

The fundamental things apply here, too

What *Casablanca* can teach us about conducting more effective ad research

Advertising creatives are inherently skeptical about the claims of researchers that they can measure what's important in good creative work. To be sure, most creatives will admit it may be possible to measure the surface meaning of an ad – the message communication – because that's the part that's easy for an audience to play back in words. But a good story well-told, a good performance well-acted, a good film well-made – all of these do their real work below the surface meaning of things. That's where the magic really happens. But 50 years of traditional copy testing has taught an unfortunate lesson to the creative community: research cannot quantify the deeper, emotional content of great creative work.

For that reason, creatives have turned to peer review to validate the quality of their work, so that award shows count for more than research metrics in the eyes of the people who actually create ads. Their position is that the aesthetic judgment of an experienced creative director cannot be replicated with audience research data.

We put this assumption to the test by comparing in detail the way a master storyteller analyzes a Hollywood masterpiece with the emotional engagement metrics produced by the online Ameritest pre-testing system. Using the same visual diagnostics that Ameritest uses to test television commercials, we conducted research on the famous bazaar scene from the classic film *Casablanca*. We wanted to answer the question, “Does our quantitative research data support the creative theory of screenwriting master Robert McKee?”

The author of the best-selling book *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and The Principles of Screenwriting*, McKee is a respected lecturer whose former students' accomplishments are unmatched: they have won 32 Academy Awards, 168 Emmy Awards, 21 Writers Guild of America Awards, 17 Directors Guild of America Awards and even a Pulitzer Prize for writing.

Casablanca is generally ranked as one of the top five greatest films of all time. From a research standpoint it is a good subject because even though the movie is famous, as an older black-and-white film it is relatively easy to find modern audiences who have not actually seen the movie.

Interesting experiment

In *Story*, McKee provides a beat-by-beat analysis of several key scenes from *Casablanca*, including one of the



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snapshot

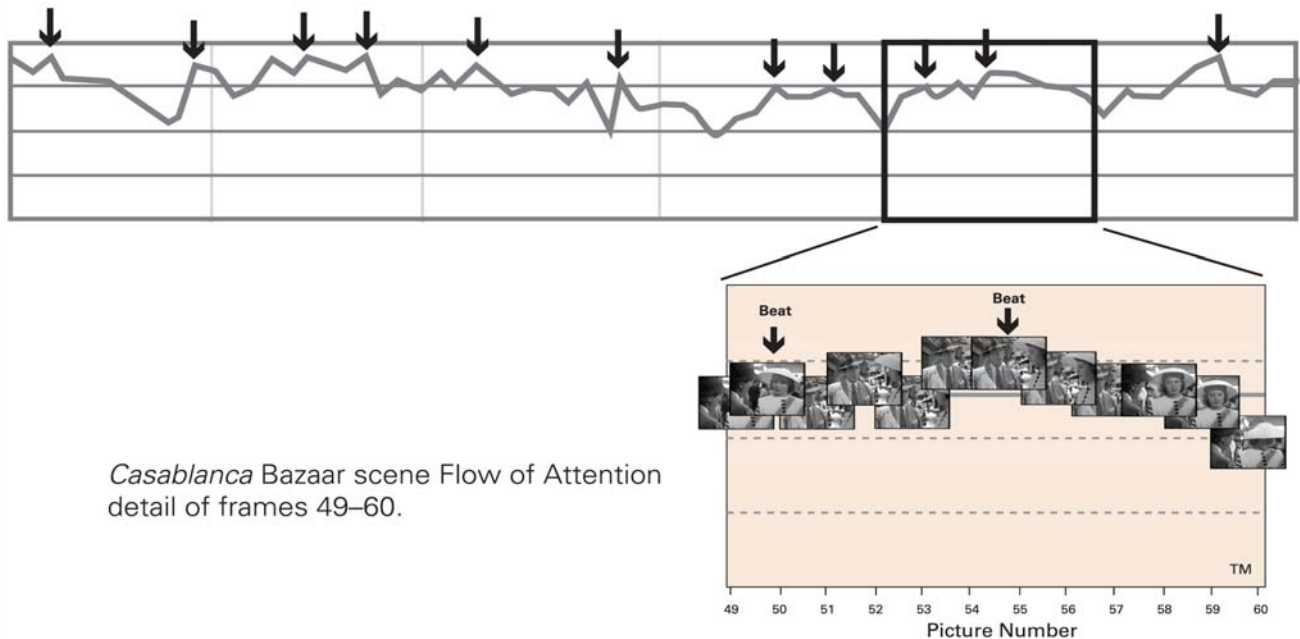
By analyzing the emotional beats of a pivotal scene from *Casablanca*, the author explores how a similar approach to ad testing can help researchers improve their relationships with advertising creatives.

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Figure 1

Excerpt from the Flow of Attention

The Picture Sorts identified eleven visual beats in the Bazaar scene from *Casablanca*.



major turning points of the movie, the bazaar scene. Serendipitously, McKee’s published theory of the movie provides us with the makings of an interesting experiment.

From a scientific standpoint, this in-depth interpretation of the film by a screenwriting expert gives us a theoretical prediction of how, from a creative perspective, the audience is expected to respond moment-by-moment to what is going on in the bazaar scene. Empirically, we could put McKee’s theory to the test by measuring actual reactions to the film among an audience of first-time viewers.

Five steps

In his deconstruction of the bazaar scene, McKee takes us through five steps of critical analysis:

1. Define the conflict driving the emotional content of the scene.
2. Note the opening emotional value of the scene.
3. Break the scene into beats, which McKee describes as the fundamental units of film structure.
4. Note the closing emotional value

and compare to the opening value.

5. Survey the beats and locate the turning point of the scene.

Importantly, these same five steps of critical thinking can be applied to the analysis of television commercials, Web videos or other types of ad film.

The first step, defining the conflict, is key to understanding how film works as a storytelling medium, for without conflict there can be no story. For the bazaar scene, Rick (Humphrey Bogart) initiates and drives the scene. Despite inner conflict over the pain he has suffered since Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) abandoned him in Paris, and the anger he suppresses at seeing her with another man, Rick’s desire is clear: to win Ilsa back!

The source of conflict is equally clear: Ilsa. Her feelings are very complex and clouded by mixed emotions of guilt, regret and duty. She loves Rick passionately and would take him back if she could, but for reasons only she knows, she can’t. Caught between irreconcilable needs, Ilsa’s desire can be phrased as “To keep her affair with Rick in the past and move on with her life.” Although entangled with inner conflicts, their

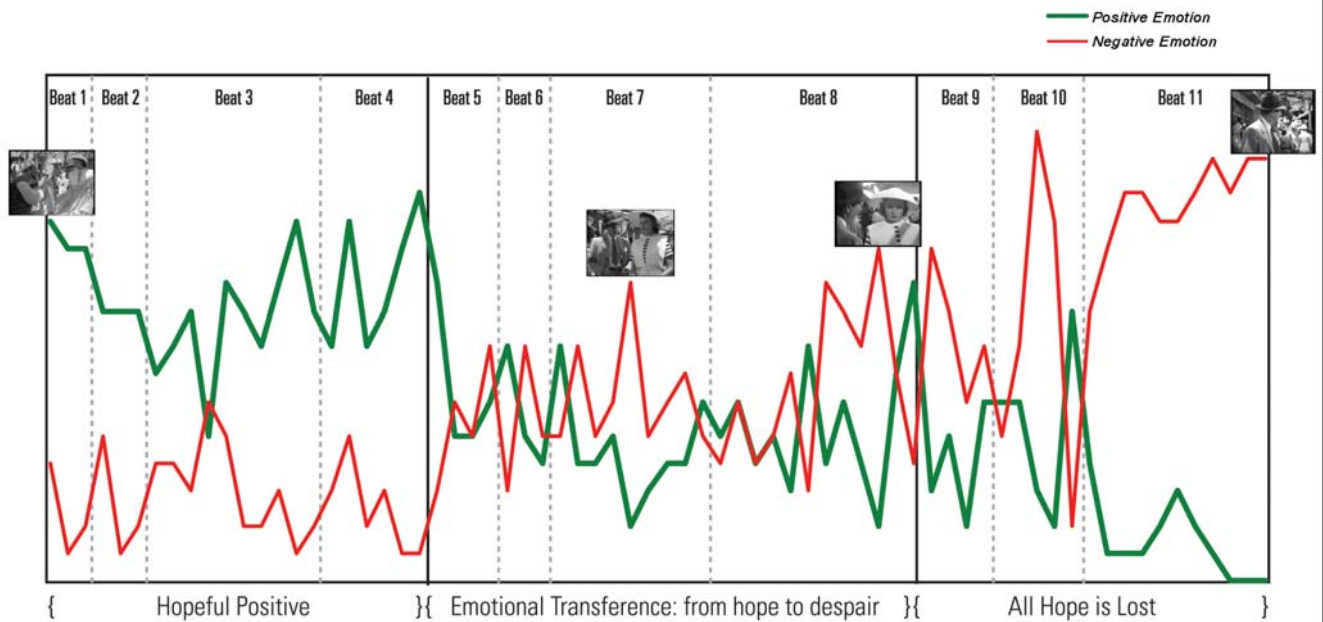
desires are thus in direct opposition.

As a second step in analysis, we identify the underlying emotional value at stake in the opening of the scene, the emotional keynote upon which this part of the story plays. For this scene, love is the governing value. In the preceding scene, Rick’s insulting behavior toward Ilsa turned the value toward the negative, yet the bazaar scene opens on a positive note because the audience and Rick see a ray of hope. In the previous scenes Ilsa has been addressed as “Miss Ilsa Lund,” a single woman. Rick hopes to change that.

The third step in analysis involves breaking the scene down into beats. McKee deconstructs the bazaar scene into 11 beats. Just as in music, the rhythmic structure of film is essential for the audience to make sense of information that is presented. The beats drive our expectations, create anticipation and cue the moments when we should pay close attention to what is going on. The back-and-forth of the dialogue and the body language between the two characters in the scene carries the audience forward emotionally as new information is revealed that gives us new insights into what is really going on in the story.

Figure 2

Ameritest Flow of Emotion from the Bazaar scene in *Casablanca*.



Ameritest data are a strong fit with Robert McKee’s theory with how emotions turn from positive to negative in the Bazaar scene.

This brings us to the fourth step in our analysis, in which we note the closing emotional value of the scene and compare it to the opening value. While the scene opens on a hopeful, positive note, it closes on a darkly negative note. Rick’s hopes have been crushed as Ilsa makes clear that she doesn’t love him now and implies that she never did. She has revealed that she was secretly married to Victor Laslo so that her affair with Rick in Paris was a sham. These are darker depths than Rick could have imagined.

The purpose of this fourth step of analysis is to determine the emotional movement that has taken place from the beginning to the end of a scene – that’s the “motion” in emotion. In theory, the movement can be from positive to negative, from negative to positive, or even from a negative to a double negative. What is important is understanding what has changed emotionally from the beginning to the end of the scene, since that is the net emotional content communicated by the film.

This change in emotion is the essence of storytelling. As McKee points out, if there is a scene in a movie where the emotions are the

same at the end of a scene as at the beginning, the scene doesn’t belong in the movie, since nothing has happened from an emotional standpoint. It should be edited out. This focus on emotional movement is what distinguishes the storytelling form of advertising from other forms of advertising presentations, in which the sequence of emotions may simply be one positive after another, though certainly the negative-to-positive is a time-tested approach for advertising and one we have analyzed repeatedly in our years of research.

The last or fifth step in the analysis is to survey the beats and locate the turning point of the story. As we see in McKee’s analysis, the action and reaction pattern between the characters builds a rapid progression of beats in this scene. In emotional intensity, each exchange tops the previous beat, placing their love in greater and greater risk, demanding more and more willpower of each person and demanding the capacity to take painful, even cruel actions while at the same time remaining in cool control. At the end of the eighth beat, a gap opens between what the audi-

ence expects to happen and what does happen. Audience emotions begin to turn decidedly negative as Ilsa goes on to crush Rick by revealing her secret. Until this moment, Rick has hopes of winning her over, but with this turning point, his hope is shattered.

Online interviews

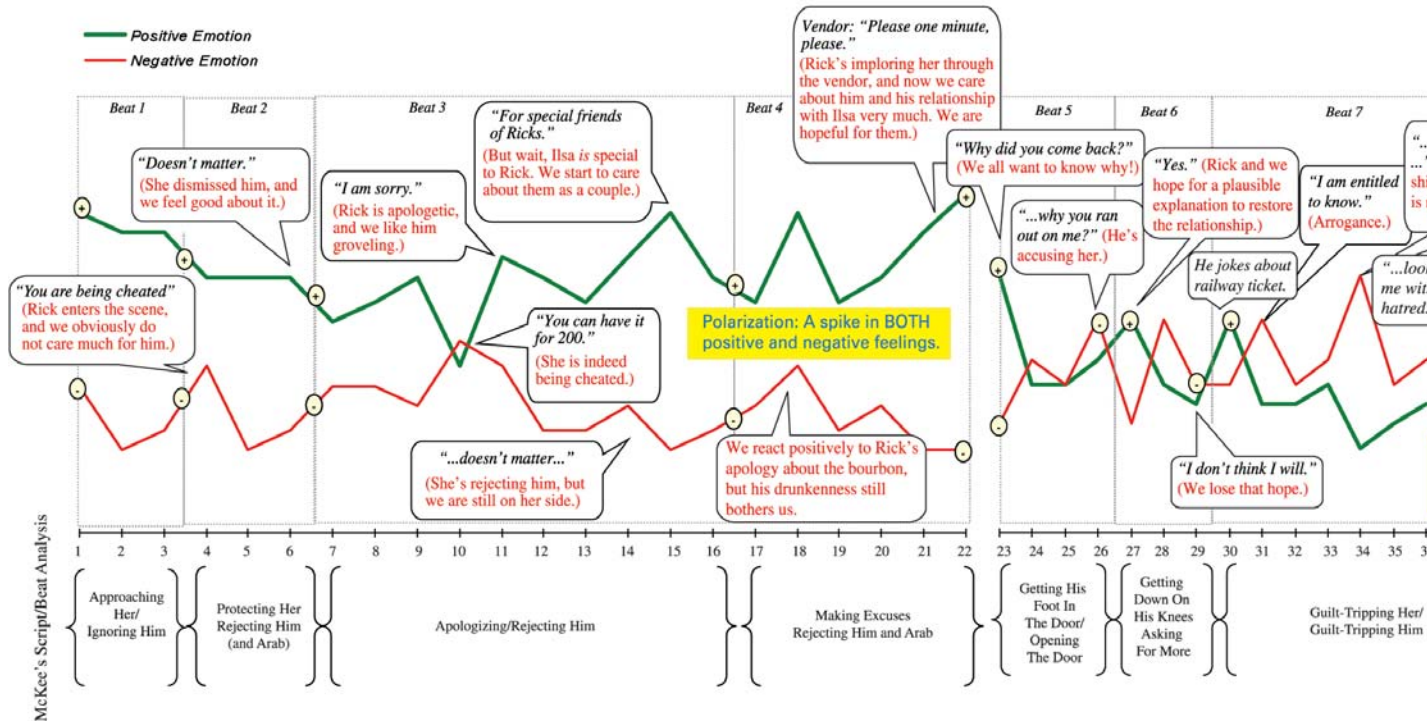
To test McKee’s analysis and his moment-by-moment predictions of how the audience is expected to respond emotionally, we conducted online interviews with a sample of 100 general-population adult respondents who had not previously seen the movie. (The respondents were shown the movie in a theater setting and re-interviewed online.) To measure the audience’s emotional responses, we used two of our standard pre-testing diagnostic tools, the Flow of Attention and the Flow of Emotion.

The Flow of Attention graph, part of which is shown in Figure 1, is constructed by having respondents sort pictures from the film based on whether they remember seeing that image in the film. It is a researcher’s tool for measuring and visualizing the beat of a scene or sequence from the

Figure 3

Beat-by-beat analysis of Bazaar scene from *Casablanca*

The Flow of Emotion graph shows that the moment-by-moment emotional response of



point of view of what stands out in the attention of the audience. What we found in our research is that the 11 beats identified by McKee correspond quite well with the 11 peak moments identified by our method.

The Flow of Attention is a measure of pre-conscious filtering or selective perception, which is a process driven by unconscious emotions. In taking the sample of visuals from *Casablanca* for our research, you might note that, at first glance, many of the pictures look similar. But on closer inspection you will see that the differences can be quite subtle, reflecting the difference of a raised eyebrow, a sideways glance, a curled lip. It turns out that the unconscious mind is quite fast and accurate in reading the non-verbal emotions expressed by our faces. And this simple picture-sorting tool can measure them and reveal the rhythmic structure of how the brain takes in visual information.

The beats of film structure described by McKee, therefore, should be thought of not just in terms of the snappy dialogue but also the visual exchanges signaling the emotions in the movie. In the case of the bazaar

scene, the visual beat of the film is well-synchronized with the beat of the dialogue so that we can identify 11 beats in the scene either way.

Our second picture sort, the Flow of Emotion graph, is a tool for visualizing the positive and negative feelings that the audience becomes conscious of as they watch the movie. It is constructed by having respondents sort the set of images they remember from the movie a second time, on a positive-to-negative scale of the feelings that they had while they were watching each moment in the movie.

Dramatic energy

It is from the creative tension between positive and negative emotions that dramatic energy or conflict arises.

In Figure 2 we see the overall emotional structure of the bazaar scene, which reflects the dramatic design of the scene. Both positive and negative emotions are present throughout, as shown by the two colored lines in the graph, illustrating the emotional tension from the beginning to the end of the scene.

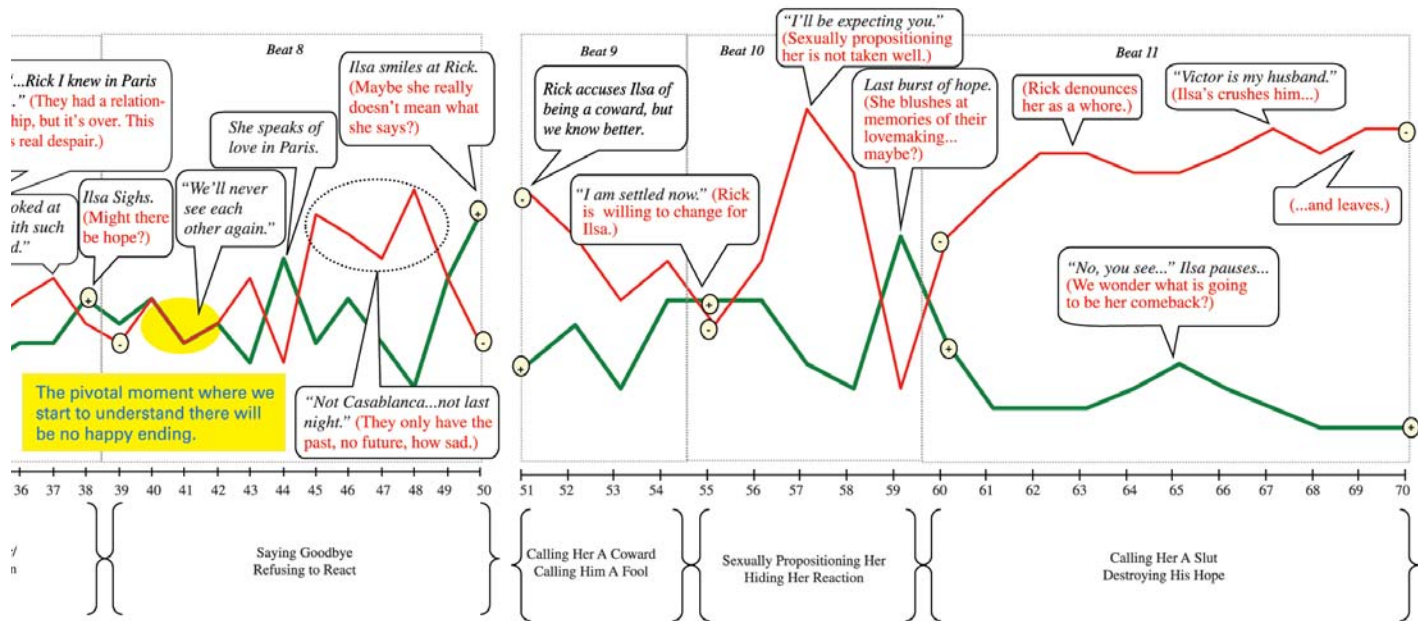
In the first four beats of the scene, positive emotions are domi-

nant, reflecting the hopeful, positive expectations the audience has about what is going to happen. Then in the middle four beats, tension increases so that positive and negative emotions are nearly equal as tension builds toward a climactic moment. At this stage audience feelings are undergoing what scientists would call a phase transition from one emotion state to another. Then, on the eighth beat of the scene, when the definitive statement is made by Ilsa to Rick (that they'll never get together), audience feelings shift decidedly to the negative as this mid-act climax ends the movie on the dark note that all hope for Rick's love is lost.

If we zoom in on the Flow of Emotion in Figure 3, we can see even more detail by looking at McKee's analysis juxtaposed with the research data. In this chart we can look at the text of the dialogue and, parenthetically, the interpretation of the subtext of what is really going on.

At the beginning of the encounter between Ilsa and Rick at the vendor's stall we the audience are siding with Ilsa: last night and Rick's awful behavior are fresh in our minds and

f the movie audience fits the predictions of the writer Robert McKee.



we are looking forward to seeing him grovel and apologize. However, during the initial phase of the interaction, with the help of the vendor (who acts as a mirror of Rick's intentions) we come to realize that Ilsa and Rick are truly, genuinely in love. We realize there is much more going on than what we see on the surface. We begin to care about them as a couple and are hopeful for a positive outcome of this encounter: he'll apologize, she'll accept his apology and they will live happily ever after.

Thus, we begin to be very emotionally engaged with the scene, reacting strongly to their every glance, word and movement. This is a moment of emotional transference, where our initial feelings are changed by the characters' words and actions. Then there comes a moment of truth - an emotional pivot in beat eight - where Ilsa states that they will never see each other again.

This is when our overall emotional response to the story changes from being mostly positive, with occasional bursts of negativity, to being overwhelmingly negative. We feel strongly for both the characters

and for their relationship and are very sad that there will be no happily-ever-after for Rick and Ilsa as a couple.

Correspond nicely

With this analysis, we can now see how well theory and experiment fit together. All five stages of McKee's method of analysis can be verified with research data. The structural beat of the film, the intensity and emotional touchpoints and the turning point of the scene that McKee described all correspond nicely with what the research measures.

McKee offers his method of analysis to other writers as a way of making explicit something they do intuitively, so they can go back after the creative heat of the first draft is over and edit their work, polishing it to make it better. These concepts help define what experienced creatives mean when they say a piece of work "feels right." That right feeling also represents a prediction that the audience will respond to the finished work the way the creative intends.

As we can see in the case of McKee's analysis, his prediction of how an audience would respond to the bazaar scene was right on. This is good

news for researchers, because it also means we have direct evidence that we can measure something that truly relates to how creatives view their work.

Our strongest hope for this research is that it chips away at the walls that confrontational, rational-based pass/fail advertising research systems have built among the creative community as it has sought - rightfully so - to protect its work.

Research is not going away, nor should it. As Robert McKee himself makes clear in his workshops around the world, creativity is not done in a vacuum and ultimately must work out in the world, with an audience. When it comes to advertising, this is even more so. As procurement pressures mount, and ROI remains the mantra at brands around the world, creatives will find their truest research allies are those who conduct brand and advertising research that respects the emotional element so critical to the creative process.

As McKee himself exclaimed upon seeing the research on one of his most beloved films, it is indeed "beautiful" when science and art can come together to support, not destroy, the creative process. | Q