Zoom Event: Cain, Wilder & Chandler, Writers in Hollywood

Introduction
Every Hollywood film needs a script. Some art films might manage making up the story as they go along but not a commercial operation like a major studio during Hollywood's classical period (roughly 1930-1960). Script/screenwriters are essential and they get a separate title credit as a key creative element, alongside the stars and supporting cast, the music composer, cinematographer, producer and director. But do they get much attention from critics and audiences as 'creators'? Film studies has arguably been guilty of ignoring writers and focusing on the director, cinematographer and star performers.

The 'property'
We know that Hollywood is a profit-making venture but it's important to realise that the studios have always been 'risk averse'. This is one of the seeming contradictions of developed capitalist economies, though since the growth of online businesses we have seen many examples of the rapid rise and fall of new business ideas as investors 'risk' large sums in the hope of big rewards. Interestingly though, some of the more successful of these new companies such as Netflix, Amazon and Apple are now beginning to behave much like the major studios of the classical period – Netflix is now a member of the 'film, TV and streaming trade association' the MPAA, joining Disney, Sony, Paramount, Universal and Warner Bros.

Being 'risk averse' simply means that when one of these large corporations wants to create a 'new' film, it will be prepared to commit to a large investment, but only if a key risk is reduced. Any new film must conform to existing audience preferences. The most obvious example of this is the reliance on 'franchises' – existing successful 'story brands' such as James Bond and the Marvel Comics Universe (MCU). As a consequence, in order to innovate, Hollywood has consistently 'absorbed' and exploited successful independent producers and directors, including those from overseas.

In the studio period, when the five major studios owned cinemas as well as studio facilities and a distribution organisation, they needed to produce a supply of films that would fill their own cinemas – as well as many of the independent cinemas. They wanted to make films quickly and efficiently without lowering the appeal to audiences.

The story department had to find new material and ideally this meant finding a 'property', a ready-made story which had already demonstrated its audience appeal. Three efficient ways to do this were to buy a popular book or magazine story, find a 'real' story in the press or select a story from history with a heroic or tragic character. Whichever option was chosen, the story had ideally to be one that the audience would know enough about to be already interested. The more 'guaranteed' the studio was of interest, the more they would pay for the rights to a best-selling book or story. On the other hand, once a property had been purchased, if it went on to be successful with audiences, why not create a sequel (or a prequel) or simply repeat the same story at a later date?

Stories were often written three times. The writer of the original story might be hired, but often was later ignored. One or two new writers, preferably with film experience, might then adapt the story for the cinema. But often this was not the end of the process. Producers might be unhappy with the script, scenes might already have been shot or the film might even have been completed and shown to a preview audience who didn't like it. At this point the studio might decide to hire a new writer (or writers) to re-work the script, sometimes being seen as a script 'doctor', or to create new scenes or replace

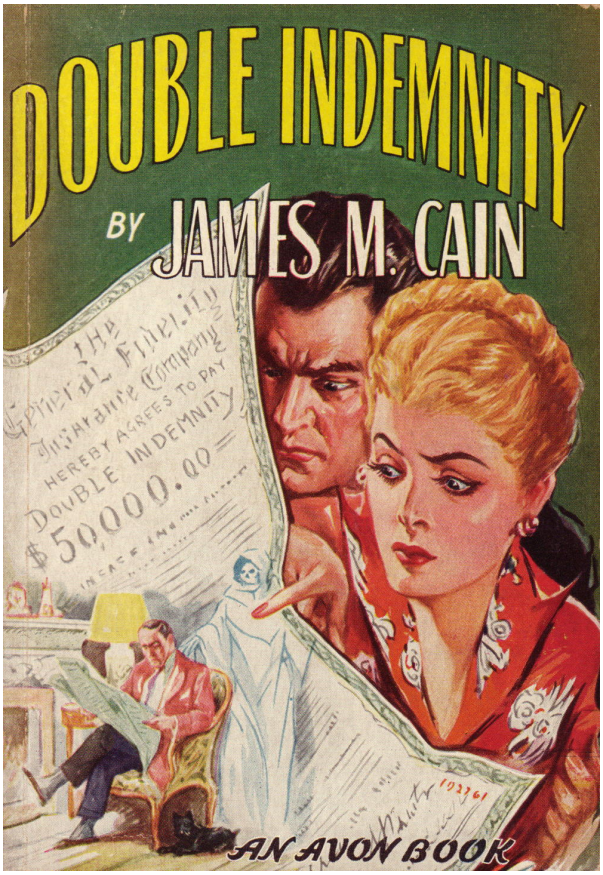
existing ones. The studios might be 'risk averse' but they weren't against spending more money to get the script right. This determination has been seen as one of Hollywood's strengths in helping to maintain quality. Other cinemas, Britain's included, have been seen to have under-invested in 'script development'.

Paramount
Paramount was one of the major studios. Its main strength was its chain of cinemas and its roster of stars, which in the early 1940s included Alan Ladd and Veronica Lake, Bing Crosby and Bob Hope (Crosby was the biggest star in Hollywood from 1944 through to 1949) and Barbara Stanwyck. Billy Wilder, a successful scriptwriter in Hollywood since his arrival from Europe in 1933, had directed two films himself since joining Paramount in 1941. A new producer at the studio had first seen *Double Indemnity* in serial form in *Liberty* magazine in 1936. But at that time, despite the public clamour around reading the story, none of the studios would buy the rights. They feared that the Breen Office, enforcers of the production code, would not allow such salacious material. When the novella was re-published in book form in 1943, Joseph Sistrom showed a copy to Wilder who very much wanted to adapt it. The rights were purchased by Paramount at the relatively low price of $15,000, roughly half what the studios would have had to pay in 1936. Now Wilder had to get it past Breen.

Billy Wilder (1906-2002)
Wilder was born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in Galicia, now part of Poland. At 20 he was working as a journalist in Berlin, becoming interested in its rapidly growing film culture. In 1929 he was one of six young men making a film titled *Menschen am Sonntag* (*People on Sunday*), all of whom would become well-known filmmakers. As well as Wilder there was Edward G. Ulmer as director alongside Robert Siodmak, whose brother Curt provided the story idea. Eugen Schüfftan was cinematographer, assisted by Fred Zinnemann. A non-professional cast played characters like themselves, enjoying an ordinary weekend in Berlin.

Raymond Chandler and Billy Wilder

Like many of his friends interested in cinema, Wilder was Jewish migrant and in 1933 after writing several film scripts in Berlin he saw the importance of leaving Germany after Hitler took control over the German film industry. He (co-)directed his first film in Paris in 1933 but left for the US soon after completing it. Many of Wilder's relatives died in the camps but he survived in Hollywood with several writing credits and the support of the German Jewish exile community. His big success came as one of the writers of *Ninotchka* (1939) for MGM, a film starring Greta Garbo and directed by another German migrant, Ernst Lubitsch. Wilder had been working with several other writers including Charles Brackett, Wilder's opposite in many ways as an upper-class, Ivy League former lawyer and Republican. Wilder and Brackett would become the best known writing pair during their time in Hollywood, but when Wilder chose *Double Indemnity* as the property he wanted to work on, Brackett refused to work on adapting such a 'trashy' book. So, what was wrong with it?



James M. Cain (1892-1977)
Cain was a former journalist, born in Maryland, who spent a year in France writing for the US Army in 1917. In the early 1920s he spent time in the West Virginia coal-mining district hoping the experience would help him write novels. He wrote three novels that he threw in the bin but he continued to write short stories alongside journalism jobs, finding that the short stories seemed to work better than novels.

James M. Cain

Eventually he lit out for California and as early as 1934 sold a story to Hollywood. In the same year his novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* was published. The basic idea, of a woman involved with a visiting man in murdering her husband, was based on a New York murder trial Cain had covered as a journalist in the 1920s. It would reappear as a story idea in *Double Indemnity*.

In his introduction to *Double Indemnity*, Cain explains that his failure in the East was, he believed, because he was using the rural speech patterns he knew from his journalistic work. In California he found the urban working-class language of young men who had "been to high school, finished their sentences and knew some grammar" worked well enough to drive a full length story. This was the language of his three

important novels that became big movie hits in multiple versions. (*Mildred Pierce*, the Joan Crawford hit in 1945, was the third.)

Cain sounds like he should have been able to work very well with Wilder but in 1943 he was working at another studio. Instead, Wilder found himself looking for another writer, partly to replace Brackett (who would come back after *Double Indemnity*) and partly to provide the kind of appropriate dialogue that was needed for the adaptation. Wilder had lived in the US for nearly 10 years at this point. How long do you need to pick up idiomatic language and slang? More likely, Wilder needed someone else to 'bounce off' ideas when writing. Anyway, because Cain wasn't available, Wilder chose to approach Chandler after reading *The Big Sleep* which had been published in 1939.

Raymond Chandler (1888-1959)
Chandler had lived quite a complicated life when he was approached by Paramount. His mother was born to Protestant parents in Waterford and his father also had some Irish ancestors. Raymond was born in Chicago, a city he later considered inappropriate for an Anglophile. He spent his summers as a small child in Nebraska with his mother's family. He was only 7 when his parents divorced (his father drank heavily) and his mother took Raymond to England and suburban South London. At 13 he was enrolled at Dulwich College, then considered one of the more enlightened public schools, which he attended as a day boy. The classical education he received would become an important factor in his later writing career.

His mother hoped he would become a civil servant because there was not enough money to send him to an Oxbridge college to read law, which was his own preference. The civil service exam required him to spend a year in Europe preparing for the entrance exam. He was naturalised as a British subject and spent the year in Paris and Münich. He worked in the Admiralty but disliked the job and resigned after six months, hoping to become a writer. For the next few years he tried journalism (a flop) and then poetry and literary essays for magazines. These were a little more successful but he was restless and in 1912 he borrowed money and returned to the US, making important friendships on the boat. These enabled him to settle in California where he again did menial jobs and some clerical/accountancy work (similar to his civil service experience).

His biographer Frank MacShane points out that over the next five years he learned about the lives of 'ordinary' Los Angelenos, but in 1917 when the US joined the Allied war effort he decided go up to Canada to join the Canadian Army.

He arrived on the Western Front in March 1918 when most of the heavy fighting by the Canadians at Vimy Ridge and Passchendaele was over. Tragically, however, the Canadian trenches suffered a heavy artillery barrage and Chandler was the only survivor from his company. He must have suffered some form of PTSD, but after his convalescence he transferred to the newly formed Royal Flying Corps. The war ended before he completed his training and he returned to Canada as a sergeant and officer cadet on discharge in 1919. He moved back to California but this time he eventually managed to get an office job in a new oil company exploiting the surge in production in Southern California.

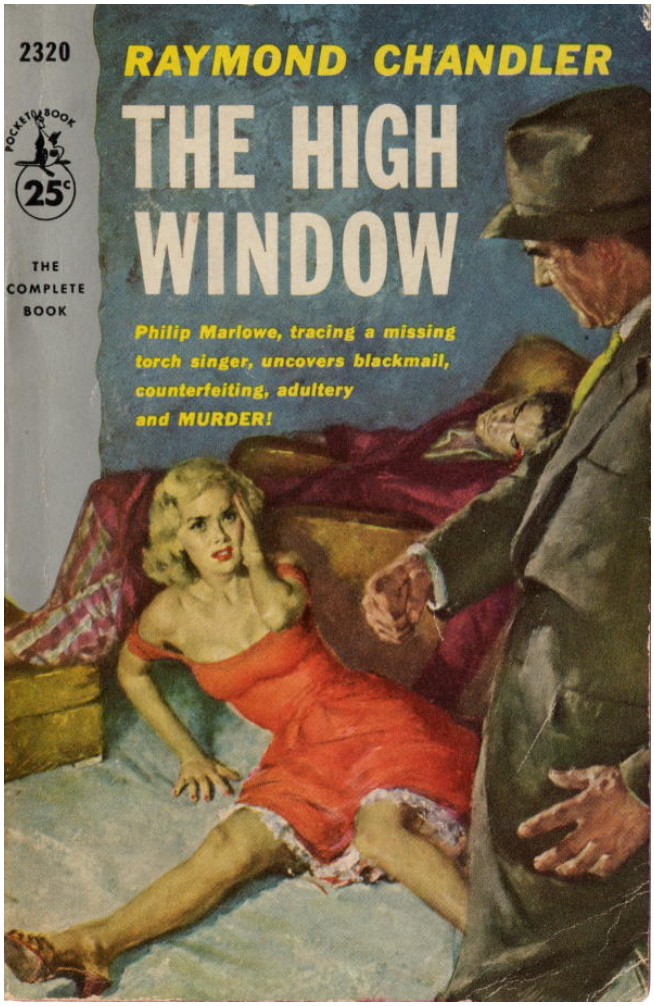
In the early 1920s Chandler began to enjoy life as a single man in his early thirties. However, he then made the surprising move of forming a relationship with the wife of one of his friends in the circle of anglophiles in LA that he had known since before the war. His mother, now in Los Angeles, disapproved. Cissy Pascal acquired an uncontested divorce, Chandler did not marry her until 1924 when his mother had died. At that point he was 35 and Cissy was 53, although she looked and acted much younger.

The oil industry job lasted until 1932. At first , as Chandler prospered within the small company and his salary rose with promotions, he and Cissy had a comfortable life, but later as she approached 60 she began to withdraw from social life and Chandler began to drink more heavily. When drunk he 'disgraced' himself with

various friends and acquaintances and seems to have had affairs with the young female employees in his office. In 1932 he was fired because of his drinking and his behaviour (and possibly to save money for the company as the depression deepened).

With a little help from his surprisingly loyal friends, he now set out to write and over the next six difficult years he slowly developed his ability to write stories for the crime fiction magazines. He first noticed the writing style of Ernest Hemingway but then realised that he also enjoyed the writing in the so-called 'pulp magazines'. Dashiell Hammett, who had been writing for *Black Mask* since the early 1920s and whose novels were being adapted for Hollywood, was his role model. MacShane writes about this in detail and during this period Chandler's distinctive style developed through a process which married his literary education at Dulwich college with his knowledge of Los Angeles and the demotic speech of the mass of its population. He began by copying writers like Erle Stanley Gardner, writing his own versions of their stories and then analysing the results and trying to improve his own writing. From this long process he eventually was able to sell a story to *Black Mask*.

Gradually Chandler's writing improved, though he earned very little money. The other 'pulp' writers had managed to get their stories serialised in the more up-market magazines and to see these stories eventually published as novels. Then they made real money. It wasn't until 1939 that Chandler would be able to complete *The Big Sleep* and see it published in novel form. Frank MacShane argues that what made Chandler a distinctive writer was the combination of sentence structure based on his British English classical education combined with the use of American vocabulary and demotic speech. Nobody else offered this combination. Its strengths were in descriptive writing, characterisation and dialogue but its weakness was Chandler's seeming lack of interest in plotting – often seen as essential in crime fiction. There are many anecdotes about this, most



famously when Chandler couldn't explain who had killed a character in *The Big Sleep*.

Part of the problem was that *The Big Sleep* and every other novel apart from *The High Window* (1943) drew on earlier short stories in their narrative construction. The short stories each had different lead characters and it was not until *The*

Big Sleep that Philip Marlowe emerges as the lead and the first person narrator.

When Paramount approached Chandler, he'd published two novels (*The Big Sleep* and *Farewell My Lovely*) and sold the rights to *Farewell My Lovely* and to his new novel *The High Window* (galley proofs were sent to studios) for relatively low sums. These first adaptations were in fact just used for 'B' pictures with different characters and film titles. Chandler was not yet a big name.

Billy Wilder was shocked to discover that Chandler was not the 'tough guy' writer he imagined and that Chandler knew very little about Hollywood. The two men were complete opposites and they aggravated each other so much that Wilder could bear only short periods of working together and Chandler at one point walked out and demanded changes to Wilder's behaviour. The script took them four months to complete. Wilder was a professional filmmaker as well as a talented writer. They got the job done and the film was nominated for seven Oscars, including Best Screenplay. It didn't win any, mainly perhaps because Paramount backed its Bing Crosby starrer *Going My Way* (which did win seven Oscars).

The anecdote that perhaps best explains why Wilder needed Chandler concerns Cain's dialogue in the original story. Chandler saw it as a problem. Wilder was sceptical so he had two contracted Paramount players read a scene which he filmed. When he and Chandler watched the result, he had to agree that Cain's dialogue didn't work.

Novella and screenplay

Cain's novella runs to only 82 pages in my printed version. The rule of thumb in film production is that a page of script means roughly a minute of screen time. A page of a screenplay isn't directly comparable with a page in a novel but the formula generally holds. A novel of several hundred pages will normally need to 'filleted' in terms of plot and perhaps characters to fit it into a standard length for an 'A' feature of 90-120 minutes. *Double Indemnity* eventually appeared as a film narrative of 107 minutes. Chandler and Wilder had space to add or extend scenes while remaining fairly faithful to the novel.

The first person narrator of Cain's story is there in the book and so is the sense of a flashback narrative. However, the ending of Cain's narrative is different, delivering something that the Breen office would not accept in a film script. Cain's first person narration is not as elegant in structure or as 'romantic' as the spoken testimony in the film.

When it came to the adaptation, we might assume that the film benefited from the different strengths of Wilder and Chandler. In fact it is quite difficult to even guess which lines came from which writer or if indeed both were involved in all the dialogue. Similarly, it may be unfair to suggest that Chandler had no part in re-structuring Cain's narrative. The screenplay works so well that I think it must have been the opportunity for the two men to co-operate that made it work, despite the fact that they found it so difficult to work together. It's also true that Cain's language does survive to some extent in the screenplay, but it is also noticeable when it has changed. For instance, because Barton Keyes in the screenplay has an almost fatherly relationship with Walter Neff, he addresses the younger man as 'Walter'. Neff, however, always calls him 'Keyes'. In the novel, Walter is addressed as 'Huff' (a name change matched by 'Nirdlinger' becoming 'Dietrichson').

James M. Cain saw the film several times and thought it the best adaptation of his work. He thought Wilder and Chandler had improved his narrative which he admitted had been a rushed job because he needed the money.

Setting up the production

While Wilder and Chandler were completing the script, the production team were trying to put together the cast and crew. Wilder stated that he wanted Barbara Stanwyck as Phyllis Dietrichson. At the time Stanwyck was a contender for the position of 'best female actor' in Hollywood – vying with Bette Davis. She was also in 1943 dubbed "the highest-paid woman in America". Stanwyck was never identified with a single

Wilder with Stanwyck and MacMurray in the minimart (I'm not sure what the cops are doing there). The precise Los Angeles locations are possibly Chandler suggestions, but Wilder knew the city as well.

particular studio but at this time she was contracted to Paramount. At first she turned down the role but Wilder is said to have challenged her with "Are you a mouse or an actor?" She agreed to do it and it's doubtful anyone else could have played the part as well. For many critics Phyllis is her best role and her best performance. She also became identified as the ur *noir femme fatale*.

Few male actors were interested in the Walter Neff role. Most thought it would damage their image. In retrospect, Fred MacMurray is the perfect choice for Neff. He was a light-hearted 'ordinary guy' who could also do 'cynical'. Physically, he was tall and strong but his manner could also suggest vulnerability. His normal role at Paramount was as a leading man in melodramas, romances and comedies. In casting him Wilder was suggesting that anyone could become a killer, even a character played by MacMurray. Many commentators have been quite dismissive of MacMurray arguing *Double Indemnity* is a one-off and that his other major roles are not important because of their genres. In the mid 1950s MacMurray left Paramount and featured in a romantic melodrama for Douglas Sirk that re-united him with Barbara Stanwyck in *There's Always Tomorrow* (1955). He'd first worked with her in 1939 on the Christmas romantic comedy drama *Remember the Night*. In 1960 he worked for Billy Wilder again in *The Apartment* with Jack Lemmon and Shirley MacLaine. Then he turned to Disney to become *The Absent-Minded Professor* who invented 'flubber' in 1961. MacMurray was a consummate performer and a leading man for forty years.

One of the structuring devices for Wilder and Chandler was the development of MacMurray's dual role in relationships that his character shared separately with Stanwyck and Edward G. Robinson. Robinson was a highly successful figure in Hollywood. In the 1930s he was known as one of the gangster figures on 'Murderers Row' at Warner Bros but he had other important roles, one as a journalist in John Ford's comedy gangster film *The Whole Town's Talking* (1935). Like MacMurray, Robinson was a leading man for over 40 years and prided himself on his acting abilities. Wilder and Chandler wrote long speeches for him, almost as what we might now call 'rants'. Chandler was amazed that he could deliver these word-perfect on the first take. The relationship that Robinson and MacMurray display on the screen is one of the film's strengths and the presence of three excellent performances in the same narrative is another marker. Wilder is said to have claimed that the film is all "about sex without actually showing any sex". Some critics/scholars have suggested that the Keyes-Neff relationship has a coded homo-erotic dimension.

The decision to use cinematographer John F. Seitz was another major factor in the film's success. Seitz was just a few years younger than Chandler and had been behind the camera since 1917, aged 25. He was contracted by MGM and worked with Rex Ingram as director and Rudolph Valentino as star. In the 1930s he switched to Fox and then back to Metro but he seemed to be working on less interesting films. A move to Paramount revitalised him in 1940 and his work with Preston Sturges and Billy Wilder produced four Oscar nominations. Seitz was an innovative technologist and was renowned for his low-key lighting and his great ability with black & white photography (which requires more skill in dealing with shades of grey rather than distinctive colours).

Walter waits for Phyllis to emerge on his first visit. Once he sees that anklet he is doomed!

Double Indemnity's claims as the first major film to create the look of *film noir*, largely rests on the relationship between Wilder and Seitz. On the first occasion Walter visits the Dietrichson house he comments on the stuffiness of the living room in which you can see the dust in the air. Seitz used fine aluminium particles to represent this 'texture'. With this kind of creative attention to detail it isn't surprising that *Double Indemnity* looks so good.

Miklós Rózsa was responsible for the film's music score. He was a year younger than Billy Wilder and was born in Budapest. He was a brilliant music student and joined another Hungarian, Alexander Korda in the UK in 1935, claiming he learned about scoring for films from Muir Matheson. Arriving in Hollywood to work on *The Thief of Baghdad* in 1940, he stayed on to become a leading Hollywood composer for the next forty years. He won an Oscar for Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945) and was nominated for *Double Indemnity*. His work on suspense was renowned.

I've mentioned the performances, camerawork and music since all must work together under Wilder's direction and the script cannot be 'realised' as a filmic narrative, no matter how brilliantly it is written, if these three elements don't gell. It's also worth noting that many of the other 'creatives' in the crew were European émigrés like Wilder and Rózsa. This has some bearing on the '*noir*' aesthetic of the film.

Film noir

It's important to discuss *Double Indemnity*'s status as arguably the first 'A' picture to combine the elements that later became recognised as the filmic mode of *film noir*. As the term suggests it was coined by French critics in 1946 when the Hollywood crime films of the 1940s began to arrive *en masse* in Paris and then more analytically by French film scholars in the mid

The lighting for the key moment when Phyllis arrives at Walter's apartment.

1950s. However, it was not really taken up by Hollywood industry professionals or American film scholars until the early 1970s.

Film noir has been claimed as a genre by some critics and scholars but I've deemed it a 'mode' applicable to films from different genres. It can be broadly defined as constituting an approach to making (and understanding) a film narrative based on a distinctive style of lighting and camerawork associated with a 'disturbed' *mise en scène*, a particular type of narration and a thematic focus on societal and personal problems. This last point is connected to the archetypal roles of the 'doomed man' led astray by a '*femme fatale*'. The high point of the production cycle which produced these kinds of films was the late 1940s which saw the problems of men returning from war and women effectively forced out of paid work and back into the home (especially in Californian cities and other urban areas). *Double Indemnity* was written in 1936 and the script actually dates the action to 1938. This doesn't invalidate the film as *noir*.

In fact, many of the 'properties' on which *noirs* were based were written in the 1930s or at least before 1945 and the end of the Pacific War. *Double Indemnity*'s first claim for *noir* status is the fact that the original novella was written by James M. Cain, a so-called 'hard-boiled' writer. It was then co-adapted by another 'hard-boiled' writer, Raymond Chandler. Cain and Chandler were responsible for another six 'properties' that became *films noir*s. One of the most prolific

Stanwyck became the iconic *femme fatale* in this picture. What gives her the power in this image?

writers associated with *noirs* was Cornell Woolrich (a.k.a. William Irish). Not all hard-boiled adaptations were made into *noirs*. Dashiell Hammett's novels such as *The Maltese Falcon* are not really *noirs* although claims are made for it as an early 1941 *noir*.

Both Seitz's cinematography, with its use of low-key lighting producing shadows, and the music score by Miklós Rózsa could be seen as contributing to a *noir* visual and aural style.

The Chandler connection gives *Double Indemnity* the 'first person' voiceover narration which features in all the Chandler novels. The flashback structure is not a Chandler trait but it is found in many later *noirs*. Thematically, *Double Indemnity* presents what might be described as the sickness of American, or perhaps specifically Southern Californian, society.

The Breen Office

The idea of self-censoring films was agreed by the studios in 1930 and known first as the 'Hays

Code' after the president of the MPPDA 1934 but many producers ignored the advice. In 1934 in the face of heavy pressure and especially religious groups such as the Catholic League of Decency, it was decided to enforce the 'Production Code' more firmly. Any film proposal had to be seen by the PCA (Production Code Administration) Office with the staunchly Catholic Breen as adjudicator. If a film script was deemed to be damaging to the moral integrity of society it could not be shown in a cinema owned by a member of the MPPDA (Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America). These were the major profitable cinemas so any un-certificated film was effectively a loss-making product. Ironically, it was one of Barbara Stanwyck's early films *Baby Face* (1933), in which she literally sleeps her way up the hierarchy of the company in which she is a secretary, that was a good example of the kinds of films that prompted the stronger enforcement of the Production code.

Breakfast or lunch between takes?

James M. Cain's novels were assumed to be anathema to Breen and initially this proved to be so. They contained adulterous relationships, implied sexual activity and perverse relationships. Crucially they seemed to present characters who escaped condemnation by the law for criminal acts. By the time Wilder approached his script, he was reasonably confident that he could get round the sexual activity by using innuendo and subtle (or not so subtle) codes. It has also been suggested that Chandler was deemed to be more 'morally responsible' than Cain as far as Breen was concerned. But Wilder was worried about the ending of the film, already changed from Cain's 'open ending'. He actually shot a sequence in a detailed mock-up of the San Quentin prison gas chamber in which Walter Neff is executed. He didn't use it and his alternative ending was accepted by the PCA. The success of *Double Indemnity* then allowed Cain's two other important novels, *Mildred Pierce* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* to be successfully adapted as hit films in 1945 and 1946 respectively.

Zoom Event

We will have time in the Zoom event to explore any questions and comments you may have about the film, but our main focus will be the script and its realisation on screen. We'll investigate the three writers and try to explain why their different talents were able to produce this revered classic.

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Double Indemnity Blu-ray, Eureka Masters of Cinema #44, 2012 (Extra material on both the disc and in a small booklet in the case.)

Roy Stafford 8/11/21