

Stories by the Bay: OLLI: Spring 2022: Weeks 3 & 4:

week 3: BULLITT: 1968: Article from the Turner Classic Movies website by Rob Nixon: “Car chases have been a staple of American film ever since the appearance of the Keystone Kops in the silent era. The ten-minute pursuit in *Bullitt* (1968), up and down the steep streets of San Francisco (which gave some viewers motion sickness with its dizzying visuals), is regarded as one of the best ever put on film along with those in *The French Connection* (1971) and *The Road Warrior* (1981) and remains the one thing most viewers remember about the movie. But *Bullitt* is worth repeated viewings for more than just its most famous sequence. A precursor to the explosive action movies of the eighties and nineties, the film brought a modern, technically advanced style to the tough detective movies of a generation before. And Steve McQueen's portrayal of the taciturn, mistrusting police lieutenant is considered one of his best and certainly most iconic.



“Frank Bullitt is not your conventional cop, even for so unconventional a city as San Francisco. He dresses sharp and trendy (in costumes that designer Theadora Van Runkle based on the clothes of a handsome, dapper boyfriend she had at the time), drives a souped-up Mustang, and has a chic girlfriend (the beautiful Jacqueline Bisset) whose major interest is modern art. He also has atypical working methods; when a mob witness he is assigned to protect is murdered, Bullitt gets a sympathetic doctor to agree to keep quiet temporarily about the death while he solves the murder, and exposes double-dealings and cover-ups in the process. While the narrative is both intricate and exciting, it actually holds less interest than the film's style, action sequences, and its presentation of McQueen as a different kind of hero for a new age. It was his own favorite film and the one for which he is best remembered, the movie that shot him into superstar status. “By the late 60s, McQueen had become big box office on the heels of his success in *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), *The Great Escape* (1963), and *The Sand Pebbles* (1966). In just a decade, he had risen from TV star (*Wanted: Dead or Alive*, 1958) to an internationally famous actor with enough clout to form his own production company. Producer Philip D'Antoni had optioned Robert Pike's book *Mute Witness* for Spencer Tracy, hoping to cast the aged actor in the central role of the luckless New York cop Clancy. When the project at last came to McQueen's attention, Warner Brothers saw the box office potential in it, and a rewrite was ordered to change the lead's name, age and location. That location became the first sticking point between McQueen and Warners, who wanted it shot on the back lot. The star suggested the studio ‘shove’ the picture unless it was done his way. His way, it was. *Bullitt* became the first film shot entirely on location with an all-Hollywood crew and the first to use the new lightweight Arriflex cameras exclusively.”

week 4: THE CONVERSATION: 1974: Roger Ebert's 1974 review of the film:

“As he is played by Gene Hackman in *The Conversation*, an expert wiretapper named Harry Caul is one of the most affecting and tragic characters in the movies; he ranks with someone like Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* or the pathetic captives of the middle class in John Cassavetes's *Faces*. Hackman is such a fine actor in so many different roles, from his action roles like *The French Connection* to this introverted, frightened, paranoid who is ‘the best bugger on the West Coast.’ He is, indeed, maybe the best wiretapper in the country, but he hasn't gone back to the East Coast since a bugging assignment there led to the deaths of three people. He tries to force himself not to care. He goes to confession and begs forgiveness for not paying for some newspapers, but not for bringing about a murder -- because the murder, you see, was none of his business. He is only a professional. He does his job and asks no questions: doesn't want to know the answers.

“His latest job has been a tactical masterpiece. The assignment: Bug a noon-hour conversation between two young people as they walk in a crowded plaza [Union Square]. He does it by tailing them with a guy who's wired for sound, and also by aiming parabolic microphones at them from buildings overlooking the plaza. This gives him three imperfect recordings of their conversation, which he can electronically marry into one fairly good tape. He is a good craftsman, and, although the film doesn't belabor his techniques, it does show us enough of how bugging is done to give us a cynical education.

“It's a movie not so much about bugging as about the man who does it, and Gene Hackman's performance is a great one. He does not want to get involved (whenever he says anything like that, it sounds in italics) -- but he does. After he has recorded the conversation, he plays it again and again and becomes convinced that a death may result from it, if he turns the tape in. The ways in which he interprets the tape, and the different nuances of meaning it seems to contain at different moments, remind us of Antonioni's *Blow-Up*. Both movies are about the unreality of what seems real: We have here in our hands a document that is maddeningly concrete and yet refuses to reveal its meaning. And the meaning seems to be a matter of life and death.

“The movie is a thriller with a shocking twist at the end, but it is also a character study. Hackman plays a craftsman who has perfected his skill at the expense of all other human qualities; he lives in paranoia in a triple-locked apartment, and is terrified when it turns out his landlady has a key. She explains she might have to get in in case of some emergency -- his furniture might burn up or something. He explains that none of his possessions is important to him -- except his keys.

“He has no friends, but he does have acquaintances in the bugging industry, and they're in town for a convention. One of them (played by Allen Garfield) is a truly frightening character. He's the one who talks about the three murders, and he's the one whose hateful envy reveals to us how good Harry Caul really is. A boozy scene in Harry's workshop, with some colleagues and their random dates, provides a perfect illustration of the ways in which even Harry's pathetically constrained social life is expressed through his work.



“*The Conversation* is about paranoia, invasion of privacy, bugging -- and also about the bothersome problem of conscience. The Watergate crew seems, for the most part, to have had no notion that what they were doing was objectively wrong. Harry wants to have no notion. But he does, and it destroys him.”