

First Impressions and *Double Indemnity*

Double Indemnity, the film noir classic by director Billy Wilder, begins with an opening credits scene that is highly reminiscent of the stark and abstract visual aesthetic of the German Expressionist films of the 1930s. As the Paramount Studios logo dissolves into the first shot of a shadowy figure, the film's credit sequence opens with a non-diegetic blare of brass instruments, soon followed by the rest of the orchestra to produce a minor key funeral march, its cadence punctuated by the droll booms of a bass drum. Dissolving in is a long –to- medium-long shot of a man on crutches. He wears a dark suit and fedora hat. The camera is angled straight on and level to the man. A single source of low-key lighting emanates from a blank backdrop behind the man, filling the entirety of the frame behind him. This backlighting effect renders the man's features utterly indiscernible and creates a high contrast image between the man's silhouetted figure and the void of light from which it emerges. A non-diegetic visual, the superimposed letters of the opening credits, add to the stark tonality of the shot with their bright, block lettering and dark underlay. The 3-D shadow effect creates the illusion of the letters jumping off the screen and out towards the audience, emphasizing the man's forward motion. The credits change by slowly dissolving into each other, but otherwise they remain still. The man provides the only motion, as he slowly lurches towards the camera in time to the music. The man moves closer and closer to the camera until his dark figure nearly engulfs the entire frame; a dissolve gives way to the next shot of a dark city street.

In this stark and abstract shot, Wilder's successful use of music maintains narrative continuity and achieves his desired audience response. The man moving in lockstep with the dirge-like cadence of the bass drum resembles a funeral procession. Foreshadowing death to create a feeling of suspense, the music provides an emotional context for the shot's ambiguous image. The melody is woeful and lamenting, with a slightly sinister quality, and foreshadows the regret of a fallen hero. Wilder uses this scene to establish the film's foreboding atmosphere as well as to evoke sympathy for the film's hero, the broken man on screen. By reprising this particular selection of music throughout the film, Wilder ensures the audience will continue to identify with the hero—even as the unsavory events of the story unfold. As the opening credits draw to a close, the man's figure looms over the camera and overwhelms the frame with darkness, portending an imminent threat of unavoidable danger.