

# Casablanca cinematography essay



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Casablanca Cinematography The film *Casablanca* directed by Michael Curtiz and released in 1943—at the height of World War II—is set in December 1941 in Casablanca, French Morocco.

It is a time of escalating power of the Nazi party, which attempted to gain control of most parts of the world starting with Europe and Northern Africa. As a result of the ascending power of the Nazis and anti-German sentiments, many Europeans were desperate to flee their homes. Because Casablanca was not yet taken over by the Germans due to its distance from Europe, it served as the holding place or middle ground for those trying to escape Europe, assuming they could get there. People would travel from Europe to Casablanca in hopes of receiving letters of transit or exit visas—the only official documents that permitted one to leave the country—in order to get to Lisbon, Portugal and then to the United States. Visitors and residence of Casablanca frequent Rick's Cafe Americain, a place where they can drink, socialize, gamble, and enjoy music without the fear of German invasion. Rick and his cafe are symbolic of neutral territory, reminiscent of the United States at that time.

Using World War II as its back drop, the film tells the story of an accidental love triangle which includes Rick Blaine, his lover Ilsa Lund, and her husband Victor Laszlo, a proud opposer of the Nazi regime. The film uses music, cinematography, and lighting to emphasize and dramatize the love, hate, and neutrality in the story. The musical score is the driving force behind the progression of the film. In fact, music or the absence of music is a major indicator of foreshadowing, characterization, and conveyance of important

messages. Most of the film is shot in Rick's Cafe Americain, where Sam, the piano player, and other musicians are the center of attention.

In order to accommodate the different moods and interactions in the scenes, a wide range and variety of music is employed, such as patriotic music, classical-romantic music, big band/nightclub music, swing, and opera. When Victor and Ilsa first arrive at Rick's Cafe in hopes of attaining letters of transport, the background music playing is classical piano. After being greeted by Captain Renault, a member of the police force in Casablanca, Victor and Ilsa sit at a cafe table, and Major Strasser of the Third Reich approaches the table. When the Major arrives at their table, the classical piano music pauses and the Major confronts Victor about "some matters arising from your [Victor's] presence on French soil" (Casablanca).

When Major Strasser walks away the music resumes, but this time rather than being classical piano, the music is opera, connoting tragedy, which is the sense the audience acquires not only because of the choice of music but also because of the juxtaposing of shots in that scene. As the opera singer performs, the camera cuts from her, to Major Strasser and Captain Renault vigilantly watching Victor, and then to a close-up of the expression of fear on Ilsa's face, as she whispers to Victor, "Be careful." These short, intentional clips are meant to create a feeling of impending danger. In a scene in Rick's office, Victor attempts to purchase the letters of transport from Rick, but is denied. During this interaction Victor hears the German officials serenading the restaurant goers with patriotic music—the German national anthem.

As a reaction to the propaganda of the German officials, Victor storms out of Rick's office to re-enter Rick's Cafe. The singing of the German national anthem represents the idea that Victor has been defeated by Germany due to his inability to purchase the letters of transport. But instead of giving up and acquiescing with defeat, Victor stands tall and proceeds to conduct the French cafe goers in the Marseilles. Victor's goal is to override the German national anthem with the Marseilles.

The music of the opposing national anthems connotes the reality of the turmoil between Germany and France at the time. The patriotic music riles up the French crowd and the enthusiasm displayed by the crowd allows the audience to feel each participant's loyalty to France. The battle of the anthems serves as a small victory for anti-Germans, yet it feels empowering. While music is essential to many scenes in the film, the absence of music in some scenes is powerful. The scenes that are not accompanied by music, are ones in which important information is being exchanged between characters and being revealed to the audience.

In some scenes the information is historical and in some it is vital to the plot. In one scene that does not include music the man who murdered and stole letters of transport from German couriers confesses to Rick and requests that Rick hold on to the letters for him. The film follows the journey of the letters of transport, therefore it is crucial for the audience to hear and witness the trajectory of the letters before and after they reach Rick. Music would detract from the importance of the exchange of information in the scene. Yet, despite the lack of music in this scene, Rick hides the letters of

transport in the piano, confirming the importance of the piano and its music in the film.

Another scene that is shot without music occurs when Captain Renault informs Rick that Victor is traveling to Casablanca with his wife and will attempt to purchase an exit visa. The Captain warns Rick not to assist Victor in any way. Captain Renault reveals to Rick that he is aware that in the past Rick has assisted the “underdog” and warns him to resist temptation to help Victor. By not including music in this scene the director ensures that the audience focuses on the Captain’s remarks because they provide insight into Rick’s personality while also giving the audience a notion of the direction the film will take. Lighting is another key aspect in analyzing cinematography. Some form of light—lamps, chandeliers, wall sconces, headlights, plane lights, spotlights—is present in almost every scene.

These lights are used to highlight and focus on specific actions and interactions of characters within the scenes, while they are also used to convey and underscore characters’ feelings and moods. Furthermore, the lighting often creates shadows, making things appear larger than they truly are. In a scene in Rick’s office when Captain Renault and Rick are discussing an impending arrest in Rick’s Cafe, Rick removes money from his safe. As Rick opens his safe, he is caught in a shadow; the shadow frames him as the center figure in the scene. The audience sees Rick as a larger than life character, an ambiguous character whose representation—his morality, humanity, political position—is thus far undefined. The importance of lighting is also evident when Rick and Sam sit in his office after Rick’s Cafe is closed for the night.

He reminisces about “ happy” times when he first met Ilsa in Paris and fell in love with her. In the sequences in Paris, there is more natural light than there is in any other scene in the film. The picture is also clearer—crisp and direct, with no intervening factors (smoke, fog)—in this sequence than it is in any other. Even when Rick smokes, there is not a wall of smoke dividing the characters and the audience.

However, the ending of the Paris sequence is in direct contrast beginning. The end illustrates the notion of doom that is the reality; the war is, in actuality, underway, and fleeing Europe is a necessity. It is dark and rainy outside when Rick leaves Paris unaccompanied by Ilsa, despite his expectation to have met her at the train station. The nature of the culmination of the sequence represents Rick’s inner feelings; he is depressed and heading alone for the unknown because he has lost the love of his life and is escaping the Gestapo. As Rick boards the train in Paris headed for Marsielle, he and the subsequent scenes are viewed through smoke and fog, creating a haze-like texture.

The hazy effect creates a feeling of ambiguity, uncertainty, and doom. When Victor and Ilsa first enter Rick’s Cafe, there is a cloud of smoke around Sam. The cloud of smoke represents a secret Sam holds. He recognizes Ilsa from Paris as the woman who broke Rick’s heart, therefore, when Ilsa enters Rick’s Cafe, Sam sees trouble, heartbreak, and pain for his beloved boss, Rick. However, as the hero of the film, Rick selflessly puts his heartbreak aside in an effort to save Ilsa and her husband from the Nazi party.

Rick arranges for Victor and Ilsa to arrive at the airport in order to escape Casablanca as he gives up the letters of transport; it is a rainy and foggy night. However, it is unclear to the audience who is actually leaving on the plane with Ilsa, and the fog along with the lighting and the shadows aid in the conveyance of ambiguity. As Victor and Ilsa walk toward the plane, they disappear into the fog that surrounds the plane. The plane departs and is almost immediately lost in the fog; the only part of the plane visible to the audience is the taillight.

In this scene the images of the characters in the forefront are clear and sharp, while the images of the surroundings in the background—symbolizing the future because it is not immediately tangible—are hazy. The haziness is meant to emphasize the uncertainty of things to come regarding the individual characters, love, the fate of the world and Nazi control. Questions pop up in the audiences' minds: what will happen to Victor and Ilsa? Will they be able to escape the Nazis? What will come of Rick since he did not get on the plane? How will the relationship between Rick and Captain Renault develop? Who will be charged with the murder of Major Strasser? The fog aids in raising these questions and creating a lust for their answers. The cinematographer of Casablanca