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Émigrés in Hollywood

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Finding Hope in *Casablanca*'s Deceit

In Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca*, it's the brink of World War II. And from the very beginning of the film, Humphrey Bogart's character, Rick, refuses to associate with any political party – he focuses on keeping his bar and casino, Rick's Café Americain, running smoothly. The film never strays much from this smoky, alcohol-ridden locale: it serves as a sort of layover as Europeans try to obtain Visas to escape to the United States. The symbolism behind this is fitting: it's a time of transition for Europe and the United States just as much as it is for the individuals in the film. Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects from behind the scenes, then, is that all of the actors in the film except for two are foreign actors, who were experiencing this time of transition first hand.

There is no doubt that Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* left a lasting impression on the film community. Created in 1942, *Casablanca* came during a time of confusion, fear, and fleeing for many people. Starring Humphrey Bogart, an infamous Hollywood heartthrob, and Ingrid Bergman, *Casablanca* quickly achieved “classic” status with its seemingly infinite number of unforgettable lines. What is so compelling is how much of society's own fears and concerns subtly added to the film. The most prevalent and obvious theme throughout the film, though, is all the deception that occurs among the characters. Everyone is lying to everybody else about something, whether it is political, legal, or personal.

Rick prides himself on his neutrality. He never allows any person's story to influence him and he never falls in love. One of his famous lines when asked by a woman if she will see him later that night is, "I never make plans that far ahead," as he lights another cigarette, not phased in the slightest by the proposition. Every hero has his or her weakness; Rick's just happens that Rick's is his first love, Isla, with whom he had previously had a brief tryst in Paris. It is compelling, then, when his one weakness walks into his bar "of all the gin joints, in all the towns, in all the world." It seems fitting that his weakness would be the only one able to suddenly pull Rick into the dangerous world of political and romantic espionage.

A common theme throughout the film is deception. It is present from the very beginning: "I'm shocked, shocked to find that gambling is going on here!" an officer of the law says, only to follow with "Oh thank you very much!" when handed his winnings from the night. The authorities fuel the corruption because, not only are they ignoring the issue, they are supporting it. Political deception is not the only form in the film, however. Shortly after in the film, the audience learns how emotional deception becomes an important theme. Rick learns that Isla had been engaged to be married during their brief romance, which was also the reason she wrote the letter stating that she could not accompany him from Paris. Their very relationship was based on deception and continues that way when they rekindle their affair.

The lies continue on to the very end of the movie, both personally and politically. In the very last scene, Rick lies to Isla: she thinks that her husband, Victor, is going to get on a plane to the United States alone and that she will stay in Casablanca with Rick to live happily ever after. But again, Rick reveals that he has lied to her, offering the

famous words of comfort, “We’ll always have Paris,” and one final repetition of, “Here’s lookin’ at you, kid” before forcing her onto the plane with Victor. As the plane prepares to take off, Rick shoots Major Strasser, a man determined to imprison Rick, in front of Louis, the very same officer who had previously turned the other cheek to the gambling in Rick’s Café Americain. Louis looks at the smoking gun in Rick’s hand and commands his subordinates to “round up the usual suspects,” furthering the untruths and corruption so prevalent in Casablanca.

Even Victor, who oftentimes seems like the most honest character, deceives the law throughout the film. It is common knowledge that he partakes in the underground movement and actively attends all the meetings in Casablanca. He spends much of his scenes in the film avoiding the police officers, leading them on wild goose chases, so he can eventually make it to the meetings. He is a heroic character, determined to stand up for what is right. He is a man inspired and motivated by his wife, a man who needs his wife to continue living, which is why the film’s true hero, Rick, acts selflessly at the end in relinquishing Isla to Victor.

For all of these falsehoods to be occurring at such a vulnerable and volatile time in history is an interesting concept. Because the world was on the edge of global war both in the film and in reality, it should have been a priority for people to be honest and to come together to maintain peace and serenity or to try to reach a political compromise. *Casablanca* simply highlights what such a period of fear and chaos drives people to do: they lie, cheat, deceive, and rally for their own causes at the expense of others. Chaos and uncertainty cause people to become extremely selfish for the most part, which is why

Isla and Victor had fled Europe in the first place; they were trying to get to America so they could be free of European control.

It is interesting to watch *Casablanca* today because the audience today knows the outcome of the war whereas the characters in the film, as well as the actors who played them, did not. They were genuinely fearful that the German Nazi's were going to take over Europe. But despite this fear, *Casablanca* is filled with moments of patriotism. The scene in Rick's Café Americain where the Germans begin their anthem and then the French chime in with Marseilles, overpowering the Germans, is one of the most moving scenes in the whole film. Through all the lies and tricks, all the fear and uncertainty, the audience feels a sense of contentment at the end of the film, as if good will prevail and the Nazis will be stopped, which is just what people needed at the time. It is why the film remains a classic and leaves such an impact on its viewers. Michael Curtiz fantastically transformed the feelings of his actors and much of the world to the silver screen through lovable characters, despite their flaws. His mix of patriotism kept the hope for a better future alive in a time when his audience most needed it and even today, audiences appreciate the film's many layers.