

POINT BREAK: AN APPRECIATION

Kathryn Bigelow's 1991 movie has become a cult classic, the internet is littered with quotes from it, and with reviews of it, though I only discovered this once I started writing this appreciation, and much of the below doubtless only re-iterates much that has already been written, but I don't care! 'I've started so I'll finish', as Bamber Gascoigne (who!!) used to say.

1. Scenario: In a brief opening scene we meet FBI agent Pappas (Gary Busey) and his tyro sidekick, Johnny Utah (Keanu Reeves). Cut to a bank robbery in progress. It turns out to be one of a string of robberies committed by a gang of four, known as the 'Ex-Presidents', so named because they wear rubber masks depicting ex-presidents Reagan, Carter, Nixon, & Johnson during the raids. There is much yelling, flourishing of guns, shooting into the air etc, but no-one ever gets hurt, they only take money from the tills, never the vault, and they are in and out in 90 seconds. Pappas suspects they may be surfers since the robberies coincide with the surfing season, and Utah is deputised to go undercover into the surfing community to suss out the gang. There he comes across a closely knit group of 4 guys led by one Bodhi (Patrick Swayze), and he begins to suspect that these are the gang, the other members being Roach, Grommet, and Nathaniel. He also meets Bodhi's girlfriend, Tyler (Lori Petty). To get in with the gang Utah must learn to surf; Tyler takes to him when she sees him struggling, and will end up teaching him, and in the process falling in love with him. And Bodhi and the group, initially suspicious, take to him when they recognise him as a former college football star who had to quit when he injured his knee, and the fact that he becomes a very good surfer in his own right leads to him becoming a fully-fledged member of the group. Then Utah discovers when and where the next robbery is to take place and he and Pappas stake it out. The robbers run, and a chase ensues, and Utah finds himself chasing 'Reagan' whom he recognises as Bodhi, and he can't bring himself to shoot him, but his cover is blown. Despite this Bodhi persuades Utah to go skydiving with them. Things fall apart, however, in a final robbery in which Utah is blackmailed to take part – Tyler has been kidnapped – but it is a robbery in which Bodhi breaks the rules and forces the chief cashier to open up the vault, and this time people do get killed, Grommet, an off duty cop, and a bank guard. Bodhi and the other two make their escape, and dragging Utah with them, make for a getaway plane, pursued by Pappas. In a shoot-out Pappas and Nathaniel get killed, and Roach gets wounded but Bodhi and Utah manage to get him onto the plane. Bodhi fixes Roach up with a parachute, and they both jump leaving Utah behind without a parachute, but he jumps anyway in the sure knowledge that Bodhi will rescue him and bring him safely down to the ground, which he does, but he again escapes Utah's clutches. In the course of the movie Bodhi has talked about wanting to surf what he calls a 50 year storm which he thinks will happen again this year in Australia, and there, having spent the intervening nine months chasing him around the world, Utah finally catches up with him, but lets him plunge into the storm knowing that he will never return.

2. Title: As for the title of the film, a point break is a type of surf break formed by 'a permanent obstruction that causes a wave to break, forming a barrelling wave that can be surfed, before it eventually collapses', to quote Wikipedia. And given the title of the film, then clearly surfing is its subject, and the spectacularly filmed surfing sequences that so dominate the film confirm this. It's a dangerous sport, requiring a deal of skill and a lot of dedication, dedication in some cases to the exclusion of all else: surfers following the sun and traveling the world in order to visit the

best beaches, each in their best season; and surfing becomes their lives: the problem of course being that making a living in more conventional ways, settling down and getting a permanent job that will tie you to a specific place, is out of the question. Hence the robberies.

3.. Man vs Nature: Surfing is at the heart of the movie, and thematically surfing is about the relationship between man and the natural world, man and the elements, specifically between man and the sea. The sea challenges man, (and I'm using the word 'man' quite deliberately, see next paragraph) and man has in the first instance to conquer it, and in the process a new unity is created: a higher, more primal unity, man living in a perfectly balanced symbiotic relationship with nature itself. Bodhi even uses the word spiritual, and describes the experience as 'a state of mind, a place where you lose yourself and find yourself'. And the fantastic images of the characters riding their boards within those huge curling tubes of water, to finally be birthed in the crashing tumble of water that explodes them back into the real world, perfectly express the exhilaration of their achievement. In the skydiving sequences a further element is added, that of the air itself, and a similarly symbiotic relationship is created, with the characters riding the air just as, earlier, they have ridden the sea, and in the process challenging gravity itself, and Bodhi again invokes the spiritual: 'It's the closest you'll ever get to God'. It is perhaps not irrelevant to note that bodhi is the Buddhist word for the enlightenment / awakening necessary for finding the path to Nirvana, essentially the Buddhist heaven, a place of ultimate bliss, free from all the negativities of everyday life, and for Bodhi himself it is the ultimate of the 50 year storm which will carry him to his death.

4. A Male World / A Bromance: My use of the word 'man' in the above is quite deliberate, the film concentrates on the men, it is the men who are shown surfing, it is the men who go skydiving. Tyler, the girl, is peripheral: yes, she can teach Utah to surf, but her role is to nourish him as a mother might a child, and her job is done when she releases him into what turns out to be the exclusively male world of surfers that he is destined to join, and thereafter the strongest relationships are between the men, most clearly expressed in the skydiving sequence where all five of them join hands together to form a circle of mutual support. And the strongest relationship of all is that between Bodhi and Utah which in the course of the movie grows to become a full blown bromance. It starts early on in when Bodhi recognises in Utah a kindred spirit who wants, like Bodhi himself, to push himself to the edge, and is confirmed when, in a narrative trope often used to express such relationships, Bodhi passes Tyler over to Utah 'Make yourself at home. What's mine is yours.' Bodhi has loved Tyler, Tyler now loves Utah. She is the conduit. She is the surrogate. And the strength of the relationship is such that, even when Bodhi discovers that Utah is an undercover FBI agent and the rest of the group want at the very least to throw him out, Bodhi argues them round and Utah can stay. Never mind that, after Bodhi has escaped the second time, Utah spends 9 months scouring the beaches of the world in order to try to find him. Is the relationship physical? Well we do see them rolling together in the surf during an improvised football game early on in the movie; and in the final sky dive, when Utah has dropped without a parachute, he clings to Bodhi in a tight embrace as they plummet to earth, and indeed, once on the ground they end up together under the cover of Bodhi's parachute. Such images are suggestive, but little else.

5. Men / Boys: Another feature of this particular all male group is that the men in it have no family responsibilities, nor do they desire them. As I noted above, if, in our conventional

western culture, maturity in men requires that they should settle down, get a job, preferably a permanent one, and start a family, then by that definition these men have not reached full maturity. They are still boys at heart, living in the pursuit of the now rather than planning for a future. Surfing itself is a dangerous activity, surfers can get killed, but these surfers are willing to take the risk. 'If you want the ultimate you've got to be willing to pay the ultimate price,' Bodhi says at one point, a comment followed up by one of the others: 'Hell, I ain't going to live to see 30!'

6. Carnival: It is no accident that the men wear carnival masks when they rob the banks, and there is a strand of the carnivalesque that runs through the movie as a whole which is very much related to the above. Carnival too is about living in the now, about challenging the norms of society, about undermining the power and authority of the state, and while carnivals are generally speaking temporary, lasting only a couple of days or so, a brief release from the pressures of everyday living, these characters have turned it into a way of life. The FBI in the person of Utah needs to arrest them because they have been robbing banks, but it makes no odds, they are beyond the law: It was never about robbing banks, 'it was about us against the system', 'We can make our own rules, why be a servant to the law when you can be its master'. And the wearing of the presidential masks gives the whole thing a political nudge too: 'We are the Ex-Presidents - - - we've been screwing you for years.'

7. The Breaking Point: But even in the most escapist of movies it can't last for ever, and retrospectively things start to go downhill as soon as Utah's cover is blown. For Bodhi all that the revelation does is up the stakes of the game, but the others take it more seriously – 'the only person this is a game to is you - - - this is serious shit and I am scared.' And from then on psychologically Bodhi is out on his own, dreaming of that ultimate surfing experience, riding that 50 year storm, even paying the ultimate price if necessary. And once on his own he starts to break the rules, most crucially in the final robbery when he breaks the 'in and out in 90 seconds' rule and decides to go for the vault, and thus people get killed: one of the gang, an off duty cop, a bank guard and during the getaway, Pappas and a second member of the gang. And taking a step back conceptually one might note that so long as they stick to robbing the small fry they're fine, but when they rob the vault, they're taking on the big guys – never advisable!

8. And all those birthing metaphors? How about the 9 months that Utah spends chasing Bodhi, at the end of which he delivers him into the all-encompassing sea itself.

9. And me? Well, as you might gather, I thoroughly enjoy the movie, and it has been a real pleasure writing about it.

© Charles Sarland 2023