

Institutional contexts

Casablanca

Casablanca is a hybrid of two popular genres produced at Warner Brothers: the film noir and the melodrama. All the key talent who produced the film were on contract at Warner Brothers, including the director, producer and cinematographer (discussed in detail in the auteur section of this chapter), as well as popular actors in major and minor roles.

Bonnie and Clyde reflects the move away from studio control. One of the reasons the film was shot on location in Texas was that executives at Warner Brothers were unable to interfere with the making of the film. Studio head Jack Warner did not like the film when he saw it, calling it 'the longest two hours and ten minutes I ever spent'. Jack Warner sold his share in Warner Brothers a few weeks later, signalling the end of the studio moguls.

Casablanca contains no explicit references to sex and its use of language may seem tame compared with films today. This was because *Casablanca* was produced at a time when the Production Code was in force. The Production Code was a set of moral guidelines, most rigidly applied from 1934 to 1954, which were voluntarily adopted by Hollywood studios as a way to prevent the government from banning or censoring films. The original code was devised under the leadership of Will Hays, president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) from 1922 to 1945, and it is therefore sometimes known as the Hays Code.

The code set out a series of rules designed to ensure that films upheld moral standards and 'correct standards of life'. Film scripts were scrutinised by the Production Code Administration (PCA) office. Filmmakers developed clever devices to suggest adult content through careful editing and use of innuendo.

Bonnie and Clyde

Bonnie and Clyde was produced at a time when the PCA was seen as increasingly stuffy and outdated. The explicit scenes of nudity and violence in the film reflect resistance to the PCA. Indeed, just one year after the film's release in 1968, the PCA was disbanded and replaced with a ratings system that is still in use today.

Specialist study area: auteur

The term auteur is the French word for 'author'. The French New Wave critics and filmmakers of the 1950s were keen to establish film as an art form, therefore it was important to ascribe an 'artist' or author to the work of art. These French critics credited certain Hollywood directors of the studio era as auteurs, including Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles, Howard Hawks and John Ford. For French critics, these directors were particularly impressive due to their unusual degree of control over their films while working in a studio system.

In 1962, American critic Andrew Sarris expanded the idea of the auteur theory for American audiences in his essay 'Notes on the Auteur Theory'. For Sarris:

Over a group of films, a director must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature.
(cited on *The End of Cinema*, 2013)



Director Alfred Hitchcock at work

Independent Activity

Research the Production Code in more detail. List the rules Hays put in place.

State how *Casablanca* adheres to the Production Code. Then list the ways in which *Bonnie and Clyde* defies the code.

Sarris also argued that a director must accomplish a high technical competence with a personal style in terms of a film's overall look, feel or meaning.

Later in the 1960s, critics began to question the focus on the director as auteur, as the theory did not always account for the collaborative nature of commercial filmmaking, and the importance of key figures such as the producer and scriptwriter.

However, the notion that the director can be an auteur has not been entirely dismissed. Some directors in Hollywood still have a high degree of control over their films and key trademarks can be established over their body of work. Consider, for instance, the films of Quentin Tarantino and Tim Burton. Also consider their regular collaborations with key personnel; the style of Tarantino's films can be partly ascribed to editor Sally Menke, who, until her death in 2010, edited all his key films. Composer Danny Elfman frequently collaborates with Tim Burton and his notable compositions contribute to the overall aesthetic of Burton's films.

Today, the notion of the auteur is used loosely and expands beyond the director to recognise the collaborative nature of filmmaking, including the influence and contribution of key personnel and talents such as the star, cinematographers and editors. Even studios during the studio era can be given auteur status, as each studio developed a distinct 'house style'.

The specification defines auteur as:

any contributor who has had an impact on the film. This could be director, star, composer, cinematographer or institution for example.

For your chosen film, consider the contributions of key talent on the film and how key talents leave their 'trademark' on the film.

Applying auteur study to *Casablanca* and *Bonnie and Clyde*

Casablanca

Casablanca is a good example of collaborative filmmaking within a studio system. The film combines the talents of the producer, director, scriptwriters, stars, composers and cinematographer. Chris Tookey (2009) noted that *Casablanca* was

proof that great films are often made not by auteurs but by collaboration between craftsmen, at uncomfortable speed, within an authoritarian studio system.

Consider the input and trademarks of some of the following key talent on *Casablanca*:

Executive Producer: Jack Warner

Jack Warner entered the film business with his three brothers, Harry, Albert and Samuel, in the early 1900s. By 1923, Warner Brothers was a fully incorporated film company. Jack was critical of the Nazi regime and became fully committed to the war effort. Warners made more films about the war than any other studio. Jack Warner was known as a tough and committed executive producer. Along with his brothers, Jack Warner developed the studio's distinct style.

Independent Activity

Choose one of the following directors who the French New Wave critics considered to be auteurs working in a Hollywood studio system:

- Alfred Hitchcock
- Orson Welles
- John Ford
- Howard Hawks.

Research the director's work (there are plenty of websites available on each director).

Define the director's distinct style in less than 50 words. Which films are considered to be the director's 'masterpieces'?



Jack Warner



Hal B. Wallis



Michael Curtiz



Arthur Edson



Max Steiner

Producer: Hal B. Wallis

Wallis was responsible for putting together the budgets and recruiting actors, directors and personnel for each film he produced at Warners. It was Wallis who developed the idea for *Casablanca* by buying the film rights for an unproduced play, *Everybody Comes to Rick's*, for \$20,000. He then assigned scriptwriters Julius and Philip Epstein to adapt the play for the screen. He closely supervised the production and editing of *Casablanca*, chose the actors and the director, Michael Curtiz, and even wrote the film's famous final line of dialogue, 'Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.'

Director: Michael Curtiz

Curtiz was an Austrian émigré who was based at Warners for most of his career. He directed over 100 films for them, including some of their biggest hits. Curtiz was a highly regarded, efficient and accomplished commercial director who could turn his hand to different genres.

Here are just three notable films directed by Curtiz at Warners:

- *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) – an expensive Technicolor swashbuckler.
- *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938) – a classic gangster film starring James Cagney.
- *Mildred Pierce* (1945) – a film noir melodrama starring Joan Crawford.

Although Curtiz is not usually considered an auteur in the same sense as Hitchcock and Welles, film scholar Sidney Rosenzweig identifies Curtiz' style as:

high crane shots to establish a story's environment; unusual camera angles and complex compositions in which characters are often framed by physical objects; much camera movement; subjective shots, in which the camera becomes the character's eye; and high contrast lighting with pools of shadows. (cited in Leonard, 2014, page 85)

Cinematographer: Arthur Edson

Arthur Edson was an acclaimed Hollywood cinematographer. He was contracted to Warners fairly late in his career, from 1936 to 1947. Edson was adept at the two dominant aesthetics of film: realism and expressionism. His expressionist style can be seen in the cinematography of the classic films *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Milesone, 1930) and *Frankenstein* (Whale, 1931). Edson was the cinematographer on an earlier Warner Brothers film starring Humphrey Bogart, *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). It is considered by many film critics to be the first film noir, renowned for its low-key lighting and use of shadows. In *Casablanca*, Edson utilises the expressionistic low-key noir style.

Composer: Max Steiner

Max Steiner was a Vienna-born composer who created Hollywood film scores for over 300 films from the 1930s to the 1960s. He is often referred to as the Godfather of film music. Steiner was influenced by German and Austrian composers and symphonies, particularly Wagner's use of leitmotifs. Steiner created dramatic, memorable scores that matched the themes and characters on the screen. He was able to perfectly synchronise music to the action on screen (a technique known as 'mickey mousing'). The musical scores Steiner composed for over the credits of films were highly dramatic and set the tone for the whole film.

Bonnie and Clyde

New Hollywood films ushered in a new era of auteurs, as power shifted from major studios to young directors and stars. Many key auteurs emerged in American cinema of the late 1960s and continued in the 1970s. Directors such as Woody Allen, Martin Scorsese, Brian De Palma and Robert Altman all made critically acclaimed films during this period.

Screenwriters: David Newman and Robert Benton

Newman and Benton were frequent collaborators. They were both film fans and wrote *Bonnie and Clyde*, their first ever film script, in the style of a French New Wave film.

Director: Arthur Penn

From the 1950s to the 1970s, Arthur Penn directed some of the key artistic films of American cinema. According to the director Paul Schrader,

Arthur Penn brought the sensibility of '60s European art films to American movies. He paved the way for the new generation of American directors who came out of film schools. (Blake, 2010)

Penn favoured on-location shooting with small production teams. Many of his films reveal a fascination with American myths and culture, classic American genres and feature characters who are 'outsiders'.

The following are three of Penn's most critically acclaimed films:

- *The Left Handed Gun* (1958) – Penn's directorial debut, re-telling the story of Billy the Kid.
- *Mickey One* (1965) – a surreal film influenced by the French New Wave.
- *Night Moves* (1975) – a neo-noir that reflects the cynicism of mid-1970s America.

Editor: Dede Allen

Allen pioneered the use of jump-cuts and audio overlaps in Hollywood cinema. She often worked in New York and was given relative freedom when editing films. Indeed, her style became known as the 'New York School of Editing'. Allen trained a number of editors in her style. For Allen,

[The 1960s] was a very rich period for New York. There was a vitality and an independence in being away from the studios. (LoBrutto, 1991 page 78)

Producer and lead actor: Warren Beatty

Beatty was only 29 years old when he produced and acted in *Bonnie and Clyde*. According to Robert Benton, Warren Beatty was a key influence on the film. It was Beatty who hired Newman and Benton, selected most of the cast and oversaw the script development. Beatty's involvement reflects the trend in New Hollywood of star-auteurs. Other key stars of the period, including Robert Redford and Jack Nicholson, directed and produced films.



Arthur Penn

iA Independent Activity

Watch two Arthur Penn films produced between 1958 and 1975. Note any similarities in the films' visual styles, structures and themes to *Bonnie and Clyde*.

iA Independent Activity

Consider three key talents' input on *Casablanca* and three on *Bonnie and Clyde*. Make a list of where each key talent's trademark is most evident in each film.