1944 is not associated to the same extent with hardship and criminal glamour does not dictate that the film should be different in this way from the book written some nine years earlier. Firstly, I will show that Chandler’s memories of the Depression had not dissipated. Secondly, wartime rationing was still in effect, and post-war economic prosperity was still a long way off (Higgs 1992, 50). Consequently, as Wheeler Dixon states, a Depression-like ‘culture of contingency,’ i.e. a lack of social and financial security pervades the film. This is most notable in the symbolic use of crutches by Neff when impersonating Dietrichson (Dixon 2005, 134). It is unsurprising then that the satirical targets are the same for both Cain and Chandler, and consequently appear in both the novel and the film.

Such satire might not be immediately apparent. Although Neff dies in search of a financially comfortable future and a loving wife, he attempts to cheat the system in the process. The simple facts of his failure and his death at the end of the film appear initially as proof that shortcuts from the ethics of hard work lead to misery. If anything it is a reaffirmation of the Dream’s validity. In entering into an affair with a man’s wife, killing him, depriving his family of its figurehead and seeking to profit from it, Neff transgresses all the social boundaries that the Dream’s ideology staked out; it seems only fair that he should meet a bad end. The same is true of his accomplice and inspiration, Phyllis (Barbara Stanwyck). By committing adultery, using her sexuality to control men and abetting murder, she not only offends the moralistic puritan and Victorian ideology that helped created the American Dream, she has also stepped well beyond what many Americans in the early 1940s considered a woman’s sphere. Her unhappy demise

might also have been a comfort to the more conservative audience members who subscribed to an idea of America based on concepts of the nuclear family and separate gender spheres.

However, Noir movies do not work as morality plays. Alongside the specific sense of malaise, 'moral ambivalence' has also been listed by Borde and Chaumeton as an obvious marker of the 'genre,' and again we find it in abundance (Borde and Chaumeton 2002, 13). Delineations between good and evil in *Double Indemnity* are far from clear. Ian Jarvie argues that the distance between appearance and reality is so large in Noir that the audience is left incapable of making moral judgements on any characters (Jarvie 2006, 169). The only way that society can function is by believing what it wants to. Neff is too willing to accept that Phyllis loves him, and ignores the fact that she has killed before because it complicates his vision of her as a neglected woman. Keyes is too willing to believe his protégé is honest, refusing to allow that he might have defrauded the company. As a character says in a different Noir movie, it '[s]eems like everything people ought to know, they just don't want to hear. I guess that's the big trouble with the world' (Tourneur 1947). As a consequence, truth is devalued to the point that lies and their tellers cannot simply be labelled as bad; any ideas related to the American Dream ideology is laid open to questioning.

As Spencer Selby points out, *Double Indemnity* was groundbreaking because it was the first film to identify its audience with a murderer. This identification, formed through the first-person narrative, compels the audience to wish that Neff will succeed (Selby 1984, 15). Moreover, like most other Noir protagonists, he is an antihero; he occupies all the screen time and agency that a conventional Hollywood 'good guy' usually does, but his behaviour does not follow. Wilder uses this and one other Tinseltown tradition - whereby 'good' characters are recognisably attractive and 'bad' ones ugly - to subvert the moral order of the film. Neff and Phyllis are 'well groomed, nicely dressed, and glamorised by flattering lighting and poses' so that they appear trustworthy. The actor and actress who played Neff and Phyllis had played good characters in previous films, so that audience preconceptions were also put to mischievous use (Palmer 1994, 46; McDonald 2000, 120). As a result, the audience is unable to make traditional moral judgements; the average audience member is made to 'share values s/he would otherwise abhor' (Palmer 1994, 42).

By contrast, the guardian of moral order, Keyes (Edward G. Robinson), is portrayed as 'intolerant, inflexible, self-righteous and incapable of sympathy' (Selby 1984, 15). Furthermore, some of Phyllis's actions are explained, if not justified, by the attitude her husband (Tom Powers) takes towards her. During the scene in which Neff tricks him into buying the insurance which Phyllis will later claim, Dietrichson is constantly boorish. When she appears to agree with him that the insurance is too costly, Dietrichson criticises her spending habits. When she merely mentions his desire to go to the Stanford reunion, he snaps: 'what's wrong with that? Can't I have a little fun every year?' (Wilder 1944). When he orders her around, there is no trace of politeness, let alone affection. Even as Neff kills him from the backseat of a car, Phyllis's husband is complaining about her driving. Not quite eliciting the audience's *approval* for the killing, the portrayal of Dietrichson's deportment does diminish the sympathy the audience ought to feel for the victim. Instead of a clear case of murder motivated by avarice, viewers are confronted with the possibility that Phyllis is seeking to abort an unhappy and abusive marriage, and Neff is merely staging a rescue. The line between right and wrong is well and truly blurred. Thus, the film cannot be seen as a validation of the American Dream just because those that seek to subvert it are punished. The tragic ending likely owes more to Production Code stipulations that no character profit from crime than to any moral tendencies among directors or writers (Robson 2005, 36). The Hays Code sought to show that 'deviant behaviour, criminal or sexual, cost violators the love and comfort of home, the intimacy of family,' but it backfired (Black 1989, 171). Rather than see the loss of family and home as tragic, Film Noir avidly depicts worlds in which family and home are missing to begin with.

When Neff first arrives at the Dietrichson home, the house appears to be in a typical 1930s or 1940s middle-class neighbourhood. The screenplay directions describe the setting: 'Palm trees line the street, middle-class houses [...] Some kids [are] throwing a baseball back and forth across

a couple of front lawns' (Chandler and Wilder 2000, 11). Cain's novel goes even further to portray the homestead as the typical setting of the twentieth-century, consumer-driven American Dream, describing a 'living room like every other living room in California, maybe a little more expensive than some, but nothing a department store wouldn't deliver on one truck, lay out in the morning, and have the credit OK ready the same afternoon' (Cain 2002, 2). We discover that Dietrichson is a hard-working oil company executive with an apparently loving family. He is the epitome of 1940s realised American potential. The picture of a wealthy, wholesome household translates well to the screen, and just like in the book, that picture is shown to be an illusion.

The opening scene is the only time children are seen, with the exception of Dietrichson's daughter, Lola (Jean Heather) and her boyfriend (Byron Barr), both of whom have more in common with the caricatures of juvenile delinquents in earlier paranoiac anti-drug films like *Reefer Madness* (1936) or *Cocaine Fiends* (1935) than with the vision of family that would exemplify post-war optimism (Schickel 1992, 48). While Neff tricks Dietrichson into buying the insurance, the family home is revealed to be, in Sylvia Harvey's words, 'the place where three people who hate each other spend endlessly boring evenings together' (Harvey 2003, 43). A working family structure is conspicuous by its absence. Lola lies to her father and stepmother, and struggles to enforce her will over both, prompting a statement from Dietrichson that she is 'a neat little fighter for her weight' (Wilder 1944). The boxing analogy reveals a break from the prescribed social mould of the obedient daughter who relies on her parents and submits to their will.

Just as Lola is a corruption of the obedient child, Phyllis is a corruption of the compliant and loving wife and mother. Her hatred towards Lola and her own childlessness are an affront to nuclear family values (Evans 1992, 169), yet she *appears* in the correct role at various points. When fixing her husband drinks or playing board games with Lola she is, as Foster Hirsch says, 'a recognizable American housewife of a certain type and class – except that something is missing, some crucial human element' (Hirsch 1986, 7). Indeed, Phyllis lacks the ability to display affection appropriately. The persona she upholds while in the presence of her family is a reserved one, as befitted a 1940s housewife, but when she first meets Neff, she deliberately parades her naked legs in front of him. She captivates him with her anklet, which, according to some, is reminiscent of fetishism, and to others, of prostitution (Rabinowitz 2002, 172; Evans 1992, 171). With one wave of an ankle, she destroys the façade of respectability that was essential to the nuclear family; her part in the conspiracy also negates her position as the tame homemaker.

Phyllis is willing to kill her husband to escape her frustration, and in doing so, she desecrates two institutions that were becoming ever more holy to Americans at the time: marriage and the family. In keeping with the Noir tradition by which outwardly respectable settings secretly house crime and scandal (the antique book shop that sells pornography in *The Big Sleep*, for example), the family home becomes the centre of evil (Hawks 1946; Naremore 1998, 220). Wilder distrusted superficially respectable society, and this mistrust plays out in dark humour on the screen (McBride and Wilmington 1970, 5). *Double Indemnity* brings murder into the realm of the American Dream, it 'domesticates crime, makes it an element of family life' (Palmer 1994, 51). Appropriately and ironically, the home that Phyllis defames and tries to escape from becomes the place where she meets her end. In true modernist fashion, the family abode is decaying and each of its members is alienated from the other. The homestead is truly subverted, and as a result, so are the morals it is meant to provide and the American Dream it is meant to symbolise. Extra-marital affairs and juvenile delinquency inhabit the new realm in which society functions (Harvey 2003, 45).

The hard-work ethic of the Dream is similarly usurped. Gilded Age industrial magnates like Andrew Carnegie imbued the American ideal with a belief that graft was more rewarding than comfort. Of his first pay-check he claimed, 'I have made millions since, but none of those millions gave me as much satisfaction as my first week's earnings. I was now a helper of the family, a breadwinner, and no longer a total charge upon my parents' (Carnegie 2007, 41). By 1944, such views had long been recognised for the narcissism they were, but social advancement through toil nonetheless became a crucial ideological driving force of American progress (Cullen

2003, 60). In *Double Indemnity*, such advancement by graft is an ideal that neither the characters nor their creators seem to share. While Carnegie's anecdotes glow with masculine self-recognition (Catano 2001, 59), for most men, the Depression had successfully destroyed the myth of manly hard work that conquers all; the recession ridiculed the sanctity of the male breadwinner (Kimmel 1997, 199). Crucially, Cain published the novel in 1935. That the book appeared during one of the hardest years of the Depression - a year of drought, a year in which the worst Dust Bowl storms destroyed prospects of agricultural recovery in the Southwest - is hardly surprising (Worster 2004, 16). Although the script was written nine years later, Chandler's personal memories of recession and hardship had not dissipated, and seem to inform his work. Of his own Depression-era experiences, he wrote, 'I never slept in a park, but I came damn close to it. I went five days without eating anything but soup once [...] It didn't kill me, but neither did it increase my love of humanity' (MacShane 1978, 59). Resultantly, disenchantment with the promise of hard work pervades Chandler's script as well as Cain's novel. In both, the daily grind is easily replaced with crime.

Cain was writing the novel during 1934 when the glamour of career criminality reached its height, with the bank-robbing exploits of John Dillinger and Bonnie and Clyde constantly making national news and often meeting favourable public opinion (Matera 2004, 119; Milner 1996, 2). With the government seemingly helpless to prevent bank runs and mortgage foreclosures, many idolised the criminals that did those things of which they only dreamed. As an occupational alternative to legal employment, crime had never seemed so attractive, nor its perpetrators so glamorous. Cain reinforced this public sentiment when he repeated it in his novel. The same is true of the movie, as the dashing looks of Dillinger and the love story of Bonnie and Clyde seem to manifest in the appearance and actions of the protagonists the seductiveness of criminality.

By contrast, stereotypical workers appear distinctly less than glamorous: Dietrichson seems miserable and is unceremoniously killed, while Keyes is constantly agitated by his job. Neither of them is physically attractive. The audience sympathises with Neff when he turns down Keyes's request to take a pay-cut and work for him, especially when the decision reduces the latter to insults. By comparison, Phyllis and Neff lead somewhat care-free lives and very nearly get away with a fortune (and murder). Like gangster films before them, Film Noir showed that the only people who could profit from Carnegie's simplistic ethos were criminals (Booker 1999, 26). The conspirators are meticulous in their planning, displaying a level of commitment and professionalism the industrialist would have admired. As Walter says defiantly to his partner-in-crime, '[t]here isn't going to be any slip up. Nothing sloppy. Nothing weak. It's going to be perfect' (Wilder 1944). Money holds the same reverence for the protagonists as it does for conventional American Dreamers, but the route they take to reach the goal distinguishes them. Phyllis and Neff have the right attitude, but apply it to the wrong field.

However, the choice of felonious action is not entirely their own. As Neff's perfectionism shows, they are far from being too lazy to make an honest buck. Instead, money is their only chance to achieve social standing, and crime is the only way to achieve truly large amounts of cash (Hillis 2005, 4). Both have tried the conventional life, and while hardly poor, neither has the happiness that rags-to-riches myths promise. Keyes's job offer shows that hard work is no guarantee of greater wealth. In his confession, Neff compares his insurance job to gambling: 'you're like the guy behind the roulette wheel, watching the customers to make sure they don't crook the house. And then one night, you get to thinking how you could crook the house yourself. And do it smart. Because you've got that wheel right under your hands' (Wilder 1944). Because his livelihood is a constant gamble, so is his chance at upward mobility. The conventional rules have dissolved. Instead, success can only come through chance and the audacity to follow it. When luck is all they have, it is hardly surprising that Film Noir protagonists do everything they can to stack the odds in their favour. Lack of faith in the likelihood of upward mobility, and the attendant opportunism, is a direct effect of the economic crisis. The Depression left a cynical mark on Chandler and his ilk - the fear of going without translated into their characters, who risk everything for a little more security.

Consumer society also comes under scrutiny. Mass production and commoditisation in the 1920s meant consumerism was already intrinsic to the American Dream (Cohen 1999, 151), but it became even more apparent during the 1940s. Furthermore, although the U.S. was still at war at the time of the film's release, many had already sensed the post-war prosperity that a war economy had begun to simulate. It was in this era that consumer credit was vastly expanded, and consumer products became more available than ever before (Calder 1999, 17). As a result, the American Dream was represented more by ownership of a car or house than by hard work and thrift, yet for many, the promise of material abundance was merely a lesser alternative to true substance. Noir writers were often sickened by the lust for consumer goods in the real world. Raymond Chandler labelled the period the

Coca-Cola Age [...] an age whose dominant note is an efficient vulgarity, a completely unscrupulous scramble for the dollar, an age where the typical middle-class family (in California at any rate) seems to exist to support a large, gaudy and expensive automobile which as a piece of engineering is outmoded junk. (Gardiner and Sorley Walker 1997, 58)

Neff and Phyllis are caught up in the same scramble, and the materialistic scenario comes under attack. The characters will do almost anything for money because they appear to live in a world where that is the only true way to get ahead. Their shallowness, while understandable, is not attractive. Furthermore, hero and heroine at least avoid the vulgar trappings of consumerism in the process. They do not suffer from the laziness that Chandler saw as resulting from consumerism: 'All our clocks are electric, all our heating is automatic, and in fact I sometimes wonder what the hell we are here for. Certainly not to use our minds' (Chandler 1981, 413).

This feeling of anti-consumerism translates curiously to film. The attack is levelled through the film's setting as well as its protagonists' actions. The choice of a suburban supermarket as the place of planning for the murder serves the same purpose as the presence of crime in the family home: it corrupts a holy seat of the American Dream and points to darkness lurking beneath the thin veneers of respectability. Wilder reinforces the effect through use of lighting in the supermarket scenes. While nearly all other scenes, even those indoors, are filmed in the various shades of heavy darkness we expect from Noir, the supermarket almost glows in a radiant brightness. The upshot is unsettling, and in a world in which Hollywood conventions are used for unconventional outcomes, the audience becomes aware that bright does not necessarily mean 'good.' The inversion of expectations is completed with cynical humour when, in the middle of a conversation about murder, Neff obliges a request of a woman with her child by reaching for some coffee on a high shelf. Surrealist involvement of the family shopping trip with murder kicks yet another dent in the American Dream.

If Frederick Jackson Turner's famous thesis can be accepted, the frontier was essential to American progress (Turner 1996, 32). As the literal 'land of opportunity', the West was also the hallowed ground of American lore. However, by the 1940s, the frontier had been closed for decades, brining an end to years of constant migration. Although plenty of time had passed, Noir leads its audience to believe that the closure remains an unsolved problem. Many critics note the fear of the intruding 'other' in Noir that speaks of a distrust of the westward movement that the Dream inspired (Lott 2000, 159; Abbott 2002, 2). Westward migration as a stimulant of progress now seems impossible, especially when we see in the opening scene that the railway, the invention that opened up California to migration, is in need of repair (Dimendberg 2004, 172). It is no coincidence that many Noir movies were based in Los Angeles, one of the last posts on the western Frontier.

Frontier closure made automobiles the quintessential symbol of American modernity; cars were the new source of freedom that was so important to the American Dream, and were marketed as such (Cullen 2003, 150). Like the supermarket, the car was a sacred structure of an increasingly commercial nation. With the same modernist surrealism that divorces the supermarket from its

customary role, the car also becomes a scene of crime. It provides the setting for the murder itself, and in the process, the automobile becomes another defiled place of American cultural worship. The sacrilege is made worse by the fact that the car was the last instrument by which the idea of the American frontier could be maintained.

Cain was particularly aware of the frontier's closure, and his preoccupation is apparent in his work. Nearly all his novels deal in some way with the corruption of America's promise. He was interested, according to David Madden, 'in the way that the high hopes of the westward movement collapsed on the Pacific shore in the vacant glare of a sunlight that gilds the cheapest artefacts of transient American technology' (Madden 1970, 108). This collapse lends Los Angeles a stifling quality in Noir movies, one enhanced by the Depression-inspired arrest of urban development in the United States during the 1930s and early 1940s (Teaford 1993, 74). With no new land and no new buildings, migration either stopped or led to overcrowding. The fences that westerners despised so much are obvious in Noir; they take the form of the skyscrapers that block out the light (Coyne 1997, 111). Looming physical obstacles suggest entrapment and danger, the surroundings 'begin small and progressively close in on the fated protagonists' (Hirsch 1986, 15).

A sense of stagnation and suffocation is created in the movie by the constant darkness and the high rises of downtown L.A., especially when compared with the open spaces and distant horizons of the Western films that were familiar to movie-going audiences by 1944. Inner cities, once the domain of financial success and progress, have become a disorienting chaos of 'clutter, distraction and noise', and are riddled with crime (Dickos 2002, 63). In 1943, downtown L.A. witnessed bloody race riots, while corrupt and brutal policing by the LAPD had given the city a tough reputation (Mazon 1988, 2; MacShane 1978, 64). This danger is palpable on film: the new frontier is urban (Crooks 1998, 179). Scholars have often compared Film Noir antiheroes to Western male leads, as both are loners battling to survive in disorientating, harsh environments (Porter 1975, 412; Matheson 2005, 891). But while cowboys could leave for pastures new, in Noir there is just the predictable ending of failure and death. The characters are trapped, and as Cain imagined, their dreams are smashed against the boundary wall. When Neff gets in his car after being shot, he cannot ride off into the sunset, he can only go to the place of work that has ruled his life to prostrate himself before yet another corrupted altar of American life, and die.

Double Indemnity's message is far from comforting. But if Noir forms such a stinging condemnation of American ideals of work, family, consumerism and migration, if it confronted viewers with failure of their nation and their dreams, why were they popular? Some suggest that audiences simply ignored the cynicism of Noir, or that its 'evocation of evil may have served only as a delicious contrast: making the ultimate victory of goodness and justice that much more glorious' (Quart and Auster 1984, 28). However, a victory marginally guaranteed only by a production code is not particularly glorious. It could be just as likely that audiences in the 1940s were not as optimistic as often assumed. In truly apocalyptic and modernist rhetoric, Chandler suggests another reason:

Possibly it was the smell of fear which these stories managed to generate. Their characters lived in a world gone wrong, a world in which, long before the atom bomb, civilization had created the machinery for its own destruction, and was learning to use it with all the moronic delight of a gangster trying out his first machine gun. (Chandler 1995, 1016)

Race riots, poverty, unemployment, inflation and war remained recent images in Chandler's memory at the time of writing the above statement. In the opinion of some historians, the Cold War had already begun (Tuttle 2001, 14). The atom bomb and HUAC hearings were just around the corner. Perhaps a vision of destructive civilization was easy to relate to in 1944. The Dream was in its death throes, but like the 'death [that] emerges at the end of a tortuous journey' in a Film Noir (Borde and Chaumeton 2002, 5), it made for compelling and entertaining viewing.

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