



## Movie Club

### Casablanca (1942)

1. The film is very much a product of its time, yet has managed to endure in popularity. Based on the play *Everybody Comes to Rick's*, it was read and greenlighted shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbour. (Ebert, Roger. Audio Commentary. *Casablanca*. Dir. Michael Curtiz, Perf. Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman, Paul Henreid. 2012. Turner Entertainment Co. and Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.) In subsequent rewrites it had “almost no resemblance” to the original, but maintained its anti-isolationist theme that struck a chord with Warner Brothers after the bombing. (Davis, J.H., [“Still the Same Old Story’: The Refusal of Time to Go By in Casablanca”](#), *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 18.2 [1990]: 122-127; p.123.) Although a call for America to get involved in the war, it was released about a year after the U.S. entered the war. Where it differed from other films dealing with the war is that it “has little of the propaganda associated with films made during the war” and that the emphasis was “not on German atrocities of inherent evil”, where even the main antagonist, Major Strasser, “is entertaining in a verminous way.” ([ibid](#), p.123-124) This explains why the film does not alienate later audiences, but does not explain why it has endured. Some have speculated that the film is best described as a cult movie, where it provides:

*a completely furnished world, so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were part of the beliefs of a sect, a private world of their own, a world about which one can play puzzle games and trivia contests, and whose adepts recognize each other through a common competence.*

(Eco, U., [“Casablanca’: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage”](#), *SubStance*, Vol. 14, No.2 Issue 47: In Search of Eco’s Rose, 1085, pp. 3-12; p.3).

But even more than that is the film’s resonance as a love story and its achievement as great craft (even if not great ‘art’), made most apparent by its writing. (Davis, [“Still the Same Old Story”](#), p.122.). What about the film gives it longevity with audiences? Do the facets of its time and its politics enrich or hinder the film, or are these not even noticeable? Both Eco ([“Casablanca’: Cult Movies and Interextual Collage”](#), p.3) and Davis ([“Still the Same Old Story”](#), p.122) describe *Casablanca* as being well crafted but not being great ‘art’. Do you agree with this description? How useful or relevant is such a demarcation?

2. On the one hand the film seems to take a cynical view of both nationalism and cosmopolitanism made clear with Rick’s response to the question of his nationality as simply, “I am a drunkard”. It could be read as both the danger of prescribing nationalism as well as the linking of cosmopolitanism with debauchery (Brence, [“The Unbearable Lightness](#)

[of Casablanca: In Defense of a Committed Cosmopolitanism](#)", *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, Vol. 28, No. 4 [2014], pp. 422-437; p. 423). But ultimately the film reinforces the need to take allegiance (it is, after all, a propaganda film).

*Casablanca, however more artful it may be, cannot be excluded from the ranks of the large numbers of Hollywood movies of the time, most now forgotten, that functioned as overt propaganda, providing justifications for American involvement in the war and for the enormous sacrifices that involvement would almost certainly require from the American people. (ibid, p. 423)*

While the film overcomes its origins and has become a favourite among film goers, the original idea of the film, making a case against US isolationism, is nonetheless a central theme, although entwined with Rick's personal life. Rick, we are told twice in the film, is at heart an idealist, fighting against the fascists in Spain and Ethiopia, both of which eventually fell to fascist forces. With the final straw of Ilse's leaving him, Rick becomes a full cynic, asserting forcefully that he sticks his "neck out for nobody" and he is "the only cause [he is] fighting for", as well as questioning Laszlo's dedication. Rick is faced with the questions he seems to tackle in his actions and changing perspectives as the film progresses. These questions are surmised by Brence:

*What sense, after all, is there in maintaining judgments of relative worth, nurturing loyalties, and entering into commitments, none of which are ultimately sustained by the world? What is the point of continually throwing oneself against a reputed evil that repeatedly triumphs anyway? Why even identify it as evil? (ibid, p.426)*

Add to this the fact that the film, although much admired for its love story, "does not present a proper love story at all, or not one in which the supremacy of romantic love is ultimately affirmed, at any rate." (ibid, p.423). Is any of the films look at nationalism, cosmopolitanism, isolationism heavy handed? How does the film entwine Rick's personal life with the public struggle? Is this effective or overblown? Do you even see the film within the political nationalism/cosmopolitanism described by Brence, or is the sole interest in Rick and Ilse?

3. Music plays a vital role in the film. One scene where this is most prevalent, and speaks heavily to the film's propagandist origins, is the scene where, as the Germans sing "Die Wacht am Rhein", they are energetically, and emotionally, drowned out by the patrons of Rick's singing the "Marseillaise". The second, which features throughout the film, is the song shared by Rick and Ilse: "As Time Goes By". Where the former is a "project of public pedagogy" that reinforces "a sense of identification and solidarity between the viewing audience and the crowd of exiles and refugees", the latter works to "engineer an equally necessary related project of collective restoration." (Anderson, P.A., "[The World Heard: Casablanca and the Music of War](#)", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 32, No. 3 [Spring 2006], pp. 482-515; p.485) Although seeming to deal with two different aspects (the contrast of "romantic song about how 'the world will always welcome lovers' and a national anthem forged in a revolutionary moment") it is this "conflict that gives Casablanca its dramatic shape, the rift

between Rick's private and public desires." ([ibid](#), p. 485). How effective, and affecting, did you find the use of the music in the film? Which of the two scenes had a greater impact either on you personally or in the film as a whole? If you found the question of the linking of personal and political element of the film problematic (as with [Brence](#) in question 2), does the use of music help intertwine these two elements more effectively, to give "Casablanca its dramatic shape"?

4. Who does Ilse truly love? What do we make of Ilse's role? She is given two options, either be Rick's woman or Laszlo's. At no point is it considered that she may be independent of either of these. In the end she submits not to her feelings for Rick, but to his informing her what she will be doing: i.e. going with Laszlo. In part this was due to the Production Code Administration, which made it unacceptable for Ilse, a married woman, to leave with anyone other than her husband. (Ebert, Audio Commentary, *Casablanca*) Ebert also pointed out that were Ilse to follow her heart and go with Rick, the film would be significantly less compelling, perhaps (in relation to question 2) because it would provide a mere rehash of the Hollywood love story. Ebert further points out that there is no reason why Rick, and even Renault, could not join Laszlo and Ilse on the plane out of *Casablanca*, with Rick's supposed inability to return to America being self-imposed. (Brence, "[The Unbearable Lightness of Casablanca](#)", p.428) Are these characters (Ilse and Rick) unable to fulfil their own happiness purely out of narrative need or Production Code Administration interference? How would the film be different if both fulfilled their desires? How would this have impacted on the longevity of the film?
5. *Casablanca* is often compared with [Citizen Kane](#) as some of the best films ever, certainly from Hollywood. But this provides an interesting comparison. Although both were made in Hollywood, *Citizen Kane* is the antithesis of the Hollywood studio system that was operating at the time. It didn't fit any genre (in fact it combined several), was written (largely), produced, directed and starred the same man (Orson Welles) who was given free reign with making the film. It was an auteur film. *Casablanca* on the other hand is different. Ebert points out that although it was an "A-list" film, "no one making 'Casablanca' thought they were making a great movie." (Ebert, R. [September 15, 1996] "[Casablanca \[Review\]](#)") In fact:

*It was made on a tight budget and released with small expectations. Everyone involved in the film had been, and would be, in dozens of other films made under similar circumstances, and the greatness of "Casablanca" was largely the result of happy chance.*

This places it firmly within standard Hollywood production conventions. What differences has the different natures of the productions created in the films? Which do you prefer? Why?