

Eighty years since John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon*

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John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* was screened in late January at theaters in the US to mark 80 years since its release. The film was shot in June and July 1941 and opened in October of that year. The recent showings were sponsored by Turner Classic Movies (TCM), Fathom Events and Warner Bros. Entertainment.

Based on the detective novel of the same title by Dashiell Hammett, published in 1930, *The Maltese Falcon*—or variations of it—had been filmed twice before. A rather stiff but facetious version, with Ricardo Cortez and Bebe Daniels, directed by Roy Del Ruth, was released in 1931, while a wildly misguided comic adaptation (retitled *Satan Met a Lady*), with Warren William and Bette Davis, directed by William Dieterle, came out in 1936.

The Huston film is conspicuously faithful to the Hammett book. Virtually every line of dialogue is borrowed from the original source. In San Francisco, private investigator Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart) becomes involved with a group of devious and scheming adventurers in pursuit of a solid gold, jewel-encrusted statuette allegedly worth a king's ransom.

The series of events, which ultimately leads to the killing of three men (four in the novel), begins with a visit by a Miss Wonderly (Mary Astor) to the offices of Spade and his partner Miles Archer (Jerome Cowan). She claims to be looking for her wayward younger sister, who is keeping company with a roughneck, Floyd Thursby. Spade and Archer (who personally volunteers to follow Wonderly that evening) agree to take the case.

The same night, Archer turns up dead, shot at close-range. Only a half-hour later, Thursby is also murdered. The police come knocking at Spade's door, hinting that he might have killed Thursby in revenge for his partner's being knocked off. Spade angrily rejects the imputation, and also protects the identity of his client.

In any event, everything that "Miss Wonderly" told Spade and Archer was untrue, starting with her name, which is actually Brigid O'Shaughnessy. However, when Spade tracks her down, she still refuses to explain what she is up to. Joel Cairo (Peter Lorre) soon arrives at Spade's office and offers the private eye \$5,000 if he can help locate a mysterious "black figure of a bird." Later, Spade encounters Kasper Gutman (Sidney Greenstreet), and his hired thug, Wilmer (Elisha Cook Jr.). Cairo, O'Shaughnessy and Gutman, the latter of whom fills in the details about the object of their collective desire, have been pursuing the figurine, which supposedly dates from the 16th century, all across the globe.

In the end, no one ends up with the supposedly priceless gold bird, several people are dead and others on their way to prison.

Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* is concisely and confidently realized, with almost no wasted words or movements. Hammett was a left-wing writer (eventually jailed during the anti-communist witch-hunts), of the hardboiled school. He belonged to a generation of artists, which emerged following the rise of America as an imperialist power and the

slaughterhouse of World War I, determined to strip life (and language) down to its essentials, to remove elaborate aestheticism, ornamentation and rhetoric. Ernest Hemingway was a far greater figure of the same generation.

Hammett's first novel, *Red Harvest* (1929), is a startling, hallucinatory series of bloody episodes and psychic traumas, set—notes James Naremore in *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (1998)—"during a period of murderous labor struggles, White House scandals, and Prohibition-style gangsterism; never overtly tendentious, it is nonetheless a deadpan exposé of union busting and police violence, filled with cataclysmic bloodshed and raw exploitation of the weak by the strong. Its title is a pun, referring not only to gory violence but also to the potential rise of the Communist International."

In the film adaptation of *The Maltese Falcon*, Huston improved on Hammett by filling the characters on the page with extraordinarily vivid human content. The director set great store by appropriate casting, and his selections here were remarkable. The first 11 actors named in the credits—Bogart, Astor, Lorre, Greenstreet, Cook Jr., Cowan, Gladys George, Barton MacLane, Lee Patrick, Ward Bond and James Burke—give near letter-perfect performances.

The sophisticated, modernist work is crisp and clean, and "cheerfully" dark and restless, if one may use that expression. Spade-Bogart, if nothing else, proves a debunker of cant and hypocrisy. He confronts O'Shaughnessy with the fraud of her "damsel in distress" routine, Cairo on his flowery, roundabout euphemisms and Gutman over his hollow bonhomie. Spade does not get rich, and he acts unpleasantly, even brutally, but he retains a certain degree of principle and dignity, perhaps the best one can hope for in the universe created by this film.

That the film was Huston's first directorial effort would probably be far more widely remembered and commented upon today had it not been overshadowed that same year by an even more impressive debut, Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*. This "two-pronged [film] noir breakthrough," in critic Andrew Sarris's words, was not mere coincidence. There are numerous connections between the two films and the two filmmakers. In the most general terms, a new and important type of social and psychological realism was emerging in the American cinema, which reached its height following World War II and was perceived by the authorities as sufficiently threatening to help set in motion the blacklist and the purge of left-wing directors, writers, producers and actors from Hollywood.

Both *Citizen Kane* and *The Maltese Falcon*, in distinct ways, cast a cold eye on the chase after (and possible attainment of) money and success. Welles' film, among other things, points to the horrible price paid by those who have "everything," which includes the freezing up and ultimate destruction of any and all genuine relationships with others. In Huston's work, "a furious and ruthless dog-eat-dog pursuit of wealth," in the words of one commentator, the characters—"dreamers consumed with greed," according to another—expend immense time and energy on what proves to

be a fool's errand. The last line of the film, added by Huston, paraphrases Shakespeare. Asked about the bird by a cop, Spade explains that it is the "stuff that dreams are made of."

The central protagonists are shortsighted, unprincipled, easily manipulated and disloyal. Spade has no great difficulty setting them against one another with his various proposals for a "fall guy" (Wilmer, Cairo, Brigid ...) They are wasting their lives on this ridiculous ornament, which may or may not even exist.

Gutman in particular has been searching for the falcon for 17 years. "I wanted it and I'm not a man that's easily discouraged when I want something." But the *something* is perhaps, in fact, most probably, *nothing*. "A swell lot of thieves!" comments Spade, and Gutman is obliged to acknowledge that "We have little enough to boast about sir, but the world hasn't come to an end just because we've run into a little setback." He continues, calculating in his head, "If I must spend another year on the quest—well, sir—that will be an additional expenditure in time of only ... five and fifteen-seventeenths percent." More delusions.

As Naremore points out, the falcon, born of a "Holy War" (i.e., the Crusades) "that, as Gutman says, 'was largely a matter of loot' ... is little more than an embellished form of raw capital, and it belongs to 'whoever can get hold of it.' The novel's final irony is that the *rara avis* turns out to be just as counterfeit as the characters." The ornament "provides a motive for the frantic activity of the novel; but when the paint is peeled away, all that remains is a lead shape, an empty object of exchange."

The first two film adaptations of *The Maltese Falcon* were unable to bring together, much less improve upon, the novel's various elements, the wisecracks, the "tough guy" dialogue and mannerisms, the unsympathetic attitude toward the police and the authorities, the emptiness and futility of the search for the statuette, the bitter conclusion. It required Huston, already with a history as a painter and writer, with his left-wing sympathies, and a decade of the Great Depression to bring that about. For figures like Welles and Huston, it certainly seemed urgent that the population, after years of immense suffering, should give up illusions about the land of limitless opportunity and consider their circumstances more critically. Urgent, and now also possible.

The film's score by the London-born former piano child prodigy Adolph Deutsch and the cinematography by Arthur Edeson contribute to the intensity of the atmosphere and the overall realism. Naremore observes that Edeson "adopts a [*Citizen Kane*]-like technique, employing a 21 mm lens to give depth and resolution to his shots. His camera is repeatedly positioned at a low level, which brings ceilings into view and creates a dynamic, foreboding sense of space."

The Maltese Falcon does not and *should* not have a happy ending because, while the immediate episode with the statuette has passed, the corrupt, criminal and even guilt-ridden facts of American existence still prevail—and it seems doubtful as well that Spade's lone wolf individualism will prove viable.

Huston was the son of journalist Rhea Gore and actor Walter Huston (who appears uncredited in *The Maltese Falcon*), who divorced when he was very young. He spent his childhood in various parts of the US. As an adolescent and a young man, he tried boxing, dance, horseback riding, short-story writing and painting. He also traveled to Mexico, Paris and London, where he lived as a "drifter." Huston returned to Hollywood in the late 1930s, and went to work as a screenwriter for Warner Brothers, the most socially conscious studio.

He worked on scripts for *Jezebel* (William Wyler, 1938), *Juarez* (Dieterle, 1939) and, most importantly, *High Sierra* (Raoul Walsh, 1941), before being given the opportunity to direct *The Maltese Falcon*. His next films, *In This Our Life* (1941) and *Across the Pacific* (1942), are not major works, although the former has a moving subplot involving the frame-up of a young black man.

During World War II, Huston made films for the Army Signal Corps:

Report from the Aleutians (1943), *The Battle of San Pietro* (1945) and *Let There Be Light* (1946). The US War Department censored or suppressed all three. When a military representative complained that *The Battle of San Pietro* was "anti-war," Huston replied, as he explains in his autobiography, *An Open Book* (1980), "that if I ever made a picture that was pro-war, I hoped someone would take me out and shoot me."

Taking into account Huston's wartime films; his screenwriting—credited or uncredited—on *Wuthering Heights* (William Wyler, 1939), *High Sierra*, *Dark Waters* (André de Toth, 1944), *Three Strangers* (Jean Negulesco, 1946), *The Stranger* (Welles, 1946) and *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak, 1946); and his direction of *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948), *Key Largo* (1948), *We Were Strangers* (about Cuban revolutionaries, 1949) and *The Asphalt Jungle* (1951), his contribution to American filmmaking during the dozen years from 1939-1951 appears to be as great as anyone's.

Huston suffered a great deal artistically and psychologically, again, perhaps as much as any other major film industry figure, from the "red scare" in Hollywood and the socio-political climate that developed in the US in the early 1950s.

In his autobiography, Huston discusses some of this history. He explains that, in his estimation, "Communism was as nothing compared to the evil done by the witch hunters. They were the real enemies of this country." He adds that the "Communists I knew were liberals and idealists, and would have been appalled at the idea of trying to overthrow the United States government. At that time no one knew about the Gulag Archipelago and Stalin's mass murders. These 'students' of Marxism held meetings, with twenty or thirty people attending, in private homes. I went to such meetings two or three times, simply out of curiosity. There would be a leader who directed the study sessions. The students would recite their lessons from *Das Kapital* or from the textbooks and pamphlets which the Party provided them." Whether this was truly his view at the time, or one that developed later, Huston goes on condescendingly, "I wasn't revolted. On the contrary, I found it all very childish. I marveled at the innocence of these good but simple people who actually believed that this was a way of improving the social condition of mankind."

In the face of the Hollywood blacklist, in September 1947 Huston helped found the Committee for the First Amendment, which included screenwriter Philip Dunne, directors Wyler and Billy Wilder and actors Bogart, Edward G. Robinson, Burt Lancaster, Gene Kelly and Judy Garland as members. The Committee came under ferocious attack, and rapidly fell apart.

Huston, although he had never been a Communist Party member, became a direct target of the witch-hunt. Hearst columnist Frank Conniff wrote that "there is very good evidence that John Huston is the brains of the Communist Party in the West." In a comment on *We Were Strangers*, the *Hollywood Reporter* accused Huston of being a "Red propagandist" (in his words) and claimed that the film was "a shameful handbook of Marxian dialectic ... and the heaviest dish of Red theory ever served to audiences outside the Soviet Union."

Huston writes in *An Open Book*, "A sickness pervaded the country. Nobody came to the defense of those being persecuted for personal beliefs guaranteed under our most sacred charter, the Constitution of the United States." Later, he explains that he traveled to Africa to make *The African Queen* (1951), and "I felt no great desire to return to the United States. It had—temporarily at least—stopped being my country, and I was just as happy to stay clear of it. The anti-Communist hysteria certainly played a role in my move to Ireland shortly afterward."

In a 1979 interview, he told Bernard Drew for *American Film*, "The McCarthy years ... weren't just a matter of censorship. Suddenly people were made into circus performers. If they didn't jump through hoops, they were disgraced, ruined, and destroyed. I had a great sense of shame at that time." Again, remarking that he had left the US because of "what

McCarthy was doing to America,” Huston explained, “I’ve remained abroad. I did not want to come back into an atmosphere that was permeated with the stench of that dreadful man. In some ways, I trace the Nixon years with its disgrace [the Watergate scandal] to the McCarthy period.”

Huston was driven out of the US, along with Welles and Charlie Chaplin, joining directors such as CP members or supporters Joseph Losey, Cy Endfield and John Berry in exile. Still others, like Abraham Polonsky and Martin Ritt, went into “internal exile,” working anonymously in television.

About the making of *Key Largo* in 1948, centered on a hostage-taking at a Florida hotel engineered by a vicious gangster (Robinson), Huston writes in his memoir, “The high hopes of the Roosevelt years were slipping away, and the underworld—as represented by Edward G. Robinson and his hoods—was once again on the move, taking advantage of social apathy. We made this the theme of the film.”

Huston fell out of fashion with various critics (including Sarris, a number of the French critics around *Cahiers du Cinéma* and more) in the 1950s and 1960s. They criticized his “dismaying decline” and the increasing pessimism and “defeatism” and “lack of conviction” in such films as *Beat the Devil* (1953), *The Misfits* (1961) and *The List of Adrian Messenger* (1963). There is no question that Huston’s work experienced a serious falling off, notwithstanding later brighter spots such as *Fat City* (1972), *The Man Who Would Be King* (1975) and *The Dead* (1987). Of course, he also made memorable appearances as an actor, notably in Roman Polanski’s *Chinatown* (1974) and Welles’s *The Other Side of the Wind* (only released in 2018).

However, a non-historical viewpoint is as useless in this case as everywhere else. Huston, along with the rest of the American left intelligentsia, passed through a bitter and disillusioning time in the postwar era. Promised by the CP and those in and around the Stalinist milieu that the end of the war would mean a rebirth of democracy, a New Deal on an even grander and more social democratic scale, Huston and the others (including Welles) were utterly unprepared for the onset of the Cold War, the National Security State and the anti-communist purges.

Huston personally underwent a series of discouraging or humiliating incidents, including the aforementioned red-baiting and ignominious collapse of the Committee for the First Amendment, a Screen Directors Guild meeting at which he and Billy Wilder were the only two to vote against a mandatory loyalty oath, and preview audiences walking out in droves from his filmed version of Stephen Crane’s anti-war novel *Red Badge of Courage* (1951), at the height of the Korean War.

Irrationalist, absurdist and existentialist moods no doubt set in or took deeper hold. Huston directed Jean-Paul Sartre’s *No Exit* on the New York stage immediately after the war, and later attempted to collaborate with Sartre on a screenplay about Sigmund Freud.

If one wants a “smoking gun,” as it were, in regard to the changed political and intellectual atmosphere in the late 1940s and its consequences, a segment of an interview conducted with Huston for *Playboy* by Lawrence Grobel in 1985—two years before the filmmaker’s death—provides it.

Grobel remarked that there seemed “to be an element of despair” in some of Huston’s recent films. “Does that reflect your own philosophy?” he asked. Huston answered, “I certainly don’t know what the point of life is ... but I don’t indulge in depression. I think I see the world very clearly, though.” Grobel then inquired, “Has life always seemed futile?”

Huston: “Not always. In World War Two, I think I had as high hopes as anybody. It looked to me as if we were on our way to some kind of understanding.”

Grobel: “What changed that vision?”

Huston: “The McCarthy era, the whole red-baiting thing. The idea of America, the America of our founding fathers, was lost. It stopped being

that America and became something else.”

As a corollary to that general pessimism, Huston developed a skepticism or mistrust toward the population, holding the latter responsible for the success of the purges. He writes, for example, in *An Open Book*, “The thing that was most disappointing to me was the submissiveness of the American people.” This is a debilitating position for an artist to adopt, predisposing him or her to a lack of interest in the lives and sufferings of wide layers of the population, who have “betrayed” or let him or her down.

Sarris and others claimed to be unable to find a unifying pattern in Huston’s work. In fact, one has no difficulty in discerning a recurring theme, at least in his best work. *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and *The Asphalt Jungle* in particular address the efforts of groups of self-deluded individuals, consumed with pragmatic, “get-rich-quick” notions rooted in fantasies about the “American Dream” and such, who pursue something unattainable or that doesn’t exist, and destroy themselves and others in the process.

As a growing demoralization sets in, Huston continues working on that theme, but now either as farce (*The African Queen*), “camp” (*Beat the Devil*) or metaphysics (*Moby Dick*, 1956). His filmmaking efforts tend then to dissolve into studies of personal neuroses of a more or less uninteresting variety, in such works as *Freud* (1962), *The Night of the Iguana* (1964), *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1967).

The critics who dismissed Huston, working backward from his weaker films to argue against his much stronger ones, pretended as though art could remain aloof, in Trotsky’s words, from “the convulsions of our epoch.” Those events, Trotsky went on, are “prepared by people, they are made by people, they fall upon people and change these people. Art, directly or indirectly, affects the lives of the people who make or experience the events.” The historical approach needs to be front and center.



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