Casablanca (1942)

Kay Kirchmann

dir. Michael Curtiz; prod. Hal B. Wallis; screenplay Julius J. Epstein, Philip G. Epstein, Howard Koch; photography Arthur Edeson; music Max Steiner. 35mm, black/white, 102 mins. Warner Bros., distrib. Warner Bros.

Courtesy of the Everett Collection

Written in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, this article attempts to take a fresh look at one of the most famous, most analyzed, and most quoted melodramas of all times, taking its starting point from this current global experience. *Casablanca* goes through the peculiar time structure of crises in general (Doane), against the backdrop of another global crisis, namely that of World War II—that of extended waiting, waiting for the crisis to end. In doing so, the film combines the basic melodramatic structure of affectual postponement with a political allegory of the circumstances of the specific time of its origin (Harmetz 102-16): more precisely, the waiting for the U.S. to enter the war, the waiting for a possibly accelerated end of the war as a result of military engagement, and the waiting—on the part of the many refugees—for options of returning home or a route to permanent exile. As several reviewers have already noted (Palmer 44), the film's famous ending also marks the departure from the (superficial) political neutrality that the two protagonists Rick Blaine (played by Humphrey Bogart) and Capitaine Renault (played by Claude Rains) had displayed up to that point. At the same time, this development also provides a commentary on the impossibility of political neutrality in times like these. Rick's decision to let his regained lover Ilsa Lund leave the country with her husband, the Czech resistance fighter Victor Laszlo (played by Paul Henreid); Rick's shooting of the German Major Strasser (played by Conrad Veidt); Renault's subsequent protection of Rick; and, last but not least, Renault's demonstrative tossing of the bottle of Vichy mineral water into the airport wastebasket—all these actions metonymically represent

a departure from the political paralysis of the two countries represented in *Casablanca* by Rick and Renault: Resistance France and the United States.

At the beginning of the film, however, there is little sign of this atmosphere of departure. Despite all the superficial amusement in its rooms, Rick's Café Americain is one thing above all: a waiting room for the thousands of refugees who fled to North Africa due to the war, and who are eagerly waiting there for a transit visa to Lisbon, from where they can travel to the U.S. And it is precisely these two things—transit papers, which finally come into Rick's possession after the murder of two German couriers, and airplanes, as symbols of escape from the waiting room—that set the film's plot in motion and also frame the film as a whole. Just as the plane taking off with Ilsa and Victor at the film's end embodies the recovery from paralysis, *Casablanca* also opens with the sound of a plane landing, raising the hopes one of the couples waiting in Rick's café that it might be a transport plane for refugees. This hope is shattered, however, when the camera reveals the Nazi symbols on the wings: It is the plane that takes Major Strasser to Casablanca to investigate the murder of the two couriers (Nichols 58). Thus, Rick's café initially remains a pure transit space, a »non-place« in the sense of French cultural anthropologist Marc Augé (1995), and it is unquestionably no coincidence that Augé has also written a book about *Casablanca* (2009). A place where time does not really want to pass. Not »as time goes by,« but rather »my watch has stopped,« the latter being Sam's answer to Rick about what time it might be in New York. A place where people bridge the waiting time with fleeting affairs, gambling, and alcohol, with music or learning English for the longed-for day of departure. That this is a global phenomenon and problem is made clear by the deliberate display of internationality among both staff and visitors in the Café Americain. In addition to the Moroccan employees, the Americans Rick and Sam, the French, and the Nazi Germans, there is also the Austrian waiter, Carl (played by S. Z. Sakall); the Russian bartender, Sascha (Leonid Kinskey); the Belgian croupier, Emil (Marcel Dalio); the Italian bar owner, Ferrari (Sidney Greenstreet); the older German and young Bulgarian refugee couples—and, of course, the Swedish Ilsa Lund and the Czech Victor Laszlo. The ensemble of characters does not only prove to be a genuine expression of a global melodrama but also reflects the internationality of a cast in which only three speaking roles were filled by U.S.-born actors (Francisco).

As the German philosopher of art Bazon Brock has pointed out, there is a waiting with and a waiting without expectations—the latter of which he calls »time sickness.« While for most patrons at Rick's café it remains undecided whether their expectations will be fulfilled, Rick's waiting is a chronic one—without any future perspective, neither political nor emotional. Steve Neale has identified the sentence »it comes too late« (8) as the temporal signature of melodrama, while Rick adds a »not yet.« The classical obstacles that lovers in melodramas are confronted with, as is well known, are of a familial, social, cultural, or medical nature, which bring about the postponement of love's happiness or its ultimate failure. However, the abrupt termination of the liaison between Rick and Ilsa in Paris with the return of Victor, who was believed dead, was warranted by the political circumstances of the era. Rick and Sam's futile waiting for Ilsa's arrival at the Paris train station is already pars pro toto for the later waiting in Morocco. In Casablanca, then, »it's too late« and »it's not over yet« apply at the same time—a single empty parenthesis in which Rick is trapped. If the end of the Parisian period is marked by the futile wait for Ilsa, the reunion of the two in Casablanca also

immediately initiates another episode of waiting, when the drunken Rick hopes for Ilsa's return in the empty café at night. In many other less prominent scenes, *Casablanca* repeatedly shows shorter phases of waiting, and mostly in relation to the classic melodramatic triangular constellation of Rick, Ilsa, and Victor. Ilsa waits for Rick in his room while Victor arrives downstairs at the café. Victor waits in the café until the police looking for him have passed by. Ilsa and Victor wait for Rick's decision regarding the transit visas. Finally, Victor still must wait on the tarmac until Rick has revealed his true intentions to Ilsa. Thus, the postponement of political and erotic decisions incessantly infuses the film's plot and temporal levels until, in the finale, the time sickness of »chronic waiting« is at last brought to a two-fold closure by Rick. His famous lines—»We'll always have Paris. We didn't have, we, we lost it until you came back to Casablanca«—are obviously meaningless as a spatial statement, as Ilsa has never been to Casablanca before. But they certainly lead to the center of the film's temporal paradox: Rick had to wait for Ilsa in the paralyzed present of the »non-place« of Casablanca, so that Paris could indeed finally become the couple's past and, at the same time, their placeless future.

Freed from the »not yet« through his ultimate acceptance of »it's too late,« Rick overcomes his own paralysis, and thus paradigmatically opens himself up for action that is again politically motivated, as he and Renault decide to join the Free French troops in Brazzaville. When Michael Palmer states that »Rick's Café Americain is not merely the gathering place for all these refugees who dream of escaping to the United States« but that it »is, in a sense, the United States, which must enter the war if the enemies of freedom are to be defeated« (45), ironically, it is actually abandoning the café that enables Rick's rediscovered patriotism. And as »Casablanca« literally means »white house,« it could also be said that following the tropes of Anglo-American imperial discourse the U.S.-American Rick has to venture further into Africa's »heart of darkness« (Conrad) in order to return to his personal »White House« at some point—but not yet.

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