

Watershed, 1 Canon's Road, Harbourside, Bristol BS1 5TX
Box Office: 0117 927 6444

Watershed January 2015 Podcast

Mark: Welcome to Watershed's January podcast; my name is Mark Cosgrove and I am the Cinema Curator here at Watershed.

This month sees the launch of a new strand of Conversations about Cinema – which will explore the impact of conflict through film, and which will run throughout our program from January until June. It is planned and hoped that it is a stimulating way of opening up a dialogue with you, the audience, about areas which films provide a springboard into. And it is part of a national initiative developed by Watershed with partners in Wales and Northern Ireland, and supported by organisations such as the British Film Institute, Bristol University, Africa Eye Festival and Community Resolve.

I am delighted to be joined by Tim Cole, Professor of History at the University of Bristol, who is working with us to develop thinking and content of the program. Welcome Tim.

Tim: Thanks Mark.

Mark: This area started out I remember as a conversation with you about centenary commemorations for World War I which just happened last year, 2014. We were talking about how the conflicts are defined by those dates: the Great War 1914-1918, and then the Second World War 1939-1945... The impact of these reaches far beyond those dates; we can think about wars as being specifically between those days; but actually, the impact of those could be quite phenomenal. Could you just say a bit about what that means from a historian's perspective?

Tim: Yes, I think, as historians, we are quite interested in kind of extending the chronology a little bit; so, 1914-1918 stretching it... so, that we are obviously interested in what's happening before, but especially what happens afterwards, pushing that chronology quite a few years on from that. I think that is partly because of the way historians think about war, as, most obviously, a very destructive force.

You got this moment in 1918, or in 1945, where there is kind of euphoria of victory, but you also got the sheer destructive realities of war hitting home, and that is obviously in 1918 primarily about the loss of life. In 1945 it's the loss of life, and in the British case the loss of infrastructure. So, it's about the devastations of cities like Bristol. That's one of the stories that historians are interested in telling, the story about the ways in which societies, individuals, nations start to deal with ... pick up the pieces if you like. But I think that's one of the things that is interesting about it; the kind of ways in which the war's destruction provides a new cinema scape. I mean, there is something about a ruined city, isn't there, which is very different kind of cinema scape than a built city.

Mark: Have you seen these amazing, iconic, images of Dresden with that amazing sculpture overlooking... and you think of Hiroshima... these are very powerful images of the war.

Tim: They are almost apocalyptic landscapes aren't they? So, a kind of a science fiction landscape, rather than a landscape... there are landscapes of the future and the landscape of present. I think that it is really jarring to think about Hiroshima or, say Warsaw in 1945, images of Warsaw are of an entirely destroyed city; and I think one of the questions in which I am interested as a historian is really how do you start to build a new world on the basis of the rubble. I think, this series is partly thinking about how far is the rubble a productive space for cinema to work with... so, to work with these apocalyptic landscapes in the present and to tell stories within those landscapes. Something like the **Third Man**, is in many ways working with that moment, isn't it? A kind of very particular

moment in urban history where cities are looking different... there is something about the planned modern city that has been undone by the destruction of war. It's almost like a liminal space where all sorts of things can happen... **Passport to Pimlico**, you know, a lot of these films are really about rubble and about destroyed urban environments. City like you've never seen it before.

Mark: also the ways in which the order has changed. You mentioned **Passport to Pimlico**, which we are screening as part of 4 films, Rebels in a Rubble season, which are: **Passport to Pimlico**, famous Ealing comedy, set amidst the bombed out ruins of London; then, Rossellini's famous **Rome Open City**, which really launched a whole wave of cinema with neorealism which was about the cameras filming in the streets and filming amongst the reality of the situation; **Ashes and Diamonds** part of Andrzej Wajda's great Polish war trilogy and then the **Third Man**; you know I'm just thinking about that change in the order, **Passport to Pimlico**, whilst being a comedy is actually quite a radical reimagining of the change to the social order of the UK, England in particular.

Tim: I think, that is one of the things that historians would be interested in with war, in that the war is a supreme test of society. It is a kind of greatest challenge often, to the status quo... To things like gender relations or the class structure or existing norms and mores and values, to politics... there is a sense in which war comes as a kind of massive challenge to all of that. So, I think during the war but especially in the immediate post-war period, you have got a period of flux. In a sense cities... the landscape of the city is in flux, so is the social structure or politics of a city. I think something like **Passport to Pimlico** is an interesting film and in many ways it's riffing of all of those, because it's thinking about the sense in which the city looked different; but actually, there are opportunities for a new kind of society, there are radical opportunities as well.

So, one of the things you find often in the postwar moments is that amidst the destruction there is a kind of window of opportunity for not just building new kind of cities but to imagining new kinds of worlds, new futures...

Mark: and, famously, after the end of Second World War which was a Tory-led coalition you get the general election and you get the labor landslide. I have always been surprised by that because Churchill was such an essential figure for the UK and the Second World War. What you get is him ousted and you come in with a labour government.

Tim: which is about war time – peace time; which, in a sense, is one day that separates war time from peace time... partly you've got continuities, but I think you've also got this radical moment of change which is that actually the politics of war may not be the politics for peace. There is a kind of aspiration for creating something different, for building a new world; and I think of that moment just at the end of wars as a kind of famously the moment for imagining new futures, new kind of opportunities. That is a very productive space politically but it's also interesting I think, in term of this series, in terms of how it is productive artistically as well. So what happens just after the end of war can be culturally as well as politically and socially and economically very productive.

Mark: What are the essential differences between the end of the World War I and World War II? You said that the World War I was about people because of the scale of the deaths in World War I. World War II was different; it had a different legacy and impact. What are the differences, in broad brush strokes, between the post war environments of World War I and World War II?

Tim: If you just take a British focus, at one level, I think it is partly about this sense of greater loss of life in the context of the First World War compared to the Second World War in a kind of British dimension. But, in the British context of the Second World War, there is kind of much greater impact upon Britain, you know, any notion of Britain as an island as being safe is starting to be chipped away at isn't it? I think aerial bombardment is like a game-changer in the way people imagine safety and think about notions of security. That's starting to develop in the First World War, but aerial bombardment is a critical intervention in the Second World War. I think people think differently about themselves and about the world as a result of the aerial bombardment.

Mark: is that world becoming smaller or feeling yourself a part of...

Tim: Exactly. I mean that's part of the context. The Second World War is really global war isn't it? I mean, the First World War has that global dimension to it for sure, and is very much rooted in the British Empire and colonial forces and groups, but the Second World War has a much more global dimension. Things like Hiroshima and Nagasaki are really striking moments where suddenly the world feels like a very small place and very vulnerable place and that's a kind of terrifying prospect isn't it? So in some ways there is a need to deal with that in the aftermath of the Second World War. The singular moment in a British context; there is that big moment of decolonization; it's a radical shift of position of Britain's power within the world.

Mark: Is that about finally the Empire declining and about the end of that

Tim: yes, absolutely. Obviously, the Twentieth century is an American century; the growth of the role of the United States. There is sense of world shrinking but also being radically reordered. So where power lies is also being thrown up into the air. You got this extraordinary destruction with the use of nuclear weapons technology; the stories are starting to come out of the death camps in Europe of the destruction of the entire ethnic group, the Jews... Some really big things that are happening, which, in a sense, if you think about '45-'46, you got a world which is trying to work with that... the cards that have been shuffled... the pack has been shuffled; and you are trying to work with this new world order; which I think is about opportunity... but there is also a lot of fear thrown in with that about what the potential for the destruction looks like.

Mark: how important was film? We've mentioned photographs; how important was photography and film in communicate the realities? Of course, technologically film hadn't evolved into the various portable formats by the end of the First World War; by the Second World War it was becoming a much more portable device. Rossellini, again, used the portability of the film medium to be able to film these things. And I suspect in First World War the story was told

afterwards. One gets a sense that with the Second World War there was more documentation, there was more footage. We just watched a documentary last year, the Night Will Fall about the liberation of Belsen. Were these images getting out to people?

Tim: Yes, they were. There is at least two wars in Twentieth century... they're visual events because of photography and film First World War, primarily is a mix of photography and then also the war artists... kind of more traditional visual arts. Second World War, I think, the newsreel footage is really a significant moment especially with Allies advance post D-Day. It is not like film footage streaming... it's not like 24/7 TV news, but it is the beginning of that sense a kind of reportage as the Allies advance towards Berlin; and that being played back onto cinema screens within the United Kingdom and also in the United States. Those kinds of images are really powerful... I mean, someone like Susan Sontag, a great writer about photography... She talks about the Life magazine images of the liberation of the camps by the Americans; I think it's Dachau or Buchenwald... as these kind of searing moments where she can split here world into before she saw those images and the moment afterwards and those kind of images of destruction, the sheer human cost of war come very quickly in 1945 to a very wide audience. They are very powerful images that become replicated later on, on news later on. Although, it's interesting Andre Singer's Night Will Fall... some of those images are too powerful in that context; so, there's also censorship... there is the use of images; but there is also a censoring of images; particular sensibility... politics; which is not necessarily showing all of those images. But I think it is a moment in '45, where you really do have live reportage of almost of the final stages of a war, which is something novel... there is something new about that.

Mark: and also, saying about film being much more usable as a medium. As I said, Rossellini can do **Rome Open City**, and film it using natural light... and very early, very primitive sound... but also, going back to **Passport to Pimlico**, the film industry is still working as entertainment for people; but the landscape in

which it was filmed in, the environment, is the very real environment of the world around. So, the creatives have gone through that and they've all been dealing with it, even in the entertainment context, that impact would still be seeping in.

Tim: It's interesting how **Passport to Pimlico** doesn't shy away from reality that British cities looked different in the mid-1940s, than in the mid-1930s because of this destructive moment in '40-'41; that becomes a part of the new reality which you can then place a political comedy within.

Mark: The new reality is a good phrase; it applies to Andrzej Wajda's dealing with the new reality of the world in Poland. Even through the **Third Man** which is a fantastic, atmospheric crime film, with a very dubious reality; but again, within the very real context of the split up Austria.

Tim: and, the black market is really important... there is a kind of an underworld operating; I think Austria in that period is an interested place; occupied territory fought over by the Allies, it's been carved up by Allies and it's about moving between those zones. That is a very unusual space isn't it; if you think of the world as mapped out, the world is traditionally mapped out to these kinds of stable borders, geo-political nations. Suddenly you got these really interesting spaces like Vienna in the setting for the **Third Man**; where there are cracks between.

Mark: people have to find ways to move between them, which is of course what Harry Lime does...

Tim: Exactly. And it can give you the feeling of kind of brooding space of opportunity and threat, doesn't it? Which is sort of part of that immediate post war...

Mark: Also the moral values may have shifted, they may have collapsed somewhat, and how do you rebuild that? As you say the world order has changed, shifted; we are not quite sure what is bad and what is good.

Tim: absolutely. One of the things that the war classically does in the Twentieth century is shakes the core notions, what good and evil are, and what is right and wrong, what belief is... so, you've got the moment of radical shaking and... the space like the postwar Vienna is very much a liminal space... it's between war and peace; it's between being a kind of sovereign territory and being under allied control; and it's between this moment where values are being questioned and challenged and there's opportunities in that as well, as a downside of that; which comes across very powerfully in the **Third Man**; it's a brilliant film, it's a kind of evoking this strange place and time.

Mark: and I think, Orson Welles, I think this is why he was attracted to play the part; it's a complex character who is neither good nor bad but is both; very charming but he's also dealing with contraband, and ultimately killing people, when you get the back story; but as you say it provides that flux that that character can portray brilliantly; which is, I am sure, why Orson Welles would want to do it.

Tim: I think the world is in flux in those moments, 1918, 1919, 20...1945, 46, 47 things are up for grabs aren't they; so it's a very slippery kind of moment where a sense that the old hasn't quite yet gone, the new hasn't quite yet come; and there is a kind of negotiation as a sort of merging of those two.

Mark: What about the films which go back to that moment? **Testament of Youth** is coming up, a new film from Vera Brittain's famous memoir of World War I; I mean, what do you think about films that are dealing with that moment in the past; the sort of good examples of how that immediate post war moment has been dealt with?

Tim: I think, one of the hardest things for film to deal with is to deal with a kind of void, absence... so, obviously that's one of the things that is happening at that moment... so, you've got these kind of gaps which is ...gaps in families, in communities, in a nation, within the continents; so visually, say post-45, you've got the bombsites, which kind of persist till the 50s, so you've got these kind of

gaps in a city. But there are these kinds of more profound gaps, absences, voids which are one of the hardest things in many ways for film to deal with; that's the kind of challenge visually – how do you represent absence; that which is gone and which will never be replaced; and in particular people, so absent people... I think it is kind of a bigger representational challenges... not just in film, it's in arts, in literature; that's the sort of the real challenge of a postwar moment; how do you capture, convey, that sense of the thing that is gone... death... the ultimate void and absence. And I suppose memorials are trying to deal with that aren't they, memorial culture that emerges in 1919, which is trying to deal with that; but that feels to me like a nub, cinematographic challenges, artistic challenges, representational challenges.

Mark: in a way, the film that comes to mind is Polanski's *The Pianist*, which is a return of Polanski to Warsaw in the Second World War, which is a film that we will screen as part of *Conversations About Cinema: the Impact of Conflict* ... It seems to me that, because Polanski lived through it ... Polanski is also in the Andrzej Wajda's films when he was a teenager, he was working with Andrzej Wajda on those films, and famously go out of the ghetto. And he makes this film, *The Pianist* about 10 years ago, extraordinary powerful, and it feels as though there is an authenticity and that he understands that very thing that is the absence of all those things and horror and everything. There is feeling that, unlike a film like, say *The Fury*, which I watched, I was very concerned about as a film, *The Pianist* seems to have an authenticity to it and perhaps that comes through the lived experience which Polanski had, which he never talks about, but it feels very much as if it's up there on the screen...

Tim: it's an interesting notion; I mean, who can make a film about war? Who can make a film about the Holocaust? you know, ... is there a kind of authenticity of being there that gives you the sense of the kind of finer, almost imperceptible, hard to communicate notions and ideas; I think *The Pianist* is a powerful, brilliant film; there is that moment I think where the guy who manages to survive Nazi occupying the city is threatened to be killed during the point of Soviet liberation,

and that is one of those moments of classic ambiguities of this kind of final phase of the war. It seems like he survived and the war is over, and yet in some ways the war carries on, and that is a very strong narrative in a Polish case, across eastern Europe. If you look at it now, the Soviet liberation is looked at in a different way, post '89; it's not just liberation but also a new sort of occupation within the East; and that is very strong in eastern and central European filmmaking, working with that kind of ambiguous story.

Mark: there is that thing of revisiting the subject matter so Andrzej Wajda, whose *Ashes and Diamonds* we are screening and was made a few years after and is very much about that postwar experience but he revisits Katyn where the Polish elite were all killed by Russians and it was suppressed for a long time and then it became public; he famously made a film about it few years ago. And it feels like there are directors who've come through the Second World War, who do want to go back and revisit those stories as you said; from the eastern European perspective as well.

Tim: It's interesting; those wars are still very productive spaces culturally; they are revisited and revisited again; contemporary films are still going back to those moments. I mean there is not a sense, 1945, boom, end, there is a limited moment of cultural production and then it's over. Actually these are stories that people actually still return to again and again. I think, those two wars have emerged as defining events in European history and culture; and I think they remain potent cinematic experiences. Obviously there is vested interest in historians looking in at that period, but I think there is vested interest in everyone looking at that period, the artist also needs to be engaged because those are significant bigger, broader moments that generate broader questions about humanity; what it means to be human; that is the only thing that matter in some ways in asking those big questions.

Mark: The plan for the season is for the audience to be invited in to engage with what the artists and filmmakers have made about it so, is there a way in which film either at the time or by filmmakers reflecting back can be viewed as a history lesson?

Tim: to some extent; I think there are two histories operating within these films; one is the history of the event the film is talking about, so if it is First World War, Second World War. For me often the more interesting is the moment of the production of that film. That's one of the things I am interested in as a historian; I am not just interested in what happened during the wars; but also the ways the post-war generations sought meaning and uncovered stories; and I think that those stories say as much about the post-war world as they do about the war themselves. So I think that's one of the things that's really interested about cinema and war, is the way it actually, for me, cinema itself is historical, it needs to be historicized; that these films are made at particular moment, and they reflect the concerns of that moment as much as they tell us anything about the war themselves; so I think they are really valuable stories to get us thinking historically. I guess I am interested in that more generally as a historian. I am kind of interested in what as people who are going to watch these films are thinking not just how the war, but thinking about the moment that film reflecting on the war and also about our own sensibilities today as cinema audience. There are 3 histories at play; you got the history of now, today; the history of back then, which might be 1945-46, Vienna, you also get this moment when this film is being made, kind of concerns of the post-war world; and I think that is what I always find stimulating thinking as a historian is that kind of moving between those different moments in time; and sitting in the cinema and watching a movie kind of forces me to confront these 3 different moments in time and the kinds of things that matter for those different moments in time.

Mark: I think that's a really interesting point, because what does it means for an audience to sit today in Watershed or other cinema and watch **Ashes and Diamonds, Rome Open City, Passport to Pimlico**... Do you see it as a

historical document or do you see it as very much telling us something we can learn from, telling us something about the impact of war and how we may take that sensibility forward, because war is not going to go away, they become more technologicalised as well, and how do you connect those histories up?

Tim: and that gets to the question of this series, there'll be films about specific wars and very particular places, say Poland in the aftermath of the Second World War is a very particular place isn't it. One thing we could think about as audiences is to get ourselves inside the heads of what the Second World War and its aftermath mean in Poland or what it looks like in Vienna and the kind of ways the story is about the aftermath, but I think there is a place for this to be not only about particular, but also about the general, just about war, isn't it; it's about the war and conflict, it's about destruction and construction; it's about opportunity and threat in the aftermath of these events. So I think as audiences, these are some tough challenges that we are going to be working with, series of different historical moments, now, the moment when the film was made and the moment the film is talking about; and we are also be moving between the particular, Poland in the Second World War and just the general about the nature of loss; and the cinema I think often does that, I think art does that, doesn't it, that it's often about the particular, but it's also asking some really big questions, challenging us to draw those connections and to think about how this object of art, this film, that particular place and that particular moment connects with other places in the globe and also just our own experiences. To me that could be a very productive conversation about cinema – that sense of trying to move between the general and the particular and between different historical moments.

Mark: so much for discussion and lots of food for thought; we want you, the audience, to please contribute and take part in this ongoing conversation about cinema which starts January at Watershed and will be running until June. For more information on how to get involved for the films that we are screening as part of the series, please go to watershed.co.uk. That's all for this month.

Passport to Pimlico

<http://www.watershed.co.uk/whatson/6302/passport-to-pimlico/>

Rome Open City

<http://www.watershed.co.uk/whatson/6351/rome-open-city/>

Ashes and Diamonds

<http://www.watershed.co.uk/whatson/6341/ashes-and-diamonds/>

The Third Man

<http://www.watershed.co.uk/whatson/6360/the-third-man/>

Testament of Youth

<http://www.watershed.co.uk/whatson/6306/testament-of-youth/>