

"Casablanca, or The Cliches Are Having a Ball" by Umberto Eco

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When people in their fifties sit down before their television sets for a rerun of *Casablanca*, it is an ordinary matter of nostalgia. However, when the film is shown in American universities, the boys and girls greet each scene and canonical line of dialogue ("Round up the usual suspects," "Was that cannon fire, or is it my heart pounding?" -- or even every time that Bogey says "kid") with ovations usually reserved for football games. And I have seen the youthful audience in an Italian art cinema react in the same way. What then is the fascination of *Casablanca*?

The question is a legitimate one, for aesthetically speaking (or by any strict critical standards) *Casablanca* is a very mediocre film. It is a comic strip, a hotch-potch, low on psychological credibility, and with little continuity in its dramatic effects. And we know the reason for this: The film was made up as the shooting went along, and it was not until the last moment that the director and script writer knew whether Ilsa would leave with Victor or with Rick. So all those moments of inspired direction that wring bursts of applause for their unexpected boldness actually represent decisions taken out of desperation. What then accounts for the success of this chain of accidents, a film that even today, seen for a second, third, or fourth time, draws forth the applause reserved for the operatic aria we love to hear repeated, or the enthusiasm we accord to an exciting discovery? There is a cast of formidable hams. But that is not enough.

Here are the romantic lovers--he bitter, she tender--but both have been seen to better advantage. And *Casablanca* is not *Stagecoach*, another film periodically revived. *Stagecoach* is a masterpiece in every respect. Every element is in its proper place, the characters are consistent from one moment to the next, and the plot (this too is important) comes from Maupassant--at least the first part of it. And so? So one is tempted to read *Casablanca* the way T. S. Eliot reread *Hamlet*. He attributed its fascination not to its being a successful work (actually he considered it one of Shakespeare's less fortunate plays) but to something quite the opposite: *Hamlet* was the result of an unsuccessful fusion of several earlier Hamlets, one in which the theme was revenge (with madness as only a stratagem), and another whose theme was the crisis brought on by the mother's sin, with the consequent discrepancy between Hamlet's nervous excitation and the vagueness and implausibility of Gertrude's crime. So critics and public alike find *Hamlet* beautiful because it is interesting, and believe it to be interesting because it is beautiful.

On a smaller scale, the same thing happened to *Casablanca*. Forced to improvise a plot, the authors mixed in a little of everything, and everything they chose came from a repertoire of the tried and true. When the choice of the tried and true is limited, the result is a trite or mass-produced film, or simply kitsch. But when the tried and true repertoire is used wholesale, the result is an architecture like Gaudí's Sagrada Família in Barcelona. There is a sense of dizziness, a stroke of brilliance.

But now let us forget how the film was made and see what it has to show us. It opens in a place already magical in itself -- Morocco, the Exotic -- and begins with a hint of Arab music that fades into "La Marseillaise." Then as we enter Rick's Place we hear Gershwin. Africa France, America. At once a tangle of Eternal Archetypes comes into

play. These are situations that have presided over stories throughout the ages. But usually to make a good story a single archetypal situation is enough. More than enough. Unhappy Love, for example, or Flight. But *Casablanca* is not satisfied with that: It uses them all. The city is the setting for a Passage, the passage to the Promised Land (or a Northwest Passage if you like). But to make the passage one must submit to a test, the Wait ("they wait and wait and wait," says the off-screen voice at the beginning). The passage from the waiting room to the Promised Land requires a Magic Key, the visa. It is around the winning of this Key that passions are unleashed. Money (which appears at various points, usually in the form of the Fatal Game, roulette) would seem to be the means for obtaining the Key. But eventually we discover that the Key can be obtained only through a Gift--the gift of the visa, but also the gift Rick makes of his Desire by sacrificing himself. For this is also the story of a round of Desires, only two of which are satisfied: that of Victor Laszlo, the purest of heroes, and that of the Bulgarian couple. All those whose passions are impure fail. Thus, we have another archetype: the Triumph of Purity. The impure do not reach the Promised Land; we lose sight of them before that. But they do achieve purity through sacrifice -- and this means Redemption. Rick is redeemed and so is the French police captain.

We come to realize that underneath it all there are two Promised Lands: One is America (though for many it is a false goal), and the other is the Resistance -- the Holy War. That is where Victor has come from, and that is where Rick and the captain are going, to join de Gaulle. And if the recurring symbol of the airplane seems every so often to emphasize the flight to America, the Cross of Lorraine, which appears only once, anticipates the other symbolic gesture of the captain, when at the end he throws away the bottle of Vichy water as the plane is leaving. On the other hand the myth of sacrifice runs through the whole film: Ilsa's sacrifice in Paris when she abandons the man she loves to return to the wounded hero, the Bulgarian bride's sacrifice when she is ready to yield herself to help her husband, Victor's sacrifice when he is prepared to let Ilsa go with Rick so long as she is saved.

Into this orgy of sacrificial archetypes (accompanied by the Faithful Servant theme in the relationship of Bogey and the black man Dooley Wilson) is inserted the theme of Unhappy Love: unhappy for Rick, who loves Ilsa and cannot have her; unhappy for Ilsa, who loves Rick and cannot leave with him; unhappy for Victor, who understands that he has not really kept Ilsa. The interplay of unhappy loves produces various twists and turns: In the beginning Rick is unhappy because he does not understand why Ilsa leaves him; then Victor is unhappy because he does not understand why Ilsa is attracted to Rick; finally Ilsa is unhappy because she does not understand why Rick makes her leave with her husband. These three unhappy (or Impossible) loves take the form of a Triangle. But in the archetypal love-triangle there is a Betrayed Husband and a Victorious Lover. Here instead both men are betrayed and suffer a loss, but, in this defeat (and over and above it) an additional element plays a part, so subtly that one is hardly aware of it. It is that, quite subliminally, a hint of male or Socratic love is established. Rick admires Victor, Victor is ambiguously attracted to Rick, and it almost seems at a certain point as if each of the two were playing out the duel of sacrifice in order to please the other. In any case, as in Rousseau's *Confessions*, the woman places herself as Intermediary between the two men. She herself is not a bearer of positive values; only the men are.

Against the background of these intertwined ambiguities, the characters are stock figures, either all good or all bad. Victor plays a double role, as an agent of ambiguity in the love story, and an agent of clarity in the political intrigue--he is Beauty against the

Nazi Beast. This theme of Civilization against Barbarism becomes entangled with the others, and to the melancholy of an Odyssean Return is added the warlike daring of an *Iliad* on open ground.

Surrounding this dance of eternal myths, we see the historical myths, or rather the myths of the movies, duly served up again. Bogart himself embodies at least three: the Ambiguous Adventurer, compounded of cynicism and generosity; the Lovelorn Ascetic; and at the same time the Redeemed Drunkard (he has to be made a drunkard so that all of a sudden he can be redeemed, while he was already an ascetic, disappointed in love). Ingrid Bergman is the Enigmatic Woman, or *Femme Fatale*. Then such myths as: They're Playing Our Song; the Last Day in Paris; America, Africa, Lisbon as a Free Port; and the Border Station or Last Outpost on the Edge of the Desert. There is the Foreign Legion (each character has a different nationality and a different story to tell), and finally there is the Grand Hotel (people coming and going). Rick's Place is a magic circle where everything can (and does) happen: love, death, pursuit, espionage, games of chance, seductions, music, patriotism. (The theatrical origin of the plot, and its poverty of means, led to an admirable condensation of events in a single setting.) This place is *Hong Kong, Macao, l'Enfer du Jeu*, an anticipation of Lisbon, and even *Showboat*.

But precisely because all the archetypes are here, precisely because *Casablanca* cites countless other films, and each actor repeats a part played on other occasions, the resonance of intertextuality plays upon the spectator. *Casablanca* brings with it, like a trail of perfume, other situations that the viewer brings to bear on it quite readily, taking them without realizing it from films that only appeared later, such as *To Have and Have Not*, where Bogart actually plays a Hemingway hero, while here in *Casablanca* he already attracts Hemingwayesque connotations by the simple fact that Rick, so we are told, fought in Spain (and, like Malraux, helped the Chinese Revolution). Peter Lorre drags in reminiscences of Fritz Lang; Conrad Veidt envelops his German officer in a faint aroma of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*--he is not a ruthless, technological Nazi, but a nocturnal and diabolical Caesar. Thus *Casablanca* is not just one film. It is many films, an anthology. Made haphazardly, it probably made itself, if not actually against the will of its authors and actors, then at least beyond their control. And this is the reason it works, in spite of aesthetic theories and theories of film making. For in it there unfolds with almost telluric force the power of Narrative in its natural state, without Art intervening to discipline it. And so we can accept it when characters change mood, morality, and psychology from one moment to the next, when conspirators cough to interrupt the conversation if a spy is approaching, when whores weep at the sound of "La Marseillaise." When all the archetypes burst in shamelessly, we reach Homeric depths. Two cliches make us laugh. A hundred cliches move us. For we sense dimly that the cliches are talking *among themselves*, and celebrating a reunion. Just as the height of pain may encounter sensual pleasure, and the height of perversion border on mystical energy, so too the height of banality allows us to catch a glimpse of the sublime. Something has spoken in place of the director. If nothing else, it is a phenomenon worthy of awe.