

Analyzing the film casablanca

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Casablanca (1942)

Casablanca is a romantic drama about an American nightclub owner, Rick Blaine, living in Casablanca in French Morocco in the early days of WWII. When he finds himself with two passes that allow travel to the US, and with his ex-lover, Ilsa, and her wanted, resistance-leader husband at his doorstep, Rick must make a hard decision about whether to reclaim and run off with his lost love, or put his own desires aside to support the Allied cause he's been ambivalent toward for years.

Ah, the legendary Casablanca: a film I've been saving, along with Citizen Kane, until the end of our quarter as to give the greatest chance for my best possible analysis. Save for The Wizard of Oz, this is the oldest movie I've seen by over a decade, and the very next oldest after that is still a decade newer. Though I'm hardly a "fan" of old-timey movies, and romantic dramas aren't even close to my preferred genre, I can respect this classic film as the cinematic milestone it is. Anyway, I was able to pick up on a number of techniques used, but I feel I could provide better and deeper analysis if I was more knowledgeable about the film's setting, particularly Vichy France. Regardless, I was able to get a number of notes on techniques ranging from narration to editing, and plenty in between.

At the film's opening, omniscient narration is provided by a delightfully 1940's-sounding, transatlantic-style man. The narrator provides very helpful background information on the film's setting of Casablanca, Morocco. The third-person narration deducts from the film's verisimilitude initially, but the interruption is quickly forgotten, and the information is greatly appreciated.

A master scene is used to provide a view of the specific setting in which the majority of the film takes place, Rick's bar. Several short shots around the bar illustrate the nature of Casablanca, with Nazis, Frenchmen, refugees from all across Europe, and seedy locals trying to scam whoever possible. Several angles of the bar are seen, along with its exterior, which helps place later scenes into relevant context.

The character of Rick Blaine is largely mired in mystery for the first part of the film. He's not seen until a number of scenes in, and even when he is, it's in a slow and somewhat dramatic way. His past is kept secret, and no one really knows why he's in Casablanca. This mystery is deconstructed throughout the film, especially during the France flashback.

I'm more or less guessing here, but I feel as if flashback wasn't as typically used in old movies as it is today. Flashback is fundamentally nonlinear in nature, which I do know conflicts with very early film, so it stands to reason it may have still been relatively rare by the early 40s. Either way, flashback is used in conjunction with montage to quickly and efficiently display the love that Rick and Ilsa shared in France in the time before its occupation.

When the montage (but not flashback) ends, the Nazis are beginning to enter France. Very harsh, non-diegetic music is played as shots of Germany convoys entering French soil are shown, helping cast the German Nazis as the enemy (as if this was needed). However, the Nazis aren't just the enemy because of their political actions, but because they signaled the end of Rick and Ilsa's time together in Paris.

Another significant use of sound/music is in the recurrence of the song "As Time Goes By." This song clearly carries great importance to Rick and Ilsa, and its significance to them can be appreciated by the audience as well. It is nostalgic to them, but in a bittersweet way; a reminder of what was, but also a reminder of what no longer is. The song is a literary symbol, but seeing as how it is also a piece of audio in a film, it is also part of the sound design.

At the dramatic scene at the train station when Rick is stood up by Ilsa, it is, of course, raining. Such tragedy would surely be incompletely expressed without the weather to accompany it. It would feel so sad if it was a delightfully balmy evening on which he was abandoned, and the fact that the weather, an unchangeable force of nature, essentially sympathized with Rick's plight helps convey and exaggerate just how sad the situation is.

One of my favorite scenes in Casablanca (aside from actually seeing the film's now-legendary quotes in context) is the musical battle between France and Germany that takes place in Rick's bar. This great scene not only captures the tension of the period, but also, as is pointed out by characters in the story, serves to showcase Victor Laszlo's ability to rally people. This scene was an important one in the development of Laszlo's character, and also important to illustrating the already-present but still-brewing animosity of the Allied countries against the Axis. All of this is managed with a single, simple scene, and with stellar sound design.