



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

Humanities

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Narrative Section of a Successful Application

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Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: Everybody Comes to Rick's: How "Casablanca" Taught Us to Love Movies

Institution: The New School

Project Director: Noah Isenberg

Grant Program: Public Scholar Program

Everybody Comes to Rick's: How *Casablanca* Taught Us to Love Movies

On Thanksgiving Day 1942, the lucky ticket holders who filled the vast, opulent 1,600-seat auditorium at Warner Brothers' Hollywood Theatre in midtown Manhattan—where today the Times Square Church stands—were treated to the world premiere of *Casablanca*, the studio's highly anticipated wartime drama. In the weeks leading up to the event, the film's marketing team had seized upon a flurry of press announcements documenting the arrival of Allied troops in North Africa to fan interest in their movie, even accelerating the release date in order to take advantage of the events unfolding overseas. The United Press dispatched a report from London on November 11th with the auspicious headline "Tanks Batter Casablanca," indicating that the Fighting French resistance forces were engaged in a pitched battle against Vichy troops and that General Patton's American forces were making inroads. A day later, and exactly two weeks before the film's first public screening, the *New York Times* reported that the city of Casablanca had indeed surrendered to the Americans. "The kaleidoscopic events of recent weeks," wrote movie critic Howard Barnes of the *New York Herald Tribune* the day after the film's premiere, "have made 'Casablanca' impressively topical," while Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* hailed it as a picture that "makes the spine tingle and the heart take a leap."

In spite of the film's overwhelming commercial success—it enjoyed an uninterrupted ten-week run at the Hollywood Theatre, where it took in over \$225,000 at the box office, and would proceed to gross over \$3 million in its initial U.S. release alone (by 1955, it had more than doubled its profits, topping \$6.8 million)—little did anyone know at the time the true impact the film would have on the history of motion pictures. Sure, there were the 1943 Oscars for Best Picture, Best Director (Michael Curtiz) and for Best Screenplay (shared by brothers Julius and Philip Epstein and Howard Koch), not to mention the acclaimed performances of Humphrey Bogart (nominated for Best Actor in a Leading Role), Ingrid Bergman, Claude Rains (nominated for Best Actor in a Supporting Role) and the extended cast. Producer Hal B. Wallis also picked up the honorary Irving G. Thalberg Award, a tribute to the highest quality motion picture production, that same charmed year.

Yet nobody could have imagined that this "happiest of happy accidents," as Andrew Sarris famously called the film, would become so firmly ensconced in the cultural imagination of North America and of the world at large. Even the most optimistic dreamer—of which there has always been a long supply in Hollywood—could never have predicted that some seven decades later, *Casablanca* would remain the perennial favorite for all celebrations of Hollywood and of movies in general; that it would be shown as the inaugural screening of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' new open-air venue in summer 2012 and as the inaugural screening of Dallas Film Society's new outdoor space at the AT&T Performing Arts Center later the same year; that the Austrian Film Museum in Vienna would devote a multi-week 2012 summer series to "Die *Casablanca*-Connection"; that the following year the London-based Future Cinema would recreate Rick's Café Americain inside the Troxy Theatre for six consecutive weeks of sold-out screenings where, like the fabled midnight shows of the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, people came dressed as their favorite character; or that we'd still be talking of a sequel seventy-plus years later (see my 2012 *Wall Street Journal* Op-Ed, "Play it Again, Sam—And Again and Again"). "Ask the man on the street today to name a Hollywood picture," writes film historian

David Thomson in his recent opus, *The Big Screen: The Story of the Movies - And What They Have Done to Us*, “and *Casablanca* will be there in the first list.” In our current age, then, *Casablanca* is no longer just “one movie,” but rather, in the apt formulation of Umberto Eco, “It is ‘the movies.’”

Indeed, much has been written about *Casablanca* since its original release. We now know nearly all the tiniest minutiae, all the cherished Hollywood trivia, culled from its legendary production history and retold in Aljean Harmetz’s authoritative guide *The Making of ‘Casablanca’: Bogart, Bergman, and World War II* (2002). We now know, for example, that the multi-authored script was still being revised throughout the shoot; that Bergman herself did not know the precise ending, nor with whom she’d be boarding that fateful flight to Lisbon, and was instructed by the screenwriters “to play it between.” In addition, we know about all the casting choices—the studio-generated gossip about Ronald Reagan or George Raft playing a part that producer Hal Wallis insisted was written for Bogie—and the input from the technical crew, not to mention the reams of Warner studio memoranda detailing such matters. Moreover, there has been no shortage of interpretations of the film over the years: as a parable of American foreign policy, as one of the big screen’s most influential love stories, as morality tale in times of war.

What has not yet been written, however, is the story of the film today and the place that it continues to occupy in our collective imagination and our collective memory. Similarly, we have not yet explained how the film has taught us how to love movies, how to love the archetypes in which it luxuriates, how to value the fundamental and timeless messages it projects. *Everybody Comes to Rick’s* is fueled by a profound desire to understand what makes a single film so captivating, so influential, and such a worldwide phenomenon; what makes it, as Eco has it, not merely a single stand-alone production but somehow representative of all movies. Through extensive research and reporting—conducting scores of interviews with a vast array of contemporary screenwriters, directors, relatives of the original cast and crew, film critics and film fans from across the globe—I seek to answer that question. And, along the way, I plan to tell a lively, intense, and engaging story whose register of meaning transcends the mere plotlines of the film and taps into our deep, undying fascination with motion pictures. It is *the* film, lest we forget, that has enjoyed more revival screenings than any other in cinema history.

Three recent books have served in part as inspiration for my approach: Molly Haskell’s *Frankly My Dear: ‘Gone with the Wind’ Revisited* (Yale University Press, 2010); David Thomson’s *The Moment of ‘Psycho’: How Alfred Hitchcock Taught America to Love Murder* (Basic, 2010); and Sam Wasson’s *New York Times*-bestseller *Fifth Avenue, 5 A.M.: Audrey Hepburn, ‘Breakfast at Tiffany’s,’ and the Dawn of the Modern Woman* (HarperCollins, 2010). All three allow critical examination of a classic film to serve simultaneously as the occasion for personal reflection, social commentary, and intellectual rumination. All are written in a style that is at once accessible, animated, and wonderfully idiosyncratic. In *Everybody Comes to Rick’s*, I hope to rely on a similar set of critical reflexes and to reach a similar audience comprised of savvy fans, film lovers, students, and readers of serious non-fiction.

I envision the book, currently under firm contract with W.W. Norton & Company in the U.S. and with Faber & Faber in the U.K. (with a delivery date of September 15, 2016, in anticipation of the film’s 75th-anniversary celebration in late fall 2017), as a series of vivid literary snapshots,

maximizing the cult status and iconic value of the film's oft-cited dialogue and endlessly reproduced images, in the form of eight interlocking chapters, each of approximately 8,000 words in length. The provisional chapter breakdown is as follows:

- 1.) "Everybody Comes to Rick's" — on the origins of the film, the unproduced stage play of the same name co-written by Murray Burnett and Joan Alison, and its long unacknowledged significance in shaping the film;
- 2.) "The Usual Suspects" — on the principal actors (Bogart, Bergman, Paul Henreid, Claude Rains, Conrad Veidt, and company) and the ways in which the film marked their careers, and their lives, from that point forward;
- 3.) "I Stick My Neck Out for Nobody" — on the political significance of the film, especially as it recounts in Rick's story the move from isolationism to active engagement (see writing sample);
- 4.) "Such Much?" — on the extraordinary number of refugee actors and crew members involved in the production and how the film poignantly underscores the historical condition of expulsion and migration to America;
- 5.) "As Time Goes By" — on composer Herman Hupfeld's original song, Max Steiner's reluctant adaptation of it, and the endless number of popular covers (from Barbra Streisand to Bob Dylan) and re-workings of it since the film first appeared;
- 6.) "We'll Always Have Paris" — on the touchstone that the film provides for screen romance, on the elements of emotional fantasy, delayed fulfillment, and mythical origins (Paris), and how this facet is later riffed upon in such films as *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), *Before Sunrise* (1995), et al.;
- 7.) "Play it Again, Sam" — on the revival screenings of the film, most famously at the Brattle Theatre in Cambridge, MA but also on the other side of the Atlantic, throughout the 1950s and 60s, and the 1969 Broadway production (later film) by Woody Allen, *Play It Again Sam*;
- 8.) "A Beautiful Friendship" — on the attempts to reimagine the film, whether in the form of a bona fide (still unexecuted) sequel or in the various homages (from Warner Brothers' follow-up *Passage to Marseilles*, made a year later, to Sidney Pollack's *Havana* of 1990 and beyond).

Each chapter will incorporate a mix of crisp, snappy dialogue with expository background and formal interpretation, illuminating the film and the larger, enduring question of movie love for a broader public. As for the anticipated audience, after publishing an Op-Ed piece on the occasion of the film's 70th anniversary, Thanksgiving weekend 2012, in the *Wall Street Journal* —what marks to a large degree the initial, albeit skeletal, conception of the book project—within days there were sixty-five readers' comments posted on the newspaper's website, close to seven hundred Facebook recommendations, and just shy of six hundred Tweets. Similarly, after introducing a packed anniversary screening of the film at the Center for Jewish History, in New York City, and then leading a lengthy and remarkably spirited Q&A afterward, a woman came up to ask me if I would be willing to visit her book club in Westchester County for a discussion

of the film. It is my hope that a book like *Everybody Comes to Rick's* will find a proper niche in reading groups such as these, in regional film societies, as well as in college-level seminars and lectures. There can be little doubt in any case that *Casablanca* attracts an unusually ardent following, both at home and abroad, and that it still has much to teach us.

At this point in time, I have a compressed draft of Chapter 3 (see writing sample), initially written when preparing the book proposal to send to prospective publishers and augmented somewhat in the time since, and will resume the writing process in earnest during my sabbatical-leave from the New School in 2015-2016 (the New School has granted me one semester of paid leave or a full year at half pay). In the past couple of years, in conjunction with the new book project, I have developed and taught an undergraduate seminar “*Casablanca*: Movie, Legend, Lore” (offered at the New School in fall 2012 and again in fall 2014), have undertaken the bulk of the project’s primary and secondary research, and have conducted a first round of interviews with novelist Leslie Epstein, son of the film’s co-screenwriter Philip Epstein; Cass Warner, granddaughter of studio co-founder Harry Warner; film critic and historian David Thomson; the critic and host of the Classic Hollywood podcast *You Must Remember This* Karina Longworth, among others. I am currently securing permission and scheduling dates to conduct further interviews (e.g., Richard Linklater, Wim Wenders, Woody Allen, Monika Henreid, Stephen Bogart, Molly Haskell, Kent Jones, André Aciman, Rob Reiner et al.).

My work plan for the academic year 2015-2016 is to continue to take full advantage of the local resources of New York City (the Research Division of the New York Public Library, the Library of Performing Arts, and the Center for Jewish History), while paying brief site visits to Los Angeles (the Warner Bros. Archives at USC and the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences). These are all institutions with which I have a long-standing professional relationship from my previous scholarly projects, including my last two books. Although not exactly an archival project, *Everybody Comes to Rick's* seeks to incorporate, and indeed illuminate, some of the vagaries of the film’s production history and its afterlife. Thus, in tandem with a final stretch of research and reporting (conducting the remaining interviews), I aim to finish drafts of chapters 1, 2, 3 (i.e., the final sections of the extant partial chapter) and 4 in summer and fall of 2015, and to complete drafts of chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 in spring and summer of 2016. As I prepare the book manuscript, I also wish to place short excerpts from it in such crossover venues as the *American Scholar*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education's* *Review* section, and the *Paris Review Daily* (where I recently published a piece on screenwriter-novelist Budd Schulberg). Owing to early interest expressed in the book project, I have been invited to deliver the keynote address, “‘Such Much?’ *Casablanca*, Hitler’s Refugees, and the Hollywood Screen,” at an international conference organized by distinguished historian Alan Steinweis and held at the University of Vermont October 6-8, 2015, which will serve as another chance to present portions of the project to a larger audience.

The new NEH Public Scholar Program strikes me as particularly well suited to the project, which has been conceived from the very beginning as a book aimed at a broad audience. For many years, I have taken that commitment seriously, writing criticism and essays for the popular press, for *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and the *New York Times*. During my first years teaching college at Wesleyan University in Middletown, CT, I made a conscious effort to contribute—in addition to placing scholarship in

the peer-reviewed journals in my field—to such outlets as *Lingua Franca*, *Dissent*, *Partisan Review*, *Salmagundi*, and *The Threepenny Review*. More recently, from 2011 onward, I have served in an editorial capacity, first as a contributing editor and now as book review editor, at *Film Quarterly* magazine, among the oldest, most venerable film publications in North America and one that has always sought to forge a bridge between academic film scholarship and the educated popular reader. In terms of recent book publications, my Film Classics monograph on the acclaimed B-noir *Detour* (British Film Institute, 2008) was written in this same spirit as was my latest book *Edgar G. Ulmer: A Filmmaker at the Margins* (University of California Press, 2014), recently hailed by the *New York Times* as “a page turner of a biography” and selected among the Best Film Books of 2014 by the *Huffington Post*. As a newly elected member of both the PEN American Center and the New York Institute for the Humanities, where I currently chair the public programs committee, I am continuing to broaden my audience and the circle of thinkers from whom I learn.

In sum, I seek support from the Public Scholar Program as a means of solidifying this important commitment and enhancing the viability, both scholarly and popular, of my current book project. In 2003, while still on the faculty of Wesleyan University, I was fortunate enough to receive a seven-month NEH Fellowship for College Teachers in support of my research on Edgar G. Ulmer. In retrospect, the grant gave me the necessary freedom to develop the project in such a way as to transform it from being merely a scholarly study of the Austro-Hungarian émigré filmmaker into a full-scale critical biography. Likewise, a ten-month Public Scholar grant from NEH, from October 2015 through July 2016—helping to compensate for the missing half of my New School salary—will enable me to devote a full academic year, free of teaching and administrative responsibilities, to the completion of the book. Finally, it will allow me to meet the publishers’ deadline of September 15, 2016 and to have the publication ready for the film’s 75th-anniversary celebration in late fall 2017.

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