

Stories by the Bay: OLLI: Spring 2022: weeks 1 & 2:

week 1: THE MALTESE FALCON: 1941: Peter Bradshaw's review of the film: *The Guardian*: "John Huston's adaptation of the Dashiell Hammett novel, as well as having the greatest MacGuffin of all time, is a ringing disproof of Raymond Chandler's belief that detective stories depend on men coming through doors with guns. People arrive with guns a good deal in *The Maltese Falcon*, but mostly without them; Humphrey Bogart's Sam Spade makes a point of telling us he prefers to be unarmed, and he has a very cool line in disarming other people. And what a superb performance from Bogart: darker, steelier and more ambiguous than his Rick in *Casablanca*, with all the world-weary cynicism, but none of the romantic sacrifice – just a strangely opaque manipulative streak, a need to use the women that cross his path. It's a tough-wised-up routine, involving pantomime displays of furious anger to intimidate people, which shifts to jaunty, unconcerned whistling when he is alone, and finally flowers into anguish and defiance.

"He plays San Francisco private detective Spade, who in time-honoured style is approached by a shady lady in his office: this is the highly-strung Brigid O'Shaughnessy, played by Mary Astor. She spins Spade a line about needing him to tail someone in the city. Spade isn't buying it but allows his excitable partner Miles Archer (Jerome Cowan) to take the job, and Spade remains sociopathically unmoved at the news that Miles has been shot dead. By who? It just so happens that Sam has been carrying on an affair with Miles's wife Iva (Gladys George) and this tough, cool customer is soon kissing Miss O'Shaughnessy full on the lips. From a shoal of red herrings emerges a slippery fellow called Joel Cairo, played by Peter Lorre, and heavy-set businessman Kasper Gutman, played by Sydney Greenstreet. They are all after the same thing: a staggeringly valuable jewelled ornament, the "Maltese Falcon," once offered in tribute by the Knights Templar in the 16th century to the King of Spain.



"Perhaps it's worth noting that the one woman whom Spade does seem to respect is his good-natured secretary Effie (Lee Patrick), whose loyalty may have been an inspiration for Miss Moneybags, and Sam's cruel detachment may have inspired the British secret agent she pined for. The scene in which Sam takes Joel's gun off him and beats him up, all without removing the cigarette jammed into the corner of his mouth, is a comic triumph, topped off with Sam sportingly returning Joel's gun to him and then bursting out laughing when Joel once again threatens him with it.

"The strange, dreamlike tension of the film escalates with each new confrontation, each new tailing, each new beating, with Gutman and Cairo shot from a queasy low angle, and the nightmare culminates in a gripping series of closeups on each strained face. Spade acidly dismisses the falcon as "the stuff that dreams are made of," an anti-Prospero of cynicism and survival."

week2: VERTIGO: 1958:

From *The Movie Guide*: "The most-discussed work of the master; despairing, sardonic and demanding of multiple viewings. Hitchcock's intensely personal and frighteningly self-revealing picture, VERTIGO is the story of a man (Stewart as Hitch) who is possessed by the image of a former love (Novak, as Vera Miles) and becomes increasingly compulsive in his attempts to make another woman (Novak as Novak) over in that image. We'll explain.



"Stewart is a former San Francisco policeman who suffers from vertigo --- a dizzying sensation brought on by his acrophobia. When he gets a call from a former classmate, shipping magnate Gavin Elster (Helmore), he agrees to play detective and shadow the millionaire's wife Madeleine (Novak) whom Elster fears is going to wind up dead. Elster ominously asks him, 'Do you believe that someone dead, someone out of the past, can take possession of a living being?' After following Madeleine for a short while Stewart becomes obsessed with her --- lost deep in a labyrinthine plot from which he cannot escape.

"Based on a novel by Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac (who previously supplied the source material for DIABOLIQUE), VERTIGO appealed to Hitchcock for reasons which become clearer the more one knows about the director's personality. VERTIGO is, in fact, nothing less than Hitchcock revealing himself to his audience --- his obsessions and desire to make over women are embodied in Stewart's character and the perfect Hitchcock woman is embodied in Madeleine. VERTIGO is also a masterpiece of filmmaking which includes one of the most important technical discoveries since the dawn of cinema --- the dolly-out, zoom-in shot, which visually represents the dizzying sensation of vertigo. The result is a shot unique to Hitchcock, unlike any other before in film, one which will always bear his stamp.

"But more than that, the behind-the-scenes preparation of VERTIGO resembles the story itself. Hitchcock had directed Vera Miles in THE WRONG MAN, and stood poised to make her a star in VERTIGO. This would be, of course, according to Hitchcock tradition: the cool blonde, whose whorish carnality is hidden beneath sleekly understated clothes and simple hair. But his plan went awry when Miles married after filming [of THE WRONG MAN] was over and soon became pregnant ('I lost interest. I couldn't get the rhythm going with her again,' said Hitchcock in an interview, but later he threw her a bone in PSYCHO). He convinced Novak to take the role; her somnambulistic quality made her very effective in the role, but he and [costume designer] Edith Head had hell convincing her to tone down.

"Yet perhaps Novak is the unsung quintessential Hitch heroine. Hitchcock himself described Stewart's character's obsession with Novak as a 'form of necrophilia'; it's chilling when you think of the director re-creating his dreamgirl again and again. Novak's heroine is degraded by suffusing her own identity to become what men want her to be. Did she feel degraded when Hitchcock and Head tried to bury the established Novak? Did it make her feel like a cheap pawn, forced to impersonate a lady, that is in itself an impersonation, within the confines of an acting job (an impersonation anyway)? And how much of her real self --- Marilyn Novik --- had fused with the manufactured Kim Novak? The latter was a star persona placed in an impossible-to-please situation in the first place. Groomed as a successor to Hayworth and a threat to Monroe, it's small wonder Novak fled the film industry to hide in Big Sur. To examine her within the context of VERTIGO is another dizzying vortex --- a virtual vertigo in itself."