

Casablanca

(1942, Michael Curtiz, USA)

Component 1: Varieties of Film & Film-Making (AL)
Component 1: American Film (AS)

Core Study Areas:
Key Elements of Film Form
Meaning & Response
The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area:
Auteur (AL)

Rationale for study

- *Casablanca* exemplifies the virtues of the Classical Hollywood narrative and style, and the collaborative nature of studio production.
- *Casablanca* is enduring classic with memorable imagery, musical score and dialogue.

STARTING POINTS- Useful Sequences and timings/links

- Rick is reunited with Ilsa and Paris flashback
- Final sequences -“We’ll always have Paris”

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- The searchlight illuminates at random -it is used in key moments in the film, casting light and shadow as Rick sits in despair after a chance meeting with Ilsa.
- The noir lighting conveys the mood of war. Rick is shown in half-light, representing his split self.
- Ingrid Bergman (Ilsa) was shot mainly from the left side using a gauze filter and soft lighting to make her eyes sparkle and convey a sadness and tenderness.

Mise-en-Scène

- The exotic locations lend the film a glamour and romance. Paris evokes romance and nostalgia with Rick and Ilsa. Their intimate world in Paris is interrupted when the Germans occupy France.
- The final sequences in the airport hangar were shot on the studio lot – a cardboard cut of the aeroplane was used in the background with midgets used to depict the mechanics. The use of miniatures in the background with key characters in the foreground creates a forced perspective.

Editing

- The film adheres to the rules of classical Hollywood continuity editing. The editing appears seamless and invisible throughout.
- The opening montage is typical of the classical Hollywood use of montage as exposition.

Sound

- “It had to be you” is a key motif throughout the film – Composer Max Steiner created an entire score based on this popular Broadway song. It is used as key points to remind us of Rick and Ilsa’s love. The orchestral score dominates the Paris scene flashback.
- Max Steiner, an iconic composer at Warners, was known for melodramatic scores that closely followed the action and heightened emotion.
- Recurrent motifs -use of music – ‘As Time Goes By’ – entire score based on this song – appears in key moments to remind the viewer of Rick and Ilsa’s love – creates nostalgia

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

Representations

- Rick represents US foreign policy - he is tough and cynical, yet altruistic. At first Rick maintains an isolationist and neutral stance (“I stick my neck out for nobody”), then shifts to self-sacrificing and willingness to join the war effort with allied forces (“This is

the beginning of a beautiful friendship”).

- The film’s supporting cast is multicultural, depicting the refugees who waited in Casablanca to travel to America.
- Rick represents a tough and cynical masculinity – his love for Ilsa reveals his vulnerability.

Aesthetics (i.e. the ‘look and feel’ of the film including Visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- The aesthetics depict a sense of romantic longing – smoky bars, exotic locations, the foggy runway and wartime costume all contribute to the film’s classic look. The film combines the aesthetics of film noir, expressionism, melodrama and documentary.
- Warner’s tight budget policy was reflected in the aesthetics of their films – low-key lighting and fog were often used to disguise cheap sets, as evident in the final scene in the aircraft hangar.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS – Contexts

Political

- *Casablanca* takes place on the four days leading up to the Japanese attack on the US military base at Pearl Harbour on 7th December 1941. The event led directly to USA entry into WW2. Rick represents US foreign policy, from isolationist to intervention. The film reinforces the USA’s support for the allied war effort.

Institutional

- Warners was one of the ‘Big Five’ studios; they controlled production, distribution and exhibition of their films. During the 1940s, Warners were known for tough detective thrillers (film noirs) and melodramas.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - Auteur - STARTING POINTS

- *Casablanca* is the result of the collaboration of accomplished personnel at Warner Bros, including: director Michael Curtiz; cinematographer Arthur Edson; and composer Max Steiner.
- Michael Curtiz was a respected ‘journeyman’ director at Warner Bros. Curtiz exemplifies the ‘contract director’ commonplace during the studio era - he directed commercial films and could turn his hand to a variety of genres. Curtiz was adept at rapid pacing and attention to detail.
- Warner Bros had a reputation for tough, gritty and realistic films. Humphrey Bogart reflects this studio style, playing tough detective figures and cynical, world-weary heroes. *Casablanca* was the first film to establish Bogart as a viable romantic lead.