

ABSTRACTS

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Casablanca and the Richness of Emotion

This article takes the classic film *Casablanca* as its example in describing a multi-levelled model of how spectators react emotionally to films. The model combines concepts drawn from film studies, reception psychology, and the study of emotions. The aim is to allow the connections between film structures, cognitive processing, and emotional responses to be described in a nuanced manner. Emotions are understood here as psychophysical phenomena shaped by both biology and culture, as multidimensional events in the mind and body of an individual that respond to external or internal stimuli.

The emotional responses of spectators are influenced by various kinds of cognition – perception, association, imagination, and memory, for example – and thereby develop into episodes of varying complexity. My model distinguishes between four levels in the development of the emotional episodes concerned.

1. The direct perception of sounds and images stimulates *perceptual affects*, that is, sensations and moods that do not concern a specific object. Moods induced by music are an example of this.
2. On this basis, spectators develop mental models of the represented world that bring forth *diegetic emotions* such as suspense, sympathy, empathy, and emotional appraisals.
3. When spectators grasp indirect meanings on the basis of the represented world, *thematic emotions* are activated, often involving social norms or individual values.
4. Finally, on a level of reflection, spectators evaluate the communication process and its elements: their own responses, the responses other spectators are assumed to have, the film-makers and their intentions, and the shaping of the film. This is the source of *communication emotions* such as moral outrage, fear of social consequences the film might have, or pride in one's own expertise.

These four levels interact with each other so that a complex web of emotional stimuli and processes takes shape. Individual emotional episodes can be confined to a single level or unfold across several levels, and several emotions can overlap in time. The upper three levels of emotionality, at least, also feature in the reception of literary works, so the model could, with some modifications, be transferred to the analysis of literature.

In *Casablanca*, as in most film drama, diegetic emotions are foremost. This level is also the one that has been discussed most extensively and controversially, so it constitutes the focus of the article. First, two ways of describing diegetic emotions are distinguished. The description of the narrative emotions of suspense, surprise, and curiosity is relatively abstract and highlights the play with spectators' knowledge that unfolds in time. Implicitly, though, it assumes a more tangible answer to the question of how emotional responses to characters and other elements of the represented world come into being. There are at least five competing explanatory approaches to answering this question: it has been suggested that spectators evaluate characters according to objective moral or non-moral criteria, according to their abilities or attractiveness, for example; evaluate them subjectively in terms of their own interests (erotic interests, for example); empathize with them and experience similar feelings to them due to emotional contagion, identification, simulation, or projection; activate emotional memory and their own recollections; or evaluate the represented situation in terms of the interests of the characters with whom they sympathize.

My model proposes that all these possibilities be considered and derived from the more general phenomenon of *perspective-borne appraisals*. Following multilevel appraisals in psychology, we can assume that characters, situations, and other represented objects give rise to emotion-triggering appraisals on various levels in spectators. The model proposed here places special emphasis on the fact that spectators adopt a particular *mental perspective* in the process: they grasp the object in question in a specific, qualitative way by means of mental processes of perception, thought, feeling, evaluation, or desire. As spectators, we ourselves adopt a particular perspective toward what is represented, but we can also attribute film-makers, narrators, or characters with a perspective and compare it with our own. Transfer of perspective or identification with characters can take place to various degrees in relation to various objects and aspects of them: we can, for example, share the perception and knowledge of a character whereas our desires and feelings can be different (and vice versa). Thus, although the explanatory approaches outlined above identify various ways in which characters and situations can be the object of perspective, they are not mutually exclusive alternatives but more a continuum of possibilities.

Applied to the analysis of *Casablanca*, the model put forward makes it possible to compare various explanations of the film's emotional effect, to test their plausibility, and to combine some of them and add new refinements to them. In this way, we obtain results that are more comprehensive and nuanced than those of the approaches employed to date, which derive emotional responses to the film from, among other things, an accumulation of stereotypes, identification with Rick's Oedipal development or moral perfection, and strategies involving suspense and nostalgia. Discussion of the film's closing scene as a case study, on the other hand, points to a combination of the following potential

emotion elicitors in first-time adult audiences in the present-day Western cultural area:

- a smooth, melancholic underlying mood on the perceptual level, generated by frame composition and music;
- activation of emotional memories that recall personal experiences of separation and are bound up with tenderness, nostalgia, and sadness;
- emotional intensification that results from caring emotions of concern for others and involves the use of catchphrases and musical leitmotifs;
- empathetic sadness put across by, among other things, the voices and facial expressions of the actors;
- moral evaluation leading to sympathetic alignment with Rick and Ilsa, which activates emotional scripts and adds respect, acceptance, and hope to the sadness;
- a liberating and morally satisfying resolution of suspense and curiosity; and
- responses to overall thematic statements of the film (such as »moral integrity is what matters most«).

The set of redundant stimuli means that it is probable spectators will experience such emotions – but those listed above do not even come close to covering the whole range of possible spectator emotions. The power structure involving Rick, who is in control, and Ilsa, who is helpless, for example, can play a role as well, with partial identification with both of the two characters being possible. The different interpretations of *Casablanca* suggest, moreover, that spectators who watch the film several times often tend to engage in more far-reaching speculation about the ambivalent motives of the main characters, about the nature of their love and how serious it is, for example. Such speculation is also relevant where emotions are concerned.

The lasting success of *Casablanca* and the comments of many spectators indicate that it is not just the story of the film that resonates, but also its overarching meanings, that the conflict of »love vs. virtue« (Renault) has the potential to move many people, and that admiration for the aesthetic achievement of the filmmakers remains undiminished.

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