

Welcome to the February podcast wherein I will be exploring in more depth some of the forthcoming films events at Watershed.

This month I'll be talking about the re-release on digital format of the Michael Curtiz 1942 classic **Casablanca**, the Turkish filmmaker Nuri Bilge Ceylan whose new film **Climates** opens and later I'll be talking to Japanese cinema expert Jasper Sharp about the forthcoming Japanese seasons; **Move Over**, **Ozu** and **Wild Japan**.

What is there to say about **Casablanca**? A film, which has moved into the realms of the mythological in its status, it's so damn quotable that I realised it can be too easy to think about it as almost a parody - Sam playing it again, the gin joints, the usual suspects. It has become so familiar, passing into the lexicon of lovers and hard-bitten cynics alike. It's a film that people can readily agree is a masterpiece of Hollywood cinema - why didn't even UK politicians vote it their favourite film - now that has to make you seriously worry.

I've been thinking about Humphrey Bogart recently and in particular the Nicolas Ray directed **In A Lonely Place** from 1950 and you know I am convinced behind this star iconic image is a great screen actor - great for technical reasons seriously evident in **Casablanca** (and I'll come back to that) but also because of his acting persona which evolved in his later films. One that played off the tough guy to display a rare masculine vulnerability and complexity - completely broken in **The Caine Mutiny**, paranoid and potentially violent in **In A Lonely Place** and brilliantly used in **Key Largo** playing opposite Edward G Robinson's archetypal mobster. It's also interesting that Bogart took his destiny in his own hands and was one of the first stars to set up their own production company - Santana Films - where he could make his own creative choices many of which precisely played with the hard guy image the studios had pinned on him. On looking again at **Casablanca**, this film seems to be the birthplace of that core interesting relationship with the tough guy persona.

To all intents and purposes **Casablanca** should just have been another Hollywood patriotic drama encouraging and supporting Europeans in their fight against Nazism. Indeed, Ingrid Bergman was so unconcerned about the film that she was busy negotiating a part in **For Whom the Bells Tolls**, which with an Earnest Hemingway source was going to be infinitely more upmarket than this the film she was working on at the moment. The scriptwriters and director didn't know what was going on, famously who was going to get the woman at the end - how incompetent does that sound? Apparently Bogart was grumpy with the proceedings - daily rewrites or just writes were common.

Out of such chaos perfection is born.

The ambiguity on set seeps into the film and from the looks on the actors' faces they are unsure how things will play out and this feeds into the very fabric of the film, which still manages to keep viewers gripped and enthralled. Ironically the dialogue is just so perfectly precise and economical. The Epstein Bros and Howard Koch achieved an amazing feat. In a way the films achievement is theirs. They knew the kind of dialogue they certainly wanted Bogart to deliver and they were just so adept at producing it.

Maybe it was the pressure that contributed to the production of such greatness. The equally great scriptwriter William Goldman – responsible for such scripts as *Butch Cassidy, Marathon Man* - writes in his book **Which Lie Did I, More Adventures in the Screen Trade** - about this exchange between Claude Rains and Bogart.

Claude Rains – “Why did you come to Casablanca?”

Bogart – “For the waters”

Rains – “But there are no waters in Casablanca”

Bogart – “I was misinformed”

In an era when scriptwriters want to set up exposition, explain the whys of motivation. This is such a brilliant exchange. You know this guy has some dark secrets and you know he is savvy at concealing them. You know he is complex, capable of falling irredeemably in love and of killing a man - the former he has already done and the latter he does at the end. The setting up of Bogart's character; cynical, detached, dispassionate, neutral then the introduction of Bergman and the unravelling of his broken heart takes **Casablanca** completely out of the run-of-the-mill Hollywood at the time. In the famous 'of all the gin joints' - watch Bogart's face or indeed when he first sees Ilsa on hearing Sam play *As Time Goes By* - there are flinches of pain twitching across his face, his eyes filled with emotion - its in these minute moments that Bogart's acting genius is demonstrated - small movements reveal aching emotional pain and depth. Great acting. Once you watched **Casablanca** go get **In A Lonely Place** and **Key Largo** for more.

Whilst the three main leads – Bogart, Bergman and Paul Henreid – were evidently agonising over where the script was going, Claude Rains was clearly just so enjoying himself. With some brilliant witty lines and a hat at a jaunty well almost camp angle, he obviously thought 'lets have some fun'.

What happened next to the characters - I'm convinced Ilsa and Victor Laszlo went on to not only play their part in the downfall of Nazism but subsequently set up the United Nations and Amnesty International – they are currently campaigning for the detainees at Guantanamo Bay whilst Rick and Capt Renault...headed south set up a nightclub with Sam and were last seen advising Martin Scorsese on the script to **Goodfellas!**

A final word of caution out there for all you newly resolutioned non-smokers – **Casablanca** is bad for your health. I have to confess I started smoking because of this film - watch the way Bogart takes the cigarette up to his mouth, takes a deep drag subtly changes the finger configuration then takes the cigarette back down - sheer class, sheer integrity. He's one helluva man, and there is on helluva lot of smoking in **Casablanca**.

Casablanca opens on 23rd February with a special Valentines Screening on the 14th February.

Turkish director Nuri Bilge Ceylan first came to my attention two years ago at the Rotterdam International Film festival with his then new film **Uzak** – translated as **Distant**. I had heard people reverentially talking about this but hadn't come across any of his work. The festival circuit is one of those that has a constant need of finding the next new thing the next buzz. So you do take recommendations with a pinch of salt – seeing is believing is my credo.

And so I saw **Uzak** and I believed. Here was an extraordinary film for a number of reasons. Initially though it was simply that here was confident filmmaking - actually what I would describe as artisanal filmmaking. The way you watch say a carpenter produce a one-off piece of furniture – it's not a mass-produced thing but rather an object of intense singular energy and intensity. Or maybe it's like the engravings of Albrecht Durer – well you know what I mean (I hope).

Anyway my cinematic frame of reference was the early films of Wim Wenders **Alice in the Cities/Kings of the Road** type material or **Stranger than Paradise** by Jim Jarmusch. And that is worth shouting about by anyone's standards.

Basically the emotion is in the detail and the detail is in the shot. Ceylan holds shots long enough for you to lose yourself in the very texture of the scenery of the shot – sometimes even the grain of the image but ultimately all leads to the unravelling of the emotions of the characters. In **Uzak** it was the relationship between a cosmopolitan but creatively blocked photographer and his rough edged country living cousin. In his new film **Climates** it is between two lovers and the unravelling of their tempestuous emotional lives.

When you find out that Ceylan himself started as a photographer you realise it all makes sense. He know how to frame a shot, he knows how to fill those frames with meaning and he has the confidence to hold shots to make the audience search beyond the surface for the emotional core of the film.

The other great thing is that Ceylan is indeed a Turkish filmmaker and given all the media debate about Turkey – whether it should be allowed into the European Union, being the bridge between east and west, and the tensions therein – here are quiet, restrained, subtle films about our emotional lives which we can all relate to.

Climates opens on Friday 9th February

The Podcast ends with a 10 minute interview with Japser Sharp, co-founder of **www.midnighteye.com**, a website dedicated to Japanese Film, and also the author of **Midnight Eye: A Guide to New Japanese Film**.

Jasper has been involved in putting together a programme of touring work **Move Over, Ozu: The 21st Century Japanese Family on Film**, hosted by Watershed from Sun 4 – Sun 25 Feb. For full details please visit **www.watershed.co.uk**

To coincide with this season, Arnolfini will be hosting **Wild Japan: Outlaw Masters Of Japanese Film** from Tue 23 Jan – Tue 27 Feb. For full details please visit **www.arnolfini.org.uk**