



Introduction

I'll be happy to be called
what I am and for who I
am – nobody's man.

John Huston¹

A bad job for cinema auteurs, John Huston. A chameleon, taking on the coloration of whatever subject he decided to film, usually someone's novel about some man's screw-up. Nothing more consistent or characteristic, no personal theme beyond masculine failure, no recognizable visual style. A director without direction. Huston himself agreeing with his commentators: no "special message to convey," no aesthetic or philosophical obsessions.²

Just enormous talent and secure judgment for telling a lively story, for keeping those high-strung racehorses, movie stars, running the course, for making hits and coming back from duds with more hits. An artistic administrator, steering film companies through the chaos of cinematic production, using whatever it takes – literary talent, personal charm, empathy with horses and other beasts, being mysterious, being male, being lucky.

In sum, the best and least lovable qualities of the American movie industry personified. A corporation in himself of discipline and connections and technical smarts. After hours a pop-press feast of marriages and divorces, seas of alcohol, fist fights, practical jokes, name-brand friends, outspoken social views. And in the neighborhood theaters something easy to sell, something well tailored, sharply pressed, with cleanly turned seams, but maybe as generic and devoid of individuality as most of the Hollywood ready-made wardrobe. Spiritless stuff shaped not by writers, producers, directors, or cinematographers so much as by the publicity departments and stars of gargantuan companies: Warner Bros., MGM, Universal, Columbia, Twentieth Century Fox.

Accounts like this have seemed plausible to most people who think about Huston, or who thought about him for a while and then went on to think about something else during his long, swift-steady gallop through a film career of half a century. But spend a few hundred hours

looking again at his thirty-seven feature-length films and the gospel about him begins to ring stupidly inadequate. Obscure movies like *In This Our Life* ('42) and *A Walk with Love and Death* ('69), all-but-forgotten ones like *Moulin Rouge* ('53) and *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison* ('57), wrenching ones like *The Kremlin Letter* ('70), *Reflections in a Golden Eye* ('67), *Wise Blood* ('79), and *Under the Volcano* ('84), or exuberant, chaotic-looking ones like *Beat the Devil* ('54) and *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* ('72) turn out to be as rich, superbly crafted, and thoughtful as *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* ('48), *The African Queen* ('51), *The Man Who Would Be King* ('75), or *Prizzi's Honor* ('85), itself a playful recollection of *The Maltese Falcon* ('41). All sharp, strange, and exciting. All with stories, themes, and a style that one begins to recognize as Hustonian.

This book describes significant tendencies in films directed by John Huston. For me, Huston's movies have a coherence-in-diversity, profundity, and artistic energy that place their director among the greatest movie makers. At the same time, I do not believe that the excellence of an artist can be shown directly, and I propose to make no systematic arguments for Huston's aesthetic excellence, social usefulness, political appeal, or genius. Those judgments are matters of taste and, as the old saw has it, not amenable to reasoned dispute.

Identification of the deep consistency of Huston's work is difficult. But once we have managed to penetrate the polished surfaces of his movies and to articulate their stylistic and thematic repetitions, we find in them a rich and coherent artistic configuration. If my sense of Huston's range and versatility is accurate, no single commentary on his work could be comprehensive. I do not make that claim here. My study addresses, mostly through detailed analyses of about one-third of his films, clusters of prevalent themes, images, and techniques. Its delineation of Huston's artistic personality is embodied principally in discussions of specific works. Many of Huston's predilections may also be seen in his early work as a screenwriter, but the movies he directed constitute the main subject of this study. In *An Open Book*, his 1980 autobiography, he wrote, "Always and forever, I'm a director."³

As a cinematic administrator and craftsman, Huston's reputation has been beyond dispute. His talent for making critical and box-office hits allowed him as many projects as he had time, inclination, and financial need to undertake. His commercial and artistic résumé – along with a determination forged from early misfortunes with studio executives and intrusive actors – won him considerable artistic freedom in bringing films

to conclusion. From the beginning of his career, he was recognized as an eloquent story-teller, an inspired caster of actors, and a director who could induce strong performances from mediocre players and superb performances from good ones. If his films have not been seen as having a style, there has never been any doubt about their having style generally, and technical polish, and a vigor that reliably led to profits. Before production, he had a talent for promotion; in a press conference he was capable of upstaging everyone, including his famous actresses and actors.

Given his five-decade career among the first rank of Hollywood filmmakers, the distinction of his collaborators, and his remarkable number of celebrated films, Huston would seem to invite scholarly attention. But though he inspired considerable interest in popular media, his work has been the object of little extended commentary. What there is, moreover, has largely concentrated on his first and fourth films, *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. *Freud* ('62) has also attracted explication during the last decade. Meanwhile, *The African Queen*, *The Asphalt Jungle* ('50), *Beat the Devil*, *The Misfits* ('61), *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, *Fat City* ('72), *The Man Who Would Be King*, and a few others hover somewhere between cult films and perennial favorites, maintaining popular visibility if only limited critical or scholarly currency. As for the remaining twenty or twenty-five, they're not quite gone and not quite forgotten but not often the stuff of festival revivals or journal articles, either. In Europe, perhaps, Huston's reputation among film scholars has been somewhat higher, despite his exclusion by most of the *Cahiers du Cinema* auteurs from lists of favored *réalisateur*s. The most illuminating consideration of his films to date is a monograph-length essay by Richard T. Jameson of England; the biographical-critical studies of Robert Benayoun in France should also be counted among the most insightful and careful writings on Huston.⁴ Books published in the United States by Kaminsky, Hammen, McCarty, and others have considerable useful information but offer only brief analyses of the films.

As a result of the neglect of Huston's oeuvre, we know little of the sources and main features of his artistic coherence, his thematic and stylistic range as it was inscribed across thirty-seven films. His critical history, to quote Jameson, "derives mainly from the fact that his films have been both celebrated and derided for maddeningly wrong reasons, having more to do with prevailing critical fashion than with the inherent qualities of his art."⁵

There have been recent indications that Huston's reputation may be ready to move from among the penny stocks onto more expensive lists:

an issue of a periodical devoted to his career, a lengthy biography of his family, two collections of essays and documents about Huston and his films.⁶ These seem little enough for a director of his range and skill. Moreover, one of the recent collections on Huston – published with the fashionably dreary title of *Reflections in a Male Eye* – rarely makes auteurist gestures toward its subject. To its contemporary contributors, Huston appears less as the author of creative works than as an exemplar of social and economic conditions in Hollywood and beyond. “Huston’s films offer a lesson in the economic, ideological, and historically specific contexts that shaped American filmmaking practice.”⁷ Though this volume reprints older essays and reviews that celebrate the strength and distinctiveness of Huston’s art, few of the modern commentators, whose essays constitute the larger part of the collection, appear willing to grant him artistic majority.

Why has Huston’s artistic personality gone more or less unremarked for so long? Briefly, his neglect seems to be a consequence partly of the history of taste and fashion among critics and academics in film studies, and partly of a stylistic finish so smooth and self-effacing that it conceals its remarkable art as straightforward, generic story-telling (if such a thing exists). Huston’s art looks to us, I suspect, as Shakespeare’s did to his contemporaries: like nature itself. Furthermore, the ethnic, national, sexual, and class politics of Huston’s films – with a few politically charged exceptions like *We Were Strangers* (’49), *The Roots of Heaven* (’58), and *Under the Volcano* – tend to be implicit and liberal. Neither of those qualities recommends his work to politicized critics. His reputation as a masculinist filmmaker, the purveyor of what Molly Haskell called “The male Huston world-view, bleak and sardonic,” has been equally unenticing to such commentators.⁸ Whatever the reasons, Huston has been banished, largely by silence, from most film critics’ pantheons of directors.

Finally, the dearth of sophisticated commentary on his movies also has to do with a general perception that Huston is a director without consistent themes or a recognizable style, a director without an artistic personality of his own. In interviews, Huston tended to imply that he had few pretensions beyond the commercial virtues of creating visual interest and telling a good story entertainingly.⁹ On the other hand, he did acknowledge that his work may have a sort of second-order consistency. When asked, “Do you feel you are trying to say something coherent to mankind?” Huston answered, “There probably is. I am not consciously aware of anything. But even the choice of material indicates a preference, a turn of mind. You could draw a portrait of a mind through that

mind's preferences."¹⁰ To Peter S. Greenberg, he spoke somewhat less conditionally: "A deep analysis [of my film career] would probably reveal the real continuity, the deep current of intention. . . . I didn't say I know what they are."¹¹

The accepted view of Huston's career, however, seems to be that the texture, shape, and thematic content of his movies have been determined by the novels he converted to film. James Agee, in his enormously influential 1950 *Life* magazine portrait, established this understanding: "Each of Huston's pictures has a visual tone and style of its own, dictated to his camera by the story's essential content and spirit."¹² The continuing power of Agee's assessment is symptomatic of the critical neglect of the director's middle and late career. Thirty-five years after the article in *Life*, Scott Hammen still echoes Agee when he writes that "To apply the term *Hustonian* with any consistency even to the films Huston directed is difficult."¹³

There have been notable dissenters from the dominant story of Huston-the-styleless, the authorial cipher. James Naremore declares, "while many people deserve credit for the success of *The Maltese Falcon*, its special quality owes chiefly to John Huston's style, a style so recognizable and individual that it is anything but the sign of a 'competent craftsman.'"¹⁴ He characterizes Huston's method by contrasting it with Dashiell Hammett's: "Hammett's art is minimalist and deadpan, but Huston, contrary to his reputation, is a highly energetic and expressive storyteller who likes to make comments through his images."¹⁵ Jameson agrees with Naremore not only in asserting that there is such a thing as a *Hustonian* style but also in characterizing some of its particulars. In *Treasure*, he argues, "Huston's realism is in fact covertly, seamlessly expressionistic."¹⁶ More generally, "while he has a genius for truly and faithfully rendering the literary originals in motion-picture form, at the same time his own personality has so pervaded and illuminated the material that the designation 'a film of John Huston' is fully validated."¹⁷

To my knowledge, at least thirty-four of Huston's thirty-seven feature films derive directly from novels, stories, or plays. He dealt with some literary properties quite freely, but usually he worked with literature for which he had a respect that led him to preserve on screen the virtues he found on the page. Perhaps the most resourceful adapter of complex literary texts in the history of American and British cinema, he began as a director with a film based on a book that accomplished directors had already screened twice, Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1930); but he made it for the first time a critical and box-office success.¹⁸ It is difficult

to imagine any other director (with the possible exception of Stanley Kubrick) transforming works so effectively from such a wide variety of writers: B. Traven, Stephen Crane, C. S. Forester, Herman Melville, Tennessee Williams, Flannery O'Connor, Malcolm Lowry, and James Joyce, among others. And it is difficult to imagine anyone else getting certain of his originals on the screen with any success at all. *Wise Blood*, *Under the Volcano*, and *The Dead* ('87) are bravura adaptations to film of works manifestly resistant to such translation. Kipling's "The Man Who Would Be King" occasioned another conversion of real virtuosity. It is an unusually elliptical, compressed, and nonvisual story, especially for that writer, but Huston successfully expanded and translated it into the medium of motion pictures, while at the same time remaining faithful to most of its details and its precarious tone.

Huston began in the movies as a writer of screenplays. Among his credits are such strong and commercially successful scripts as *Jezebel*, *Juarez*, *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet*, *High Sierra*, and *Sergeant York*; and he worked with top directors at Warner Bros.: William Wyler, Anatole Litvak, William Dieterle, Raoul Walsh, and Howard Hawks. He has spoken of the intimate connection between writing and directing: "There's really no difference between them, it's an extension, one from the other. Ideally I think the writer should go on and direct the picture. I think of the director as an extension of the writer."¹⁹

I am not going to argue for the "development" of John Huston from writer to director, or as a director, though I believe that his movies become denser and richer, more assured and fluent, as he matures in his profession. In particular the editing, *mis en scène*, and writing of his films seem to me to become more resonant between *The Maltese Falcon* and, say, *Freud*. But this is a highly subjective judgment and there are undeniable exceptions to it. In any event, Huston was thirty-five when he directed his first film and he had been in and around show business and other arts all his life. When he returned from World War II to pick up the career that he would follow for the next thirty-nine years, he was forty years old. From the start of his directorial career, then, Huston was a relatively mature artist. If he did not spring fully formed from the head of Zeus, most of his parts were in place from his remarkable debut, and virtually all of the main ideas, aesthetic tendencies, and complications of his cinematic world are identifiable in the pictures of his first decade as a director. Thematic emphases change from film to film; genres are taken up, dropped, returned to, parodied; technical opportunities and interests

evolve. But Huston's work exhibits most of its multifaceted coherences without fundamental change through time.

"Fashioning human nature," wrote Benayoun, "is Huston's main occupation."²⁰ Fashioning their own natures is the main occupation of his central characters. In virtually all of his films, Huston chronicles his protagonists' attempts to discover, create, or recover themselves, to conceive and articulate their identities. Their quests for self are often embodied in the most time-honored of metaphoric vehicles, the adventurous journey – films like *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *Moby Dick* ('56), *A Walk with Love and Death*, or *The Man Who Would Be King*. Implicit in early works like *The Maltese Falcon*, *In This Our Life*, and *Key Largo* ('48), themes of identity continue to dominate at the end of Huston's career in *Prizzi's Honor* and *The Dead*. Near the center of his forty-six years as a director, he explicitly addresses questions of who we are and how we create ourselves in *Freud*, "an intellectual suspense story."²¹ He follows that tightly packed, difficult film with a breezy semi-comic meditation on related themes of self-creation and the revealing lies that we tell each other in *The List of Adrian Messenger* ('63), another suspense/detective story. Very variously, Huston's other movies also incorporate insistent querying of the processes by which humans create their identities. *Moulin Rouge* portrays Toulouse-Lautrec's recovery of himself and his place in society through art; *The Kremlin Letter* and *Under the Volcano* dramatize the pains of self-loss or self-abandonment. Diverse as Huston's pictures are in other respects, they may be seen from perhaps the most comprehensive perspective as returning to fundamental questions of identity and individual integrity.

Huston directly addressed the idea of happiness – both good fortune and abiding pleasure – in his long-suppressed documentary of an Army psychiatric hospital, *Let There Be Light* ('46, released '80). The definition of human fulfillment embodied in it, "the ability to give love and to receive it," occupies the center of fiction movies like *The Misfits* and *The Night of the Iguana* ('64).²² In some of Huston's films, however, love comes into conflict with personal integrity or with the protagonists' places in their cultures. *The Barbarian and the Geisha* ('58), *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison*, and *The Unforgiven* ('60) make such conflicts central.

Selfhood, happiness, and love are intimately connected to the idea of home, a congenial place among other people and in the world. Huston seemed to regard "being at home as the full achievement of identity" (as

Hayden White once put it).²³ Quests for homes of one kind or another are nearly as pervasive in Huston's films as quests for identity and love, and they are often portrayed as practically equivalent.

Enlarged and extended through time, a home becomes a group, then a society. Huston's films give emphasis to one of the historically dominant issues of narrative, the relation between individuals and their cultures. As far as Huston is concerned, everyone needs other people; there is no future for the class of individuals to which Ahab assigns Moby Dick, "the great solitaries and hermits." His films are imbued with consciousness of the extent to which culture determines the lives and personalities of individual human beings. The exotic settings of his movies bring together cultures that are partly incomprehensible to each other, a clash underscored by frequently untranslated foreign-language dialogue.

The encompassing subcategories of class, historical moment, and ethnicity (or, rarely, race) also have recurrent importance. Gender, a preoccupation in academia for the past fifteen or twenty years, gets less attention than culture and history. Despite the insistence of commentators and biographers on Huston's masculinity, his films do not often emphasize distinctions between living as a female and as a male. (*The Dead* and *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean*, to a greater degree than most of Huston's other movies, differentiate men and women.) Culture, class, and ethnicity, however, frequently obstruct or abridge the capacity of Huston's characters to create their identities and discover their humanity. Whether in the majority of films that have significant female characters or the few that do not, gender rarely plays such a role.

The people that Huston portrays are often as complex as their worlds. With the exceptions of a few films in which the clear moral separations of romance prevail – *The African Queen* or *Annie* ('82), for example – Huston's audience is neither invited to side exclusively with his protagonists nor discouraged from sympathizing with antagonists. Commentators have discovered in the most famous of Huston's heroes, Sam Spade, everything from a spiteful sociopath obsessed with insecurity about his masculinity to a self-sufficient, stylish hero of unimpeachable integrity. (Huston himself has attracted a similar spectrum of characterizations.) One could expect as much disagreement about other Huston figures as about Spade, if they were to receive as much critical attention; for such disputes reflect characters' variegated qualities, which will appear predominant in turn according to the directions from which critics approach.

In most of Huston's films, humanity, the natural world, and divinity

are intertwined; what characters can become is determined by all three, which are both within and outside them. To seek one's self in Huston's films is to seek the truth of the world. Dismaying discoveries of vanity, corruption, and weakness are inevitable; strength and courage consist in facing and accepting the profound limitations of human life without despair or resignation.

Responding during a visit to Huston's Irish home to an interviewer's question about "her duty as a writer," Carson McCullers gave an answer that the director found memorable enough to repeat in his autobiography: "Writing, for me, is a search for God."²⁴ Making films, for Huston, seems to have constituted a similar search for divinity, which he sought in fate, the natural world, and humanity. Several years before McCullers's visit, while working on *The Bible . . . In the Beginning* ('66), Huston remarked, "I believe that all man builds, creates or constructs is religious. . . . The only religion in which I can believe is creation."²⁵ Huston's films generally show little fondness for institutionalized religion, setting it in opposition to private, personal piety and the godhead to be found in individual human beings. The divinity of self-creation is central to *The Man Who Would Be King*, *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean*, *Moby Dick*, and, tragically, *Wise Blood*. The aesthetic distance and objectivity that become increasingly distinctive as Huston's career proceeds reflect at once his skepticism and his reverence toward the universe and toward human life.

In any single movie, Huston attempted to subordinate all formal aspects to its particular quest, to what Huston called "the idea" of the film.²⁶ Across his work as a whole, a solar system of identifiably Hustonian imagery, situations, figures, actions, and attitudes revolves around the central ideas to which he repeatedly returns. We have already noted plots that take the form of quests, exotic settings, and strikingly individualized, complex characters. Add to them a sympathy for the natural world; the capacious symbolism of sky, earth, water, and fire; Huston's inclination to find in the extreme and eccentric the universally human; and an empathy for weakness or futility joined with a deep respect for the pertinacity of anyone who remains upright, who survives. The Hustonian also includes smaller, more particular stylistic and thematic tendencies: the association of mirrors with falsehood or deception, a fondness for opening shots that end by panning down from the sky, a penchant for striking introductory shots of major characters, and so on. Out of such materials, Huston constructs narratives of people who struggle, who occasionally win outright, who manage an unlikely draw (*Vic-*

tory, '81), or who in losing still win. His stories mean the world, as we say, and require the best possible telling. Hence the importance of his meticulousness, the combination of vividness and exactitude that he required of his pictures.

It is possible for a director to make a strong, original film or two without the kind of formal engagement and ingenuity that Huston brought to his art. But few directors have been able to sustain significant careers without absorbing themselves in all the possibilities of their medium. Prolific filmmakers who have created bodies of work at once coherent and varied evolve as artists through their ongoing fascination with the formal qualities of story, camera, sound, light, and editing as much as through recurrent ideas and feelings. Without formal inventiveness, a filmmaker who tells similar stories over and over will seem less an author than an automaton.

Huston's cinematic contemplations of the paradoxes of heroic successes and failures make up one of his central aesthetic (as well as thematic) preoccupations. Most of his other recurrent formal concerns – his interests in color and composition within the frame, for example – are also linked with the thematic content of his stories. Still others belong to a dimension of film that we understand and talk about with difficulty, its momentary patterns and its abstract rhythms of image, movement, and sound.

An accomplished, lifelong painter, sketcher, and art collector, Huston brought to his films a visual resourcefulness and literacy evident from the graphic energy and precision of *The Maltese Falcon* to the casual mastery of the *tableaux vivants* of *The Dead*. Unfortunately, the difficulty of viewing many of Huston's films in the form in which he composed them handicaps our understanding and appreciation of his visual art. Prints that retain the painstaking alterations of the usual palette of Technicolor cinematography in *Moulin Rouge*, *Moby Dick*, and *Reflections in a Golden Eye* are generally unavailable; indeed, the desaturated color version of the last may survive only in a single reel. Only slightly more accessible are the widescreen versions in which Huston made two-thirds of the films of his last thirty years. Despite this impoverishment of his oeuvre, however, we can still find in the standardized versions of his pictures inventive, systematic use of color and light/darkness. His expressive disposition of figures and other elements within the frame, his consciousness of the implications of characters' movements into and out of the picture and toward or away from each other also remain evident.

Huston handles entrances and exits with a deftness and wit, especial-