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YORK FILM NOTES

Casablanca

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Once the American 'Lois' was dropped from the original stageplay, it was apparent that a European – and this European in particular – was exactly the right choice. Curiously, the lack of on-set chemistry between her and Bogart is almost legendary, although she always claimed he treated her with charm and respect. How they combined to portray one of the cinema's great love stories is often cited as the film's central enigma.

HUMPHREY BOGART

Humphrey Bogart came from a solidly middle-class background, the son of a GP and an illustrator. Perhaps the source of his cynical persona lies partly in his disappointment that acting did not constitute a real, 'grown-up' achievement for him. We can almost sense Bogart, the man, in his lines to Laszlo 'We all try ... you succeed'.

Before a couple of false starts in Hollywood in the early 1930s, Bogart had a flourishing acting career on Broadway. Warner's took him up for *The Petrified Forest* in 1936. Once established as a second-row player, he played heavies in his early Warner years – typically being killed before the final reel by Jimmy Cagney or Edward G. Robinson.

The film *High Sierra* (1940) established his 'doomed' persona as a leading man in 1940; and his star potential was spotted about the time he starred in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). That he should come to stardom relatively late is surprising, except for the fact that his appeal is as an older, wiser, cynical tough guy who has been around the block.

In fact, were it not for the fact that Warner Bros stars Paul Muni and George Raft – the only real competitors for this persona – were on the wane, Bogart might never have been taken up at all. Nevertheless, a decision was taken in 1940–41 to 'build' Bogart as a leading man, and the part of Rick was written from the start with him – and this – in mind.

Bogart was notoriously uncomfortable playing romantic roles, at least before he starred with Lauren Bacall – who became his fourth and final wife, and the one with whom he was finally happy – in *To Have and Have Not* (1945). Perhaps the source of his discomfort was in a series of increasingly disastrous relationships with women. By 1942, he was married to the violently jealous Mayo Methot, and accounts of the making of the

film recall numerous on-set feuds, fights, and even a stabbing (see Sperber and Lax, 1997).

Casablanca ended up playing to his strengths: the wise-cracking lines, the half-shadows, and, most of all, the core of moral decency – what Bacall called his 'integrity' – have all become synonymous with his persona, along with the trenchcoat and hat.

authorship

That a film should have an 'author' is in many ways an absurd idea. Film-making is so much a collaborative enterprise that it does not fit our commonsense ideas of how art is made – the lone artist, engaged in creative struggle, bringing a work to life from his (and the stereotype is male) imagination. Although many claims have been made for film-making as an artistic process – and for film itself as '*le septieme art*' in France anyway – it is still primarily a commercial and industrial activity. In the 1930s and 1940s, film-making in Hollywood was perfected as an industrial enterprise – called the **studio system**.

The claim that films are 'authored' by their directors was established by an influential group of French film directors and critics writing for a film journal in the 1950s, *Cahiers du Cinema*. The original idea was promulgated in a kind of manifesto, the '**politique des auteurs**' in the 1950s (see Cook, 1999). The movers behind the 'politique' included Jean Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol and Andre Bazin, and focused on American directors such as Orson Welles and Nicholas Ray, and the English director Alfred Hitchcock, by then working in Hollywood.

The impetus behind the theory was to recuperate film-making from being a commercially-driven industrial process, in which the director was just one cog in an enormous machine, to an artistic process in which the director's vision was paramount.

Identifying the markers of an **auteur** in a director's body of work became a pre-occupation, to the extent that even the inferior works of an important director became more important than the most commercially successful mainstream film.

artistic and commercial success

This sense still lingers in the understanding and appreciation of directors today: film critics still anxiously await the latest films by established directors like Martin Scorsese, Tim Burton, Quentin Tarantino in the US, and Mike Leigh and Ken Loach in Britain. However, even the Hollywood marketing machines now incorporate the notion of 'authorship' in their publicity, selling the involvement of someone like Quentin Tarantino in films even where he only has had a tangential role.

The 'politique des auteurs' has been countered, or superseded, by a range of other critical approaches since the 1950s. Films which could not be appropriated to the 'auteur' principles were recognised in the 1960s under **genre theory**, so Westerns, musicals, gangster films came to be interpreted and respected for other reasons, and the directors of important genre films became admitted to the canon of 'auteurs'.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the role of audiences in creating meaning in films was treated more seriously, particularly in relation to how audiences are prepared for the conventions and pleasures of genre films, and, later, in the creation of stars. Richard Dyer's *Stars*, published in 1979, established the study of stars as a legitimate route to understanding how films work.

THE GENIUS OF THE SYSTEM

In 1989 a book was published which challenged the orthodoxy that authorship was a concept restricted to the individual, often maverick, director, with a unique cinematic style and sensibility. Called *The Genius of the System*, the book set out to identify what it was about the organisation and method of the major Hollywood studios of the 1930s and 1940s which contributed to the creation of so many lasting commercially and critically successful films.

The argument of the book's author, Thomas Schatz, was that the system itself was responsible for the artistic and commercial success of such films as *Rebecca* (1940), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *Casablanca* (1942), *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), and *A Star is Born* (1937). His real contribution was to identify the role of the studio executive producer in the making of studio films – both in their attention to the content of films, and in their management of the talent creating it.

'Fordist' system

For the **major film studios** of the time, making films was the same as any other form of mass production. Mass production itself has been called a 'Fordist' system, after the conveyor belt model of car-making devised by Henry Ford, and the studio system was certainly Fordist.

Essentially the model was this: a script or treatment would be bought by a studio, particularly if it had obvious roles for contract stars, and a team of writers would be asked to develop it into a screenplay. Usually more than one team of writers would be put on a project, working on the same script independently. Specialist writers would be drafted in to write dialogue, or to ensure continuity of plot and action.

Casting would be carried out while the script was being drafted; screen tests would be set up using sections of the script, or scenes especially written. The shoot would then start on a Monday morning, and typically the director, the technical crew, and some of the actors would have only finished working on another film two days before.

A shoot might take eight weeks, with scenes shot out of sequence according to the availability of key players. Post-production, when the film was edited and a musical score added, was supervised by the production executive. The director and the cast and crew would by now be working on another film.

According to the hunch of the producer, extra scenes or lines of dialogue might be added to the film at this stage. A finished version would be screened for senior studio executives, and more changes might be suggested. The film would preview with test audiences, and yet more changes might be made. The film would then be handed over to the marketing arm of the studio, which was typically situated on the east coast of America.

Every Hollywood studio film was made in this way. The process enabled the studio staff to be working all year round on films as they went through different stages of production; it enabled Warners in 1942, the year *Casablanca* was made, to make thirty-three other films. Even this was down on the year before, when they made forty-eight; the impact of the war on production is visible in the fact that in 1934 Warner Bros made sixty-nine films.

key player

Even so, in August 1942, there were six other films being shot on the Warner Bros lot in August, as *Casablanca* was winding up. A contract director such as Michael Curtiz was able to make eighty-seven films for Warner Bros in twenty-six years, and a staggering 160 throughout his career.

It should be clear, then, that the Hollywood director of the 1930s and 1940s did not have more than a functional role in the making of any one film. Their major input was in supervising the shoot – eight weeks out of maybe eight months. The director had no role in the choosing, buying or writing of a script property; invariably they did not see the script until a couple of days before shooting. Once the film was shot, the studio took control of post-production.

So if the director did not control the process, who did? The answer is that the production supervisor, or production executive, was the key player in the studio system. Each studio had their own *éminence grise* – MGM had Irving Thalberg, renowned as the producer with the most refined cinema sensibility in Hollywood (and immortalised as F. Scott Fitzgerald's Last Tycoon, in the novel of that name) until his death in 1937. MGM also had David O. Selznick until 1935 when he left to become an independent producer of prestige films, including *Gone with the Wind* (1939).

Warner Bros's first 'creative' executive producer was Darryl F. Zanuck whose right hand man was Hal B. Wallis. When Zanuck moved to create an independent production company, which within a few years became the major player 20th Century Fox, Wallis was left as the most senior production supervisor; from 1933, his was the most influential voice in the production of Warner Bros films.

In terms of controlling the production process of Warner's films, Wallis had the key role. By 1942, he had become so powerful that he negotiated himself a deal with Jack Warner whereby he was contracted to make four films a year for the studio. He had sole control over these films – he chose the properties, actors, directors, and crew. His first six films – *Now, Voyager*, *Desperate Journey*, *Casablanca*, *Watch on the Rhine*, *Princess O'Rourke*, and *Air Force* – received eighteen Oscar nominations, and were all box-office successes, an extraordinary testimony to his commercial acumen.

most influential of the authors

For *Casablanca*, Wallis approved buying the rights to the original play script, *Everybody Comes to Rick's*, supervised the writers, the casting process, appointed the director and the key technical staff, and the composer Max Steiner. He took great care over the detail of the film; he even wrote the famous last line. As evidence of his attention to detail, Aljean Harmetz quotes an extract from four pages of cutting notes that Wallis sent to the film's editor:

> Take out the group of soldiers before the cut of the loading of the refugees into the patrol wagon ... Trim a little on Rains' line, 'And I am prepared to refuse it.' ... Take out two of the last four shots from Ugarte ... Lose the long shot of the waiter bringing the bottle and glasses. Cut to Bergman right on her line, 'Ask the piano player to come over.' ... Take out that long look of Bergman looking around before she says, 'Where is Rick?'
>
> *Harmetz, p. 261*

A closer look at any of these scenes reveals the small but significant differences that each of these changes makes to the drama and pace of the film. Wallis was also respected by his staff for his understanding of narrative drive, character, and emotion. Unusually for a producer he also had a keen sensitivity to the importance of both music and lighting (see Style).

In one sense, then, Wallis can claim to be the most influential of the authors of *Casablanca*, but there are others who have claims, too. In addition to Murray Burnett and his wife Joan Alison, who wrote the original stage play, there were four other writers who had key roles, and each of them put their own stamp on the film. Philip and Julius Epstein, wise-cracking, practical-joking twins, brought a deflating Jewish humour to the romance in a series of crackling one-liners.

However, it was clear to Wallis that the film needed some other authority; it was after all being made just at the time America was entering the Second World War, and Hollywood in general, and Warner Bros in particular, were keen to support the war effort (see Contexts: Hollywood at war). In order that the war in Europe was not just the backdrop for a romantic thriller/melodrama, the politics need to be beefed up. This job was given to Howard Koch, a left-leaning playwright and screenwriter who amongst other things was responsible for *The Sea Hawk* (1940) and *The Letter* (1940), both for Warner Bros. He also wrote the script for the Orson Welles radio play *The War of the Worlds*.

In the later stages of script revision, while the Epsteins and Koch were still, independently, working on it, writer Casey Robinson was drafted in to sharpen the romance. In the original stage-play the relationship between Rick and Ilsa (or Lois, as she was in *Everybody Comes to Rick's*) would not have made it past the **Hays Office**. Robinson elevated the relationship from a casual sexual liaison to something more noble and tragic. He also strengthened the relationship between Ilsa and Laszlo, so that her loving him, and leaving Rick, had some credibility.

Harmetz credits Robinson with foregrounding the role of Sam. In order to give emotional depth to Ilsa and Rick, he proposed using Sam as a mirror of both of their feelings:

> Scene between Rick and Ilsa is weak. You must heighten here the great fear that Sam has, the almost superstitious darky fear, and also heighten his pleading with Rick to get out of town until this woman is gone.
>
> *Harmetz, p. 176*

What seems to be unusual about Robinson's role is that he is not really a screenwriter as such; rather he edits and analyses extant pieces of script, with a sure sense of how relationships should play, and how to involve the audience. The fact that he did not script specific lines – that, in effect, he was a contract script-doctor – is reflected in his absence from the film's credits.

On their own, it is clear that each of these writers was not capable of producing a script as complex or multi-layered as *Casablanca*. Once production started – and even after it was finished – changes were made. Because these later changes were never formally written down, it is difficult to know who to attribute them to. Legend has it that 'Here's looking at you, kid' was improvised on set by Humphrey Bogart, and Wallis

himself wrote the film's final line. The scripting of *Casablanca* thus testifies to the collaborative multi-authored process of film-making typical of the era.

So what, then, was the role of Curtiz? The 'politique des auteurs' stressed that the director – or rather an élite band of directors – authored a film with a personal vision and signature style. The directors favoured by the Cahiers' group included Alfred Hitchcock as the exemplary exponent, and one can see in Hitchcock's films pre-occupations and motifs, even obsessions, recurring with reassuring consistency.

With Curtiz there is no such consistency. Partly this is because, as a contract director for Warners, he made whatever film he was assigned to. Not being a writer, and having no role in pre-production, there was little he could do to influence the conception of any film, and so he did not have the opportunity to stamp on a film his own thematic or generic concerns. He was renowned as a great director of both action and melodrama, and he successfully directed musicals, biopics, and horror films, so he was not given simple genre products to work with.

He was valued for his professional approach, his work rate, his understanding of camera set-ups and shot composition, and these latter two not because he did interesting or innovative things in the frame, like Orson Welles or John Ford, but because he knew exactly how to tell stories visually, with an economy that was in itself elegant. He knew how to pace narratives, so there were no *longeurs* (long drawn out parts) that might pass in other directors for a 'signature visual style'. As he is often quoted, when challenged about continuity, or consistency in character, 'I make them so fast nobody notices'.

Curtiz's emphasis on the visual in his film direction might be accounted for by a number of factors. As a Hungarian émigré, who had made films in Austria, Czechoslovakia, Germany, and Denmark before coming to America in 1926, he was less likely to have a sensitivity to dialogue, especially in English. Indeed, Harmetz points out the role of the dialogue coach in studio films of the 1930s, particularly important with the high proportion of European émigré directors in Hollywood, many of whom had fled Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Also, of course, any director who had learned their trade before 1927 was entirely used to constructing visual narratives, working as they did in the silent era of film-making.

Curtiz's style was thus often misconstrued as being distinctly unfriendly to actors. In fact, this was more to do with his understanding of actors as elements in the composition of the frame than with any diffidence or rudeness on his part. Byron Haskin, quoted in James Robertson's *The Casablanca Man* (1993), called him 'the Busby Berkeley of drama' (p. 140).

Curtiz is difficult to pigeonhole as a director. Among his successes with Warner Bros were *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), *Angels With Dirty Faces* (1938), *Dodge City* (1939), *The Sea Wolf* (1941), *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942) and *Mildred Pierce* (1945). His range even here includes a gangster film, a Western, a swashbuckling adventure, a musical biopic, and a melodrama.

Maybe his adeptness with each of these forms led to a critical suspicion that a director who could turn his hand to anything somehow lacked the artistic integrity necessary to be called an 'auteur'. Working with genres was in itself an indicator of a director's lack of artistic independence. A critic such as Andrew Sarris (in Robertson, 1993, p. 2) sees him as too much the compliant studio employee, without a personal artistic vision, to be thought of as an auteur. However, in a telling revelation, he credits *Casablanca* as an exception:

> The director's one enduring masterpiece is, of course, Casablanca, the happiest of happy accidents, and the most decisive exception to the auteur theory.
>
> *Robertson, p. 2*

One could take this further; the fact that Curtiz does not conform to the profile of the film 'auteur' might single him out – rather than just *Casablanca* – as a decisive exception to the auteur theory. His importance lies in the scope of his body of work – over 160 films – rather than in any single film. (For a fuller account of critical debates over the auteur status of Curtiz, see Robertson, 1993, pp. 2–3.)

It is not really possible – or desirable – to come to any definite conclusions about the paramount 'authoring' role of any single member of the team

Bogart and Bergman, portraying one of cinema's great love stories

Casablanca © Turner Entertainment Co. All Rights Reserved.

who made *Casablanca*. Indeed, there are key personnel, not even mentioned here, who made invaluable contributions to the outcome. Max Steiner turned 'As Time Goes By' into one of the most potent signature tunes of perhaps any film, even though he did not actually write the song. Arthur Edeson, the film's cinematographer, did a great deal to create the characters of Rick and Ilsa – and the personas of Bogart and Bergman – through his meticulous lighting set-ups. And, of course, Bogart and Bergman themselves manufactured in their performances one of the most passionate cinematic love stories.

The likelihood is that a particularly fertile circumstance – Warner Bros in 1942 – produced what Sarris called 'the happiest of happy accidents'.

narrative & form

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Stories are one of the major modes through which society talks to itself, and makes sense of itself; in this century, films are perhaps the dominant mode of storytelling in Western culture.

The study of the structure of stories has been formalised into a quasi-science – narratology; the object of study, the structures studied, have been called narrative. We will now consider some of the features of narrative form.

plot & story

E.M. Forster came up with the still workable distinction between plot and story. The sentence 'the king died and then the queen died', he said, is a story; 'the king died and then the queen died of grief', on the other hand, is a plot. A plot, therefore, is a sequence of events that are linked by cause and effect.

Forster was working with definitions arrived at coincidentally by a group of Russian Formalist critics, for whom narrative was a key area of interest. They, too, distinguished between the story (*fabula*) and the plot (*sjuzet*). For them (see Chatman, 1978) the story is the total sequence of events represented or referred to in a narrative, while the plot is the peculiar ordering of those events. This distinction is referred to elsewhere as that between 'story' and 'discourse'.

Thus, the story events in *Casablanca* include the flashback scenes in Paris, the possibility that Rick and Ilsa spend the night together when she visits him above the bar, and Rick's journey to Brazzaville with Captain Renault. If the story events referred to in the film were arranged in chronological order, one would probably start with Ilsa having a brace fitted to her teeth in 1930 (from the flashback scene 'What were you doing, say, ten years ago?' Rick's answer to the same question, 'Looking for a job', probably does not constitute a story *event*).