Discussion Questions for Women in Film--Cleveland Gathering,
Wednesday, October 2, 2013:

Focal Film: *Double Indemnity* (1944; U.S.; Screenplay by Billy Wilder and Raymond Chandler, Based on the novel by James M. Cain (*The Postman Always Rings Twice*); Directed by Billy Wilder (*Sunset Boulevard, Some Like It Hot, The Apartment*))

NOTE: This film will be shown on the Turner Classic Movies (TCM) network at 10 pm on Tuesday, October 1, 2013...the night before our discussion group!

In *Double Indemnity*, the principal characters are:

* Phyllis Dietrichson, a scheming southern California housewife (played by Barbara Stanwyck)
* Walter Neff, insurance agent (played by Fred MacMurray)
* Barton Keyes, Neff’s boss and close friend (played by Edward G. Robinson)
* Lola Dietrichson, Phyllis’ step-daughter (played by Jean Heather)

The cast of characters also includes Mr. Dietrichson, Phyllis’ husband and Lola’s father (Tom Powers), Lola’s sometime boyfriend Nino Zachetti (Byron Barr), and Mr. Jackson, the sole witness to Mr. Dietrichson’s supposed accident (Porter Hall).

*Double Indemnity* is a top film of the mid-20th-century. It was added to the U.S. Library of Congress’ National Film Registry in 1998, and was named the 38th best film of all time by the American Film Institute.

This film has been the focus of study and analyses primarily due to its status as (a) classical Hollywood Studio System output, and, correspondingly, (b) a prime example of a great genre film (in particular, the perennially popular genre of film noir). The studio that produced this film, Paramount Pictures, would not ultimately be the studio to be known for films noirs—Warner Brothers and RKO would be. Nevertheless, *Double Indemnity* is considered by some scholars to be the original film noir, and the Phyllis Dietrichson character is considered the most authentic femme fatale. Although slightly earlier films had introduced a number of the conventions that would become identified with film noir (e.g., *Citizen Kane, M*), this film is perhaps the first to bring all the necessary elements together so successfully that imitators were sure to follow.

Indeed, it is a set of films that imitate a core successful film that creates what we call genre films, a peculiar construction emerging from the Hollywood Studio System. A genre is a sort of contract between filmmakers and the audience. As a set of films is produced that fits a given profile, and an appropriate label is attached (e.g., screwball comedy, slasher film, film noir), the audience comes to expect standard characteristics such as plot structure, cinematic look, prototypical characters, and symbolism.

The genre of film noir has been one of the most enduring and popular film genres in history. Film noir is distinguished by (a) a nonlinear narrative, usually including flashbacks and voiceovers, (b) a set of morally challenged characters, featuring a focal bad guy, a femme fatale, and, centrally, a “tarnished knight” on a quest to solve a crime, (c) an “atmosphere of corruption in which violence, paranoia, and obsessive desire hold sway” (Gaylyn Studlar), (d) realistic, urban, usually nighttime locations, (e) fatalistic narrative and
hard-boiled, double-entendre-laden dialogue, and (f) black and white photography with highly stylized, high-contrast lighting.

1. How well does this film fit the expected profile of the film noir genre? How does it differ from other films noirs you may have seen?

2. Writing about women in film noir, scholar Janey Place says that “film noir is a male fantasy, as is most of our art... women are defined in relation to men, and the centrality of sexuality in this definition is a key to understanding the position of women in our culture.” She also delineates between the “two poles of female archetypes” in film noir: The “evil seductress” and the “innocent/redeemer.” The seductress is seen as “sexually expressive,” such that she has “access to her own sexuality... and the power that this access unlock(s).” The innocent provides a clear contrast to this. How do these notions apply to this film, and in particular to the characters of Phyllis and Lola?

3. Specifically, let’s consider definitions of the femme fatale. Writer Julie Grossman notes that the femme fatale is an evil, opaque woman who “cannot be humanized.” Film scholar Steve Neale considers the definition of the femme fatale as a “fatal woman... who uses her beauty to lure and entrap men,” who is not predictable, not easily legible. He contends that as part of this illegibility of Phyllis, we generally are attached to the character of Walter Neff, through his very revealing voiceover and through camera shots that present his viewpoint (e.g., the ankle bracelet). Only once do we become attached to Phyllis, only once are we able to “read” her clearly—when we are privy to her reaction as Neff kills her husband. What is her reaction, and therefore how are we attached to her? Can she be humanized, do you think?

4. Similarly, scholar Gaylyn Studlar writes that in film noir, “women are dangerous, not only because they kill, but because they arouse the man’s desire; in unleashing his sexual desire, the woman also arouses his ability to act on other—heretofore repressed—desires, including murderous ones.” What is Walter’s repressed desire?

5. Who is the true mastermind of the murder plot? Writer/critic Richard Schickel says that in the second and final grocery store scene (and why are we in a grocery store, anyway?), we realize that Phyllis, not Walter Neff, is in charge. But for Neff, the intellectual challenge is a driving force—he is fascinated with the question of “how you could crook the house.” The late critic Roger Ebert felt that the interaction of the two characters was necessary—neither one would have acted alone. What are your thoughts?

6. Double Indemnity was groundbreaking at the time of its release in its challenge to the Hollywood Production Code (making it what has been called a “code-breaking” film). The Production Code stated that “the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil, or sin.” Yet films in the 1940s such as Double Indemnity began to do just that. What was going on in the world at this time that might have changed Hollywood’s outlook?

7. Double Indemnity is rather unique among films noirs in the fact that the main male character (i.e., Walter Neff) is not a “tarnished knight” on a quest to solve a mystery, but is rather himself a perpetrator. Your thoughts on this?
8. Much discussion has been prompted by the wig worn by Barbara Stanwyck. Reportedly, Paramount executive Buddy DeSylva was dismayed: “We hire Barbara Stanwyck and here we get George Washington.” Wilder responded, “I wanted her to look as sleazy as possible” (William Hare). Others have commented that the “phoniness” of the wig reflects the phoniness of Phyllis herself. What is your interpretation?

9. And how about the anklet? While it might be seen as the lynchpin that secures Walter’s attraction to Phyllis, it’s unclear exactly how this has occurred. What do you think the anklet represents?

10. Some critics and scholars see Barton Keyes as father figure to Walter Neff. Others interpret their close “loving” relationship as submerged homosexuality. And there are those who see the two as simply very close and interdependent friends. In all cases, the Keyes-Neff relationship is seen as the real romance of the film. (Billy Wilder himself confirmed this.) Where does that leave the Phyllis-Walter Neff relationship?

11. Roger Ebert noted that Walter always called Phyllis “‘baby,’ as if she’s a brand, not a woman.” Does this give you a different way of viewing the relationships among the characters?

12. In Cinema Journal in 2005, Hugh Manon writes: “Although not popularly regarded as such, Double Indemnity stands as one of Hollywood’s quintessential articulations of perverse desire.” That is, Walter Neff is not simply trying to win Phyllis Dietrichson by killing her husband—he has more unusual and unexpected motives. What do you think his perverse motives might be?

13. Double Indemnity was remade as Body Heat by writer/director Lawrence Kasdan in 1981. The latter film was able to portray the Phyllis-Walter relationship as much more overtly sexual, of course. Thus, the two versions of the story present different implications as to the motives for the murder. What is lost, and what is gained, by this change in the remake?

14. One motif that weaves through the film is that of the linear journey—as Phyllis says, “It’s straight down the line for both of us.” This journey is manifested through the use of vehicles—cars (the murder location, Neff giving Lola a ride, Neff’s erratic final drive to the insurance building), the train (site of the murder coverup), and Keyes’ reference to the killers being “on a trolley ride together and the last stop is the cemetery” (Claire Johnston). Your thoughts?

15. Another motif is that of the lighting of cigars and cigarettes. Walter repeatedly provides a lit match for Keyes, who seems to constantly be unable to find one, despite his extraordinary analytical abilities. And in the end, it’s Keyes who lights Walter’s last cigarette. But who lights Phyllis’ cigarettes? And what does this all mean?

16. Barbara Stanwyck was one of the most widely respected female stars of the Hollywood Studio Era. Her ambition (coming as she did from a very humble, possibly abused childhood), her work ethic, her professionalism, her intelligence and authenticity, were all highly regarded by directors, other actors, and crew members. At the time of Double Indemnity, Barbara Stanwyck was the highest paid woman in America. Phyllis Dietrichson is about as far away from Barbara Stanwyck as you can get. Comments on this particular performance?
17. Fred MacMurray and Edward G. Robinson are both cast in this film very much “against type.” In over 100 films (plus the TV series My Three Sons), MacMurray played a dark character only three times, two of them for writer/director Billy Wilder (Double Indemnity and The Apartment, plus The Caine Mutiny). Robinson, famous at the time of this film for his gangster roles, did begin to segue into warmer, more personable characters (e.g., Our Vines Have Tender Grapes, A Hole in the Head, Soylent Green). By the way, his portrayal of Keyes has been noted for its close similarity to the persona of Billy Wilder himself. How do these two cases of against-type casting contribute to the film overall?

18. Consider the production techniques in this film—the high-contrast lighting typical of film noir (including the frequent use of venetian blind shadows that seem to represent prison bars) . . . The “edgy, neurotic” score by Miklos Rosza . . . The tracking shots that follow Phyllis’ feet as she descends the staircase. How do such elements contribute to the overall film?

19. As in the other Billy Wilder film we have viewed, The Apartment, Wilder’s fascination with and criticisms of American society are apparent in this film. Scholar Gerd Gemunchen notes that Wilder represents urban southern California as a “sterile and culturally shallow place populated by disenfranchised, disconnected, and dishonest people.” Gemunchen sees the film as “debunking the American dream,” and sees Walter Neff as an outsider marginalized within southern California’s consumer culture. Do you see evidence of this Wilder point of view?

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Archive of Women in Film discussion questions: http://academic.csuohio.edu/kneuendorf/womeninfilm

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