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Techniques Used to Establish the First Person Narrator and Perspective in *Double Indemnity* and *Murder, My Sweet*

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ABSTRACT

Directed by Billy Wilder (1944) and Edward Dmytryk (1944) respectively, the films noir *Double Indemnity* and *Murder, My Sweet* each have a storyline that unfolds from a first person perspective as told by a narrator. The techniques used in the films establish this first person perspective through which the films are understood. Both films include voice over as a technique, which determines who the narrator is and the amount of information withheld or disclosed to the audience. Establishing the visual perspective of the narrator is portrayed through differently for each film. While, *Double Indemnity* utilizes camera angle, *Murder, My Sweet* uses camera filters and special effects. Lastly, to achieve the first person narration, the character narrating in each film must be present in every scene or give explanation of events that occur in his absence. The various techniques used in each film function cohesively to establish the narrator and achieve his perspective through which the plot is understood by the audience.

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Techniques Used to Establish the First Person Narrator and Perspective in *Double Indemnity* and *Murder, My Sweet*

Directed by Billy Wilder (1944) and Edward Dmytryk (1944) respectively, the films *Double Indemnity* and *Murder, My Sweet* each have a storyline that unfolds from a first person perspective. In these films noir, the directors succeed in establishing a narrator and accomplishing his perspective by means of various film techniques. The technique of voice over is utilized in both films to determine the narrator. The visual perspective of the narrator in each of the films is presented through camera angle and special effects. Additionally, to achieve a first person narrated film, the narrator must be present in every scene; or, give his own explanation of events that occur during his absence, as is the case in *Double Indemnity*. The techniques function together in each work of film to establish a narrator, whether he is a murderer or a private investigator, and to accomplish the perspective through which the plot is understood and developed.

The voice over technique used to establish the narrator differs between the two films *Double Indemnity* and *Murder, My Sweet*, affecting the perception of the plot. One difference is the amount of background noise heard during the films. During the voiced over parts in *Double Indemnity*, everything is silent and viewers hear only Walter Neff's (Fred MacMurray) voice; whereas in *Murder, My Sweet*, some background noise is heard. By silencing all except Walter's voice, the audience is placed into his world and perspective without external distraction in the film, just as Walter undistractedly concentrates on committing the "perfect" murder, as he reiterates throughout the film (*Double Indemnity*). Being submerged into his world throughout the film via the voice over leads to the audience's understanding of how the plot unfolds. By clearly determining Walter as the narrator, the plot unfolds through the eyes of a murderer, not that of an investigator or detective as in *Murder, My Sweet*.

The voice over technique employed in *Murder, My Sweet* establishes Philip Marlowe (Dick Powell), a private investigator, as narrator of the film; it is through Marlowe's perspective that the audience understands the plot. However, unlike *Double Indemnity* where all background noise is silenced, there is some slight background noise heard at times during the voiced over parts in *Murder, My Sweet*. During the opening scene, when Marlowe begins to inform the policemen what he knows concerning the murders, the sounds of L.A. traffic are still heard through the voiced over flashback. In a later scene, when he recounts his visit to

Jessie Florian (Esther Howard), the widow of the man who previously owned a bar where an ex-conman's (Mike Mazurki) former girlfriend (Claire Trevor) used to work, the sound of Jessie blowing her nose is heard. By not completely silencing all background noise, the audience is delivered the view point of a detective. This is the view point of an observer who pays close attention to every detail including sound as he gathers clues to solve a case. Thus the voice over not only establishes Marlowe as narrator, but also influences the understanding of the plot by achieving the observant perspective through which Marlowe views the events given his profession

Another difference between the voice over technique used in *Double Indemnity* and *Murder, My Sweet* is the amount of information the audience receives, which influences the perception of the plot. At the beginning of the *Double Indemnity* Walter informs the audience of two key pieces of information: who was murdered and who committed the crime. Being told this information at the beginning of the film focuses the plot's suspense not on who committed the murder, but rather on how it was committed. The foreknowledge of both crime and perpetrator offers answers to questions not formulated yet by the viewer, and these answers provide more questions as the viewer seeks a sense of understanding (Tyrer, 110). The understanding sought after is how the murder was committed or planned which becomes the focus of the plot's suspense (Tyrer, 110). Therefore, the key information given through the voice over at the beginning of *Double Indemnity* frames the understanding by which the plot is perceived and creates suspense surrounding "how" and "why," rather than "who" or "what." The plot is perceived through the perspective of the murderer, as he details the mechanistic aspect of the crime he committed.

The amount of information given to the audience in *Murder, My Sweet* is also controlled by the voice over, although differently, which affects the understanding of the plot. At the beginning of the film, Philip Marlowe sits at a table with a few policemen who question him regarding his investigation and the murders that were committed. Marlowe can only tell the police what he witnessed during his investigation, thus his narration limits the audience's understanding of the plot to his own knowledge obtained during his investigation. Unlike the beginning of *Double Indemnity* where important information is revealed, information is withheld at the onset of *Murder, My Sweet*. Thus, different from *Double Indemnity*, the suspense in *Murder, My Sweet* focuses on discovering both who committed the crimes and how. The lack of information from the onset, pertaining to both the crimes and who committed

them, creates suspense leading to an element of mystery as the concealed truth is sought after. However, viewers discover the truth as Philip Marlowe reveals and sees it through his perspective. Thus the voice over implies not as much fact, as much as it implies Marlowe's interpretation of the truth. As a result, the voice over provides a backdrop for controlling information and creating suspense while the understanding of the plot is framed by the extent of Philip Marlowe's knowledge as he reveals the truth throughout the course of the film from his perspective.

The use of camera angle is another technique employed to further establish Walter as the narrator in *Double Indemnity* by giving him the narrator's visual perspective. During one of the first few scenes of the film, Walter recounts his first visit to Mr. Dietrichson's (Tom Powers) house, where he meets Mrs. Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck). While Walter stands in the doorway, Mrs. Dietrichson, wrapped in a bath towel, begins talking with him from above on the second story behind a guard railing. During this scene of their first encounter, the camera angle is always directed up toward her and down to Walter when the two converse. Thus the angle establishes his perspective relative to how he viewed the events, which is important in further establishing the viewers' understanding of the plot. By employing a camera angle that achieves Walter's visual perspective, the audience understands the plot through the narrator's bias as he recounts the events. Additionally, Walter's visual perspective is delivered to the audience, further setting up Walter as the narrator. Thus, the understanding of the plot is impacted through Walter's visual perspective.

To further establish Philip Marlowe as narrator in *Murder, My Sweet*, camera filters and special effects are mainly used, as opposed to camera angle, to create his visual perspective. This is especially evident throughout the hallucination scene during which Marlowe's vision is altered, and whenever Marlowe is knocked unconscious. To mimic Marlowe's distorted perspective, the director uses a ripple effect during parts of the hallucination scene. This effect stretches and shrinks what Marlowe sees in his surroundings and in his dream, leaning more toward a surreal view of events, rather than an objective one. Later when Marlowe awakes in Dr. Sonderborg's clinic after being drugged, he compares his vision to that of a "grey web woven by a thousand spiders" (*Murder, My Sweet*). Here his visual perspective is depicted by a camera filter imitating stringy spider webs which continues on and off throughout the scene as Marlowe comes in and out of a daze. Additionally, whenever Marlowe is knocked unconscious, the camera's image significantly blurs, which obscures any

finite detail from view. The camera's image is also gradually swallowed in dark ink-like blots that fade into a new scene many hours later. The dark ink blots like the blurred focus, ripple effect, and spider web effect, deliver to the audience Marlowe's visual perspective, or rather his "subjective experience," which is a "hallmark of [film] noir" (Telotte, 229-230). By using the camera filter and special effects, Marlowe is further established as the narrator by presenting his biased view of events, and as a result the perception of the plot is influenced by his subjective view.

Close up shots are another technique used in *Double Indemnity*, employed to reveal the focus of Walter's memory of the events. During a scene when Mrs. Dietrichson joins Walter in the living room, the camera follows only her feet as she walks down the staircase. During this close up shot of her feet, Walter makes mention of her anklet. The audience views the main focus of his memory surrounding her. By focusing on her anklet, which held a sexual connotation during the 1940s when the film was produced, the close up shot of her feet leads the audience to understand Walter's view of Mrs. Dietrichson. Sexualizing her, Walter views Mrs. Dietrichson as an object to own, which he passionately desires. Walter, during another scene of the film recalls Mrs. Dietrichson and her anklet saying, "I kept thinking about Phyllis Dietrichson and the way that anklet of hers cut into her leg" (*Double Indemnity*). Walter's recollection of Mrs. Dietrichson in this scene is a "mix of passion and sadism" (Orr, 57). This mixture reveals the narrator as a man so entrapped in his lust for Mrs. Dietrichson that he is unable to stop himself from murdering someone. Understanding Walter's perspective, subversed with both "passion and sadism," plays an important role in how the audience perceives the plot, because the entire murder on Walter's side is predicated on lust (Orr, 57). It is his lust that leads him to devise a plan with Mrs. Dietrichson, even if it includes murder, so that he may obtain her.

In both films, the perspective offered by the narrators is limited by their own experience, and this limitation impacts the interpretation of the plot. Additionally, the narrator must be present in every scene to establish a first person narrator. An example of this in *Double Indemnity* occurs when Walter walks into Barton Keyes' (Edward G. Robinson) office while Keyes is discussing a claim with a client (Fortunio Bonanova). Since Walter enters the room mid-conversation, he is not abreast of anything said during his absence. To illustrate this, the audience does not hear Keyes' conversation with his client until the door opens and the camera shows Walter entering the office, as opposed to

hearing the conversation while Walter is absent and not experiencing it. However, there is part of a scene where Mrs. Dietrichson is shown at her house hiding the gun she uses to shoot Walter with under a cushion, and he was not present at her house to witness her action. But, because Walter narrates the story after being shot by Mrs. Dietrichson, he surmises that she must have hidden a gun under a cushion at some point before he entered the house. Walter's surmising then also illustrates the limitation of the narrator's perspective to his own experience as he provides his own explanation for where the gun was hidden. Therefore in *Double Indemnity*, the understanding of the plot is impacted by the narrator's perspective through his experience, or through an explanation offered to understand what occurred in his absence. The narrator's limitation of experience and its influence on the plot is also shown in *Murder, My Sweet*. The narrator, Marlowe, is present in every scene, enabling him to recount his experience of events through his bias. One way this is illustrated is during the scenes in which visitors come to call on Marlowe at his office. The audience is not made aware of any visitors unless Marlowe is aware. His visitors are first seen when Marlowe encounters them. He either encounters them when they enter his office, or when he returns to his office to find them waiting. Thus these scenes are a few of many that illustrate how Marlowe's perspective given to the audience is limited by his experience, effecting the understanding of the plot.

The various techniques used in *Double Indemnity* and in *Murder, My Sweet* impact the understanding of the plot through the narrator's perspective. The variety of techniques include voice over, camera angle, close up shots, special effects, and camera filters. In both films, the voice over clearly establishes the narrator and delivers his perspective to the audience; however, the avenue by which the voice over achieves the narrator's perspective differs in the control over the amount of information given and the extent of the background noise heard. The narrator's visual perspective is delivered differently also. In *Double Indemnity*, the visual perspective is given through camera angles; whereas in *Murder, My Sweet*, it is given through camera filters and special effects. The close up shots utilized in *Double Indemnity* convey to the audience where Walter places his focus, which exposes his lustful memory and provides insight to his motive for murder. Another technique used is having the first person narrator present in every scene to give his account of events, unless he surmises an explanation of what transpired during his absence since his perspective is restricted by the extent of his experience. Ultimately, the various combination of the techniques used in both *Double Indemnity* and *Murder, My Sweet* function

together to cohesively establish a narrator, through whose perspective the plot is framed, developed, and perceived.

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