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Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage*

UMBERTO ECO

1. *Cult*

"Was it the cannon fire or is my heart pounding?" Whenever *Casablanca* is shown, at this point the audience reacts with an enthusiasm usually reserved for football. Sometimes a single word is enough: fans cry every time Bogey says "kid." Frequently the spectators quote the best lines before they are uttered.

According to the traditional standards in aesthetics, *Casablanca* is not a work of art—if such an expression still means anything. In any case, if the films of Dreyer, Eisenstein, or Antonioni are works of art, *Casablanca* represents a very modest aesthetic achievement. It is a hodgepodge of sensational scenes strung together implausibly; its characters are psychologically incredible, its actors act in a manneristic way. Nevertheless, it is a great example of cinematic discourse, a palimpsest for the future students of twentieth-century religiosity, a paramount laboratory for semiotic research in textual strategies. Moreover, it has become a cult movie.

What are the requirements for transforming a book or a movie into a cult object? The work must be loved, obviously, but this is not enough. It must provide a completely furnished world, so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were part of the beliefs of a sect, a private world of their own, a world about which one can play puzzle games and trivia contests, and whose adepts recognize each other through a common competence. Of course all these elements (characters and episodes) must have some archetypal appeal, as we shall see. One can ask and answer questions about the various stations of the subway in New York or Paris only if these spots have become or have been taken as mythical areas, and such names as "Canarsy Line" or "Vincennes-Neuilly" do not only stand for physical places, but become the catalyzers of collective memories.

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It is curious how a book can give rise to a cult even though it is a great work of art. Both *The Three Musketeers* and *The Divine Comedy* rank among the cult books — and there are more trivia games among the fans of Dante than among the fans of Dumas. On the contrary, I suspect, a cult movie must display some organic imperfections: it seems that the boastful *Rio Bravo* is a cult movie whereas the great *Stagecoach* is not.

I think that in order to transform a work into a cult object one must be able to unhinge it, to break it up or take it apart so that one then may remember only parts of it, regardless of their original relationship to the whole. With a book, one can unhinge it manually, so to speak, dismembering it into a series of excerpts. A movie, on the contrary, must be already wobbly and disjointed in itself. For a perfect movie, which cannot be reread every time we want or from the place we choose, as it happens with a book, remains in our memory as a whole, in the form of a central idea or emotion; only a disjointed movie survives as a disconnected series of images, of peaks, of visionary icebergs. To become cult, a movie should not display a central idea but many. It should not exhibit a coherent philosophy of composition. It must live on in and because of its glorious incoherence.

However, it must have some qualities. Let me say that it may be disjointed from the point of view of its production (in the sense that nobody knew exactly what had to be done — as is evidently the case with *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*), but yet it must display certain textual features since, beyond the conscious control of the producer, it has become a sort of textual syllabus, a living example of living textuality. In the face of this, the addressee must suspect that it is not true that works are created by their authors. Works are created by works, texts are created by texts, and all together they speak to and with one another independently of the intentions of their authors. A cult movie is the proof that, as literature comes from literature, cinema also comes from cinema.

Which are the elements of a movie that can be dislocated from the whole and adored for themselves? In order to go on with this analysis of *Casablanca*, I should use some important semiotic categories, such as the ones (provided by the Russian Formalists) of theme and motif. I confess that I find very difficult to ascertain what the various Russian Formalists meant by motif. If — according to Veselovskij — a motif is the simplest narrative unit, then one wonders why “fire from heaven” should belong to the same category as “the persecuted maid” (since the former can be represented by an image, while the latter requires a certain narrative development). It would be interesting to follow Tomacevskij and to look, in *Casablanca*, for free and tied motifs or for dynamic and static motifs. We should distinguish between more or less universal narrative functions à la Propp, visual stereotypes like the Cynic Adventurer, and more complex archetypal situations like the Unhappy Love. I hope that someone will do such a job, but let me today assume, more prudently (and borrowing the concept from the research in artificial intelligence), the more flexible notion of “frame.”

In my *The Role of the Reader* I distinguished between common and intertext-

tual frames. By common frame I meant data-structures for representing stereotyped situations like dining at a restaurant or going to the railway station; that is, a sequence of actions which are more or less coded by our normal competence. And by intertextual frames I meant stereotyped situations coming from the previous textual tradition and recorded by our encyclopedia, such as, for example, the duel between the sheriff and the bad guy or the narrative situation in which the Hero fights against the Villain and wins; as well as more macroscopic textual situations, such as the story of the *vierge souillée* or the classical scene of the recognition (Bakhtin considered this a motif, in the sense of a chronotope). We could distinguish between stereotyped intertextual frames (for instance, the Drunkard Redeemed by Love) and stereotyped iconographical units (for instance, the Evil Nazi). But since even these iconographical units, when they appear in a movie, if they do not directly elicit an action, at least suggest its possible development, we can use the notion of intertextual frame to cover both.

We are interested, moreover, in finding out those frames which not only are recognizable by the audience as belonging to a sort of ancestral intertextual tradition, but which also display a particular fascination. "A suspect who escapes a pass control and is shot by the police" is undoubtedly an intertextual frame, but it does not have a "magic" flavor. Let us take intuitively the idea of "magic" frame. Let us define as "magic" those frames which, when appearing in a movie, and when then separated from the whole, transform this movie into a cult movie. In *Casablanca* we can find more intertextual frames than "magic" intertextual frames. Let us call these latter *intertextual archetypes*.

The term "archetype" here does not pretend to have any particular psychoanalytic or mythic connotation, but serves only to indicate a pre-established and frequently re-appearing narrative situation that is cited or in some way recycled by innumerable other texts, and provokes in the addressee a sort of intense emotion accompanied by the vague feeling of a *déjà vu* that everybody yearns to see again. I would not say that an intertextual archetype is necessarily "universal." It can belong to a rather recent textual tradition, as it happens with certain "topoi" of slapstick comedy. It is sufficient to consider it as a topos or standard situation that comes to be particularly appealing to a given cultural area or historical period.

2. *The Making of "Casablanca"*

"Can I tell you a story?" asks Ilse. Then she adds: "I don't know the ending yet."

Rick says: "Go on. Tell it. Maybe one'll come to you as you go along."

Rick's line is a sort of epitome of *Casablanca* itself. According to Ingrid Bergman, it seems that the film was being made at the same time as it was being shot. Until the last moment not even Michael Curtiz knew whether Ilse would leave with Rick or with Victor, and it is plausible that Ingrid Bergman

appears so fascinatingly mysterious because she did not know which man she should look at more tenderly. This explains why, in the story, she in fact does not choose her fate, but rather is chosen.

When you do not know how to deal with a story, you put in it stereotyped situations because you know that they, at least, have already worked elsewhere. Take a marginal but revealing example. Each time Laszlo orders something to drink (and it happens four times) he changes his choice: (i) cointreau, (ii) cocktail, (iii) cognac, and (iv) whiskey (once he drinks champagne but does not ask for it). Why such confusing and confused drinking habits in a man endowed with an ascetic temper? There is no psychological reason for that. My guess is simply that each time Curtiz was quoting, unconsciously, similar situations in other movies and trying to provide a reasonably complete sampling.

Thus one is tempted to read *Casablanca* as T. S. Eliot read *Hamlet*, attributing its fascination not to the fact that it was a successful work (actually he considered it one of Shakespeare's less fortunate efforts), but to the imperfection of its composition. He viewed *Hamlet* as the result of an unsuccessful fusion of several earlier versions of the story, so that the puzzling ambiguity of the main character was due to the author's difficulty in putting together different topics. So both critics and public find *Hamlet* beautiful because it is interesting, believing it is interesting because it is beautiful.

On a smaller scale the same thing happened to *Casablanca*. Forced to improvise a plot, the authors whipped up a little of everything, and everything they put in came from a repertoire that had stood the test of time. When only a few stock formulas are used, the result is simply kitsch. But when the repertoire of formulas is used wholesale, then the result is an architecture like Gaudi's Holy Family Church — the same vertigo, the same stroke of genius.

3. *Stop By Stop*

Every story plays upon one or more archetypes. Usually, to make a good story a single archetype is enough. But *Casablanca* is not satisfied with that: it uses them all.

It would be nice to identify our archetypes scene by scene and shot by shot, stopping the tape at every relevant step. Every time I have scanned *Casablanca* with very cooperative research groups, the whole business has taken many hours. Besides, when a team starts this kind of game, the chances of stopping the videotape grow proportionally according to the size of the audience. Each member of the team sees something the others did not, and many start projecting into the movie their memories of other movies made after *Casablanca* — which seems to be the normal situation for a cult movie and which suggests that perhaps the best deconstructive readings should be made upon unhinged texts (or that deconstruction is simply a way of breaking texts).

I think, however, that the first twenty minutes of the film represent a kind of review of the principal archetypes. Once they have been assembled, without

any concern for synthesis, then the story begins to suggest a sort of savage syntax of the archetypal elements and organizes them in multilevelled oppositions. *Casablanca* looks like a musical piece with an extraordinarily long overture where every theme is exhibited according to a monodic line. Only later the symphonic work takes place. In a way, the first twenty minutes could be analyzed by a Russian Formalist and the rest by a Greimasian.

So, let me try just a sample analysis of the first part. I think that a real text-analytical work on *Casablanca* is still to be done. I merely offer here some hints to future researchers who will implement, some day, a complete reconstruction of its deep textual structure.

First, African music, then, the Marseillaise. Two different genres are evoked: the adventure movie and the patriotic movie.

Third genre: the newsreel. Over the image of the globe, the voice off suggests the news report. Fourth genre: the odyssey of the refugees. Fifth genre: Casablanca and Lisbon are, traditionally, high places of international intrigue. Thus, in two minutes, five genres are evoked at the same time.

Casablanca-Lisbon. Passage to the Promised Land (Lisbon-America). Casablanca is the Magic Door. We still do not know what is the Magic Key and by which Magic Horse one can reach the Promised Land.

"Wait, wait, wait." To make the passage one must submit to a Test. The Long Expectation. Purgatory.

"Deutschland über alles." The German anthem introduces the theme of the Barbarians.

The Kashbah. Pepé le Moko. Confusion, robberies, violence, and repression.

Pétain (Vichy) vs. the Cross of Lorena. See at the end the same opposition closing the story: Vichy water versus Joining the Resistance. War Propaganda movie.

The Magic Key: the visa. It is around the winning of the Magic Key that passions are unleashed. Captain Renault is the Guardian of the Door or the boatman of the Acheron, to be conquered by a Magic Gift (money or sex).

The Magic Horse: the airplane. The airplane flies over Rick's "*Café Americain*" recalling the Promised Land of which the Café is the reduced-scale model.

Major Strasser shows up. Theme of the Barbarians and their emasculated slaves. "Je suis l'empire à la fin de la décadence / qui regarde passer les grands barbares blancs / en composant des acrostiques indolents. . . ."

"Everybody comes to Rick's." By quoting the original play, Renault introduces the audience to the Café. The interior: the Foreign Legion (each character has a different nationality and a different story to tell—as well as his own skeleton in the closet), Grand Hotel (people come and people go, and nothing ever happens), the Mississippi River Boat, the New Orleans Brothel (with the black piano player), the Inferno of Gambling in Macao or Singapore (with Chinese women), the Smugglers' Paradise, the Last Outpost on the Edge of the Desert. Rick's place is a magic circle where everything can happen—love, death, pursuit, espionage, games of chance, seductions, music, patriotism. Limited resources and the unity of place, due to the theatrical origin of the story, suggested an admirable condensation of events in a single setting. One can identify the usual paraphernalia of at least ten exotic genres.

Rick slowly shows up, first by a synecdoche (his hand), then by a metonymy (the check). The various aspects of the contradictory (plurifilmic) personality of Rick are introduced: the Fatal Adventurer, the Self-Made Businessman (money is money), the Tough Guy from a gangster movie, Our Man in Casablanca (international intrigue), the Cynic. Later he will also be characterized as the Hemingway Hero (he helped the Ethiopians and the Spaniards against fascism). He does not drink. This undoubtedly represents a nice problem, for later Rick must play the role of the Redeemed Drunkard, and he has to be made a drunk (as Disillusioned Lover) so that he can be redeemed. But the face of Bogey supports pretty well this unbearable amount of contradictory psychological features.

The Magic Key itself: the transit letters. Rick receives them from Peter Lorre, and from this moment everybody wants them. How to avoid thinking of Sam Spade and of *The Maltese Falcon*?

Music Hall. Mr. Ferrari. Change of genre: comedy with flippant dialogue. Rick is now the Disenchanted Lover, or the Cynical Seducer.

Rick vs. Renault. The Charming Scoundrels.

The theme of the Magic Horse and of the Promised Land returns.

Roulette as the Game of Life and Death (Russian Roulette that devours fortunes and can destroy the happiness of the Bulgarian Couple, the Epiphany of Innocence). The Dirty Trick: cheating at cards. At this point the Trick is an Evil one, but later on it will be a Good one, providing a way to the Magic Key for the Bulgarian bride.

Arrest and attempted escape of Ugarte. Action movie.

Laszlo and Ilse. The Uncontaminated Hero and the Femme Fatale, both in white—always; clever opposition with the Germans, usually in black. In

the meeting at Laszlo's table, Strasser is in white, in order to reduce the opposition. However, Strasser and Ilse are the Beauty and the Beast. The Norwegian agent: spy movie.

The Desperate Lover. Drink to Forget.

The Faithful Servant and his Beloved Master. Don Quijote and Sancho.

Play it (again, Sam). Anticipated quotation of Woody Allen.

The long flashback begins. Flashback as a content and flashback as a form. Quotation of the flashback as a topical stylistic device. The Power of Memory. The Last Time I Saw Paris. Two Weeks in Another City. Brief Encounter. French movies of the thirties (the station as *Quai des Brumes*).

At this point the review of the archetypes is more or less complete. There is still the moment when Rick plays the Rough Diamond (who allows the Bulgarian bride to win) and two typical situations: the scene of the Marseillaise and the two lovers discovering that Love Is Forever. The gift to the Bulgarian bride (along with the enthusiasm of the waiters), the Marseillaise, and the Love Scene are three instances of the rhetorical figure of Climax, as the quintessence of Drama (each climax coming obviously with its own anti-climax). Now the story can elaborate upon its elements.

The first symphonic elaboration comes with the second scene around the roulette. We discover for the first time that the Magic Key (which everybody believed to be affordable only by money) can in fact be given only as a Gift, a Gift that rewards Purity. The Donor will be Rick. He gives the money (free) to the Bulgarian couple, and he gives the visa (free) to Laszlo. Actually there is also a third Gift, the one Rick makes of his own desire, sacrificing himself. The receiver of this gift is the uncontaminated Laszlo, for (and please notice) there is no gift for Ilse, who in some sense, even though innocent, has betrayed two men. By becoming the Donor, Rick finds Redemption. No one impure can reach the Promised Land. But Rick and Renault redeem themselves and so can reach toward the other Promised Land — not America (which is Paradise), but the Resistance, the Holy War (which is a glorious Purgatory). Laszlo flies directly to Paradise because he has already undergone the Ordeal of clandestinity. Moreover, Rick is not the only one to make a sacrifice: the idea of sacrifice pervades the whole story, from Ilse's sacrifice in Paris when she abandons the man she loves to return to the wounded hero, to the Bulgarian bride's sacrifice when she is prepared to give herself to help her husband, up to Victor's sacrifice when he is resigned to see Ilse with Rick in order to guarantee her safety.

The second symphonic elaboration is upon the theme of the Unhappy Love. Unhappy for Rick, who loves Ilse and cannot have her. Unhappy for Ilse, who

loves Rick and cannot live with him. Unhappy for Victor, who understands that he has not really kept Ilse. The interplay of unhappy loves produces various twists and turns. In the beginning Rick is unhappy because he does not understand why Ilse left him. Then Victor is unhappy because he does not understand why Ilse is attracted to Rick, or when it happened for the first time. Finally, Ilse is unhappy because she does not understand why Rick makes her leave with her husband.

These unhappy loves are arranged in a triangle. But in the normal adulterous triangle there is a Betrayed Husband and a Victorious Lover, while in this case both men are betrayed and suffer a loss.

In this defeat, however, an additional element plays a part, so subtly it almost escapes the level of consciousness. Quite subliminally, a hint of Platonic Love is established. Rick admires Victor, Victor is ambiguously attracted by the personality of Rick, and it seems that at a certain point each of the two plays out a duel of self-sacrifice to please the other. In any case, as in Rousseau's *Confessions*, the woman is an intermediary between the two men. She herself does not bear any positive value (except, obviously, Beauty): the whole story is a virile affair, a dance of seduction between Male Heroes.

From now on the film implements the definitive construction of its intertwined triangles, to end with the final resolution: the Supreme Sacrifice and the Redeemed Bad Guys. Notice that, if the redemption of Rick has been set up or foreshadowed quite early on, Renault's redemption is absolutely unjustified. It apparently comes only because this was the final requirement to meet, on the part of the movie, in order to be a perfect Epos of Frames.

4. *The Archetypes Hold a Reunion*

Casablanca is a cult movie precisely because all the archetypes are there, because each actor repeats a part played in other occasions, and because the characters live not the "real" life of human beings, but a life as stereotypically portrayed by previous films. *Casablanca* brings with it the scent of *déjà vu* to such an extent that the spectator is ready to see in it also what happened after it. It is not until *To Have and Have Not* that Bogey played the role of the Hemingway hero, but here he appears "already" loaded with Hemingwayesque connotations for the simple diegetic detail that Rick fought in Spain. Peter Lorre trails behind him reminiscences of Fritz Lang; Conrad Veidt wraps his German officer in a faint perfume from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*—he is not a ruthless technological Nazi, but a nocturnal and diabolical Caesar.

Casablanca has succeeded in becoming a cult movie because it is not *one* movie. It is "the movies." And this is the reason it works, in spite of any aesthetic theory. For it stages the powers of Narrativity in its natural state, before art intervenes to tame it. This is why we accept that the characters change mood, morality, and psychology from one moment to the next, that conspirators cough

to interrupt the conversation when a spy approaches, that bar girls weep at the sound of the Marseillaise. . . .

When all the archetypes burst in shamelessly, we reach Homeric depths. Two clichés make us laugh, but a hundred clichés move us because we sense dimly that the clichés are talking among themselves and celebrating a reunion.

Just as extreme pain meets sensual pleasure, and extreme perversion borders on mystical energy, so does extreme banality allow us to catch a glimpse of the Sublime. Nobody would have been able to achieve such a cosmic result intentionally. Nature has spoken here in place of men. If nothing else, this is a phenomenon worthy of veneration.

5. *Cult Culture*

The structure of *Casablanca* helps us to understand what happens in those movies that are *born in order to become cult objects*.

What *Casablanca* does unconsciously, other movies will do with an extreme intertextual awareness—and with the expectation that the spectator be equally aware of their purposes. These are “postmodern” movies, where the quotation of the topos is recognized as the only way to cope with the burden of our encyclopedical filmic competence.

Think, for instance, of *Bananas*, with its explicit quotation of the Odessa steps sequence from Eisenstein’s *Potemkin*. In *Casablanca* one enjoys the quotation even though one does not recognize it, and those who do recognize it feel as belonging to the same clique. In *Bananas* those who do not catch the topos cannot enjoy the scene, while those who do simply feel smart.

Another (and different) case is the quotation of the topical duel between the black Arab giant with his scimitar and the unprotected hero in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. If you remember, the topos suddenly turns into another one, as the unprotected hero is transformed, in a split second, into The Fastest Gun in the West. Here the naive viewer is allowed to miss the quotation, except that his or her enjoyment will then be pretty trivial; and the real enjoyment is reserved for the people accustomed to cult movies, who know the whole repertoire of “magic” archetypes. In a way, *Bananas* works for cultivated *cinephiles* and film buffs, while *Raiders* works for *Casablanca* addicts.

The third case is the one of *E. T.*, when the alien is brought outside under a Halloween disguise and meets the dwarf from *The Empire Strikes Back*. You remember that E.T. is startled and then runs to greet him (or it). Here nobody can enjoy the scene if they do not share, at least, the following elements of intertextual competence:

- (i) they must know where the second character comes from (Spielberg citing Lucas),
- (ii) they must know something about the relationship between the two directors,

(iii) they must know that both monsters have been designed by Rambaldi and that, consequently, they are linked by some form of brotherhood.

The required competence is not only inter-cinematic. It is inter-media, in the sense that the spectator must know not only other movies, but the whole of massmedia gossip about the movies. This third example presupposes a "Casablanca universe" in which cult has become the normal way of enjoying movies. Thus, in this case, we witness an instance of meta-cult, or of cult about cult — a cult culture.

It would be semiotically uninteresting to look for quotations of archetypes in *Raiders* or in *Indiana Jones*: they were conceived within a meta-semiosical culture, and what the semiotician can find in them is exactly what the directors put there. Spielberg and Lucas are semiotically nourished authors working for a culture of instinctive semioticians.

With *Casablanca* things go differently. So *Casablanca* explains *Raiders*, but *Raiders* does not explain *Casablanca*. At most it can explain the new ways in which *Casablanca* will be received in the next years.

A day will come, and it will be a sad one, in which an overly smart, oversophisticated audience will read *Casablanca*, as conceived by Michael Curtiz, after having read Calvino and *Communications* 4. That will be sad, but it will happen. Only in the course of this symposium have we been able to discover, for the last time, the Truth.

Après nous, le deluge.