

FIL 1001, SPRING 2003 TERM
Introduction to Understanding Film
Betty Gilson
<http://www.artistrue.com>
Casablanca
Instructor: Lois Wolfe
02/8/2003

The movie, *Casablanca*, is one of the best romantic dramas ever made, and it's no wonder that generation after generation laughed and cried with the characters of the movie. What makes *Casablanca* a great movie? Is it the characters, the stars' persona, the narrative, or is it the Hollywood style? I would say all of the above. There's a great balance between the story, its characters, and of course, the director's talent to present the story. It is important to observe that the mise-en-scene contributes to the success of the movie, because even from the beginning the viewers are drawn into the story. They are intrigued by Casablanca's distant location and by its strange scenery, they are shocked by the fact that people are being killed, and then they are drawn into a romantic restaurant where a pianist is singing a wonderful love song. In this essay, to better understand how the director brings to life this beautiful love story, we will focus on the mise-en-scene elements.

The movie opens with a view of the spinning Earth. The camera keeps zooming in until the continents and countries become visible, while the narrator informs the viewers that, during World War II, people who wanted to escape to the "New World" would have to go through France and Iran, then stop in Casablanca with the hope that they could get visas for Lisbon and then fly to America. I can't help but think about how Orson Welles used this graphic method in *Citizen Kane* as well—but what a difference in transitions, narrative, and music! In *Casablanca*, these elements are synchronized and almost have a relaxing effect, while at the same time they

intrigue the viewers who are tempted to pull up a chair and get ready to watch an interesting story—or at least it has to be interesting: the oriental music during titles suggests mystery, the Earth's panoramic view promises virtual trips to unknown territories, and when the viewers enter the world of *Casablanca*, they are pulled in a hostile environment where soldiers in uniforms reveal danger and conflict. This is a great example of how the director uses mise-en-scene to capture viewers' attention and to make them feel part of a different world. Suddenly, the rhythm shifts with a more active change of camera shots, and the music complements it, although you're still not aware of it because it only serves the narrative by enhancing the dramatic atmosphere. Almost every detail has its purpose: the medium close-up shot of the policeman who receives a telegram—with the order that two people, believed to have killed two German soldiers, have to be captured immediately—serves to advance the narrative; the crowded plaza provides important details about the very modest Moroccan lifestyle; and the hunting and shooting of suspects reveals the dangers of living in Casablanca. There are also various types of crooks, sophisticated enough to fool others into thinking that they're nice citizens, when actually they're thieves. Perhaps the best example of how the director uses mise-en-scene to transport the viewers through time and space and to confer credibility to the characters is the character's interaction through different languages and accents. All of these elements of mise-en-scene capture the viewers' attention and prepare them for the rest of the story.

There's promise of romance in *Casablanca* when the camera enters "Rick's Café American." For the first time, the viewers realize that a beautiful song, "It had to be you," plays in the background and creates a romantic atmosphere—but only for a second. The customers in the busy café are preoccupied with money, the ongoing war, and their desire to escape it, or are

planning to kill German soldiers or are being chased by them. When we finally meet Rick, the narrative's pace increases, and the viewers only get a quick introduction to this intelligent yet unhappy persona. There's more to Rick than he would like to admit, and even one of his customers remarks to that. This particular customer provides illegal visas to people who can afford them, and he asks Rick to hold some special passes for him, while he plays in the Casino. He entrusts Rick with them, even though those passes are worth a lot of money, because they provide full clearance at the customs for anyone who carries them. Rick doesn't seem interested in escaping to the "New World," preferring instead to stay in Casablanca and to keep his business, even if he doesn't seem to enjoy it.

Who is Rick viewers ask themselves? He's not a person in love, although he dates someone; he's not interested in quick money, preferring instead to stay busy; he seems preoccupied by something; and he doesn't sympathize with Germans, "Yesterday they were just two German clerks; today they are the honored dead." All this information is provided by the director through the use of *mise-en-scene*. The director has good control over the flow of information that the viewers intercept. They feel intelligent for "reading" Rick's emotions, when actually the director is feeding them all of this information. If Bogart is playing Rick, then Rick is playing Rick. Even when the corrupt Captain Louis Renault reveals some of Rick's dark past, the director finds an ingenious way of separating Rick from the Captain. Rick is out of camera range, but his shadow, projected by an unknown light source, creates a "negative" of the Captain's image. Through this ingenious *mise-en-scene* the director suggests that Rick is exactly the Captain's opposite, even if appearances seem deceiving.

The corrupt Captain plans to assist the Germans to arrest a fugitive, Victor Laszlo—who has escaped from the German concentration camps. Rick's seems offended by the fact that the Captain suspects that he might be interested in helping the fugitive, but the Captain surprises the viewers with a very insightful remark about Rick's character: "I suspect that under that cynical shell, you're, at heart, a sentimentalist." Suddenly, the Captain seems to be more than just a corrupt individual. He seems to possess intelligence and appears to be a good judge of character.

When Lazlo and his wife arrive, the pianist's expression seems to reflect surprise and sorrow at the same time. He seems to recognize someone, although the viewers don't know who exactly. The director's intention is to puzzle the viewers and to provide them with an additional clue that something interesting will happen. When, Lazlo and his wife sit down at their table, the director uses *mise-en-scene* to advance the narrative by maintaining the camera on a medium close-up shot, while the characters meet the French Captain—but Mrs. Lazlo seems more interested in the pianist. It is probably she whom the pianist recognized earlier. Rick's name comes up and Mrs. Lazlo seems uncomfortable for a second, either because his name reminds him or someone, or maybe because she just remembered someone else related to the pianist. Definitely this *mise-en-scene* establishes a relationship between Mrs. Lazlo, the pianist, and Rick. Soon we find out that Mrs. Lazlo and Rick used to know each other to the point that they were romantically involved. When Mrs. Lazlo asks Sam to play, "As Time Goes by," the song beautifully captures the tragic essence of Rick and Ilsa's love story: "You must remember this/A kiss is just a kiss/A sigh is just a sigh. /The fundamental things apply/As time goes by./And when two lovers woo/They still say, I love you/On that you can rely./No matter what the future brings/As time goes by." They once

were—and still are—in love with each other, even if their lives have taken separate turns. She leaves the café with her husband, as Rick watches helplessly.

Lisa's return shatters the fragile equilibrium of Rick's life that he was trying so hard to maintain. As soon as he sees Lisa, he can't hide his feelings of love for her anymore, and the viewers sense his heart-breaking desperation: "Of all the gin joints, in all the towns, in all the world, she walks into mine." When Rick asks Sam what time it is in New York, for a moment I remembered how Susan, in Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*, felt the same loneliness and despair, and I can't help empathizing with Rick's character. In the scene where he drinks, hoping for her to return to his cafe, the low-key lighting matches Rick's dark feelings of despair and unfulfilled love for Lisa. Flashbacks about his short love affair with Lisa, just before Germans invaded Paris, reveal how deep their love was. He had to flee Paris because he was wanted by the Germans, but Lisa didn't follow him as promised. Now she returns to his café, trying to talk to him about something important; but he's not ready to listen, offending her instead. Lisa leaves the café and Rick is in even more pain than before. Rick later finds out that she was married to Lazlo even before their love affair in Paris. She had thought that Lazlo died in the German concentration camps, but that wasn't true; therefore, she had to leave Rick when she found out that her husband was still alive.

In the name of his love, Rick graciously helps a Bulgarian couple to win the roulette, in order to pay for their visa. The alternative was that the Bulgarian's wife would have to pay the French Captain with her own body. All of his staff seems very happy, and there's a positive attitude in the café. Even Rick seems to find some redemption for his long lost love. But would Rick help Lisa and her husband to flee Casablanca? He still has the two passes left by the customer who

got murdered by the Germans. The director carefully builds the suspense, leaving this time the viewers with no clues. The camera can't capture Rick's facial expressions, as he manages to control his feelings. Of course this is also the director's intention, who shifts the focus from Rick's feelings to Lazlo's fight to get out of Casablanca.

How would Rick and Lazlo connect? Is there even such a possibility? The director uses *mise-en-scene* again. At Rick's place, while the Germans were singing patriotic songs, Lazlo commands the band to play the French national anthem. The band is reluctant until a quick eye-contact with Rick gives them his approval. Everybody in the room proudly joins them at the expense of the Germans. Ilsa admires her husband's enthusiasm—revealed in a camera close-up—although he owes his moment of glory to Rick, because Rick is the one who supported his initiative. The French Captain is ordered by the Germans to close down Rick's place. Now we can see that after this turn of events Rick might decide to help Lazlo escape just to spite the Germans. Apparently, the fact that the Germans have closed his café is not enough. Rick needs total redemption, and he gets it when Lisa admits that she still loves him.

It becomes more and more difficult to analyze the *mise-en-scene* elements as they become more and more invisible with the precipitation of the events. The viewers have to keep up with the narrative, as they become more and more interested in finding out if Lazlo succeeds in leaving Casablanca, and if Rick and Ilsa will remain together this time.

In the end, Rick helps both Lazlo and Ilsa to leave Casablanca, which takes the viewers by surprise, since Ilsa had agreed to stay with him. Only a great man could set his feeling aside, in

order to help a greater cause. In the end, his love is not as important as supporting a great man who fights for a great cause. By helping Lazlo, Rick helps future generations to avoid the pain and suffering he had to endure living in occupied countries. For them is not too late. Through close-up and medium close-up shots the director captures Rick and Ilsa's painful separation. The director uses the fog to create a dream-like state, but the small plane is the viewers' material proof that this is not just a bad dream. Once the plane rises into the fog, nothing seems certain again, and one can only hope that Ilsa and Lazlo will save the world. By killing the German major who was trying to stop the plane, Rick saves his own life and also gains Captain Renault's friendship, who turns out to be a patriotic man after all. There's a happy ending in the fact that at least the main protagonists don't get hurt. The camera zooms out on Rick and the French Captain, as they walk in the opposite direction of the zoom. The last events helped to develop their relationship into a real friendship: "Louis, I think this is the start of a beautiful friendship."

As we can see, *mise-en-scene* combined with a great narrative, helps the director in presenting a complex story in ways that allow the viewers to anticipate or understand some events—when intended—but also to be surprised by the ending of the movie. This wonderful but sad romantic drama can easily be placed in time and space through the use of *mise-en-scene* and *décor*, but on the other hand it becomes the universal story of people with broken hearts who have to sacrifice themselves for a greater cause. Even if this is not your story, as a viewer you can't help but fall in love with these charismatic characters. The paradox here is that you can't decide what side to take: Rick's or Lazlo's. This is a good thing in the end, because it makes it less painful to cope with the outcome. What a great movie!

Works Cited

Casablanca, dir. Michael Curtiz. Warner Bros., 1942.