

AN APPLICATION OF THE
EXPERIENTIAL-CINEMATOGRAFICAL METHOD
A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF
“CASABLANCA”

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This study is an application of the experiential-cinematographical method.¹ Respondents view a film and interpret a meaningful scene in the film. I draw on the intuition of the viewers of the film to interpret the experience, choice and action of a particular character in the film to reveal the character's self. To get a true picture of the character, the choice or action must be at a pivotal point in the character's life. When the character's self is revealed, I will have a clearer understanding of the experiential montage² the film maker is arranging.³ I will also have a clearer understanding of the meaning of the film in the metaphysical dimension.

Synopsis of the Film

The film used in this study is the classic “Casablanca” (1942). In the film Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) is a cynical saloon owner in Casablanca who claims allegiance to no cause or country during World War II. Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid) is an inspirational leader in the underground movement against Germany. Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman) is Victor's wife and they are traveling together and seek passage out of Casablanca to continue the underground fight against the Germans. Victor Laszlo's life is in danger the longer he stays in Casablanca.

Rick is in possession of two exit visas but will not sell them at any price and is unwilling to give them up for “a cause.” Rick is also bitter over being jilted by Ilsa in Paris years before Victor and Ilsa showed up in Casablanca. Before Ilsa met Rick in Paris, she was mistakenly informed that Victor was killed in a German concentration camp, when she found out he was alive, she wrote Rick a note saying she could never see him again and gave no explanation. In spite of threats on his life and lucrative offers, Rick will not give up the visas...until the last scene in the movie.

The character Rick is the subject of this study. Rick suddenly makes an unexpected choice to give the visas to Victor and Ilsa. What does this choice tell us about Rick? What does this ending tell us about the experiential montage put together by the film maker? The background story in making this movie is that many endings were tried. Why is this ending so right?

Presuppositions

Rick needed to regain his belief that the human race was worth saving from the Germans. With statements like “Let the world be put out of its misery” and “I’ll die in Casablanca, it’s a good place for it” Rick appears to have given up on saving the world. Rick is touched by Victor’s dedication to the underground cause and love for Ilsa. Rick is also reassured when Ilsa finally explains what happened in Paris. Rick’s choice shows him to be a compassionate human being willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for the good of the human race.

Experiential Expressions

The participants in the study were asked to respond to the following statement: Please describe your interpretation of the reason why Rick decided to send Ilsa away on the plane with Victor.

Michael

Although Rick seemed to be neutral, *his inner feelings were on the side of Victor Laszlo. The good of the many outweigh the good of the few or the one. He also realized that Ilsa made the right decision in Paris and that he must do the same.*

Nicole

Love - *He realized that when you really love someone you want what is best for them. You allow them to follow what is in their heart.*

Patriotism - He realized that this one decision he had to make could make a major difference in the world. *He gave up his immediate personal happiness for the possibility of the state of the world to be different...better.*

Hilary

When you’re in love, you would rather give up your life so the other person could live. At the time the movie was made it wasn’t acceptable for a woman to leave her husband for another. Times have changed and if it came out now, Ilsa probably wouldn’t have stayed with Victor.

Kerstin

Rick felt that Ilsa would have regrets in the future if she left without Victor. These regrets would have tainted their future together. Ilsa may have loved Rick but she admired Victor’s strength and determination. She would eventually compare them.

Anthony

He sent her away to preserve his memory of Paris and the good times he had there with Ilsa. In order to preserve them properly no new experiences must be added to that time or the memory might once again be lost for a second time.

Emergent Experiential Themes

Sacrifice—Global Cause

- EE1 *his inner feelings were on the side of Victor Laszlo.*
- EE2 *The good of the many outweigh the good of the few or the one.*
- EE3 *He gave up his immediate personal happiness for the possibility of the state of the world to be different...better.*

Sacrifice—Love of Another

- EE4 *He realized that when you really love someone you want what is best for them.*
- EE5 *When you're in love you would rather give up your life so the other person could live.*

Self-Centeredness

- EE6 *Rick felt that Ilsa would have regrets in the future if she left without Victor. These regrets would have tainted their future together.*
- EE7 *He sent her away to preserve his memory of Paris and the good times he had there with Ilsa.*

Honor of Marriage

- EE8 *At the time the movie was made it wasn't acceptable for a woman to leave her husband for another.*
- EE9 *He realized that Ilsa made the right decision in Paris and that he must do the same.*

Thematic Amplification

Sacrifice—Global Cause

When Rick made the statement in the final scene “the lives of three people don't amount to a hill of beans in this world” he was looking beyond himself. In EE1 *his inner feelings were on the side of Victor Laszlo*, the respondent interprets Rick's acceptance of the underground cause. Rick put aside his feelings for Ilsa for the cause for which Victor was fighting. EE2

The good of the many outweigh the good of the few or the one applies here but this is a line from Mr. Spock in Star Trek. The respondent, however, feels that Rick shares the same feelings of self-sacrifice for the good of many. EE3 *He gave up his immediate happiness for the possibility of the state of the world to be different...better* says the message most directly: give up self for the good of the world. It seems Rick is good at being noble.

Sacrifice—Love of Another

Rick's love for Ilsa is the basis for this theme. EE4 *He realized that when you really love someone you want what is best for them* suggests that Rick knew that Ilsa would be better off with Victor. EE5 *When you're in love, you would rather give up your life so the other person could live* says that Rick's choice was one that put his life in jeopardy. This was so when he shot Major Strasser. He did this so Ilsa and Victor could live.

Self-Centeredness

Two respondents felt that Rick was a bit self-centered in his actions. EE6 *Rick felt that Ilsa would have regrets in the future if she left without Victor. These regrets would have tainted their future together* suggests that life would not have been so great had Rick decided to stay with Ilsa. EE7 is even more shallow *He sent her away to preserve his memory of Paris and the good times he had there with Ilsa*. This respondent feels he sent her away for the sake of a memory. These themes are in the minority.

Honor of Marriage

This theme makes Rick's choice rather simple: respect of Victor and Ilsa's marriage. EE8 *At the time the movie was made it wasn't acceptable for a woman to leave her husband for another* accounts for the traditional culture back in 1942. Rick could not possibly run away with another man's wife. EE9 *He also realized that Ilsa made the right decision in Paris and that he must do the same* says that Rick now understands fully what happened in Paris and agrees with the reasoning. She is married to Victor.

Reflective Synthesis

Rick's choice held implications not only for three people but also the fate of the world. The dominant theme reveals a person who has sacrificed his own happiness for the good of the world and an individual he cares for very much. This also shows how a person who is very bitter can dramatically transform their attitude towards a higher plane of values.

The experiential montage by the film maker is about ideals lost and regained. The unfinished love affair is like an open wound that needs to heal

before a person can rise to a higher plane of ideals. Rick was a person with high ideals at one time who lost them in a bad love affair. But Rick's situation was not hopeless once the wound healed. The ending to this movie is perfect because it shows the actions of high ideals.

Louis, the Prefect of Police in Casablanca, had Rick pegged all the time. Rick did have the heart of a sentimentalist and he showed it in a big way with his actions.

Notes

- 1) Sunnie D. Kidd and James W. Kidd, *Experiential Method: Qualitative Research in the Humanities Using Metaphysics and Phenomenology* (Bern: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1990).
- 2) Sunnie D. Kidd, "Experiential Montage: The Interpersonal Self", *Migrant Echo*, X, no. 2 (May-August 1981).
- 3) Sunnie D. Kidd, "Experiential-Cinematographical Montage: Hermeneutics in Play", *International Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Spirituality*, 2, no. 2 (1993).

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