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Marc Augé, *Casablanca: Movies and Memories*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. Translated and with an afterword by Tom Conley. Originally published in French as *Casablanca*, Paris: Seuil 2007. 120 pp. Illustrations. \$57.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8166-5640-0; \$18.95 U.S. (pb). 978-0-8166-5641-7.

Review by Sylvie E. Blum-Reid, University of Florida.

In his foreword to *Casablanca: Movies and Memories*, Marc Augé immediately warns the reader that the “text is not an autobiography, but... a ‘montage’ of a few memories.” What follows is the writer coming to grips with both his personal past and a significant film he has watched time after time since its release, Michael Curtiz’s *Casablanca*. For a French spectator and child growing up in France during World War II and its aftermath, the film has acquired the aura of myth, most likely a different one from the vision of the film experienced by American audiences over the years. Part autobiography, part ethnography, part film analysis, Augé’s book combines an account of the traumatic past of the war and Occupation, on the one hand, as it was depicted romantically by the film and, on the other hand, as it was lived by the author as a child. The book’s short sections are given titles and listed in an opening Table of Contents: “Sometimes the idea strikes me,” “Every film we have enjoyed,” “Montage,” “Why is Rick (Humphrey Bogart) so bitter?” etc. Augé’s montage reads like a meditation on memory, bringing to mind another writer, Roland Barthes, whose ghost haunts these pages though he is never evoked by name. Augé’s work is also evocative of Gilles Deleuze. In order to better remember the time before and during the war which, for Augé, was characterized by constant travel, the author had to rely on the memories of his aging mother whom he urges to return to the 1940s. The reader knows that Augé was lucky in the year 2000 to be able to rely on a parent’s memories and that, at some point, the source of these reliable memories will no longer be present.

In the high-tech era of DVDs and iPods, Augé stands out as a purist, a resistance fighter, someone who prefers watching films in the theater, who would rather go to the Action Christine cinema house to watch *Casablanca* for the nth time than sit at home with a DVD version of the film. There is a ritual observed by such a filmgoer, although one realizes that this, too, will pass and that we may be living this nostalgia along with Augé. Different components of film as a process are described and embraced: the usherette (“*L’ouvreuse*”), the female worker who used to guide spectators to their seats with her flashlight has an importance in this world. Film memories are tied to the parents who would take their child with them to the movies every weekend. The word “Casablanca” evokes the Hollywood classical movie, but also a cherished uncle, a veteran and figure of respect in the family, who fought several wars and was a hero to Augé when he was a child. *Casablanca* is not the first film that he saw as a spectator at the age of eleven, but “it was my first experience of time induced by fiction” (p. 11).

Discoursing on *Casablanca* allows several possibilities: first, the book probes films as narratives, considering what they—differently from books—provoke in the reader. Second, the work discusses actors along with their roles and auras. Proust is a central literary touchstone for Augé’s prose. Films constitute and engender their own special memories; a spectator will necessarily associate a specific memory with the day when he/she watched a film. Images seen become part of one’s personal memory bank (p. 10).

Augé's personal memories go back to an earlier time, that of his father's mobilization and its consequences: along with her son, his mother followed his father, a career officer, on the roads of France in order to be near him. Augé's life was thus marked by a constant "exodus." Augé's work resonates with ethnographic discussions of travel narratives and displacement. In *L'Impossible voyage*, memories of childhood, the Occupation, and films were already intertwined.^[1] Tati's films, such as *Les Vacances de Mr. Hulot*, and Woody Allen's *Purple Rose of Cairo* inspire interesting interpretations and perambulations. Images were already predominant. As a result of his autobiographical montage in *Casablanca*, the reader begins to see the origins of Augé's interest in mapping out different locations. His map of France underpins the present book and although it is not literally represented, a series of towns appears: Champagné, Le Mans, Bordeaux, Canéjan, Tarbes, Caylus, Toulouse, Brive (p. 19). After an initial struggle with memories that were fuzzy and disorganized, the itinerary is finally foregrounded. In short, Augé puts order to the map of his own memories and resorts to multiple film techniques to create his own personal montage, drawing on a technical word that usually applies to filmmaking: "When it seems as if I now retain a few images from the montage, I can't be sure if I'm not confusing them with shots from *Forbidden Games*" (pp. 25-26). "The story has to end somewhere because in the next shot I am with my parents and my father is dressed in civilian clothes" (p. 23). He also resorts to a key witness whose memory is still vivid: his mother.

Augé's fond memories of *Casablanca*—a film he was able to watch after the war, once France was again allowed to see American films—are tied to the fact that the moment shown in the film is inextricably linked to the people who have lived through it. This has to do with temporality: for those who lived in 1941 and 1942, the time of the film's diegesis, "when the film arrives in France in '47, it has already acquired an aged and mythic look, yet it still shimmers with history" (p. 55). It is, of course, remarkable that *Casablanca* dealt in the melodramatic genre with World War II history and located its "contemporary story of refugees fleeing the Nazis" in North Africa with reminiscences of a Paris love affair.^[2]

Casablanca is not the only film evoked here, but it serves as a marker for an entire generation who grew up during the war and witnessed key moments of French/European history. *Casablanca* evokes the American arrival in North Africa and the battle that ensued for the liberation of France. All these are listed in the final pages of Augé's book where the film is associated "with emotions, faces, and landscapes" (p. 56).

Augé's generation is marked by Algeria and the fear of being drafted for the Franco-Algerian war. As it turns out, Augé went to Algeria in the immediate aftermath of that conflict. His life was thus once again marked by travel and displacement. In one of the last sections of his book, the writer comments on his love for the Montparnasse train station. His *flâneries* through the station evoke a symbolic place. Once more *Casablanca* is a marker, summoning the specter of railway stations of the past when steam engines were still running and when one spent fourteen hours on a train to get to Brittany. Augé ultimately proclaims it is impossible ever to return to the past. *Casablanca* could never have had a sequel; when one attempts to return to the desired past, there is only frustration and disappointment. Instead one moves on. "In *Casablanca* during the war, Rick and Ilsa's story was open-ended and possible. After the war it's too late" (p. 72).

The last segment of Augé's essay marks an abrupt shift with regard to the previous parts. "I'll let time go by" constitutes a transition, with all the verbs in the future tense, as the writer leaves for a daytrip to Brittany: "I will leave." This Proustian twist, however, suggests a further Proustian or Barthesian essence, especially when at the midpoint of this section, he mentions that "I'll lay flowers on my mother's grave" (p. 75). At that moment, Augé lets the reader know about his mother's death omitted from earlier digressions. His dialogues with his mother and their comparative exchanges on memories have come to an end. The essay closes with this last trip to Brittany where she is buried, concluding

with his return the same day to Paris to the familiar warmth of the Lycée Fénelon where he has worked for more than a century.

Augé draws a refreshing parallel between life and films. The parallel is not new, but tends to be obliterated from contemporary discussions of cinema. It can indeed be found in other philosophers who have considered similar material. Augé writes: “There is a sequel to memories, and that is what makes managing them so delicate. The film of memory is always included in a longer film, the film of life that inflects its meaning” (p. 73).

The book was translated into English by Tom Conley who also wrote a translator’s afterword in the form of an essay, “A Writer and His Movie.”

NOTES

[1] Marc Augé, *L’Impossible voyage: Le Tourisme et ses images* (Paris: Rivages poche/Petite Bibliothèque, 1997).

[2] Robert Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 89.

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