Potential Subversion And Challenging Of Gender Norms In Double Indemnity and Bringing Up Baby

Explore the potential subversion and challenging of gender norms in at least two films from the module. Are these films and character types repeating old patterns or are they breaking out of traditional frameworks? Precisely, how does this work in the films in question?

After watching the two films I will discuss in this essay, two images stayed with me. One of them being Cary Grant wearing a frilly dressing gown in a scene from Howard Hawk's screwball comedy Bringing Up Baby (1938), and the other is the image that accompanies the title sequence of Billy Wilder's noir, Double Indemnity (1948): the silhouette of a man on crutches. These are just examples of the extent to which both films, despite their differences, appear to subvert and challenge gender norms and traditional protagonist roles in the Hollywood studio system. One has been humiliated and feminized while the other is frail and fallible, an image of damaged masculinity. While this is certainly the case, it is also possible to argue that throughout each of the films these conventions are perhaps unintentionally reinforced.

In this essay I will be examining Double Indemnity and Bringing Up Baby in relation to the portrayal and construction of the male and female characters. It is by no means obvious to compare these two films, and although they belong to different genres, they both manage to disrupt their given conventions by attempting to subvert the traditional expected relationship between men and women. Moreover, despite having been written and released in different periods before after war, they also reflect the social reality of their respective periods in a way that justifies my comparison.

During the first half of the twentieth century the social expectation around marriage began to change. As the American population grew by 300 per cent from 1867 and 1929, so did the divorce rate by a staggering 2000 percent. In her book Ina Hark writes that "screwball comedies by and large celebrated the sanctity of marriage, class distinction and the domination of women by men." Bringing Up Baby however, subverts all three of these categories, presenting a romantic scenario between a man who is already engaged and a woman of the same class group who in fact appears to have complete control over his fate. In fact, throughout the film we see characters display characteristics that one would usually ascribe to the opposite gender. As Natalie Harris Bluestone writes in her book Double Vision: Perspectives on Gender and the Visual Arts: "In spite of her flighty ways, Susan is always self-possessed and independent (with Hepburn in the role she could hardly be otherwise). David on the other hand, is perpetually helpless: utterly reliant on other people - usually women - to steer his course." Moreover, Susan is not the only woman who has a great influence on his life. In the very first scene we witness his fiancée, Miss Swallow, and the hold she has over him and we eventually discover that Susan's aunt Elizabeth is in fact the donor with the power to "make or break David's museum" . In Bringing Up Baby we are presented a world of the higher classes which is fundamentally built on tradition and societal norms which Hawk's challenges through his approach to the two protagonists and the dynamics of their relationship.

There is little surprise that Double Indemnity is as subversive as it is. Billy Wilder was a more progressive director who originally came from Germany during the time of the Weimar Republic

which saw Berlin transform into a place where the arts flourished in an unprecedented manner: “Writers, painters, musicians, actors, directors, flocked to find freedom there”. It was a place with much looser gender norms and unlike in America where strong ethical and moral standards were enforced heavily in Hollywood at the time, in Weimar Berlin creatives had complete freedom to do as they pleased artistically. Wilder also brought with him from Europe much stylistic influence. This was most obviously characterised by his use of shadows and stark chiaroscuro lighting. Many of the shots from the film bear great resemblance to UFA classics such as The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920) and Nosferatu (1922). He also brought with him some thematic influence in the darkness of his themes and his approach to loving relationships. Much like Bringing Up Baby, Double Indemnity was made around a time of significant social change and the film certainly reflects this. It was made during The Second World War, a time of great independence for women who were forced for the first time out of their expected roles in the home and into the workforce. This coupled with the so called ‘crisis of masculinity’ caused by the war, due to the sheer amount soldiers returning with PTSD, made for a new social dynamic between the sexes. In Double Indemnity, Wilder mirrors this through his formation of Walter and Phyllis, especially the latter who embodies the role of the ‘femme fatale’. In this case, a seemingly normal upper middle-class woman with a family who secretly craves great financial independence from men and their destruction by proxy. Interestingly, one could draw a comparison between the two periods the films were made, in the sense that they were both times of masculine crisis. While men in the 1940’s were returning psychologically and physically damaged from the war, many men in the 1930’s were struggling to support and feed their families due to the economic and social instability caused by great depression.

Walter Neff is the male protagonist of Double Indemnity. He is a character who presents himself as manly and powerful, whose actions and decisions often lead to contradict his outward demeanour. On his first appearance on the screen he is presented as weak as he has been shot. We also discover that he has killed somebody, for money and for a woman, an act many would perceive as cowardly. We are immediately presented Walter in his most vulnerable state and are made privy to his true self, making it easier to read through his façade as the film proceeds. Billy Wilder also lets us into his personal thoughts through the use of voice over. On the way back from meeting Phyllis for the first time he remarks on the smell of the honeysuckle on her street, a very uncharacteristically masculine remark. He spends many of his interactions with Phyllis in the first half of the film reassuring her of his plan and his ability to carry it out. During the scene in his apartment where he begins to plan the crime he tells her there won’t be anything ‘sloppy’ or ‘weak’ in their scheme, reassuring her of his manly ability to be in control. When she leaves, he smooths out a crease in the rug, as if to reinforce the notion of being in control, of keeping things tidy. Furthermore, his dark shadow is projected onto the curtain, presenting a strong, foreboding figure. Although Neff may present himself as a powerful masculine figure, there are many signs throughout the film that point towards him being insecure of his manhood, leading him to compensate through certain behaviours. With his office being a primarily male domain, this is necessary. Edward G. Robinson, playing Barton Keyes, is Walter’s boss, a confident, talkative, intelligent and business savvy man, perpetually smoking a cigar. He is concise in his language and often uses sports metaphors: “You’ve got the ball, you better run with it.” As he already authentically represents the American image of masculinity, he has no need to compensate as Walter often does. For example, when he visits Walter’s house to discuss the Dietrichson case, he asks for a peppermint tea as he has a stomach ache. But Walter only has manly drinks like bourbon. As like in a previous scene when decides to stop for a beer to wash the taste of Phyllis’ tea out of his mouth, he feels the need to assert his masculinity, unlike Keyes, who is comfortable in his masculinity.

While Walter could be perceived as a weak, naïve character who needs to act like the man he wishes to be portrayed as, Phyllis could be seen as a fierce, cunning woman who uses her intellect to subvert her true self to achieve her ultimate goal. Many see her as the quintessential ‘femme fatale’, which is defined by Barry Grant and Jim Hillier in their book The Film Studies Dictionary: “From the French for “fatal woman”, a female character who uses her beauty to lure and entrap men, leading to their downfall and, usually, death”. They continue describing Phyllis by writing that: “She harbours threat that is not entirely legible, predictable, manageable”. At least in the scene where they first meet, “We have no access to her thoughts, no way of knowing what she I thinking. At this point at least she is illegible”

She plays the role of the naïve woman, who needs the help of men. She makes Walter feel important, enforcing his masculine self-image, and he falls directly into her trap. She uses gender stereotypes to her advantage, lulling Walter into a false sense of security, saying at one point that she just likes to “sit and knit”. Many of these films use a supporting female character as an ideological ‘double’. In this case, Lola plays the role of the pure, good woman without any negative intentions. In an online essay entitled The Femme Fatale in Hollywood Film Noir, Amy Lauren writes “These two archetypes juxtapose the new, independent, woman with one who fills the traditional, submissive role, showing the threat men felt from the possibility of changing gender roles following women’s increased independence, gained through the workforce in World War II” . Men were “fearful of the potentials of this new breed of woman” and the threats to the collective sense of masculinity. As Jack Boozer writes in The Lethal Femme Fatale in the Noir Tradition: “This figure largely abjures traditional romance and passive domesticity, choosing instead to apply her sexuality to homicidal plots in the service of greed” . There was a fear that when women achieved a certain level of wealth and freedom they would want more and become greedy, including destroying men in the process, and through the death of Phyllis, “women are reminded of the consequences and the patriarchy is re-asserted” . Phyllis does not only use her sexuality and beauty as a ‘femme fatale’ to achieve her goals, but also intelligently uses her smarts to concoct a plan which would not be seen as conventionally feminine. On the other hand, she relies on men to do the dirty work for her, implying that as a woman, she would not be capable, enforcing gender norms. In fact, in many ways, through its attempts to subvert gender expectations, Double Indemnity manages to further enforce these norms. Even the well-intentioned Lola lies to her father about Nino and holds her tongue when Walter tells her not to say anything about her suspicions of Phyllis. The meals and walks could be seen as Walter buying Lola’s silence. While Lola represent the ‘good double’, she is still flawed. This creates the notion that even good women are being “morally corrupted” as they become freer, in turn deepening man’s mistrust of all women.