

Essay #4—Film Analysis

For this assignment, choose a film from the list below and write a paper in which you argue for the significance of some aspect of it. Your essay can consist of a discussion of symbolism, of character, of setting, of point of view, a particular scene in the film that seems to you to be especially significant. . . anything, in other words, that you think a closer examination of will lead us to a deeper understanding of the film you've chosen.

Keep in mind: analysis is NOT the same as “review,” which is, to borrow a phrase, a thumbs-up/thumbs-down assessment of the film, and it most definitely is NOT the same as a retelling of the film's story. Keep in mind as well that because you'll be engaged in the work of interpretation, you'll need to pay close attention to what you see and hear, but it's understood that the possibility exists for multiple interpretations. But more to the point: Don't just tell me the obvious; make a case for why something is as it is in the film you choose. For example, Yes—I *know* Tyler Durden is a projection of the central character in *Fight Club*. Your job for a paper like this is to make a case for *why* the film chooses to tell the story it does in this way and not some other way.

Here are some other examples of the sorts of questions that will work for this paper: What would you argue is the significance of *Caché*'s opening sequence as it relates to the rest of the film? What do you think *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* has to say about the nature of Love? In *A Fistful of Dollars*, would you say that Clint Eastwood's character is at base a good man or a bad man, and how do you know this? *Memento* tells its main story backwards; why tell this story in such an unusual manner? Though *The Conversation* was made in 1974, what do you think it might have to tell us today about the subject of technology and privacy? And so on.

Following the film list, you'll see a sample of my writing on *Casablanca* that does the sorts of things I hope you'll do if you choose to write about a film. (Sorry for the relatively unedited nature of the piece; if you are curious about where the hyperlinks lead, you're welcome to visit the original post at my blog, *Blog Meridian*.) You are welcome to refer to outside sources for this assignment, if you wish; but if you do, you are expected to cite them properly and provide a separate Works Cited page.

Here are the films from which you may choose:

*8 1/2* (1963; dir. Federico Fellini; Italian, subtitles)  
*2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968; dir. Stanley Kubrick)  
*Adaptation.* (2002; dir. Spike Jonz)  
*The Age of Innocence* (1993; dir. Martin Scorsese)  
*Amélie* (2001; dir. Jean-Pierre Jeunet; French, subtitles)  
*American Beauty* (1999; dir. Sam Mendes)  
*Apocalypse Now* (director's cut) (1979; dir. Francis Ford Coppola)  
*Barton Fink* (1991; dir. Joel Coen)  
*Be Kind, Rewind* (2008; dir. Michel Gondry)  
*Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012; dir. Benh Zeitlin)  
*Being John Malkovic* (1999; dir. Spike Jonz)  
*Being There* (1979; dir. Hal Ashby)  
*Big Fish* (2003; dir. Tim Burton)  
*Blade Runner* (director's cut) (1982; dir. Ridley Scott)  
*Blue Velvet* (1986; dir. David Lynch)  
*Caché (Hidden)* (2005; dir. Michael Haneke ; French, subtitles)  
*Citizen Kane* (1941; dir. Orson Welles)  
*Coffee and Cigarettes* (2003; dir. Jim Jarmusch)  
*The Conversation* (1974; dir. Francis Ford Coppola)  
*La Dolce Vita* (1960; dir. Federico Fellini; Italian, subtitles)  
*Dr. Strangelove* (1964; dir. Stanley Kubrick)  
*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004; dir. Michel Gondry)  
*Fight Club* (1999; dir. David Fincher)

*A Fistful of Dollars* (1964; dir. Sergio Leone)  
*Girl with a Pearl Earring* (2003; dir. Peter Webber)  
*The Godfather* (1972; dir. Francis Ford Coppola)  
*The Graduate* (1967; dir. Mike Nichols)  
*Her* (2013; dir. Spike Jonze)  
*High Noon* (1952; dir. Fred Zinnemann)  
*Koyaanisqatsi* (1982; dir. Godfrey Reggio)  
*Lost in Translation* (2003; dir. Sofia Coppola)  
*The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001; dir. Joel Coen)  
*The Manchurian Candidate* (1962; dir. John Frankenheimer)  
*Memento* (2000; dir. Christopher Nolan)  
*Naqoyqatsi* (2002; dir. Godfrey Reggio)  
*No Country for Old Men* (2007; dir. Ethan and Joel Coen)  
*O Brother Where Art Thou?* (2000; dir. Joel Coen) (If you choose this one, also watch *Sullivan's Travels* (1941; dir. Preston Sturges))  
*Open Your Eyes* (1997; dir. Alejandro Amenábar; Spanish, subtitles)  
*Powaqqatsi* (1988; dir. Godfrey Reggio)  
*Rashomon* (1950; dir. Akira Kurosawa; Japanese, subtitles)  
*Rear Window* (1954; dir. Alfred Hitchcock)  
*Russian Ark* (2002; dir. Aleksandr Sokurov; Russian, subtitles)  
*Le Samourai* (1967; dir. Jean-Pierre Melville; French, subtitles)  
*Stranger Than Fiction* (2006; dir. Marc Forster)  
*Synecdoche, New York* (2008; dir. Charlie Kaufman)  
*Talk to Her* (2002; dir. Pedro Almodóvar; Spanish, subtitles)  
*The Third Man* (1949; dir. Carol Reed)  
*The Tree of Life* (2011; dir. Terence Malick)  
*The Truman Show* (1998; dir. Peter Weir)  
*Up in the Air* (2009; dir. Jason Reitman)  
*Vertigo* (1958; dir. Alfred Hitchcock)  
*WALL-E* (2008; dir. Andrew Stanton)  
*Where the Wild Things Are* (2009; dir. Spike Jonze)

If you think it might be helpful, you can find scripts for many films online; also be advised, though, that these are usually *shooting scripts* and thus will not always and everywhere correspond with what finally makes it onscreen. In fact, an interesting variation on the assignment might be to discuss a finished scene that varies in significant ways from the shooting script and make an argument for what is gained or lost as a result of those differences; just as one example, that there are considerable differences between *Vertigo's* shooting script and what the viewer sees on the screen.

## Where I'm going, you can't follow": On chess boards, *Casablanca* and postmodern space

(from *Blog Meridian*, 3 July 2011. Web. Accessed 25 October 2012.)



A still from Humphrey Bogart's first scene in *Casablanca*. On the set, Bogart played chess with Claude Rains and Paul Henreid; it was Bogart's idea to have the chess board be Rick's stage business as he talks with Ugarte. According to Roger Ebert's commentary in the [edition](#) of *Casablanca* I have, Bogart preferred chess to poker because in chess, no one can cheat. Image found [here](#).

[UPDATE: [This piece in chessville.com](#) is something of a summation of attempts to explain *Casablanca*'s enduring appeal. It includes a nice discussion of the details of Rick's chess board and chess's larger semiotic function in the film--in particular, for both chess and the film, the significance of Rick's playing black.]

Humphrey Bogart doesn't have a traditional entrance in *Casablanca*. He doesn't walk into a scene. Rather, it's more like the audience makes *its* entrance into *Rick's* scene--which is to say, his space: the camera, taking on the point of view of a customer at Rick's who moves through the bar's entrance and seating areas and observing all the bargaining and haggling for papers, for money, for favors, then moves toward a table on which we see a drink, an ashtray, a chess board with a game in progress, and the hands of someone signing someone's tab for a waiter. (Perhaps he's signing our tab--after all, the scene is shot to appear as though we're accompanying the waiter who brings it.) The camera then pulls back to show Rick contemplating the board, holding one of his opponent's already-captured pieces.

The board itself isn't the scene's focus, of course; if it were meant to be, director Michael Curtiz would have made it thus. (Ebert in his commentary remarks several times on Curtiz's economy as a director; with very few exceptions, Ebert says, every shot we see in *Casablanca* functions to help move the story along.) Still, in those shots in which we see the board in this scene, there seem to be some continuity problems that are worth pondering in their own right. Each time it appears, it is as though we're seeing a different game: at least two shots show different, well-advanced games; two others show a board whose game has barely begun, if at all. I think, to be honest, that the only work the chess board is intended to do here is just be a chess board and thus serve as an outward sign of Rick's careful, strategic thinking. We're probably not supposed to notice the pieces' very different arrangements on the board; the film's continuity editor (if it had one) either missed the problem or decided (or Curtiz did) that it didn't matter. But let's imagine for a bit that these inconsistencies are in fact intentional. Then, we can read the chess board as conveying the idea of *different* games being played simultaneously, all of them on one board, as we stand there waiting for Rick to OK our tab. Rick is in his bar all night, every night. Each night is a new series of simultaneous games for him--in those opening scenes, Rick deals with a bewildering variety of customers and they with each other--all playing out in the space of his bar, whose very tables are laid out like squares of a grid. [Aside: compare the interior of Rick's to the chaotic interior of Ferrari's bar, the Blue Parrot.]

Perhaps that is why, in the scene(s) involving the chessboard(s), we never see who Rick's opponent(s) is/are.

"Everybody comes to Rick's," Captain Renault tells Major Strasser earlier in the film. Perhaps, potentially, everyone is Rick's opponent. Even--and especially--Ilsa: the one person most capable of hurting Rick—because, we will learn, she already has.



Ilsa confronts Rick in his office. Note the shadow pattern on the walls behind her; click in the image to enlarge. Image found [here](#).

Again: The last thing I'm claiming here is that Curtiz intends for the chess board to work in his movie in the way I've described it above. However, I do want to claim that these apparent errors in fact end up reinforcing *Casablanca's* strong sense of de-centeredness, of the city's being comprised of façades behind which little if anything (and certainly nothing pleasant) withstands closer scrutiny. Better put, *Casablanca* shows us a constantly-shifting space with no constants ruling apart from a far-off, bureaucratic System and, within this place on the periphery of that System's domain, most everyone's acting solely out of his/her self-interest. Few if any here are traditionally Good or Bad; all have in them the potential to be either, though corruption in this place is far more likely than redemption is. We have vague allusions to shadowy pasts; multiple rumors of deaths that turn out not to have been true--or, as Laslow says of the five different rumors regarding his death, "True every single time"; language either emptied of meaning or obliquely acknowledging that its speaker cannot freely speak the truth of a matter; and, presiding over all, the rhetoric and machinery of the [Surveillance State](#). In such a place, people alternate between wanting to believe in and mocking the old verities of love and disinterested sacrifice for others in service to a Greater Cause. The verities are no different from any other narrative whose intrinsic value (never mind their truth or the motives of those who act in accordance with them) can be scrutinized and adopted or mocked, too, because, after all, what does anything matter in the end? ("[I]t doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world.")

Chess boards are stylized maps on which one can assert power over another. I suspect Rick much prefers them to real maps, which depict spaces divvied up and controlled by others. I hope no one tells him, though, that he happens to be a character in a movie obsessed with maps and grids--human projections of virtual boundaries onto physical space, over which the vast majority of us have little say, much less the power to control. Consider the film's opening sequence: a raised-relief globe which turns to the western end of the Mediterranean; the camera moves toward France and, at the same time, a wipe replaces the relief map with a two-dimensional paper map that shows the circuitous route that people fleeing the Germans had to take to get to Lisbon and thence to the U.S.--this map functioning at the same time as a screen on which is projected newsreel footage of war refugees. The film's central plot device is the possessing of Letters of Transit. Rick Blaine's language often wryly comments on the conflicts between what people wish the world were and its stubborn physical and political realities. Rick says he had come to Casablanca "for the waters;" when Captain Renault asks what waters Rick means, that Casablanca is in the desert, Rick says, "I was misinformed." When the German Major Strasser asks what nationality Rick is, he replies, "A drunkard," which prompts Captain Renault to declare Rick "a citizen of the world"--yet Rick's Everyman's homeland--his saloon--cannot hide him from Ilsa: "Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she had to walk into mine." When Victor Laslow requests a table as far from Major Strasser as possible, Rick tells him, "Well, the geography may be a little difficult to arrange . . ." This world is a rootless one: with the single exception of Ferrari, the owner of the Blue Parrot, who seems to have fully assimilated into the culture of the place, it seems as though anyone who speaks on the matter would rather be somewhere, anywhere, besides Casablanca. Everyone here is in some sense a refugee. Moreover, the name aside, no one can really say what Casablanca *is* on its own terms, apart from the palimpsests the expatriates have turned it into.

*Casablanca*, in other words, is a virtual-space rendering of a place called Casablanca--and that place's correspondence to a real place by that same name is a tenuous one at best. All we know about these places, really, are what we can say about them via the suspect medium of language.

One of this blog's very first posts [asked](#) about the source(s) of *Casablanca's* enormous popularity among both cinephiles and people who just love good movies. Aside from the usual responses of "good acting" and "good story, tautly told," in that earlier post I couldn't make sense of how this film, shot on a very tight 2-month schedule and "just" one of 50 that Warner Bros. made that year, "just" one of the three films Curtiz would direct that year, is #2 on the American Film Institute's Top 100 films. As I watched it yesterday for the first time in quite a while, searching for possible answers, the simplest one of all is the one that occurred to me: It retains its immediacy despite its precise placement in time (December 1941). For this film's first audiences, it must have felt like a newsreel: A reader for Warner's first read the play on which the film is based on December 8, 1941, the day after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor; in the very week of *Casablanca's* release, the Allies had begun the North Africa campaign. For us watching it today, I daresay, it feels like we are watching our own world in embryonic form--and, if we're really thinking about the particulars of the film's romantic triangle, we're seeing just how difficult it is to love authentically, balancing self-interest and sacrifice, in such a place.

Some films, their intentions aside, just get really, really lucky. *Casablanca* appears to be one of those films.