CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Casablanca's Conscience, by Robert Weldon Whalen
Authors	Corbett, Lexie
Publication date	2024-11-01
Original Citation	Corbett, L. (2025) 'Casablanca's Conscience, by Robert Weldon Whalen', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 28, pp. 115–118. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.28.10
Type of publication	Article (not peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.28.10
Rights	© 2025, the Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/
Download date	2026-11-07 23:25:58
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/17078



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 28, 2024, pp. 115–118
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.28.10

Casablanca's Conscience, by Robert Weldon Whalen. Fordham University Press, 2024, 142 pp.

Lexie Corbett

Weaving together history, philosophy, and fiction, *Casablanca's Conscience* presents the eponymous film as one embodying timeless philosophical resonance, representing themes of concern to all people. Exile, purgatory, irony, resistance, and most especially love are the chapter headings and organisational matrix by which author Robert Whalen comprehends the continued relevance of this now eighty-two-year-old film. In *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), everybody comes to Rick's. Rick (Humphry Bogart) is a worn-out cynic with a mysterious past. His Café Americain is a non-partisan meeting place for drinks, dames, gambling, and music. When Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman), Rick's former lover, appears at the café with her husband, famed resistance fighter Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid), Rick is forced to confront his past. Casablanca, located in unoccupied Moroccan French territory, is a purgatory: a waystation for those seeking to flee Europe once and for all. In 1942, the war is reaching its zenith, and the efforts of the Nazi death machine seem unstoppable.

Casablanca has enthralled since its New York premiere in November 1942. Originally intended by Warner Brothers as a quicky studio release with no special merit, the film became immediately popular. Whalen cites Jeff Siegel's estimation that in its first year the film "garnered […] a 500% return on investment" (4). In 1943 it won three Oscars, including Best Picture. With that popularity has come an unprecedented amount of writing on the film. Whalen observes how Aljean Harmetz's 1992 history of the film includes a bibliography containing 102 titles (2). With that in mind, what does *Casablanca's Conscience* contribute to this already crowded conversation?

Casablanca's Conscience links the fictional history of the film to real history. The author, a Professor Emeritus of History at Queens University of Charlotte, has previously taken Nazi Germany as his subject in *Assassinating Hitler: Ethics and Resistance in Nazi Germany*. Indeed, the historical lens is operative here as Whalen connects the overt themes of *Casablanca* to the writing and movements of three contemporary figures: Hannah Arendt, Albert Camus, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Paradoxically, *Casablanca's Conscience* is not a history book, rather the history of both the film and the Second World War are woven into a reflection on the "memory and moral life of *Casablanca*" (2). The book asks, "whether *Casablanca*'s truths were true for" its contemporaries who, throughout their intellectual lives, queried the human condition whilst witnessing the horrors of the Second World War (2).

© *Lexie Corbett*
This article is published as Open Access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial Licence (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0) which permits non-commercial use, distribution and reproduction provided the original work is cited

As much as *Casablanca* is of its own time, it is its paradoxical timelessness that forms the core of Whalen's book. Its exploration of "themes that strike an eternal chord" are represented in Rick's stated ambivalence, the impossibility of romantic love in a complicated world, and the movements of memory in amongst the reality of purgatory, and exile (3). That *Casablanca* resists these troubles is part of its appeal, reflected in Rick's development as a character who at once says to hell with the world, while ironically making pragmatic moral decisions to better it.

Whalen's other concern is how *Casablanca* speaks to the quandaries of the human condition, both then and now. Chapter One, "Exile", situates Rick's Café Americain as a symbol of exile, a place where "no one […] is at home" (16). Whalen links this fiction with the reality of exile from the opening of the film, which takes on the characteristics of a documentary news reel when it introduces the film's setting. Indeed, few of *Casablanca*'s cast were "at home" either. Whalen notes that the vast majority of them were immigrants who had fled Europe in the course of both wars. For Arendt, Bonhoeffer, and Camus, exile was foremost in their minds. Arendt's brilliant academic career in Germany was cut short by the Nazi takeover. She fled and her German citizenship was revoked, rendering her stateless in a "world of states" (23), and further frustrating her efforts to flee Europe for America. Camus ruminated on exile in his Resistance novel, *The Plague* (*La peste*), understanding exile as an ever unfurling "dull and thick" present (22). Bonhoeffer fled in 1939 but found the sadness of his exile too much to bear, returning to Germany that same year with fatal consequences.

Chapters Two to Five function in much the same way as Chapter One: standing the production and the reception of *Casablanca* next to the writings and experiences of its three contemporaries under thematic headings. In this respect, Whalen can be a little repetitive, which occasionally results in the discussion of the film not flowing as smoothly into the discussion of the three contemporaneous writers as it could. However, the brevity of Whalen's book does not render such a flaw fatal. At 104 pages of text, the book is sufficiently compact to prevent its tendency towards repetition becoming problematic. Chapter Three, "Irony", and Chapter Four, "Love", are easily the most compelling sections of the book. Whalen sees irony as the gateway out of Casablanca, where ironic tensions "explode and love rushes in [to] lead the way out [of exile and purgatory]" (44). Discussions of how irony played into the film's production are fascinating. Writer Julius Epstein noted the chaotic nature of the screenplay such as the writers issuing rewrites mere "hours, even minutes before the scene was to be shot" (47). The writers played to this confusion on set, refusing to inform Ingrid Bergman, as Ilsa, who exactly she was supposed to be in love with—Rick or Laszlo.

For the role of Ilsa, producer Hal Wallis wanted an actress with a "luminous quality, the "embodiment of hope and love" (66). For her part, Bergman was concerned with being typecast in the romantic role and irritated with the script. "'Every morning,' she remembered, "we said, 'Well, who are we? What are we doing here?'" (66). But, ironically, Bergman's confusion over the question of love in a chaotic script influenced her performance, adding a "slightly numbed" quality that spoke to Ilsa's traumatic experiences (67).

"Love", the longest chapter, uses as its template a series of radio talks given by C.S. Lewis after the war on the subject of different forms of love. Following Lewis's classification, Whalen divides the chapter on love according to Storge (familial), Philia (friendship), Eros (romance), and

Agape (spiritual). Whalen gives the most attention to Eros in consideration of *Casablanca*'s focus on romantic love. Here, he relates the heartbreaking story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's doomed romance with Maria von Wedemeyer, which is documented in the latter's diary. Less than a year after their meeting, Bonhoeffer was arrested by the Gestapo. Though Maria continued to write, and even visit him in prison, the escalation of the war meant Bonhoeffer was moved to Flossenbürg, a concentration camp, where he was murdered. Maria was not informed of his death until Germany surrendered in May 1945. In this chapter, love is seen as a complex, multifaceted experience: articulating the reality that Eros cannot live in a vacuum, being beholden as it is to the success of other types of love. Whalen cites Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, Hannah Arendt's biographer, reflecting on how she was inspired by "amor mundi, 'love of the world,' […] and it was in that remembered and restored world, shaped by Philia/Friendship, that Eros too might flourish" (68). Such complications of love are also present in the fictional world of *Casablanca*, where Rick experiences many types of love, including Philia/friendship with the pianist, Sam (Dooley Wilson), whose recurrent theme, *As Time Goes By*, comes to embody all the thematic movements of the film. Sam as Rick's friend "transports Rick back into the forgotten world of Eros" (62). Whalen illustrates these intricacies at length, drawing together the different types of love through continuing reflection on the film alongside Arendt, Camus, and Bonhoeffer. As such he weaves a fine tapestry that illuminates the shape of life as something moulded to the needs of love.

Whalen's book is a finely tuned work, and one that reveals an unbridled passion for *Casablanca* as a timeless artwork. It is Whalen's enthusiasm that makes *Casablanca's Conscience* infinitely readable, original, informative, and even comforting. Whalen's careful organisation of the film's themes by chapter heading connect it to its philosophical matrices, while inviting readers to comprehend the film according to its time, and its timelessness. *Casablanca's Conscience* represents not only a passionate embrace on the part of the author, but a thoroughly researched reflection on human themes by way of the aesthetic movements of film art. Readers in Cinema and Media Studies will find that the book offers a keen elucidation of Second World War history and does not demand too much foreknowledge of the subject. Whalen's text puts the contemporaneous writers in context efficiently. History scholars looking to link their work to cinema will likely find the text's clear description of the relationship between the study of history and the study of film illuminating. Readers with a hard philosophical bent might find the text somewhat limited as it is a little theoretically light in that respect. However, those looking to reflect on the intersections of morals, ethics, media, and history will likely enjoy exploring the intricacies of Whalen's book. *Casablanca's Conscience* is an enjoyable and academically robust work, packed with good research, and fascinating stories. In addition, its profound reflections on themes common to all people offers something sorely lacking in most academic texts: that of a life-affirming reading experience.

References

Camus, Albert. *The Plague.*1948. Translated by Stuart Gilbert, Vintage International, 1991.

Casablanca. Directed by Michael Curtiz, performances by Humphry Bogart, Ingrid Bergman, and Paul Henreid, Warner Brothers, 1942.

Whalen, Robert W. *Assassinating Hitler: Ethics and Resistance in Nazi Germany.* Susquehanna UP, 1993.

Suggested Citation

Corbett, Lexie. "*Casablanca's Conscience*, by Robert Weldon Whalen." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 28, 2024, pp. 115–118. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.28.10.

Lexie Corbett is a writer, artist, and Master's student in Cinema and Media Studies at York University. She has previously published in *Little White Lies* and *Bright Lights Film Journal*.