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## THERE'S MORE TO BANTER THAN MEETS THE EYE: ON THE DIRE CONSEQUENCES OF FLIRTATION IN BILLY WILDER'S "DOUBLE INDEMNITY" (1944) FROM THE COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE

This paper employs the Cognitive Linguistics paradigm to argue that flirtation, especially verbal, may be interpreted as a phenomenon resulting from the working of two conceptual mechanisms, namely metaphor and metonymy. As far as the corpus of the present paper is concerned, the analysis is predominantly based on dialogues extracted from the film "Double Indemnity" (1944) directed by Billy Wilder.

Keywords: film noir, flirtation, metaphor, metonymy, Double Indemnity

"Just like the first time I was here.  
We were talking about automobile  
insurance. Only you were thinking  
about murder. And I was thinking  
about that anklet."

(Walter Neff "Double Indemnity")

### 1. Introduction

Flirtation evokes positive associations. In short, it may be defined as a universal language whose overriding aim is to attract another person and engage them with fleeting pleasure derived from a stimulating conversation. Coquetry makes use of both non-verbal and verbal tools and signals among which one may enumerate, for example, maintaining eye contact, twiddling with

jewellery and holding a multi-layered colloquy rich in puns and sexual innuendo. In fact, initiating and drawing someone into a veiled dialogue, tinged with humour and evocative suggestions, may turn out to be a challenge given that the other party has to share not only our sense of humour, but they also need to have the same goal. Generally speaking, flirtation is an innocuous pleasure-oriented activity devoid of the intention of hurting anyone, therefore interlocutors are equal and they ought not to strive for physical gratification which puts paid to coquetry.

In this paper, however, we perceive flirtation as a tool that serves to achieve a certain purpose. To be more precise, we attempt to show that in certain circumstances coquetry may lead to the dire consequences. On the basis of film noir we are going to show that, apart from providing pleasure, flirtation may also be used as a weapon to manipulate others.

The language of coquetry draws from metaphor and metonymy, therefore it is worth discussing the influence of these two mechanisms on this particular type of discourse. The corpus of data used for our analysis is the script for the film “Double Indemnity” by Billy Wilder and Raymond Chandler, based on the novel entitled “Double Indemnity” by James M. Cain (1936). The screenplay was obtained from the website [https://sfy.ru/?script=double\\_indemnity\\_1944](https://sfy.ru/?script=double_indemnity_1944) (hereinafter DI). The analysis is based on either the main male character’s short monologues or the dialogues between Walter Neff and Phyllis Dietrichson.

Obviously, the following study is only a fraction of what can be said about flirtation, which is a very complex phenomenon. Nevertheless, we believe that it is worth scrutinizing different facets of coquetry and comparing data extracted from various sources (films, advertisements, literature, real-life situations) in order to arrive at valid conclusions connected with the notion in question.

Let us now outline the structure of the paper. First and foremost, we shall start with a brief description of the film “Double Indemnity”. Then, we focus on works devoted to both the film under scrutiny and the phenomenon of flirtation. Before embarking on the analysis we also present the methodological framework employed in the paper. Last but not least, we present conclusions and suggestions for future research.

## **2. “Double Indemnity” as a representative of film noir**

“Double Indemnity” is a film noir directed by Billy Wilder in 1944. Barbara Stanwyck was cast in the role of Phyllis Dietrichson (a femme fatale) and Fred MacMurray played Walter Neff (an insurance salesman). The film is based on James M. Cain’s novel from 1936 published in “Liberty” magazine.<sup>1</sup> It is worth

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.laphamsquarterly.org/contributors/cain>

noting that it was a true story of a deliberate murder, committed in 1927 by a married woman Ruth Snyder and her lover Judd Gray, that served as inspiration for the storyline of the book. In a nutshell, the couple was accused of having murdered Snyder's husband in order to collect on an insurance policy and then they were executed by electrocution in 1927 (see Campbell 2014). In fact, the framework of Cain's novel also bears close resemblance to Zola's "Thérèse Raquin" ([1867] 2004). The *modus operandi* in both books is similar: an unhappily married female wants to kill her husband, and with her lover's help she manages to put her cruel plan into effect.

As far as the film's plot is concerned, the story is narrated in flashback by the main male character, the insurance salesman making and recording a confession for his colleague Barton Keyes. The salesman introduces himself and familiarizes both Keyes and the viewers with the intricacies of the scam he had partaken in. Neff makes a clean breast of his fault and admits that he killed his client – Mr Dietrichson. We can see a wound on Walter's shoulder, but we do not know what happened. The scene in an office dissolves into another one, which is the beginning of the story and, simultaneously, Neff's problems. The narrative structure of "Double Indemnity" is elaborate, because there is a direct connection between the scenes that begin and end the film, and the final shot gives deep meaning to the opening shots of the film (see Tyrer 2013: 106-107). While the viewers are familiar with the end of the yarn straightaway, they are to be acquainted with the details and the convolutions of the plot listening to Walter's confession.

### 3. Literature review

"Double Indemnity", as one of the main representatives of film noir, has been discussed by, among others, Copjec (1993), Naremore (1996), Manon (2005) and Tyrer (2013). Copjec's (1993) essay addresses the topic of private space in the film in question. Naremore (1996) focuses on the ending of the film, which in the original version was different from what we can see today. Instead of being shot by Phyllis, Walter was supposed to have died in the gas chamber. Nevertheless, it was too controversial a scene, thus Wilder decided to change the ending. In his paper, Naremore (1996) tries to prove that the initial conception of putting Neff to death in the gas chamber was the upshot of several significant themes in the film. Manon (2005) draws on psychoanalytic theory in order to recognize a fetishistic imperative in the crime committed by the protagonist. In turn, Tyrer (2013) attempts to establish a link between Wilder's film and philosophy, drawing on the experience of psychoanalysis and Lacan's theory of language. The author focuses on the function that the point de caption plays in the retroactive structure of the film.

In turn, Rabinowitz (2001) and Bronfen (2004) create a tragic portrait of a woman, or – to be more precise – femme fatale in film noir. The former author focuses on an anklet that has a special meaning in “Double Indemnity”, as it helps to lead the main male character astray, whereas the latter focuses on Phyllis’s motivation and her deadly relationship with Neff.

The analysis of film which contains multimodal material has been carried out by, among others, Rohdin (2009) and Eggertsson and Forceville (2009). In his paper, Rohdin (2009) concentrates on classical film theory from the 1920s to the 1950s, while Eggertsson and Forceville (2009) elaborate on the HUMAN VICTIM IS ANIMAL metaphor in horror films.

The very phenomenon of flirtation has been investigated in a collection of essays entitled *Flirtations* (2015) edited by Hoffman-Schwartz et al., where the authors explore both the aesthetic and rhetorical side of the notion in question. Hoffman-Schwartz’s article (2015), which may be found in the book, is devoted to “Double Indemnity”. Grzaśko and Kiełtyka (2021) address the phenomenon of flirtation from the cognitive perspective on the basis of another film noir, namely “The Big Sleep” (1946). Last but not least, let us make mention of Kalinowska’s monograph (2018) in which the author discusses flirtation from the sociological viewpoint.

#### 4. Behind the theoretical apparatus – metaphor and metonymy

As far as the methodology of the paper is concerned, we shall draw from the findings of Cognitive Linguistics. The importance of metaphor and metonymy, as two conceptual mechanisms, has been discussed by, inter alia, Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Lakoff (1987), Lakoff and Turner (1989), Radden and Kövecses (1999), Kövecses (2008; 2010; 2015; 2018; 2020) and Littlemore (2015).

The mechanism of conceptual metaphor is at the core of the cognitive paradigm. Metaphor facilitates the way we comprehend complex phenomena by organizing and structuring the unfamiliar by means of the familiar. If two concepts share some degree of similarity, we may establish some mappings between them. In short, mappings may be defined as the correspondences (similar elements) between the source and the target domains (see Kövecses 2010: 14). During the process of communication we tend to derive metaphorical expressions from a source domain that is more concrete and closer to our experience. In turn, the target domain may be defined as the abstract and less familiar one. For example, human beings may talk and think about ideas in terms of food, as in the following examples extracted from Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 46-47):

All this paper has in it are *raw* facts, *half-baked* ideas, and *warmed-over* theories.

There are too many facts here for me to *digest* them all.

I just can't *swallow* that claim.

That's *food* for thought.

She *devoured* the book.

As may be observed, people extract metaphorical expressions from the domain of FOOD (source domain) in order to understand the domain of IDEAS (target domain). Therefore, we may say that one must refer to the source domain to fathom the target domain.

In contrast, conceptual metonymies entail only one domain. As stressed by Kövecses (2008: 381), we employ metonymy “to provide mental access to a domain through a part of the same domain (or vice versa) or to a part of a domain through another part in the same domain”. In fact, we are dealing with the mechanism of metonymy if there is some kind of relationship between two entities within a given knowledge network (see Littlemore 2015: 9). Let us refer to the following examples of metonymies discussed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 37-38):

THE FACE FOR THE PERSON

She's just a *pretty face*.

We need some *new faces* around here.

OBJECT USED FOR USER

The *sax* has the flu today.

The *gun* he hired wanted fifty grand.

As stressed by Kövecses (2010: 174-175), metaphor is based on similarity (however distant it may be, given that one of the domains is abstract and the other is concrete), whereas metonymy on contiguity. As a result, metonymy involves a single domain in which we may find two entities (vehicle entity and target entity) closely related to each other, whereas metaphor employs two conceptual domains.

Forceville (2006) focuses on the distinction between monomodal and multimodal metaphors. While the aim of the former is to show both source and target domains in the same mode (e.g. pictorial, verbal, sound), the purpose of the latter is to demonstrate that source and target domains are represented in different modes (e.g. verbo-visual or verbo-gestural metaphors). Górska (2014) stresses that communication is based on various modalities (not only language itself), thus one can hardly ignore the importance of the multimodal trend in linguistic research.

## 5. Findings and discussion

In what follows we shall discuss the metaphorical and metonymic motivation behind the dialogues extracted from “Double Indemnity”. We shall also focus on the symbolic nature of an anklet that fulfils a vital function in the film and the process of flirtation. The analysis is divided into subsections devoted to particular instances of metaphor or metonymy.

### 5.1. FEMININITY IS JEWELLERY metaphor

The first scene and, simultaneously, Walter's encounter with Phyllis is memorable. She is the epitome of the femme fatale: a treacherous bold blonde who leads men astray. The woman stands at the top of a flight of stairs looking down at a stranger below. On the one hand, she keeps the man at a distance, on the other hand, she will flirt with him in a few minutes. The stairs symbolize the extent of space between the female protagonist and the viewers. At this particular moment, we fail to discover Dietrichson's real intentions (see *Girls Do Film* 2015). In this case we are dealing with a twofold perception of the stairs: planar and vertical. If we look at the stairs from the planar viewpoint, it is possible to formulate the conceptual metonymy STAIRS FOR DISTANCE, which implies the physical space between Phyllis and Walter, but also between Phyllis and the viewers. She is a mystery that is to be solved by both the protagonist and the audience. From the vertical viewpoint, however, we are dealing with a hierarchy established between the characters. It is the woman that manipulates the man and their meeting eventually proves to be Walter's undoing. While the man is unaware of the consequences of their encounter, the woman seems to have been searching for a victim for a long time. Therefore, it is Phyllis who observes him from upstairs bearing in mind that he may become her prey.<sup>2</sup>

The lady is wearing a shoddy blonde wig. She is half naked, there is only a towel wrapped around her slender body, a pair of slippers on her feet and a gold anklet around her leg. The first impression that she leaves us with is indelible. The woman leads a life of leisure and given that she is not ashamed of exposing her barely covered body to strangers, we may put forward a plausible hypothesis that she is bold and sexually aware. It seems that her outfit signals her readiness to be on the hunt for new prey (see *Girls Do Film* 2015). In terms of the cognitively-couched model of analysis employed in the paper, we may formulate two metaphors, namely WALTER IS PREY and FEMME FATALE IS A HUNTER, or, in this particular context,<sup>3</sup> PHYLLIS IS A HUNTER. We may also postulate that she is a predator, therefore we may argue that she embodies the HUMANS ARE ANIMALS metaphor represented here by A WOMAN IS A PREDATOR schema.<sup>4</sup>

The anklet has a special meaning in the film, because the accessory figuratively represents fetters that make a slave of Walter. Every shot with the seemingly inconspicuous gold trinket adorning Phyllis's ankle evokes the power of the female's body, or, to be more precise, the power of females' feet to hold

<sup>2</sup> Note that their very first dialogue is discussed in section 5.2 (extract 4). In section 5.1 (extracts 1-3) we focus on the anklet that is part and parcel of Phyllis's physical appearance.

<sup>3</sup> On the role of context in cuing metaphorical mappings see Kövecses (2020).

<sup>4</sup> The metaphor in question in the context of a femme fatale has been discussed by, among others, Grzaśko and Kiełtyka (2021).

sway over men. The piece of jewellery, which symbolizes imprisonment, appears a few times in the salesman's utterances, which may imply a sort of fascination/obsession with it. We may say that the object is used to reinforce his lust. Consider the following quotations extracted from the film:

1. Walter: We've been handling this insurance for three years for Mr. Dietrichson... (The **anklet** has caught his eye) That's a honey of an **anklet** you're wearing, Mrs. Dietrichson. (INTEREST)

(...)

Walter: Accident insurance? Sure, Mrs. Dietrichson. (His eyes fall on the **anklet** again.) I wish you'd tell me what's engraved on that **anklet**.

(CURIOSITY)

Phyllis: Just my name.

Walter: As for instance?

Phyllis: Phyllis.

Walter: Phyllis. I think I like that. (BANTER)

Phyllis: But you're not sure?

Walter: I'd have to drive it around the block a couple of times.

(...)

Walter: Will you be here, too?

Phyllis: I guess so. I usually am.

Walter: Same chair, same perfume, same **anklet**? (BANTER, FETISH)

Phyllis: I wonder if I know what you mean. (TEASING TONE)

Walter: I wonder if you wonder. (MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING) (DI)

2. Walter: But I kept thinking about Phyllis Dietrichson and the way that **anklet** of hers cut into her leg. (OBSESSION) (DI)
3. Walter: Just like the first time I was here. We were talking about automobile insurance. Only you were thinking about murder. And I was thinking about that **anklet**. (OBSESSION, IMPRISONMENT) (DI)

The above-mentioned quotations prove that Neff cannot get the gold chain out of his head and that he has a fetish about it. During Phyllis and Walter's first encounter (dialogue 1), the salesman takes an instant interest in the item of jewellery which he finds alluring. There finally seems to be something interesting in his mundane life. The man is enthralled by the woman's scent (honeysuckle) and the small chain "innocently" adorning her leg. He cannot stop thinking about the trinket, therefore he provokes a conversation that pivots on it. As stressed by Russell (2000), the allusion to the sense of smell is not coincidental. Neff recognized the woman by the smell of honeysuckle (her perfume), not by common sense, therefore, in this context, he is like an animal.

Given that they are strangers and they should follow a certain code of behaviour, innuendo is one of the best means employed to express their sexual engagement. Chandler, the co-author of the script, was an accomplished wordsmith, therefore the dialogues are rich in subtexts. Furthermore, the line with the repetition of the verb *wonder* is a prime example of the use of a palindrome which is a lexical item or a group of lexical items that remains unchanged when read backwards (see Baldick 1990: 158-159). Russell (2000) argues that the statement itself “is its own mirror – «I wonder if you wonder/ you wonder if I wonder» – a telepathic seal on the perfect crime”. Indeed, it seems that Walter and Phyllis perfectly understand the other’s intentions and they decide to play a game, therefore we are dealing here with the FLIRTATION IS A GAME metaphor. There are two contestants who are familiar with its rules even though they have not been announced.

As already mentioned, the anklet is a recurrent topic in the film (dialogue 2). The man admits that he keeps thinking about the small gold object, which stimulates his imagination and arouses his desire. We may even put forward a plausible hypothesis that he seems to be obsessed with the small piece of jewellery. As observed by Kenny (2013), the verb *to cut* (dialogue 2) has a special meaning in this context as it implies a touch of sadism. The lexical item refers to sharp tools, therefore it is connected with causing pain. In fact, given Neff’s obsession we may conclude that he suffers at the very thought of the woman (femme fatale), her smell and accoutrements. Moreover, his anguish is connected with the fact that he cannot quench his desire.

The last extract (dialogue 3) is yet further proof that Walter is chained by Phyllis’s gold anklet, he becomes her slave and the prisoner of his own lust. The woman seized power over Walter simply by nourishing and weaving his sexual fantasies. Interestingly, as observed by Bronfen (2004: 106), even though males may lust for voluptuous sexually aggressive women, they are, simultaneously, afraid of feminine domination.

Indeed, Phyllis embodies men’s dreams. She is a seductress and the anklet stands as a symbol of her sexual allure and femininity. Anklets themselves evoke various associations, but they have always been connected with femininity and sexuality, therefore we may formulate a FEMININITY IS JEWELLERY metaphor. The fact that the main female character is wearing this particular item of jewellery when we see her for the first time is by no means a coincidence. Anklets may signal that a woman is promiscuous and that is what Neff has read between the lines (see Kenny 2013). This is the reason why he cannot stop thinking about the woman. As observed by Rabinowitz (2001: 54), men’s eyes are tempted by anklets and, as a result, males may not be able to resist wandering through the axis of a woman’s body. Though brief, a pleasant trip eventually fixes men’s eyes on the feet, thus foregrounding “the fetishistic quality of women’s footwear” (Rabinowitz 2001: 54).



In this respect, we may refer to the metaphoric interpretation of Phyllis's anklet. We may formulate the conceptual metaphor AN OBJECT IS ANOTHER OBJECT realized as JEWELLERY (ANKLET) IS FETTERS:

**Source domain:**

JEWELLERY

anklet

fragile

alluring

sexuality

**Target domain:**

FETTERS

cuffs (imprisonment)

heavy

deadly

fatality

We may say that a light and fragile trinket that adverts to femininity and sexuality turns out to be a harbinger of Walter's doom. Sexuality is intertwined with fatality and a fragile object represents heavy cuffs that make the man a slave who fails to free himself from the trap. It is worth noting that the lexical item *cuff* is on the one hand an item of jewellery worn around the wrist and, on the other hand, its plural form *cuffs* is an informal word for handcuffs, that is chains around a prisoner's hands. Figuratively speaking, Walter is imprisoned by Phyllis's sexual allure and her anklet and, like every prisoner, he will eventually be punished for his deeds.

## 5.2. Rhetoric vs. cognitive approaches to metonymy and the mechanisms involving substitution

As already mentioned, the protagonist meets the attractive Phyllis Dietrichson when he pays a visit to her husband and his client in order to renew his expired auto insurance. The man is not home, which accidentally leads to a flirtatious conversation between the salesman and the woman standing upstairs:

- 3) Phyllis: (Looking down at Neff) I'm Mrs. Dietrichson. What is it?  
 Walter: How do you do, Mrs. Dietrichson. I'm Walter Neff, Pacific All-Risk.  
 Phyllis: Pacific all-what?  
 Walter: Pacific All-Risk Insurance Company. (DI)

The dialogue revolves around the word *risk* which, from the rhetorical point of view, "is a metonymic elision of «risk insurance». The implied presence of the elided term, however, makes all the difference, distinguishing the attempted negation of risk from risk itself" (Hoffman-Schwartz 2015: 14). Phyllis deliberately pretends that she has not heard the name of the company and she emphatically stumbles over the word *risk*. As elucidated by Hoffman-Schwartz (2015: 14), indeed, risk implies the possibility of something hazardous yet

exciting happening, which makes it far more titillating than the activity of insuring somebody against risk. Instead of focusing on what has been implied by the man, she intentionally devotes her attention to what has been said, thus hinting to us that she is interested in risk itself.

Neff is an ordinary salesman. Even though his job involves some risk, it is not one of a kind that he himself can experience, but rather one that he is supposed to predict or minimize. The word *risk* acquires a new meaning when he meets Phyllis and something that was only hypothetical appears to become likely to happen. Given the outward appearance of the half-naked woman, risk also alludes to sexuality.

Let us stress at this juncture that the cognitive approach towards the relation between metonymy and other processes involving omission (e.g. elision or ellipsis) differs from the rhetorical one discussed by Hoffman-Schwartz (2015). As argued by Polański (1993: 330), Paradis (2003: 1), Kosecki (2005: 23-24) and Kiećtyka (2020: 59-60), there is a significant difference between metonymy and elision even though they might be viewed to have something in common. At first glance some linguistic expressions may seem to be cases of metonymy, but on closer scrutiny they should rather be analysed as examples of ellipsis or elision. Polański (1993: 31) stresses that in contrast to metonymy, the interpretation of elision and ellipsis is always dependent on the context. Kosecki (2005: 24) observes that we cannot equate metonymy with other figures of speech that involve substitution, because, as in the case of ellipsis, the missing components may be placed back into the expression from which they were extracted. We do not intend to disregard Hoffman-Schwartz's (2015) rhetorical approach according to which there is little difference between the mechanisms in question, but we want to highlight that following the principles of the Cognitive Linguistics paradigm, the case of *risk* is not metonymy.

Let us now hark back to Simmel's theory of flirtation ([1909] 1984; [1911] 1949), according to which risk is inherent to flirtation given that in sexually-oriented banter interlocutors cross some boundaries but do not overstep them. The chief quality of flirtation is the equality of the conversationalists, thus there are no winners or losers. People flirt not to achieve a certain goal, but to engage in a pleasant dialogue tinged with veiled allusions. As elucidated by Simmel ([1909] 1984; [1911] 1949), the strength of flirtation lies in the fact that it is a game with no stakes, because flirting does not strive for physical consummation of the "relationship". In spite of the fact that people employ both verbal and non-verbal signs whose aim is to provoke the other person, they do not encroach on intimacy. Indeed, flirting does not preclude the, however theoretical and vague, chance of going beyond flirtation, but sexual gratification is not the aim itself.

Hoffman-Schwartz (2015: 14-15) stresses that in "Double Indemnity" flirtation is not consummated in the sexual act, but in death, therefore we may

say that flirtation is on the border between a love affair and a crime. In lieu of having sexual intercourse, Phyllis and Walter murder the woman's husband, which, in fact, puts paid to the would-be lovers' relationship. In this particular case, the stakes turn out to be high given that it is their freedom that is at stake.

### 5.3. COVERAGE metaphor

The continuation of a seemingly innocuous conversation (dialogue 4 in the previous section) seems to be even more thought-provoking than its beginning. The salesman has understood the subtext and this time it is Walter Neff who employs a double entendre in order to provoke the woman:

4) Phyllis: Is there anything I can do?

Walter: The insurance ran out on the fifteenth. I'd hate to think of your having a smashed fender or something while you're not fully **covered**. (DOUBLE ENTENDRE)

Phyllis (She glances over her towel costume.) (With a little smile) Perhaps I know what you mean, Mr. Neff. I've just been taking a sun bath.

Walter: No pigeons around, I hope... About those policies, Mrs. Dietrichson I hate to take up your time. (DI)

Now, the dialogue pivots on the word *covered* and its use. Literally, and in the context of Neff's utterance, the lexical item in question refers to the female's body, therefore we may speak here about the domain of PHYSICAL OBJECTS. However, if we take into account the whole scene and the colloquy, we are dealing with the figurative interpretation of the verb *to cover*. When employed with reference to insurance, the word *covered* is a metaphor.

Neff's witty remark applies to the insurance, which just like the femme fatale's body is "not fully covered". In this context, the word has two meanings: one the one hand, it refers to the possibility of an insurance pay-out, but on the other hand, it adverts to the fact that Phyllis has not dressed/covered herself yet. When she replies that she has just been sunbathing, the man half-jokingly mentions pigeons. The use of the double entendre allows for a shift from the domain of INSURANCE to the domain of BODY.

As observed by Hoffman-Schwartz (2015:16), the libidinous nature of the above-mentioned metaphor may be interpreted on two planes. On the one hand, we may speak about the human body, which may be covered (with a garment) or, quite the contrary, uncovered (naked). On the other hand, Walter talks about the (un)covered body as if he was talking about something else, namely the uncovered car insurance. In fact, he tries to conceal the fact that he is thinking about the woman's nakedness. As elucidated further by Hoffman-Schwartz (2015: 16): "coverage is a figure for figuration itself, a self-thematizing figure".

Incidentally, there is a pinch of irony in the line given the presence of psycho-analytic negation present in a wish camouflaged with apprehension: “I’d hate to think of your having a smashed fender (...).” (DI)

#### 5.4. MASK FOR FACE metonymy

The strangers meet again in the living room after a few minutes during which the woman has got dressed. She walks into the room and stands in front of a mirror in order to check her hairstyle and apply her lipstick. While doing so, she flirtatiously says: “I hope I’ve got my face on straight.” (DI). Interestingly, this is a moment when the camera deliberately slightly distorts her face and we look at Phyllis from a different angle. From the cognitive perspective, we may formulate the MASK FOR FACE metonymy. Indeed, until the end of the story neither the audience nor Neff are able to say when she is lying and when she is being honest. She puts on her mask and we fail to decipher her real intentions.

The mirror serves yet another vital function in our analysis. As observed by Hoffman-Schwartz (2015: 16), the object “enables a spatial configuration that constitutes something like a classical diagram for flirtation as such”. To put it simply, the woman looks at herself in the mirror simultaneously standing with her back to the protagonist. We can see Neff’s reflection in Phyllis’s background, thus, at the same time, the woman is “turned toward him and turned away from him” (Hoffman-Schwartz 2015: 16). Hoffman-Schwartz (2015: 17) adds that she partakes in two actions which coincide with each other, namely self-examination and self-display. The scene itself is quite intimate given that the woman introduces the stranger into the feminine world, which brings them closer together. The living room is figuratively transformed into a stage, where the woman can wear her mask and play her part. It seems to be a performance in which everything, from checking her hair to uttering a witty remark, has been perfectly staged. In this respect, we may formulate the FLIRTATION IS A PERFORMANCE metaphor. Non-verbal flirtation (using her lipstick, touching her chair) accompanies the brilliance of the woman’s line. We may say that gestural flirtation finds its reflection in her words, given that both allude to her face. Let us hark back to Jaques’ line uttered in Shakespeare’s “As You Like It” ([1623] 1994: Act 2 Scene 7): “All the world’s a stage, /And all the men and women merely players”. Dietrichson’s behaviour seems to prove that indeed she is a player, therefore we may formulate the FEMME FATALE IS A PLAYER metaphor. Furthermore, the analysis of the scene allows us to formulate a ROOM IS A STAGE metaphor and a PEOPLE ARE ACTORS metaphor.

As elaborated further by Hoffman-Schwartz (2015: 17), we may speak here about one more topological turn, because Mrs. Dietrichson openly admits that her face is covered with a mask (troped, figured) and her confession is itself metaphorical “in the most disturbing way, with the would-be literality of the face

coming to figure the mask” (Hoffman-Schwartz 2015: 17). Neff is entrapped, he has swallowed the bait, which is obvious when he says: “It's perfect for my money.” (DI) The salesman has fallen under the femme fatale’s spell and thus his fate has been sealed. Nevertheless, it seems that he wants to be deluded, as his desire is stronger than his common sense.

### 5.5. Co-occurrence of two metonymic projections

The conversations between Phyllis and Walter are usually overtly sexual. Let us examine the following extract from the film:

- 5) Phyllis: He's got a lot on his mind. He doesn't want to listen to anything except maybe a baseball game on the radio. Sometimes we sit all evening without saying a word to each other.  
 Walter: Sounds pretty dull. (Phyllis shrugs)  
 Phyllis: So I just sit and knit.  
 Walter: Is that what you married him for?  
 Phyllis: Maybe I like the way his thumbs hold up the wool.  
 Walter: Anytime his thumbs get tired... (DI)

We are dealing here with a co-occurrence of two metonymies.<sup>5</sup> We may say that the word *thumb* figuratively adverts to either a penis or a man. Therefore, we may formulate two metonymies, namely BODY PART FOR ANOTHER BODY PART OR PART FOR WHOLE. In turn, the reference to “thumbs holding up the wool” is an implicit reference to the woman husband’s staying power in the bedroom. This impression is reinforced with Walter’s response about getting tired. As a result, we may posit the working of the following metonymies:

BODY PART FOR ANOTHER BODY PART metonymy OR PART FOR WHOLE metonymy  
*thumb for penis*                                 *thumb for man*  
 NON-SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR FOR SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR metonymy  
*holding up the wool (by thumbs) for staying power in bed* metonymy

### 5.6. DRIVING metaphor

Another impressive example of Walter and Phyllis’s courtship takes place when Neff is about to leave the woman’s house. Their tête-à-tête is an informal and flippant verbal duel in which they attempt to trump the other with a witty

<sup>5</sup> Following Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez and Galera Masegosa (2014: 117), “metonymic complexes are [...] the chained combination of two or more metonymies in which the expanded or reduced domain that results from a first metonymic operation constitutes the point of departure for another metonymic shift”.

retort. The palpable sexual tension that may be sensed in the air finds its release in a dialogue that literally refers to driving (which is no accident given that the man sells automobile insurance), but figuratively it adverts to flirting and checking whether Neff can seduce a married woman. The metaphor acquires another symbolic meaning if we take into account that the main characters find it difficult to start a car when they want to escape after murdering Mr Dietrichson. All in all, the car itself has multiple meanings in the whole story. Let us look at Walter and Phyllis's dialogue:

- 6) Phyllis: Mr. Neff, why don't you drop by tomorrow evening about eight-thirty. He'll be in then.  
 Walter: Who?  
 Phyllis: My husband. You were anxious to talk to him weren't you?  
 Walter: Sure, only I'm getting over it a little. If you know what I mean. (AMBIGUITY)  
 Phyllis: There's a speed limit in this state, Mr. Neff. Forty-five miles an hour. (WARNING)  
 Walter: How fast was I going, officer?  
 Phyllis: I'd say about ninety.  
 Walter: Suppose you get down off your motorcycle and give me a ticket. (SUGGESTION ABOUT WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN)  
 Walter: Suppose it doesn't take.  
 Phyllis: Suppose I have to whack you over the knuckles.  
 Walter: Suppose I bust out crying and put my head on your shoulder.  
 Phyllis: Suppose you try putting it on my husband's shoulder.  
 Walter: That tears it. (DI)

As we can see, the application of a DRIVING metaphor is not coincidental. If Phyllis wants to ensnare Walter, she cannot show her hand. If she wants everything to go according to her audacious plan, she cannot surrender herself to a stranger once she meets him, because that would make him mistrustful of her. As noticed by Bronfen (2004: 105) "actions occur »accidentally on purpose«". The dialogue reveals that both Neff and Mrs Dietrichson enjoy playing a game and keeping each other guessing what the other's reply will be. In the case of Phyllis, it is a game of seduction and she has to keep a poker face as the stakes she is playing for are high. Walter, in turn, is driven by lust, which he finds difficult to control, and that is what makes him a loser at the end of the yarn. Phyllis tempts Walter ("Suppose I have to whack you over the knuckles" DI) just to keep him at arm's length a moment later ("Suppose you try putting it on my husband's shoulder" DI). She fuels his desire and checks how far he can go to please her. Bronfen (2004:106) stresses that even if it is pure chance that they have met, the outcome of this meeting was already meticulously planned as

she had expected someone like Walter to come to her house and help her to execute the plan. Walter believes that it is him that exercises control over their conversation, but, in fact, it is quite the contrary.

The would-be partners in crime use vocabulary whose senses are connected with the domain of DRIVING (*speed limit, officer, to get down, to go*) and the domain of PUNISHMENT (*ticket, warning, to let off, to whack somebody over the knuckles*) for the following reasons: to flirt, to talk about domination and to check how far they can go. The metaphorical schema SEDUCTION IS DRIVING is presented below:

**Source domain:**

DRIVING AND PUNISHMENT

speed limit  
 45 miles an hour  
 90 miles an hour  
 state  
 to go (drive)  
 officer  
 to get down  
 ticket  
 to let off  
 to whack sb over the knuckles

**Target domain:**

SEDUCTION/FLIRTING

restrictions  
 not to exceed permissible limits  
 to exceed permissible limits  
 house  
 to flirt/banter  
 the woman  
 to approach  
 penalty  
 to leave unpunished  
 to punish sb (but not harshly)

In this case, the use of vocabulary connected with DRIVING AND PUNISHMENT serves as a concealing mechanism to talk about crossing the boundaries in flirting. The motivation behind the figurative development of the words whose senses are linked with the source domain in question seems to be determined by the fact that the man's profession is to insure cars, therefore it is natural for both characters to talk about it. Secondly, it turns out that while talking out driving, they may simultaneously flirt and check how far they can go. While ostensibly talking about vehicles, the man, in fact, verifies if the other party is willing to flirt and cross the boundaries. Both characters may be said to be accomplished wordsmiths as their dialogue resembles a verbal duel.

### 5.7. "Straight down the line" metaphor

The phrase "straight down the line" is repeated a few times in "Double Indemnity". It is first uttered by Neff when he introduces the plan to kill Mr Dietrichson to his wife:

- 6) Walter: There isn't going to be any slip up. Nothing sloppy. Nothing weak. It's got to be perfect. (He kisses her.) You go now. (He leads her towards the door) Call me tomorrow. But not from your house. From

a booth. And watch your step. Every single minute. It's got to be perfect, understand. Straight down the line. (They have now reached the door. Neff opens it. Phyllis stands in the doorway, her lips white.)

Phyllis: Straight down the line. (DI)

The line adverts to a few things: first and foremost, it refers to a well-laid and cunning plan concocted by Neff (Mr Dietrichson is supposed to accidentally die on train tracks and given that he unknowingly signed an accident policy, his wife is to receive a large amount of money in the case of his death); secondly, the secret that binds Walter and Phyllis, who from that moment are trapped by the plot; last but not least, it alludes to the dangers caused by deviating from the straight and clear path. Moreover, the literal meaning of the euphemism ('in every case, completely, at every stage') overlaps with its figurative meanings (discussed above). Phyllis repeats the line five times in the whole film.<sup>6</sup> The phrase is like a mantra for the woman. Before meeting Dietrichson, Neff was an ordinary salesman; however, once his eyes were caught by the anklet adorning the femme fatale's foot, he veered from the straight path and opted for a convoluted route to crime.

## 6. Conclusions and implications for future research

In the article we have discussed the case of flirtation which leads to the death of all the main characters in the film "Double Indemnity" (Walter and Phyllis murder Mr Dietrichson, then Walter and Phyllis shoot each other), therefore we may say that innocence and flirtation dice with death, as far as this particular example of film noir is concerned. We may confirm Simmel's theory ([1909] 1984; [1911] 1949), according to which flirtation is a pleasant activity, although in film noir we discover a more treacherous shade of it. In "Double Indemnity" coquetry is a means to an end, thus it fulfils two functions: it is pleasure- and purpose-oriented at the same time.

From the linguistic perspective, we support Grzaśko and Kiełtyka's (2021) observation that coquetry hinges on allusions, evocative suggestions, sexual innuendo, witty remarks and double entendres. We have also stressed that the language of flirtation may be metaphorically or metonymically motivated.

<sup>6</sup> "Phyllis: *Straight down the line.*" (DI)

"Phyllis: It's going to be a train, Walter. Just the way you say. *Straight down the line.*" (DI)

"Phyllis: This is it, Walter. I'm shaking like a leaf. But it's *straight down the line* now for both of us." (DI)

"Phyllis: It's *straight down the line*, isn't it?" (DI)

"Phyllis: Yes. And nobody's pulling out. We went into it together, and we're coming out at the end together. It's *straight down the line* for both of us, remember." (DI)



Indeed, every analysed conversation has two meanings, namely literal and figurative ones. The vast majority of the dialogues in the film are rich in figures of speech and thought. Given that both parties are intelligent, we may say that their conversations resemble verbal duels in which no one aims to surrender.

What seems to be particularly interesting is the role of the woman, who is not a victim/prey, but rather a predator/hunter (A WOMAN IS A PREDATOR/A WOMAN IS A HUNTER). In fact, we may confirm that the HUMANS ARE ANIMALS metaphor finds its reflection in the analysed type of discourse. Moreover, we may observe that seemingly innocuous objects, such as an anklet, may play an important role in the process of flirtation.

As far as the implications for future research are concerned, it is worth analysing the language of flirtation in other films noir in order to either refute or support the theses put forward in this article. Furthermore, given that the lovers' discourse is a complex phenomenon, one should also take into account more recent examples of verbal flirtation, therefore it would be advisable to analyse coquetry in advertisements or in everyday language.

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