

CASABLANCA AS PROPAGANDA

You Must Remember This: The Case of Hal Wallis' *Casablanca*

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Casablanca haunts the imagination. Fifty years after it was made it still seems fresh. Unlike so many other World War II films that had one eye on the box office and the other on the need to boost wartime morale, *Casablanca* has not gone stale with age. If a scene or two seems a touch campy to us today, the film as a whole can still call forth deep emotions. Watching it, we are apt to laugh at the same jokes, be aroused by the same appeals for patriotism, and sense the same demands for sacrifice that moved audiences a half century ago. How can one not smile when Captain Louis Renault (Claude Rains) questions Richard Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) about why he left America and came to Casablanca:

Renault: I have often speculated on why you don't return to America. Did you abscond with the church funds? Did you run off with a senator's wife? I like to think you killed a man. It's the romantic in me.

Rick: It was a combination of the three.

Renault: And what in heaven's name brought you to Casablanca?

Rick: My health. I came to Casablanca for the waters.

Renault: Waters? What waters? We're in the desert.

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Figure 9 *Casablanca* (1942). Warner Bros. Directed by Michael Curtiz. Courtesy of Jerry Murbach, www.doctormacro.info.

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The producers of *Casablanca*, however, hoped that their film would educate as well as entertain its viewers. From the first day of production, *Casablanca* was consciously designed to aid America's war effort. To be sure, Warner Bros., the studio that made the *Casablanca*, planned to make money from the film, but it also wanted the film to dramatically show the battle between good and evil that had so recently engulfed the world. In short, the movie mixed propaganda with entertainment, patriotism with laughter and romance, and became a document for America at a particular time. Today, a viewer can passively watch *Casablanca* and be thoroughly entertained, but the same viewer can also subject the film to a more critical analysis and as a result be entertained and learn something about Hollywood, America, and the world in the early months of World War II.

The history of the making of *Casablanca* is almost as interesting as the film itself. It started when Murray Burnett, a New York high school vocational teacher, took a trip to Europe in 1938. Although Burnett visited Europe a full year before the outbreak of the European phase of World War II, he saw everywhere signs of an impending conflict. German dictator Adolf Hitler was on the move, and had been for several years. Since 1936, his armies had reoccupied the Rhineland, forced an *anschluss* (reunion) with Austria, and overrun Czechoslovakia. Frightened by Hitler's anti-Semitic and fascist doctrines, many German, Austrian, and Czech Jews, as well as

liberal and radical Catholics and Protestants, fled their homelands. Burnett witnessed the sad exodus of the refugees. At one point on his trip, Burnett sat in a cafe on France's Mediterranean coast listening to a black American piano player entertain the cafe's patrons and to refugees discuss the best route out of Europe. Many of the refugees, Burnett noted, were en route to Casablanca in French Morocco, from where they hoped to board a plane to Lisbon and then another to the United States.

It was a dramatic story, and Burnett dabbled in drama. In 1940 he teamed with Joan Allison, and the two wrote a play about an American who runs a cafe in Casablanca. Entitled *Everyone Comes to Rick's*, the play centers on Richard Blaine, the disillusioned cafe owner, and a woman torn between loyalty for her heroic husband and her love for Rick. Although the play generated modest interest among several New York producers, it had problems that kept it from being produced. Failing in New York, Burnett and Allison turned to Hollywood. On December 8, 1941, the day after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the United States' entry into World War II, *Everyone Comes to Rick's* reached the desk of Warner Bros.' story analyst Steven Karnot. He thought the story had possibilities and sent it to Hal Wallis, Warner Bros.' leading producer. Wallis was intrigued by the story's mixture of romance and sacrifice, cynicism and idealism. In addition, the story was set in Casablanca, an exotic setting that reminded him of *Algiers*, the successful 1938 film which featured Charles Boyer and Hedy Lamarr. Although Wallis recognized that Burnett and Allison's story had serious problems, he was confident that he could correct the troubled areas and turn the story into a profitable movie. Within a few months, Wallis had purchased the rights to *Everyone Comes to Rick's* and renamed the story *Casablanca* to underscore its exotic setting and identify it in the public mind with *Algiers*.

During the next eight months, a team of Hollywood screenwriters labored to solve the play's problems and turn it into a patriotic romance. To be sure, improvements were made: the central characters and issues were more clearly defined and the dialogue was polished until almost every line and scene became memorable. But the story remained essentially unchanged.

Summary of *Casablanca*

Casablanca is set in early December 1941. As the film opens, a narrator informs the viewers that with the start of World War II many Europeans

turned hopefully, or desperately, toward the freedom of the Americas. Lisbon became the great embarkation point. But not everyone could get to Lisbon directly; and so, a tortuous, roundabout refugee trail sprang up. Paris to Marseilles, across the Mediterranean to Oran, then by train, or auto, or foot, across the rim of Africa to Casablanca in French Morocco. Here, the fortunate ones through money, or influence, or luck, might obtain exit visas and scurry to Lisbon, and from Lisbon to the New World. But the others had to wait in Casablanca, and wait, and wait, and wait.

Into this world of waiting and intrigue comes Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid), the leader of the Czech underground and symbol of the resistance to Nazi domination of Europe, and his beautiful wife Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman). They too are struggling to

obtain passage to Lisbon. In fact, they are scheduled to meet the black marketeer Ugarte (Peter Lorre) who had killed two Nazi couriers and secured two letters of transit signed by General de Gaulle. Unfortunately for Laszlo and Ilsa, Ugarte is killed before he can sell the letters of transit to them, but not before he gave them to American Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) for safe keeping.

Rick is a man of mystery. Little is known of his past. Apparently he was once something of an idealist and an anti-fascist. In 1935 he had been involved in supplying guns to Ethiopia, and in 1936 he had fought in Spain on the Loyalists' side. But now he is committed only to his own neutrality. As he says several times in the film, "I stick my neck out for nobody." Rick is a man without a country. Some unknown reason prevents him from returning to the United States, and when asked his nationality, he replies, "I'm a drunkard." To which Captain Louis Renault (Claude Rains), the prefect of the police in *Casablanca*, adds, "That makes Rick a citizen of the world." Rick, then, is a cold cynic, jealous of his own neutrality and interested only in the affairs of his own cafe. The mystery is what changed Rick from an active idealist to a drunken cynic.

Ilsa provides the answer. Before the war she and Rick had been lovers in Paris, but when Rick had been forced to flee that city, Ilsa had not joined him at the railroad station. When Ilsa and Laszlo show up at Rick's Cafe American, the pain of those memories sweeps over Rick, making him bitter and angry. He vows never to give the letters of transit to Laszlo and Ilsa. But slowly Rick's anger and cynicism melt away. He and Ilsa meet, she explains why she couldn't leave Paris with him, and the two profess their love for each other. They also hatch a plan to get Laszlo out of Casablanca while they remain behind.

All goes according to plan until they reach the airport. This time Rick forces Ilsa to leave without him. Similar to Ilsa's motives in Paris, Rick's is motivated by idealism and sacrifice. Always a citizen of the world, he has joined the world's fight against fascism. "Where I'm going," he tells Ilsa, "you can't follow. What I've got to do, you can't be any part of. Ilsa, I'm no good at being noble, but it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world." The film ends with Rick and Renault, another cynic who has suddenly been converted to idealism, striking off for a Free French garrison in Brazaville.

A Critical Examination of *Casablanca*

Casablanca is a wonderful film, but it is also a propaganda document. The film premiered on Thanksgiving Day, November 26, 1942, only nineteen days after the United States had landed forces at Casablanca in Morocco and, along with Great Britain, in Algeria. It was the first direct American blow against the Nazis and it thrilled Americans. *Casablanca* dominated the headlines. The day after the nationwide release of *Casablanca*, the city was once again in the news. On that day, January 24, 1943, it was announced that American President Franklin Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin had met secretly earlier in the month to formulate a joint war plan to fight Germany. The American public learned that Roosevelt's headquarters had been codenamed "Rick's Place." Certainly, the publicity surrounding the Allied invasion of North Africa and the *Casablanca*

Conference generated interest in the film *Casablanca*. But the military and political activity did more than simply guarantee financial success; it gave the film an almost mythic quality. Rick became the symbol of America, and his transition from isolationism to involvement underscored America's similar transition.

Critical thinking involves asking questions. If we consider *Casablanca* as a wartime document, what can it tell us about Hollywood, America, and the world during the early months of World War II?

What biases or underlying assumptions animate the film?

A film is a collaborative product. Before considering the message of any film, it is important to recognize that a film is the result of the labor of many people, from the producer, director, writers, and actors to the photographers, gaffers, and grips to the editor, music coordinator, and publicists. At no time was this more true than during the Studio Era, a period in the history of Hollywood that started toward the end of World War I, reached its full maturity during the 1930s, and achieved its high point during World War II.

Casablanca was made at Warner Bros., a studio known for a certain style. "Warners' pictures," said one film historian, "were blunt and tough and fast. Their mise-en-scene was flat and cold; their individual cadences were clipped." Warners' leading actors and actresses – James Cagney, Humphrey Bogart, Edward G. Robinson, George Raft, Paul Muni, John Garfield, Bette Davis, Joan Blondell – were also noted for their tough, raw style. They were urban types, often cynical, sometimes mean, and never stupid. They might die at the end of film, but they were not rubes or suckers. Warner Bros. did not shy away from making pictures with social messages. *Little Caesar*, *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet*, and *Angels with Dirty Faces* explored some of the social problems that plagued America during the Depression. And Warner Bros. was the first major studio to make films that emphasized the threat of Adolf Hitler. *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* and *Sergeant York* attempted to warn America of the threat posed by Hitler and German militarism. America, the films suggested, did have a stake in European affairs, and wars were often the result of a real clash between good and evil.

The head of production for Warner Bros. was Jack Warner, an outspoken and irreverent mogul who rubbed almost everyone the wrong way. He told vulgar jokes, dressed in flashy clothes, and seemed to delight in embarrassing people. His own nephew once called him "an endearing personality – treacherous, hedonistic, and a tyrant." But as a Roosevelt Democrat, Jack Warner was also perhaps the most liberal of the studio heads, and he was certainly patriotic. He was commissioned as a lieutenant colonel during World War II. From the first, Warner and the other people who worked on *Casablanca* intended that the film would have a pro-war message.

The original play was anti-Nazi but not really pro-war. To tighten the political theme of the picture, Hal Wallis, the film's producer, hired screenwriter Howard Koch to work on the script. Just as anyone who wants to fully understand the biases woven into *Casablanca* has to understand Warner Bros. and Jack Warner, that person should also ask questions about the background and political beliefs of Howard Koch. Like many other screenwriters, Koch came to Hollywood after writing for Broadway and radio. He gained national attention as the man who adapted H.G. Wells' *The War*

of *the Worlds* for Orson Welles' famous 1938 broadcast. But his best work was done in message films. Although he never joined the Communist party, Koch was a political radical who was active in several liberal causes. (During the politically repressive period that followed World War II, Koch was blacklisted in Hollywood.)

Koch gave Rick his political conscience. In the play *Everybody Comes to Rick's*, Rick lacks a defined political philosophy. In *Casablanca* his anti-fascist credentials are impeccable. He had fought against fascism in Ethiopia and Spain and, although he professes his neutrality, it is clear that he will eventually resume the struggle against fascism. Most importantly, Rick sees the folly of America's prewar isolationism. In one exchange with his friend and employee Sam, the black piano player, Rick asks, "Sam, if it's December 1941 in Casablanca, what time is it in New York? I bet they're asleep in New York. I'll bet they're asleep all over America." The point of the exchange could not have been lost on American audiences in 1942 and 1943. Trapped in its isolationism, America was asleep in early December 1941. Pearl Harbor provided an unpleasant wake-up call.

Questioning the biases of the people who made *Casablanca* provides several clues of the nature of the film. Even if you had not seen the film, you could predict that it would be patriotic, politically liberal, and interventionist. You could predict that it would follow fairly closely President Roosevelt's own view of the conflict.

How was the film received when it premiered in 1942?

One of the pitfalls of historical – or critical – thinking is presentism. We have a tendency to read our present values into past events. What we think of *Casablanca* or internationalism or even World War II is partially conditioned by our feelings toward the international events – from the Cold War to the Vietnam War to the remarkable international changes of the recent years – that have shaped our own lives. To avoid presentism, historians try to reconstruct how an event was received and interpreted at the time that it occurred. To fully understand the impact and importance of *Casablanca* we have to examine what was written and said about the film in late 1942 and early 1943.

Reviews provide an important clue to how audiences reacted to *Casablanca*. The *New York Times*' reviewer commented that the film "makes the spine tingle and the heart take a leap." Other reviewers agreed that the *Casablanca* was a remarkably good film: "a crackling, timely melodrama" (*New York Morning Telegraph*); "today's headlines translated into arresting drama" (*New York Mirror*); "smashing ... moving ... superior" (*New York Herald Tribune*). The Hollywood trade journals echoed the dailies' opinions, emphasizing the film's timeliness as well as its suspense, drama, and entertainment qualities. The review in the *Hollywood Reporter* epitomized the favorable reception of *Casablanca*: "Here is a drama that lifts you right out of your seats The picture has exceptional merits as absorbing entertainment, reflecting the fine craftsmanship of all who had hands in its making."

A technically near-perfect film, to be sure, but how was *Casablanca* judged as an example of propaganda? To answer this question we have to leave the published reviews in newspapers and trade journals and look elsewhere. As you might expect, the United States government was quite interested in the content of movies. The average ticket sales in America each week during World War II ranged between eighty and ninety million, or two-thirds of the country's population. Movies were the nation's leading

leading entertainment outlet, and as such, they exerted an awesome power to influence and mold public opinion. In fact, two months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Senator Gerald P. Nye, the isolationist from North Dakota, had charged that Hollywood was making films designed to pull the United States into the European war. A special subcommittee of the Committee on Interstate Commerce looked into Nye's charges. Although the subcommittee issued no report when it adjourned on September 26, 1941, it did suggest that Hollywood was at least partially guilty of the charge.

After Pearl Harbor, the Roosevelt administration quickly enlisted Hollywood in America's war effort. The Office of War Information (OWI), which coordinated the country's wartime information and propaganda activities, established the Bureau of Motion Pictures (BMP) to watch over the film industry. Although the BMP did not have direct control over the film industry, it did exert a powerful influence in Hollywood. In its "Government Informational Manual for the Motion Picture Industry," the BMP asked every producer to consider one central question: "Will this picture help win the war?" The BMP reviewed every film made during the war. Its reports evaluate the contribution—or lack of contribution—that each film made to the war effort.

The BMP report on *Casablanca* assesses the movie's effectiveness as propaganda. "From the standpoint of the war information program," noted the BMP report, "*Casablanca* is a very good picture about the enemy, those whose lives the enemy has wrecked and those underground agents who fight him unremittingly on his own ground." More specifically, the report detailed how *Casablanca* aided America's fight against Germany: the film portrays evil, arrogant Nazis who disregard "human life and dignity" and who create "chaos and misery" throughout Europe; the film demonstrates "the spirit of the underground movement" and suggests that not all of the French people are cooperating with the Nazis; the film presents the United States as "the haven of the oppressed and homeless" and as the defender of democracy and freedom; and the film shows the need to sacrifice "personal desire" to defeat fascism. In short, *Casablanca* presents the BMP's slant on the United States, its enemy, and its allies as well as underscoring the reasons America is in the war (see the BMP report, which follows).

The reviews of *Casablanca* and the BMP report on the film illustrate the need for the critical historian to return to the primary sources to understand how an event—in this case a movie—was greeted. Critical thinkers are aware that their reactions to an older film or event from history may be different from how the film or event was originally perceived. The critical thinker, therefore, attempts to overcome this natural presentism by examining primary sources.

3. Could Ilsa have stayed with Rick?

Legends swirl around *Casablanca*. The most famous legends involve the script, which was still not finished when filming started at the end of May, 1942. One Hollywood legend holds that problems with the script forced director Michael Curtiz to shoot the film, from first scene to last, in the same order as the scenes appeared in the finished movie. This legend is utterly fantastic. No movie is filmed in such a fashion. To do so would involve tying up several sound stages—the most precious commodity at any studio—as well as paying all the actors and actresses and renting all the needed props and equipment for the duration of the filming. No studio could afford that wasteful luxury.

Script problems gave rise to an even more intriguing legend, that until nearly the end of the shooting it had yet to be decided whether Ilsa would leave *Casablanca* with her husband Victor Laszlo or stay behind with her true love Rick. One variation of the legend holds that the screenwriters wrote two different endings; another variation claims that both endings were actually shot. Indeed, Ingrid Bergman has said that for most of the production period she had no idea who she would end up with in the film's final scene. At one point, she told the writers, "You must tell me because after all there is a little bit of difference in acting toward a man that you love and another man for whom you may just feel pity or affection." "Well," the writers replied, "don't give too much of anything. Play it in between"

Clearly *Casablanca* suggests that Ilsa loves Rick but only respects Laszlo. Several times in the film Laszlo professes his love for Ilsa, and each time she deflects his comments. In one scene Laszlo says, "I love you very much, Ilsa." She replies, "Your secret will be safe with me." Later in the film, when Laszlo realizes that Ilsa had been in love with Rick in Paris, he tells her again, "I love you very much, my dear." "Yes, yes I know," she responds. In contrast to her guarded responses with her husband, she freely confesses her love for Rick. Toward the end of the film, Ilsa tells Rick, "The day you left Paris, if you knew what I went through! If you knew how much I loved you, how much I still love you! ... I know I'll never have the strength to leave you again I can't fight it anymore. I ran away once. I can't do it again I wish I didn't love you so much."

But in the end, Ilsa does leave Rick. Could the film have ended otherwise? Could the scriptwriters have discovered a way to have Laszlo leave without his wife? The question may at first seem trivial and not of any critical significance. But it is not, for its answer illuminates an important aspect of Hollywood and the movies during the 1930s and 1940s. The answer also demonstrates that Hollywood legends, like so many other good stories, should not be taken at face value.

To begin with, although the film differed in many details from the play, *Casablanca* was faithful to the intent of *Everybody Comes to Rick's*. In the play, Rick moves from moody isolationist to passionate patriot. For a higher ideal, he convinces Ilsa to leave Casablanca with Laszlo. He sacrifices his personal desire for the good of a more important cause, the battle against fascism. In none of the drafts of *Casablanca* is there any hint that Ilsa would not leave with Laszlo. Legends are nice, but at no time did the screenwriters consider altering the core of the play's ending.

Even if the screenwriters wanted to change the story and invent a pat Hollywood ending, they would have faced powerful opposition. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, one of the most influential voices in [the] movie industry was that of Joseph Ignatius Breen, head of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA). Breen's job was to make sure that every Hollywood release was good, clean, wholesome, family entertainment. The mop Breen used to keep movies clean was the Motion Picture Production Code, which clearly stated the dos and don'ts of moviemaking. Almost everything about *Casablanca* attracted Breen's attention. Raised in a devout Catholic family and a former student at the Jesuit St. Joseph's College, Breen was not likely to approve any script or give the Code's blessing to any movie where the hero and heroine had an adulterous love affair. It just couldn't happen, not as long as Breen exerted any power in Hollywood.

The Code was quite specific on such matters. Article II of the Code states, "The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not

infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing." And in Article II (1), the Code further notes, "Adultery, sometimes necessary plot material, must not be explicitly treated, or justified, or presented attractively." In short, the producers of *Casablanca* had better dance delicately around the relationship between Ilsa and Rick. One slip, one overly suggestive comment or scene, could doom the film to perdition.

Breen pored over the script of *Casablanca*, searching for anything that might offend American tastes – or what he judged to be American tastes. (Remember, in *Gone With the Wind*, Breen objected to the use of the word "damn" in the film's last scene.) He demanded that Renault's character – or at least, dialogue – be cleaned up. Captain Renault, the prefect of police who exchanges visas for sexual favors, upset Breen. Early in the script submitted to Breen, an aide informs Renault that several "visa difficulties" have come up. When Renault discovers that two beautiful women are having "problems," he muses, "Which one?" Then with a sigh, he says to aide, "Ten years ago there would have been no problem. Oh, well, tell the dark one to wait in my private office and we'll go into her visa matter thoroughly ... And it wouldn't hurt to have the other one leave her address and phone number." Such suggestive comments were far too direct, Breen decided. They had to be toned down considerably. Hal Wallis, the film's producer, argued that Renault's exploitative nature was important to the film because in the end when Renault joins the anti-fascist cause it proved that even the self-admitted "poor corrupt officer" was not beyond political redemption. Using the rule of "compensating moral values," Breen allowed Renault to keep a few of his less blatantly suggestive lines.

As for Ilsa and Rick, Breen was less tolerant. Not only could Ilsa not remain with Rick, the film could not suggest, even obliquely, that the two had a sexual reunion in Casablanca. Ilsa and Rick's affair in Paris could be explained: Ilsa thought Laszlo was dead and that she was therefore single. But in *Casablanca*, Laszlo is quite alive and Ilsa is indisputably married. Breen insisted that, when Ilsa and Rick meet alone in Rick's private quarters and she reaffirms her love, the set contain no bed or couch, "or anything whatever suggestive of a sex affair." In addition, Breen insisted that the scene be shot differently. As originally written, there was a time shift in the middle of the scene. "The action ends," commented one authority on the film, "with her declaration of love and resumes as she is telling Rick why she originally left him." After reading the script, Breen commented, "The present material seems to contain a suggestion of a sex affair which would be unacceptable if it came through in the finished picture. We believe this could possibly be corrected by replacing the fade out on page 135, with a dissolve" This solution, used in the film, prohibited the audience from imagining that Rick and Ilsa resumed their Paris affair. In *Casablanca*, their love was pure and idealized, not physical.

The question of why Ilsa didn't remain with Rick thus leads into a larger discussion of the morals and politics of the motion picture industry. It involves Joseph Breen, MPPDA, and the regulation of movies, and it touches on censorship in American arts and society. Only by critically thinking about what you read and see will you be able to move beyond passive consumption to active engagement with the subject and the issues it raises.