

Last Action Hero?: *Casablanca*'s Cult Film Propaganda Strategy

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Abstract

Casablanca has been described as both a masterwork of propaganda and as a chaotic production that only accidentally became a cult classic. Several myths about behind-the-scenes problems imply that its look and tone, which shift radically from scene to scene, were the result of a rushed and hectic production process. I argue, on the other hand, that the rapid and jarring generic shifts the movie deploys are a means of extending its anti-isolationist political message. The film requires audience members to draw upon not only their knowledge of the situation abroad (which might be scant) but also upon their knowledge of filmic conventions, particularly of other recent releases from the Warner Bros. Studios, to imagine multiple potential outcomes for the film's love story; and, by extension, the battle against the Axis forces. Ultimately, a 'happy ending' and an Allied victory are only possible if Rick (Humphrey Bogart) rejects the cynicism of the *film noir* and embraces the role of the romantic hero. Film fans are able to intuitively grasp this notion not because they have a nuanced understanding of international affairs, but because they may have nuanced meta-understanding of film conventions and of Hollywood as a meaning-making machine.

Introduction

Casablanca (Dir. Michael Curtiz, 1942) has been the subject of two opposing sets of critical discourses over the years. The first focuses on its development as a tool to help shape public opinion on the United States' entry into World War II. The other explains its eclectic visual and narrative style(s) as a failure on the part of the filmmakers to decide on a single, consistent artistic vision. Critics in this second camp cite several popular myths about the production history of the film as evidence of their thesis, which suggest that it feels disjointed because its plot was still being charted by a frantic cadre of writers well after shooting began (Scharnhorst 2005: 167). For Andrew Sarris, the film is the 'happiest of happy accidents', an unintentional success story in which everything fell into place through sheer luck rather than by design (1968: 176). Diana Paladino calls *Casablanca* a 'superposition of fictions and a mixture of genres. It is a pastiche. A dynamic, heterogeneous, and exuberant text, that builds its own imaginary universe using the base of

other texts (films, characters, genres) with different laws and different codes' (2002: 30). According to Umberto Eco, the writers unintentionally stumbled onto a hit in their panic to complete the picture (1985: 6). The result, according to this narrative of the production, was a messy and inconsistent 'hodgepodge' (Eco 1985: 3). Eco argues that the film was able to achieve a kind of inadvertent cult status¹ because it serves as a 'reunion' of filmic archetypes, writing, '*Casablanca* became a cult movie because it is not *one* movie. It is "movies"' (1985: 10-11, emphasis in original). It is all the pleasures of Hollywood wrapped up into a single delicious (if incoherent) bundle.

Indeed, according to Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik, 'as a rule' cult films 'blur and push the generic conventions they are supposed to respect' (2008: 2). As such, 'the consumption of cult cinema relies on continuous, intense participation and persistence' on the part of 'an active audience' (2008: 4). In the case of *Casablanca*, audiences must borrow

from—or as Michel de Certeau (1984) and later Henry Jenkins (1992) might say, poach from—their mental database of other Hollywood movies (particularly those from the Warner Bros. Studios) to follow the film's twists and turns. At any given point during the movie, the audience might be asked to change their point of view regarding a character or an event by placing it into a different generic context. The film harnesses the power of Hollywood in service of its propagandistic mission, by leading the audience to use their filmic knowledge to make (and then later re-evaluate) predictions about what kind of person Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) is, who he used to be, and what he might decide to do. And by extension, they are encouraged to ask the same questions about themselves and about the United States. In other words, Curtiz manipulates his audience by shifting generic codes mid-film, moving his cast through multiple kinds of stories (each with their own unique visual calling cards, character archetypes, and stock plot devices) to demonstrate the logical conclusions that will result from various political philosophies such as isolationism and interventionism. The main character and primary point of identification, Rick, is set up as the film's controlling figure—the one through which the narrative is focalised—and so his philosophy shapes how the world looks to the audience. For example, when we first meet Rick he sees the world through a cynical lens, and the movie's visuals appear to support his opinion in its *film noir* aesthetic. At the film's conclusion, however, Rick rediscovers his fighting-spirit and his sense of justice, as the film transforms into a wartime adventure complete with gun battles and noble sacrifices for country and cause.

The constantly varying look and feel of the film visually reinforces its propagandistic aims. Just as the world of the film reshapes itself around the perspective of its main character, Rick, the film suggests that the collective outlook held by the citizens of the United States has the power to transform the rest of world. Americans might choose to support intervention on behalf of their European Allies, thereby enabling the Allies to hope that the Nazis might be defeated, or they might choose to withdraw their support for the war, refusing to 'stick their neck out'

for the rest of the free world. In either case, the film posits, the choice is theirs to make. The story of the rest of the world is their story to shape, much like *Casablanca* is ultimately a story about Rick, and a story whose telling is shaped by him.

A Fight for Love and Glory: *Casablanca* as Wartime Propaganda

By 1942, the year of *Casablanca's* release, the United States had already officially joined the war, but the American public was anything but unified behind the cause. This was a time in which

millions of Americans were unable to explain the reasons for the United States' intervention in World War II beyond the shocking fact of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Americans knew who they were fighting but could not explain why they were fighting (Nachbar 2000: 5).

In fact, a Gallup poll taken during the first year of the war reported that 96% of Americans were in favour of taking a neutral stance in the conflict (Tunc 2007).

In order to rehabilitate the public's perception of the conflict, Hollywood was 'drafted' into the war effort by the newly created Office of War Information (Raskin 1990). Between 1942 and 1945, Hollywood cranked out 500 war-related features including Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series (1942-1945), which contained contributions from *Casablanca* screen-writers Julius and Philip Epstein (Tunc 2007). *Casablanca* itself fulfils a propagandistic purpose, as

a political allegory, with Rick as President Roosevelt (casa blanca is Spanish for 'white house'), a man who gambles on the odds of going to war until circumstances and his own submerged nobility force him to close his casino (read: partisan politics) and commit himself—first by financing the Side of Right and then by fighting for it. The time of the film's action (December 1941) adds credence to this view, as does the irrelevant fact that, two months after *Casablanca* opened, Roosevelt (Rick) and Prime Minister Winston Churchill (Lazlo) met for a war conference in *Casablanca* (Corliss 1973: 186-187).

The allegory is further bolstered by the decision to

use an international cast. Bogart, of course, is American; Ingrid Bergman, Swedish; Conrad Veidt, German; Paul Heinreid, Austrian; and Claude Rains and Sydney Greenstreet, British. Even bit players like Yvonne, Rick's jilted paramour, was played by a French refugee named Madeleine Lebeau, while Berger, Lazlo's contact inside La Résistance was played by a Canadian named John Qualen (Tunc 2007). Producer Hal Willis assigned the feature one of the motifs suggested by the Office of War Information; 'United Nations—Conquered Nations' was a theme designed to 'illustrate that personal desires must be subordinated to the task of defeating fascism' (Tunc 2007). As such, the film asked its audience to consider making sacrifices of its own, a message which was echoed by official government requests that families give up everything from gasoline to food stuffs to their sons and daughters, to support the war effort (Nachbar 2000: 10-11).

It's Still the Same Old Story: *Casablanca* as *Film Noir*

However, in many ways *Casablanca* is a strange vehicle for a patriotic war story. This is because one of the most marked visual styles employed by the film is that of the *film noir*. *Noir* was a popular and influential style in 1942, born out of a unique combination of sociological and aesthetic inspirations including a new awareness and acceptance of violence in media arising from the coverage of the World Wars (Borde and Chaumeton 2002: 21). Aesthetically, *noir* speaks to the convergence of the visual style of the European cinema with the prose style of the hard-boiled crime novel (Borde and Chaumeton 2002: 15, 22). In fact, the term '*noir*' comes from the French name for hard-boiled crime fiction, '*série noir*' (Krutnik 1991: 15). 20% of the *noir* films made from 1941 to 1948 were direct adaptations of hard-boiled novels or short stories (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985: 79).

Jans B. Wagner offers the following succinct definition of the genre:

Films noirs are crime films, mostly black-and-white, made in Hollywood in the 1940s and 1950s, often featuring a hard-boiled male and a beautiful, duplicitous female protagonist, usually set in urban surroundings. The occasional use of complex narrative structures and dramatic

visual effects, including night-for-night photography, low-key lighting, and bizarre camera angles, also appear (2005: 13-14).

The effect of this dark and chaotic visual style, according to Richard Martin, is to create 'a body of work which offered a bleak and, to a certain degree, subversive worldview that contrasted starkly with the self-promoting American myths that characterized many... Hollywood films' (1999: 2). Similarly, James Naremore suggests that *noir* is 'somewhat "anti-American" or at least ambivalent about modernity and progress' (1998: 45). In the *film noir*, 'if there are policemen, they're of dubious character.... Or at least they allow themselves to get caught up in the machinery of crime' (Borde and Chaumeton 2002: 7). Justice does not usually win out in these films, a fact that sets the genre apart from what might be considered as typical Hollywood fare.

Tom Conley adds another signature characteristic to the list: an emphasis on immobility, which leaves characters and viewers feeling trapped, both physically and psychologically (1987: 350). Conley writes,

Outside space or light tends to be evoked but closed off or set apart by narrative immobilized in no-exit situations. Immobility, to be sure, grounds the cruel theater of noir. The present is confining, artificial, cast under dim three-point lighting fragmenting the figure of the characters. The outside is seen across orders of Venetian blinds. Actors stare through their slits, as if disheartened avatars of the nineteenth-century novel and painting... They are striated by the shadows of light cutting their bodies into lines (1987: 350).

Characters within a *film noir* are marked by the shadowy world that they inhabit, marked by the shadows that are thrown upon their very bodies. They find themselves caught in stale, claustrophobic environments, unable to reach for the freedom that is represented by the bright, open outdoor spaces that exist just out of their reach. Janey Place and Lowell Peterson expand this idea, arguing:

The 'dark mirror' of the film noir creates a visually unstable environment in which no character

has a firm moral base from which he can confidently operate. All attempts to find safety or security are undercut.... Right and wrong become relative, subject to the same distortions and disruptions created in the lighting and camera work. Moral values, like identities that pass in and out of shadow, are constantly shifting and must be redefined at every turn (1996: 69).

Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton write that the 'identifying sign' of *noir* is 'the moral ambivalence, criminal violence, and contradictory complexity of the situations and motives' which 'combine to give the public a shared feeling of anguish or insecurity.... The vocation of *film noir* has been to create a specific state of malaise' (2002: 13).

Gary Scharnhorst (2005) argues that *Casablanca* mobilises enough of these elements to be classified as a *film noir*. One strong argument for this classification is the casting of Humphrey Bogart in the leading role. Bogart was a *noir* fixture, starring in such standards as *The Maltese Falcon* (Dir. John Huston, 1941), *High Sierra* (Dir. Raoul Walsh, 1941), and, not long after *Casablanca*, the *noir* masterpiece, *The Big Sleep* (Dir. Howard Hawks, 1946), all of which were Warner Bros. releases. In fact, he was so strongly associated with the genre that the pressbook advertisements for *The Maltese Falcon* described Bogart himself and not his character, Sam Spade, as a 'killer' (Miller 1994: 195). *Casablanca* also evoked *The Maltese Falcon* directly by pairing Bogart with two of his co-stars from that film, Peter Lorre and Sydney Greenstreet.

However, the film's affiliation with *noir* does not stop with its stars. *Casablanca* is set almost entirely at night (Scharnhorst 2005: 162), and most its scenes take place in the same cramped, crowded, smoky, shadowy interior spaces that form a calling card of the genre. Low-key lighting is used extensively. Also, the opening voice-over of the film describes the city of Casablanca as a place of stagnation and immobility, where people rot away while seeking the papers that will allow them to flee to America; a place where refugees 'wait... and wait... and wait... and wait' (*Casablanca*). The city is a 'shadowy maze' (*Casablanca*), located on the 'dark continent' of Africa (Tunc 2007); a den of thieves and a 'monstrous marketplace' in which 'every body has its price, every

relationship is a transaction, visas are the medium of exchange, and competition is literally cutthroat' (Scharnhorst 2005: 162-163). In *Casablanca* there is no such thing as right and wrong, because morality itself has been replaced by the survival of the fittest. There are 'vultures everywhere' (*Casablanca*), waiting to prey upon the innocent and the unwary.

One way in which the trade in human beings first mentioned by Signor Ferrari (Sydney Greenstreet) manifests itself is in the sexual negotiations undertaken between Rick and Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman). The Production Code Administration insisted that this seedy side of *Casablanca* be downplayed somewhat, by demanding that sexually suggestive dialogue be cut. For example, this line, which was spoken by a young woman to a lecherous older man, wound up on the cutting room floor: 'It used to take a villa at Cannes or at the very least a string of pearls. Now all I ask is an exit visa' (Harmetz 1992: 163-165). Nevertheless, more than a hint of the existence of a sexual black market remains within the film. Several women, from the brash young Yvonne (Madeleine Lebeau), the bold yet demure Bulgarian refugee Anina Brandel (Joy Page), to our heroine, Ilsa, attempt to use their sexuality as coin to buy their freedom.

Scharnhorst argues convincingly that Rick and Ilsa's supposedly romantic reunion is nothing more than a sexual negotiation. Note that Ilsa is dismissive of Rick before she learns that he is in possession of the exit visas that her husband needs to flee to the United States. Also, Ilsa seems to have come to terms with the idea that she might be forced to sleep with her former flame before she arrives at Rick's Café Américain to ask him for the papers. Before she heads over, she worriedly (and vaguely) asks Victor, 'Whatever I do will you believe that I, that I...'. She is unable to complete her thought, but he reassures her that he will love her no matter what, and so Ilsa goes to Rick's with a mind to do anything to obtain the visas. Both characters speak in the language of commerce, with Ilsa telling Rick, 'You can ask any price you want', and Rick warning Ilsa that to bring up their time together in Paris would be 'poor salesmanship' (Scharnhorst 2005: 166). Ilsa even goes so far as to momentarily step into the shoes of the *femme fatale* when she pulls a gun on Rick and demands the

papers. She only relents because Rick claims that he keeps the letters with him in the pocket of his jacket, and thus may become damaged if she fires at him. When it becomes clear that neither money nor violence will foot the bill, Ilsa finally agrees to the terms that Rick has set by falling into his arms and telling him that she loves him. And lest anyone doubt what happens between them, we are treated with a fade-to-black; when we return, we see them smoking a post-coital cigarette (Scharnhorst 2005: 166). Ilsa has provided a nostalgic sexual fantasy in exchange for Rick's exit papers.

Scharnhorst is correct when he says that these scenes invoke the feeling, the atmosphere, the look, and the moral ambivalence of the *film noir*. In fact, these moments directly parallel several scenes from *The Maltese Falcon*, which means that Warner Bros. fans might have been prepared to read these scenes in this sordid way. Simply replace the letters of transit with the gilded statuette, and Ilsa Lund with the secretive and mysterious Brigid O'Shaughnessy, and one can find a very similar, if more direct, scene in *The Maltese Falcon*:

Sam Spade: What have you ever given me besides money? Have you ever given me any of your confidence? Any of the truth? Haven't you tried to buy my loyalty with money and nothing else?

Brigid O'Shaughnessy: What else is there I can buy you with?

Spade roughly grabs O'Shaughnessy's face with both hands and pulls her in for a kiss. O'Shaughnessy freezes in place and allows it, but as Spade pulls back, her face remains cold and she stares at him blankly.

And yet, the ending of *Casablanca*, with its message of hope and self-sacrifice, is seemingly opposed to the many of the key themes of the film noir. The pro-interventionist political message imbedded in Rick's sudden and heroic reversal upholds the moral code that noir typically upends. The movie transforms from a work of cynicism to a work of patriotism, from a rejection of the establishment to a propaganda piece. By finally 'sticking his neck out,' killing Strasser, and sending Ilsa off with Victor, Rick makes his

own sacrifice, giving up not only his comfortable position in *Casablanca* but also his love (for a second time, no less) in the name of the cause.

Or did he? If Scharnhorst's reading of Rick's reunion with Ilsa is to be believed, then giving up Ilsa is no sacrifice. The 'love' between them was nothing more than an exchange of goods. His choice to send both of them on together is merely the fulfilment of their bargain. Then again, Rick's passionate speech to Ilsa—his declaration that they 'will always have Paris'—as well as her obvious surprise and dismay at Rick's decision to stay behind, seem to indicate that there was something real between them.

A Kiss is Just a Kiss: *Casablanca* as Romantic Melodrama

How can we explain this abrupt shift? Scharnhorst believes that *Casablanca's* ending is an unfortunate compromise, a betrayal of the *noir* aesthetic made in the name of the war effort. He writes that the ending 'belongs to a different movie', and that Curtiz and his script writers 'sacrificed the dark voice of *film noir* to wartime propaganda' (2005: 168). However, there are other moments in the film besides the ending that also do not fit the mould of the film noir. For the most part, these moments revolve around the other male lead, Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid). How are we to explain them?

When *Casablanca* was first released, Henreid had just finished up working on the romantic melodrama *Now, Voyager* (Dir. Irving Rapper, 1942) alongside Betty Davis as Charlotte Vale, a spinster aunt who blossoms into a beautiful confident woman after falling in love with a married man and rejecting her cruel and, dare I say, dictatorial mother. *Casablanca's* own Claude Rains plays her psychiatrist, Dr. Jaquith. Like *Casablanca*, *Now, Voyager* ends with a moment of sacrifice as Charlotte agrees to maintain a platonic relationship with Henreid's Jeremiah 'Jerry' Durrance, in order to continue mentoring his daughter, Tina, who has also been abused by her mother, Jerry's wife. To continue her work with Tina and other girls like her, Charlotte must give up the illicit romance her heart desires.

While watching *Casablanca*, a Warner Bros. fan in 1942 may have noticed many visual similarities

between it and *Now, Voyager*, beyond their shared cast members. Jerry and Charlotte dress quite similarly to Victor and Ilsa, the former wearing a white tuxedo and the latter favouring broad-brimmed hats and jackets that mimic men's wear. Like Laszlo, Jerry credits his lady love with providing the inspiration that allows him to go on with his work as an architect. And, as mentioned above, the film ends with a sacrifice that reinforces the sanctity of marriage despite the desires of the two protagonists. These similarities suggest that Rick's assessment of Ilsa as a conniving *femme fatale* might be mistaken, that perhaps Ilsa is better viewed as a romantic heroine struggling against a tragic and unlucky fate. Indeed, though Rick often looks at Ilsa through a veil of darkness in the form of noir-ish shadows, her scenes with Laszlo typically depict her bathed in the glow of an angelic light. When we look at Ilsa through her husband's eyes, we see a different woman. We might even say that we find ourselves in a different movie.

We also know that Rick saw Ilsa this way too, once upon a time. During the flashback scenes depicting their time in Paris, Rick looked at the world through different eyes. These scenes are visually reminiscent of Charlotte and Jerry's courtship in *Now, Voyager*. They are brightly lit, take place during the day, and oftentimes outdoors. They emphasise the possibility of mobility via an automobile ride in front of a laughable green screen (a convention we see used in *Now, Voyager* as well. Rick and Ilsa even dance to the exact same song as Jerry and Charlotte when they are on their cruise in Brazil (Max Steiner composed the music for both films). Back in those innocent days, before the Nazis marched into Paris and before Ilsa left Rick to return to her husband's side, Rick saw himself as the romantic type. He was optimistic about a potential future with Ilsa, and since the film is focalised through his point of view, this glimpse of his former life looks like a romantic melodrama from the Warner Bros.' catalogue.

If, in these moments, *Casablanca* can be said to mirror *Now, Voyager*, then we can venture that audience members who were familiar with the latter might have begun to expect a similar ending to the former, one involving true love and noble sacrifice. At the same time, audience members who were

well acquainted with Bogart's previous roles playing gangsters, thugs, and morally ambiguous private detectives may expect an ending to the picture fraught with dirty double crosses and overlaid with hopelessness and dread. Might these duelling sets of expectations simply be the result of sloppy filmmaking as Eco et al. imply? Or might there be a method to Curtiz's madness?

A Tale of Do or Die: Love and Sacrifice

A close reading of these shifting markers suggests that, in some ways, the film recognises itself as a film, one whose characters are trying to determine its genre from within. Upon this reading, Rick becomes the central figure of the story of *Casablanca* in more ways than one. He is the character whose point of view dictates the shape of the world around him. He is both the film's protagonist and, in a sense, its director, dictating the 'rules' of the universe around him through his philosophical outlook. When we first meet Rick, he is cynical and dejected and so the world around him adapts to his expectations, taking on the look and the conventions of the film noir. And unless Rick changes his outlook, his world (our world) is doomed to remain one of darkness. No other character within the film has enough clout to make a lasting change to the film's genre (which is determined by Rick's focalising point of view), without his cooperation. Similarly, the film implies, if the United States does not change its outlook on world affairs, then Europe will fall to the Nazis, because, according to its own logic, no other European country has what it takes to oust them on their own.

Rick's nihilism is best expressed when he remarks to Renault 'I stick my neck out for nobody'. He sees his world in much the same way that the genre of *film noir*, which postulates that the world is hard and unyielding, money-obsessed, morally ambiguous, and irredeemable. We in the audience look out at the city of Casablanca through Rick's eyes, and because Rick's worldview is aligned with *noir*, Curtiz gives us the visual trappings of *noir*. To put it another way, Rick's focalising perceptions of the world colour the images that the camera shows us.

And yet, despite having gone through far worse experiences at the hands of the Nazis than

Rick has, Victor Laszlo does not have a bitter point of view. Rather, his experiences have galvanised him into assuming the role of the hero to Rick's anti-hero. He believes that the world can be redeemed, and he strikes out against the Nazis at every opportunity. Not only that, but his presence and his fervour seem to momentarily revitalise the city of Casablanca. Upon his arrival, the previously meek pleasure-seekers at Café Américain suddenly discover their political side when everyone, even the ridiculous and petulant Yvonne, joins him in a stirring rendition of 'La Marseillaise'.

Through Victor's arrival in Casablanca, Curtiz momentarily introduces an alternative worldview, a light into the darkness that is the *film noir*. The universe of the film and the characters that inhabit it change around him, and the audience is, for a moment, encouraged to see the world as Lazlo sees it. We may see the good in people who we previously assumed to be 'vultures' (for example, Yvonne, who had up until this point been sexually 'collaborating' with the German soldiers in an attempt to make Rick jealous), and pinpoint the Nazis as a source of moral evil that must be resisted and defeated rather than as an inevitable outcome of the retched human condition. The film here professes a desire to fight, and some hope for the future.

However, Curtiz makes it clear that this stirring moment, this glimpse of another possible future, only occurs because Rick *allows* it to occur. Rick must give his permission in the form of a nod to the band-leader for Lazlo's musical rebellion to take place. Thus, it is still Rick who is in control of the genre of the film, who has the ultimate power to make changes in his environment. Furthermore, we can assume that Lazlo's miniature revolution has only a small effect on Rick's worldview, as Rick refuses to aid Lazlo further. In fact, as soon as the song concludes, Rick's nihilistic point of view reasserts itself and the Nazis close the bar. Soon after, Ilsa enters into her seedy negotiations with her former lover. Rick still does not believe in 'sticking his neck out', and, because of the weight that Curtiz has assigned to his point of view, his refusal to join in the cause adversely affects those around him, forcing them to conform to the rules of a dirty, cutthroat underworld that is maintained

and perpetuated by his apathy for their plights. His attitude helps to sustain the conditions that render questionable moral behaviour necessary; even the most idealistic of freedom fighters, Lazlo, cannot tip the balance towards the good. It seems that, unless Rick has a change of heart, the residents of Casablanca are doomed to remain in a benighted *noir* world.

Likewise, the film intimates, if the people of the United States (for whom Rick stands in) refuse to rise out of their own apathy, the citizens of the world will be doomed to remain under the thumb of the Axis forces. The film is a self-aggrandising fantasy that renders the involvement or non-involvement of the United States as the most important factor in the war, postulating that no other world power has the vitality to enforce and maintain an effective resistance against the Nazi war machine (even though many credit the Soviet Union for tipping the balance in favour of the Allies [Tharoor 2015]).

The conclusion of the film models the attitude adjustment the audience is encouraged to make, with Rick metamorphosing during the final scenes into a gun-toting hero and Curtiz reorganising the genre of the film around him once more; transforming it from a *noir* into a patriotic war film, or perhaps even a film from that most iconic American genre, the Western². In their final showdown, Rick is forced to outdraw Major Heinrich Strasser (Conrad Veidt) like a sheriff in a shootout at the O.K. Corral (Vonalt 1991). Once again, it is only through Rick's actions—in this case, his decision to shoot Strasser and to send Ilsa to help Lazlo with his mission—that any meaningful, positive change can be sustained. Along the way, he makes amends for his poor behaviour by bestowing rigged casino winnings upon Annina and her husband, thus preventing the young refugee woman from having to enter the same kinds of sexual negotiations with Captain Louis Renault (Claude Rains) that Rick imposed upon Ilsa earlier. This moment emphasizes even further that Rick controls the fates of those in Casablanca, in that it is his intervention alone which prevents an ill-fated resolution to the young refugees' journey towards freedom.

These moments are only made possible because Rick has taken on a new role for himself, one that more closely resembles that of Jerry from *Now*

Voyager than it does Sam Spade from *The Maltese Falcon*. In fact, perhaps we might even say that, like Charlotte Vale blossoming under Jerry's kind regard, Victor Laszlo acts as the catalyst that allows Rick to transform into a new and better man, one more in touch with his emotions ('a sentimentalist') and more willing to allow himself to become personally vulnerable (to 'stick his neck out') when ethics require it (Morrison 2013: 220).

During the final scene at the airport, all resentments that might have remained between Rick and Ilsa vanish. The city of Casablanca and the people in it are remade. In this new world, the world of the melodramatic romance, a noble sacrifice is required in the final act, and so the pair are transformed from callous manipulators into patriots and lovers giving up their own happiness for the sake of the greater good. It is as if their previous scenes of heartache and exploitation never happened, as if everything tawdry between them has been erased. Their pasts have been scrubbed clean and all of their sordid deeds are undone as they slip into the roles that this new genre requires of them. This slippage is necessary in order to fully recuperate Rick into the role of the romantic hero. After all, there can be no noble sacrifice if there is no love to be sacrificed.

There is an abrupt tonal shift as one version of Rick, who represents the pitfalls of our present course, is brushed aside and a new version steps into his place. It can be read allegorically that if the United States remain in their isolationist ways, then the world will come to resemble the morally ambiguous world of the *noir* film, and nobility, goodness, and love will disappear in the wake of the Nazis' conquest. If the United States reject that position and join the fight by enacting sacrifices at home, then it is possible to return to honour and prevent the abuses that occur when people are made into commodities. Either way, the role played by the United States is narcissistically imagined to be central to the outcome of the war.

Indeed, in 1943, Warner Bros. considered the possibility of continuing Rick's transition into a full-blown war hero in a sequel that was to be titled *Brazzaville*. It would have been 'revealed after the American invasion of Casablanca that Rick and

Renault were secretly Allied agents all along' (Lumenick 2012). If this wartime 'bromance' had been allowed to go into production (Morrison 2013), Rick's cynical *noir* persona would have been completely and officially ret-conned out of existence. American audiences could then do what they have been doing ever since: re-write our own histories to forget our reticence to join the fight, in favour of a story in which we rush to the aid of Europe and single-handedly save the free world.

Conclusion

In other words, for the political allegory of the film to work, Curtiz must count on the audience to apply their knowledge of film genres. The audience's active participation in interpreting and reinterpreting the film as it unfolds, their ability to try on different roles and explore different world views as Rick does, is what may lead them to accede that it is necessary for them to proverbially 'stick their necks out' for their allies in Europe. Their knowledge of other films from the Warner Bros. catalogue provided them with several different models they might expect the film to follow, models that they had to adapt or discard even as they watched. The concept of the meta-discursive 'cult film' may not have been available to Curtiz as he developed the film but the cultish aspects of the *Casablanca* are not 'accidental'. Rather, they are integral to the film's propagandistic aims.

Notes

¹ This as opposed to those later films that were, according to Eco, 'born in order to become cult objects' (1985: 11).

² According to Robert B. Ray's famous analysis in *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*, *Casablanca*, 'like so many of Classic Hollywood's most popular movies, employed a reluctant hero story, clearly derived from the western' (1985: 90). However, as I argue above, I believe that the strong visual and thematic resonances between *Casablanca* and the recent projects of its two male stars (*The Maltese Falcon* and *Now, Voyager*) make the *noir* and the romantic melodrama more accessible as generic 'instruction manuals' for an audience in 1942 attempting to decode the film mid-viewing.

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