

Research on the Influence of War on Film Art

——Taking Casablanca During World War II as an Example

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Abstract: The monumental events of World War II deeply impacted numerous spheres of human life, including Hollywood cinema. This paper delves into the influence of WWII on Hollywood's thematic and narrative shifts, using the iconic film *Casablanca* (1942) as its focal point. Released amidst the war's tumult, *Casablanca* seamlessly blends a distinct love story with contemporary political dynamics, exemplifying Hollywood's adaptive response to wartime conditions. Through meticulous examination of *Casablanca*, this study gleans insights into Hollywood's filmmaking choices and content transformation against the war's backdrop, drawing from varied sources such as film archives, governmental records, and industry reports. This exploration vividly highlights the lasting impact of the war on cinema, positioning *Casablanca* as a paragon of the synergy between cinematic art and wartime politics.

Keywords: *Casablanca*, World War II, Hollywood, cinema, film industry

1. Introduction

World War II (WWII) cataclysmic events significantly shaped the twentieth century, penetrating all elements of human life, including movies. Hollywood, which dominated global cinema during this period, was particularly hard hit. This study examines the impact of WWII on Hollywood content, style, and production, with an emphasis on Michael Curtis' *Casablanca*. The film exemplifies the convergence of film art and wartime politics [1] [2]. It was released during the height of the war and integrated the political circumstances of the moment into the film, reshaping the subject into an unorthodox love story. This fusion of themes shows Hollywood's strategic approach to the turbulent period, and researching it reveals how WWII influenced thematic and narrative changes in Hollywood films, as well as transformational shifts in the broader film industry's production techniques and societal function. This study examines the interplay of political reality, Hollywood's strategic response, and their combined influence on cinematic storylines and styles through the lens of *Casablanca*. A detailed analysis of the making of *Casablanca* offers insights into the strategic considerations of filmmakers working within the constraints of wartime Hollywood.

2. Hollywood and World War II: Thematic and Stylistic Changes

During WWII, Hollywood was the unrivaled powerhouse of global cinema. Its influence was far-reaching, creating cultural narratives and reflecting the current social, political, and economic milieu. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt wrote in a letter naming Lowell Mellett as the government's liaison with Hollywood:

"The American motion picture is one of our most effective media in informing and entertaining our citizens. The motion picture must remain free; insofar as national security will permit...I want no restrictions placed thereon which will impair the usefulness of the film..." [3] .

As the war progressed, Hollywood became inextricably linked to the problems, opportunities, and moral quandaries of the moment. The outbreak of WWII caused significant alterations in film production, distribution, and exhibition. After the war developed, the rules governing the depiction of violence in films gradually changed. The conventional application of the Production Code of Ethics argued for the portrayal of guilt leading to punishment and the belief that murder should always be avenged [4]. However, this idea was thrown into question when the Production Code Administration demanded justice for the Nazi agent killer in Lillian Hellman's *Watch on the Rhine*. Hellman responded by asking if the administration "was aware that killing Nazis was now a matter of national policy." [5] Yet, the contentious scene was preserved in the film despite the uproar surrounding it, demonstrating a delicate compromise between the Production Code's established precepts and the changing circumstances of World War II [6].

Furthermore, the socio-political landscape of WWII influenced not only cinema creation but also film reception and impact on society. Films started to be used to raise morale, promote patriotism, and sway public opinion. The cinema evolved into a vehicle for upholding national solidarity and promoting the principles and values required to get through these trying times. In June 1942, the Office of War Information (OWI) was founded; this new organization established various branches, concentrating on the authorization and tactical preparation of government films, the distribution of informational propaganda, and attempts to convince Hollywood of making movies compatible with the national interest [3]. When analyzing films like *Casablanca* and *The Gorilla Man*, one fundamental question was central to OWI considerations: "Will this picture contribute to the war effort?" [3]. This concentration of wealth and authority reveals a purposeful effort to exploit the power of the film industry as an instrument for modifying the public's mind and achieving the wartime objectives.

3. *Casablanca*: The Intersection of Cinematic Art and Wartime Politics

Casablanca, a film classic admired for its significant influence and pervasive significance, is a monument to the imaginative decisions taken by its creators and their capacity to capture the nexus between cinematic art and political conflict. In this section, we examine the microscopic aspects that contributed to *Casablanca*'s enduring appeal while delving into the film's production background. The purchase of the play *Everyone Comes to Rick's* marked the start of *Casablanca*'s adventure. Producer Hal Wallis at the studio saw the story's promise and hired the Epstein twins to streamline the plot, add current events, create interesting character archetypes, and create lead roles that were ideal for the legendary duo of Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman. The movie took shape under Wallis' direction, eventually developing into the romantic melodrama that audiences now recognize as *Casablanca* [7].

Director Michael Curtiz noticed that the story lacked a recognizable antagonist and a realistic depiction of the Nazi threat in the script development phase. In result, the German official Strasser's personality was developed, taking on the role of a scary character who personifies the impending

danger and deepens the plot [7]. This artistic choice not only increased the suspense but also gave the movie a clear feeling of the background of the war.

The timing of *Casablanca*'s debut in the early 1940s was far from accidental; it came at a moment when Hollywood needed to synchronize its storytelling with the prevailing wartime circumstances and America's changing attitudes toward the war. The character played by Humphrey Bogart, a skeptic who ultimately contributes to the Allied cause, struck a chord with viewers, offering a touching screen depiction of the era's collective mood [5]. Landing at a pivotal time, *Casablanca* not only captured but also adapted to the dynamic changes taking place in the film industry due to the war. If the movie had been made in 1939, its forthright stance against the Nazis might not have been as well-received. However, the film came out at a time when Hollywood was forced to modify its storytelling to match the fluid realities of the war and the shifting public opinion regarding America's role in it [3].

Even with the restrictive framework imposed by the Production Code, aimed at censoring and regulating Hollywood cinema, *Casablanca* was able to work within the limitations to communicate its themes skillfully and effectively. Just six days before the start of filming, Jack Warner received a letter from the Production Code Administration highlighting major concerns with the second and third parts of the script [3]. Additionally, the summary page of the movie in the Production Code's records paints a fascinating picture, noting the inclusion of contentious elements such as sexual undertones, gambling, and alcohol consumption [8]. This peek into the regulatory constraints emphasizes the tightrope the creators had to walk to both comply with stringent guidelines and preserve the film's artistic value. To navigate these constraints, the filmmakers utilized subtle techniques, making use of dialogue, pauses, and camera perspectives as potent metaphors to explore themes like love, ethics, and the complicated dynamics of relationships during wartime [3].

Behind the curtain, organizations like OWI and other government liaisons had a considerable influence on the content and themes of Hollywood films during the Second World War. *Casablanca* serves as a prime example of the intricate interplay between governmental aims and artistic freedom during this period. The government's push for films that would aid in the war effort created a complex backdrop that required thoughtful negotiations throughout the film's development [3].

In summary, the making of *Casablanca* serves as an extraordinary intersection of artistic ingenuity, the demands of wartime, and cultural factors. The film's skill in managing the constraints of its era, while also offering a compelling story and mirroring societal intricacies, has secured its status as a timeless piece of cinema. *Casablanca* remains compelling for modern audiences, offering invaluable perspectives on the deep-rooted relationship between film artistry and the politics of war.

4. *Casablanca* and Its Continued Impact

The impact of World War II continues to echo in Hollywood, significantly influencing the direction of the film industry. The war constituted a pivotal moment in world history, with its repercussions altering societies and shaping a new geopolitical landscape. Hollywood, as a major cultural institution, had to evolve in response. Post-war films shifted in terms of themes, narrative structures, and storytelling styles, mirroring a world in recovery with new values, fears, and hopes.

Not only did WWII alter Hollywood's external circumstances, but it also drove the industry to engage with nuanced and often contentious topics. In the post-war period, films began to address previously off-limits subjects like the Holocaust, the trauma of war, and the civil rights movement. Between 1942 and 1945, nearly 500 war-themed films were produced, including the iconic *Casablanca*, which premiered a year after the U.S. entered the war [9]. These films served as catalysts for self-examination, social commentary, and cultural evolution, expanding the horizons of cinematic storytelling.

Casablanca, specifically, has left an enduring imprint on American media and pop culture. This classic film, a recipient of several Academy Awards such as Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Screenplay, occupies a unique space in film history [10]. Its lasting appeal is exemplified by its early availability on videocassette and its enduring presence in video stores, marking it as a perennial favorite [11].

In today's Hollywood, which faces its own set of challenges and socio-political dynamics, analyzing classics like *Casablanca* gains added relevance. Interpreting the movie through a modern lens allows for a nuanced understanding of its themes, messages, and portrayals, providing valuable insights into wartime ethics, politics, and cinema's role in shaping collective awareness. Some scholars have even gone beyond film studies to argue that *Casablanca* influenced post-WWII refugee law [12].

Apart from the narrative and thematic developments evident in *Casablanca*, the broader Hollywood industry underwent substantial transformations in its filmmaking approaches due to WWII. The war pressed filmmakers to modify and refine their storytelling techniques, thus questioning established paradigms. Although the classic narrative style of Hollywood, characterized by characters with defined objectives and straightforward narratives, remained prevalent [13], films like *Mrs. Miniver*, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, and *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* illustrated how wartime complexities altered these narratives. Now, characters weren't just pursuing personal objectives but also grappling with profound ethical conflicts, the significance of their wartime choices, and broader questions of loyalty and obligation. This wartime context added layers of complexity to character motivations, infusing Hollywood's traditional storytelling with social and political nuances that resonated with the challenges of the era.

5. Conclusion

World War II, a monumental epoch in human history, significantly influenced various sectors of society, with Hollywood cinema being no exception. The research undertaken in this paper underscores the profound impact of the war on film art, using *Casablanca* as a quintessential case study. Released during the peak of the war's tumult, the film epitomizes the seamless blending of a poignant love story with the broader political dynamics of the time, exemplifying Hollywood's nuanced response to the global conflict. Delving deeper, we observed how WWII not only reshaped thematic elements in films but also brought about transformative shifts in the film industry's production practices and societal role. Through movies like *Casablanca*, Hollywood navigated complex moral landscapes, reframed character motivations, and redefined narrative structures in a manner that echoed the wartime ethos. However, this essay, while comprehensive, predominantly focuses on *Casablanca* as its primary point of reference, which may limit the broader generalizability of its conclusions to the entirety of Hollywood cinema during WWII. Future research could benefit from a comparative analysis of multiple films from the era, examining different genres, directors, and cultural contexts to offer a more holistic understanding of WWII's influence on Hollywood.

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