The Maltese Falcon

Directed by John Huston
Based on the novel by Dashiell Hammett
Screenplay by John Huston
Original Music by Adolph Deutsch
Cinematography by Arthur Edeson
Film Editing by Thomas Richards
Meta Carpenter....script supervisor

Humphrey Bogart...Sam Spade
Mary Astor...Brigid O'Shaughnessy
Gladys George...Iva Archer
Peter Lorre...Joel Cairo
Barton MacLane...Det. Lt. Dundy
Lee Patrick...Effie Perine
Sydney Greenstreet...Kasper Gutman
Ward Bond...Det. Tom Polhaus
Jerome Cowan...Miles Archer
Elisha Cook Jr....Wilmer Cook
James Burke...Luke
Murray Alper...Frank Richman
John Hamilton...District Attorney Bryan
Walter Huston...Capt. Jacobi

Selected for the National Film Registry, 1989
3 Oscar nominations: best picture, best screenplay, best supporting actor (Greenstreet)

John Huston, The Maltese Falcon (1941, 101 min)

During WW II. Another – Let There Be Light 1946 – so frightened military officials they kept it under lock and key for 34 years because they were convinced that if the American public saw Huston’s scenes of American soldiers crying and suffering what in those days was called “shellshock” and “battle fatigue” they would have an even more difficult time getting Americans to go off and get themselves killed in future wars. One military official accused Huston of being “anti-war,” to which he replied, “If I ever make a pro-war film I hope they take me out and shoot me.” During his long career he made a number of real dogs, e.g. Annie 1982, Victory 1981, Phobia 1980, and The Macintosh Man 1973, part of the price of being a director in the studio system. He also made films that regularly turn up on all major critics’ lists of classics. Probably no director anywhere made so many films of major works of literature. Some of his fine films are The Dead 1987 based on James Joyce’s short story, Prizzi’s Honor 1985, Under the Volcano 1984, Wise Blood 1979, The Man Who Would Be King 1975, The Misfits 1961, Moby Dick 1956, Moulin Rouge 1952, The African Queen 1951, The Red Badge of Courage 1951, The Asphalt Jungle 1950 and The Treasure of the Sierra Madre 1948. Huston directed both his father and his daughter to Academy Awards: Walter for Treasure of the Sierra Madre and Angelica for The Dead. Huston was nominated for 14 Academy Awards: best director for Prizzi’s Honor, Moulin Rouge 1952, The African Queen, The Asphalt Jungle; best screenplay for The Man Who Would Be King, Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison 1957, The African Queen, The Asphalt Jungle, Sergeant York 1941, The Maltese Falcon, Dr. Ehrlich’s Magic Bullet 1940, best supporting actor for The Cardinal, 1963. He won Oscars for
best director and best screenplay for Treasure of the Sierra Madre. He was given the American Film Institute’s Life Achievement Award in 1983. He also won the Razzie for Worst Director for Annie.

Dashiell Hammett (Samuel Dashiell Hammett, 27 May 1894, St. Mary’s County, Maryland—10 January 1961, New York, throat cancer) was the best of the hard-boiled school of detective fiction writers who were published in pulp magazines and then in novels from the 1920s through the 1950s. Much of his work, sometimes credited and sometimes not, was filmed, such as No Good Deed (2002, from a short story), Last Man Standing 1996 (based on Kurosawa’s Yojimbo which was based on Hammett’s Red Harvest), Miller’s Crossing (1990 [based on the novels Red Harvest and Glass Key], The Wizard of Malta (1981 [based on The Maltese Falcon]), ”The Dain Curse” (1978 [tv miniseries, based on his novel], Yojimbo (1961 [based on Red Harvest, uncredited], The Glass Key 1942 [based on the novel], The Thin Man 1943 [based on the novel], The Maltese Falcon 1941 [based on the novel], Satan Met a Lady 1936 [based on The Maltese Falcon], The Glass Key (1935, based on the novel, seven Thin Man films, Roadhouse Nights 1930 [based on Red Harvest], and more.

Humphrey Bogart (25 December 1899, New York, New York—14 January 1957, Los Angeles, California, throat cancer) was best known for playing tough guys and hard cases, but he didn’t start out that way. His father was a surgeon, his mother a magazine illustrator, and he went to Trinity School in Manhattan and Phillips Academy in Andover. It’s hard to tell which “facts” about Bogart’s life are true, which are folklore and which are studio hype. After several years of minor stage and film roles, he got his breakthrough part as the gangster Duke Mantee in The Petrified Forest 1936, a role he played on Broadway. The studio wanted to give the part to Edward G. Robinson, maybe America’s most famous smarmy gangster because of Little Caesar 1930, but Bogey’s pal Leslie Howard, who also starred in the film, insisted that he and Bogart play the roles they’d played on Broadway. (Bogart later named one of his children Leslie.) Lauren Bacall was 19 years old when she co-starred with Bogart in John Huston’s To Have and Have Not 1944. Her famous line from the film was: “You know you don’t have to act with me, Steve. You don’t have to say anything, you don’t have to do anything. Not a thing. Oh, maybe just whistle. You know how to whistle, don’t you? You just put your lips together and (beat) blow.” Bogie’s coffin contains a small, gold whistle, which Bacall put there. You never know. His longtime friend and 7-time director John Huston said of him, “The trouble with Bogart is he thinks he’s Bogart.” Huston also said, “Himself, he never took too seriously—his work, most seriously. He regarded the somewhat gaudy figure of Bogart the star with amused cynicism; Bogart the actor he held in deep respect.” He died in his sleep after surgery for throat cancer. His last words are supposed to have been, “I should never have switched from scotch to martinis.” George Raft was as important to Bogart’s film career as Leslie Howard: in two of the dumbest career moves ever, Raft turned down the role of “Mad Dog” Earle in High Sierra and Sam Spade in The Maltese Falcon, both in 1941. Bogart won a best acting Oscar for The African Queen 1951 and nominations for The Caine Mutiny 1954 and Casablanca 1942. Some of his other films are The Harder They Fall 1956, The Desperate Hours 1955, The Barefoot Contessa 1954, In a Lonely Place 1950, Knock on Any Door 1949, Key Largo 1948, The Treasure of the Sierra Madre 1948, Dark Passage 1947, The Roaring Twenties 1939, and Angels with Dirty Faces 1938.

Mary Astor (Lucile Vasconcellos Langhanke, 3 May 1906, Quincy, Illinois—25 September 1987, Woodland Hills, CA, heart attack) first appeared in film in The Scarecrow 1920. She worked again the next year in Sentimental Tommy 1921 but her scenes were all deleted. Her last screen job was in the 1980 TV miniseries “Hollywood.” Along the way she was in Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte 1964, Return to Peyton Place 1961, Any Number Can Play 1949, Little Women 1944, Meet Me in St. Louis 1944, Across the Pacific 1942, The Prisoner of Zenda 1937, Dodsworth 1936, Trapped by Television 1936, Red Dust 1932, The Lost Squadron 1932, Other Men’s Women 1931, Ladies Love Bruises 1930, Dry Martini 1928, The Rough Riders 1927, Don Juan 1926, Bullets or Ballots 1921. She won a Best Actress in a Supporting Role Oscar for her work in The Great Lie 1941.

Peter Lorre (László Löwenstein, 26 June 1904, Rózsadej, Austria-Hungary, now Ruzomberok, Slovakia—23 March 1964, Los Angeles, California, USA, stroke) had only one uncredited screen-role before his star-turning performance in M 1931—as a dentist’s patient in Die Verschwundene Frau 1929. He is probably best known these days for his performances as Ugarte in Casablanca 1942 and Joel Cairo in The Maltese Falcon 1941. His last film was The Patsy 1964. In the 1930s he starred in nine films about a detective named Mr. Moto. Some of his other 87 films were The Raven 1963, Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea 1961, Silk Stockings 1957, Around the World in Eighty Days 1956, 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea 1954, Beat the Devil 1953, The Chase 1946, Arsenic and Old Lace 1944, The Mask of Dimitrios 1944, Crime and Punishment 1935, and The Man Who Knew Too Much 1934. The Nazis used footage of him in M in what is probably their most famous antisemitic propaganda film, Der Ewige Jude The Eternal Jew, 1940.

Barton MacLane (25 December 1902, Columbia, South Carolina—1 January 1969, Santa Monica, California, cancer) was in nearly 180 films and tv series, most of them westerns or cop films. Among them were: Law of the Lawless 1964, Best of the

SYDNEY GREENSTREET (27 Dec. 1879, Sandwich, Kent, England—8 Jan 1954, Hollywood, diabetes and nephritis) had a long and distinguished stage career in England and the US before he made his screen debut as Kaspar Gutman in The Maltese Falcon when he was 62. He appeared in 24 films, 5 with Bogart and 8 with Lorre. Some of his other roles were in Malaya 1949, Flamingo Road 1949, The Hucksters 1947, The Mask of Dimitrios 1944, Passage to Marseille 1944, Casablanca 1942, Across the Pacific 1942, They Died with Their Boots On 1941.


Jerome Cowan (6 October 1897, New York City, New York—24 January 1972, Encino, California) was, in the 1950s through the early 1970s, ubiquitous on American television: he appeared (usually just once) on all the major and minor drama and comedy series in those years. He also appeared in over 100 (mostly forgotten) films, a few of which were Visit to a Small Planet 1960, Dallas 1950, The West Point Story 1950, Young Man with a Horn 1950, Joe Palooka Meets Humphrey 1950, The Fountainhead 1949, Miracle on 34th Street 1947, The Song of Bernadette 1943, The Maltese Falcon 1941, High Sierra 1941, Voyages of 1938 1937, New Faces of 1937 1937, You Only Live Once 1937, and Beloved Enemy 1936. He was best known in film for his eight appearances in a film series based on a comic strip, Blondie.

Arthur Edeson (24 October 1891, New York, New York—14 February 1970, Agoura Hills, California) got his first cinematographer credit with The Dollar Mark 1914 and his last with The Fighting O'Flynn 1949. There were more than 130 other films between the two, many of them truly memorable. He did My Wild Irish Rose 1947, The Mask of Dimitrios 1944, Casablanca 1942, Across the Pacific 1942, They Drive by Night 1940, Each Dawn I Die 1939, They Won't Forget 1937, Gold Diggers of 1937 1936, Satan Met a Lady 1936 (the previous film version of TMF), Mutiny on the Bounty 1935, The Invisible Man 1933, Frankenstein 1931, Doctors' Wives 1931, All Quiet on the Western Front 1930, Stella Dallas 1925, The Thief of Baghdad 1924, Robin Hood 1922, and The Three Musketeers 1921. He was nominated for three best cinematographer Oscars: Casablanca 1942, All Quiet on the Western Front 1930 and In Old Arizona 1929.


John (Marcellus) Huston, American director, scenarist, actor, and producer, was born in the town of Nevada, Missouri, where the Water and Power Company—or, according to some accounts, the entire town—had been won by his maternal grandfather, John Gore, in a poker game. Huston's father, Walter, was at that time a small-time actor whose itinerant troupe had just gone bust in Arizona; John Gore therefore installed him as head of Nevada's public utilities. Totally without engineering training, he proved spectacularly unsuited for this post, and when a fire broke out he mishandled a valve, cutting off the water supply. Half of Nevada burned to the ground, and Walter, with his wife and infant son John, went back on the road.

Huston's parents' marriage—contracted at the St. Louis World's Fair was never a great success, and in 1909 they separated, divorcing four years later. Huston spent his boyhood shuttling between them, spending most of the time with his mother, who became a journalist under her own name, Rhea Gore. With her he traveled the Midwest, picking up her taste for literature, horses, plush hotels, and gambling. He remained somewhat in awe of her, though, feeling that she despised him as a romantic fantasist. “Nothing I ever did pleased my mother,” he later remarked.

He was far more at ease with his father, who when not acting in New York would take him on the vaudeville circuit, staying in hotels that were anything but plush. Huston thoroughly relished the contrast, and was enthralled by the theatrical low-life he encountered. But at twelve he was found to be suffering from
Bright’s disease and an “enlarged heart.” The boy was placed in a sanatorium in Phoenix, Arizona, and told he must henceforth live as a cautious invalid. Rebelling, he took up secret midnight swimming in a nearby river. After some months, this pastime was discovered, and it was decided that he must have made a fortunate recovery.

His mother, who had remarried, moved to Los Angeles, where Huston attended Lincoln High School. As if making up for lost time, he plunged into a multitude of interests: abstract painting, ballet, English and French literature, opera, horseback riding, and boxing. At fifteen he dropped out of high school, becoming one of the state’s top-ranking amateur lightweights (with a permanently flattened nose) while studying at the Art Students League in Los Angeles. He was also “infatuated” with the cinema, though as yet only as a spectator. “Charlie Chaplin was a god, and William S. Hart. I remember the enormous impact the UFA films had on me, those of Emil Jannings and The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari. I saw this many times.”

Walter Huston had moved over from vaudeville to the legitimate theatre, and in 1924 achieved fame on Broadway with the lead in O’Neill’s Desire Under the Elms. Watching his father’s rehearsals, Huston was deeply impressed by O’Neill’s work and fascinated by the mechanism of acting: “What I learned there, during those weeks of rehearsal, would serve me for the rest of my life.” He himself acted briefly with the Provincetown Players in 1924. The following year, recovering from a mastoid operation, he took a long vacation in Mexico, where among other adventures he rode as an honorary member of the Mexican cavalry. On his return, Huston married a friend from high school, Dorothy Harvey. The marriage lasted barely a year.

He had begun to write short stories, one of which was published by H.L. Mencken in the American Mercury. Further pieces, clearly influenced by Hemingway, appeared in Esquire, the New York Times, and other journals. He also wrote Frankie and Johnny, “a puppet play with music (the music being by Sam Jaffe). This was produced in Greenwich Village by Ruth Squires and published in book form. Through his mother, Huston was given a job on the New York Graphic. “I had no talent as a journalist whatever and I was fired oftener than any reporter ever has been within such a limited time. There was a kind-hearted city editor who kept hiring me back.” When even that man’s patience ran out, Huston headed for Hollywood, where his father had moved with the coming of talkies.

Huston was hired as a scenarist by Goldwyn Studios, spent six months there with no assignments, and then moved to his father’s studio, Universal, where he collaborated on four scripts, two of them for films starring his father: A House Divided and Law and Order. His colleagues had no doubt of his talent, but one of them described him at this time as “just a drunken boy, hopelessly immature.” After a lethal automobile accident in which he was the driver, he “wanted nothing so much as to get away” and left Universal for a job at Gaumont-British in London. Unhappy there, he quit again and lived rough for a while, before bumping his way to Paris and eventually back to New York. After a brief stint as a journalist there and a few months with the WPA Theatre in Chicago, he returned to Hollywood in 1937 and went to work as a writer for Warner Brothers.

Newly married to Leslie Black, Huston now seemed ready to settle to a serious career as a screenwriter. His first credit was for William Wyler’s Jezebel (1937); this was followed by The Amazing Dr. Clitterhouse (1938), and two of Warner’s prestigious biopics, Juarez (1939) and Dr. Ehrlich’s Magic Bullet (1940). Dr. Ehrlich won Huston an Academy Award nomination. As did his next script, for Howard Hawks’ Sergeant York (1941). He was now successful enough to persuade the studio that, if his next script was a hit, he should be allowed a chance to direct. “They indulged me rather. They liked my work as a writer and they wanted to keep me on. If I wanted to direct, why, they’d give me a shot at it, and if it didn’t come off all that well, they wouldn’t be too disappointed as it was to be a very small picture.”

Huston’s next script was for High Sierra (1941). Directed by Raoul Walsh, it gave Humphrey Bogart, as a gunman on the run, his breakthrough to stardom, and provided Huston with the hit he wanted. Warners kept their word and offered him his choice of subject. He chose Dashiell Hammett’s thriller, The Maltese Falcon, which had already been adapted twice by Warners, both times badly. Wisely, Huston stuck closely to the original, taking over much of Hammett’s dialogue unchanged, and filming with a clean, uncluttered style that provided a cinematic equivalent to the novel’s fast, laconic narrative. He also benefited from a superb cast. George Raft was offered the role of the private eye Sam Spade but turned it down (as he had previously with the lead in High Sierra). Bogart, who liked Huston, was happy to take over, supported by Mary Astor, Peter Lorre, Sydney Greenstreet (in his first film role), Elisha Cook, Jr. and—in a walk-on part “for luck”—Walter Huston.

The Maltese Falcon (1941) was made on a small, B-picture budget, and put out by Warners with minimal publicity. They were taken aback by the enthusiastic response of public and critics. The latter immediately hailed the film as a classic, and it has since been claimed as the best detective melodrama ever made. “It is hard to say,” wrote Harold Barnes in the Herald Tribune, “whether Huston the adapter, or Huston the fledgling director, is more responsible for this triumph.” Already, in his directorial debut, many of Huston’s characteristic preoccupations appear. The plot is a web of deceptive appearances; characters and even objects (including the coveted falcon itself) are duplicitous and untrustworthy, and the hero himself is not what he seems. Spade, outwardly a cynical opportunist, proves to be driven by a scrupulous personal code. “When a man’s partner is killed,” he says, turning the woman he wants over to justice,” he’s supposed to do something about it.”
...A few days before shooting was complete on *Across the Pacific*, Huston received his army induction papers....Appositely, his first assignment as a documentary filmmaker for the Signal Corps was across the Pacific—in the Aleutian islands off Alaska. The resulting film, *Report From the Aleutians* (1943) was described in the *New York Times* as “one of the war’s outstanding records of what our men are doing. It is furthermore an honest record.”

Promoted to captain, Huston was sent to Italy to make *The Battle of San Pietro* (1944) regarded as one of the finest combat documentaries ever filmed. “No war film I have seen,” wrote James Agee in *The Nation*, “has been quite so attentive to the heaviness of casualties, and to the number of yards gained or lost, in such an action.”...Huston’s ironic realism disconcerted the War Department. One general accused him of having made “a film against war,” eliciting the response: “Well, sir, when I make a picture that’s for war—why I hope you take me out and shoot me.” Despite this, he was promoted to major and awarded the Legion of Merit.

His last film for the army was *Let There Be Light* (1945), on the rehabilitation of soldiers suffering from combat neuroses. The overtly optimistic message was constantly undercut by the compassionate objectivity of the filming, which for Huston was “practically a religious experience.” The War Department shelved the picture, but it was finally given general release in 1980. Noting “its voice-over narration [provided by Walter Huston], its use of wipes and dissolves, and its full-orchestra soundtrack music,” Vincent Canby called it “an amazingly elegant movie.”

Discharged from the Army in 1945, Huston returned to Hollywood, where he was divorced from his second wife. After a brief, spectacular affair with Olivia de Havilland, he married the actress Evelyn Keyes in 1946....

At this period Huston had a reputation—which he did little to discourage—as one of the wild men of Hollywood. Along with such friends as Bogart and William Wyler, he indulged in frequent and well-publicized bouts of drinking, gambling, and general horseplay. ...Jack Warner, though autocratic, was ready to tolerate a lot in return for talent and box-office success. He even let himself be persuaded—though with considerable misgivings—to allow Huston to shoot his next film almost entirely on location, and in Mexico. At the time, this was a radical move.

The results justified it. *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948) is generally agreed to be one of Huston’s finest films. ...Treasure has often been cited as the archetypal Huston movie, though the director himself denies the presence of any authorial unity in his films.” I fail to see any continuity in my work from picture to picture—what’s remarkable is how different the pictures are, one from another. In fact, though Huston’s cinematic style varies according to the nature of his subject matter, clear thematic preoccupations can be seen to recur throughout his work. The classic “Huston movie” concerns a quest, often a parody of one of society’s sanctioned forms of endeavor—the pursuit of wealth, power, religious knowledge, imperial sovereignty—which is destined, after initial success, to end in failure and futility. (This kind of denouement became known in the trade as “the Huston ending.”)...

The art, technique, and moral implications of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (as of *The Maltese Falcon*) have since been discussed in great detail by many critics. ...Warners were less circumspect over Huston’s next film, his fourth with Bogart. *Key Largo* (1948) was adapted from a prewar play by Maxwell Anderson, originally written in blank verse. Huston and his co-scriptwriter Richard Brooks, junked the verse and updated the plot. ...To Huston’s annoyance, the studio cut several scenes from the final release. Not long before this, Huston had been refused permission, under the terms of his contract, to direct a play by his idol Eugene O’Neill for the Broadway stage, Angered by these incidents, Huston left Warners when his contract expired.

Together with Sam Spiegel and Jules Buck, Huston founded Horizon Films. The new company’s first feature was a courageous failure. Huston had been among the strongest opponents of HUAC and the Hollywood blacklist, and when John Garfield came under pressure, Huston offered him the lead on *We Were Strangers* (1949) as a deliberate gesture of defiance—the more so since the prophetic plot concerned a revolution in Cuba against a corrupt dictatorship. It was attacked on release by both left and right. It was also a box-office disaster, and Huston admitted that “it didn’t turn out to be a very good picture.” Needing funds, he signed a short-term contract with MGM.

Having refused *Quo Vadis*—despite an amazing episode when Louis B. Mayer (according to Huston) “crawled across the floor and took my hands and kissed them” in order to persuade him to reconsider—Huston took on a far more congenial subject in *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950). Based on a novel by W.R. Burnett (author of *Little Caesar* and *High Sierra*), this was the progenitor of a long cycle of “caper movies,” in which a crime (here a million-dollar jewel theft) is successfully carried out by sympathetically depicted criminals, only to fail through subsequent ill-chance or internal dissension. Huston was breaking new ground in presenting crime as an occupation like any other, “a left-handed form of human endeavor” carried out by ordinary people motivated not by the megalomaniac will to power of the 1930s movie gangsters, but simply by the desire to feed their families or realize some small private ambition....That same year, 1950, Huston was amicably divorced from Evelyn Keyes; one day later he married Enrica Soma. In August, while *Asphalt Jungle* was still filming, his father died of a heart attack. Huston’s second picture for MGM was... *The Red Badge of Courage* (1951), taken from Stephen Crane’s novel of the Civil War....Huston left for Africa to make a film for Sam Spiegel, his partner in Horizon Films.

The script of *The African Queen* (1951) was taken from C.S. Forester’s novel and written by Huston in collaboration with his greatest critical supporter, James Agee....Filming, on location in the Congo and Uganda, took place under appalling conditions: not only extreme heat and humidity, but dysentery, malaria,
mosquitoes, crocodiles and safari ants beset actors and crew. Everybody became ill except Bogart, Lauren Bacall (who came to keep Bogart company), and Huston, who all ascribed their immunity to copious quantities of Scotch….The film was huge popular success, and won Bogart the only Oscar of his career.

Through some financial sleight-of-hand, little of the profits from *The African Queen* ever reached Huston, who consequently pulled out of Horizon Films. For his next three films he acted as his own producer….Meanwhile, disgusted by theHUAC “witch-hunt” and the “moral rot” it had induced in the entertainment industry, Huston had moved to Ireland. He had bought a house in Galway, St. Cleans, and moved there in 1952 with his wife Enrica and their children Anthony and Angelica. Twelve years later he took Irish citizenship.…

After two financially unsuccessful picture [Beat the Devil and Moby Dick]…deep in debt…he accepted a three-picture contract with 20th Century-Fox—*Heaven Knows, Mr Allison* (1957), teaming Robert Mitchum and Deborah Kerr as a marine and a nun stranded on a Japanese-held island during World War II, struck many reviewers as an attempt to repeat *The African Queen*. Huston coscripted, and enjoyed working with Mitchum, whom he considers “one of the really fine actors of my time.”

…A retrospective atmosphere of doom hangs over the *Misfits* (1961). Clark Gable died shortly after shooting was finished. Marilyn Monroe never completed another film. Montgomery Clift and Thelma Ritter were dead within a few years….Huston had conceived the idea of making a film about Freud while working on *Let There Be Light*. He now invited Jean-Paul Sartre to prepare a script. Sartre did so—four hundred pages of it. Huston tactfully suggested that cut might be necessary, and he and Sartre went over the script together. Sartre returned to Paris, and in due course submitted his revised script—of six hundred pages. With the help of Charles Kaufman, who had coscripted *Let There Be Light*, the scenario was pruned to a manageable hundred and fifty pages, although Sartre disowned it.

*Freud: The Secret Passion* (1962) is not a conventional biopic, but rather an intellectual detective story, in which Freud is shown tracking down, in himself as much as in others, the psychosexual source of the guilt which torments them….By way of relaxation, Huston turned to a spoof murder mystery, *The List of Adrian Messenger* (1963), in which the villain, played by Kirk Douglas, appears in numerous elaborate disguises. As an additional gimmick, the film features various guest stars, also heavily disguised. Response was mainly puzzled.…

“The Huston ending” wherein all human activities culminate in ironic futility and disaster was notably absent from *The Night of the Iguana* (1964). Huston and his co-scriptwriter, Anthony Veiller, took a characteristically overheated and doom-laden play by Tennessee Williams and transformed it into a melodramatic farce with a happy ending. Amazingly, Williams went along with their changes and even helped with the script.…

While *Iguana* was doing well at the box office, Huston was visited in Ireland by Dino de Laurentiis, who planned to film *The Bible*. He envisaged a multiplicity of episodes, each with its own eminent director. Eventually, the producer modestly limited himself to half the Book of Genesis, with Huston as sole director. Huston also played Noah and the voice of God….The film finally cost eighteen million—by far the most expensive of Huston’s career—and received atrocious notices.…

Huston had long cherished an ambition to film Kipling’s story *The Man Who Would Be King*. Originally he planned it with Gable and Bogart; then with Peter O’Toole and Richard Burton. It finally reached the screen with Sean Connery and Michael Caine in the leading roles as the two British soldiers who set up a private kingdom in the wild mountains of Afghanistan. For once, delay proved beneficial. As Huston remarked, his modern actors brought “a reality to it that the old stars could not do. Today they would seem synthetic, so in a way I’m glad I didn’t make the picture with them.” Certainly it would be hard to imagine the film done better. There is a sweep and grandeur, a legendary resonance to the narrative for which the misused term “epic” is for once wholly appropriate….For the first time in a decade, Huston achieved success at the box office as well as with the critics, and he and Gladys Hill were nominated for an Academy Award for their screenplay. After *The Man Who Would Be King*, Huston underwent heart surgery and as a result produced no feature films for four years. Any speculation, though, that his career as a director might be over was answered by *Wise Blood* (1979)….An unmixed success was *Prizzi’s Honor* (1985), based on the book by Richard Condon, starring Jack Nicholson, Katherine Turner, William Hickey and Huston’s daughter Anjelica (who won an Oscar for best supporting actress)….After this success, Huston set to work on an adaptation of James Joyce’s story” The Dead,” which he completed shortly before his death.

Robin Wood wrote of Huston in Richard Roud’s *Cinema* that “the problem lies in tracing any significant unifying or developing pattern through his career as a whole….This is but one of several signs—though a crucial one—that Huston is not a major artist, though he has at different stages of his career been mistaken for one.” This is the view that has dominated serious discussion of Huston’s work since the rise of auteurist criticism in the 1960s. But Andrew Sarris, once one of the director’s most dismissive critics, wrote in 1980 that “what I have always tended to underestimate in Huston was how deep in his guts he could feel the universal experience of pointlessness and failure.”…

Richard T. Jameson maintains that “we do encounter a cohesive world-view, not only thematically, but also stylistically; there is a Huston look,” though one extremely difficult to define.…In his last years, Huston pursued a parallel career as a film actor. In 1963 he was invited by Otto Preminger to portray a Boston prelate in *The Cardinal* and virtually stole the picture. Then, besides taking key roles in several of his own films, he appeared in a wide variety of works directed by others: most notably as the sinister patriarch Noah Cross in Polanski’s *Chinatown* (1974), and as Teddy Roosevelt’s adviser John Hay in Miliius’s *The Wind and the Lion* (1975). Huston evidently enjoyed acting and invariably denied that
he took it at all seriously. “It’s a cinch,” he maintained, “and they pay you damn near as much as you make directing.”

In a 1981 interview, Huston spoke of his first film as “a dramatization of myself, how I felt about things.”

**from An Open Book, John Huston Knopf NY 1980**

I [Huston] came well to my very first directorial assignment. The Maltese Falcon was a very carefully tailored screenplay, not only scene by scene, but set-up by set-up. I made a sketch of each set-up. If it was to be a pan or dolly shot, I’d indicate it. I didn’t want ever to be at a loss before the actors or the camera crew. I went over the sketches with Willy Wyler. He had a few suggestions to make, but on the whole, approved what he saw. I also showed the sketches to my producer, Henry Blanke. All Blanke said was, “John, just remember that each scene as you shoot it, is the most important scene in the picture.” That’s the best advice a young director could have.

Peter Lorre was one of the finest and most subtle actors I have ever worked with. Beneath that air of innocence he used to such effect, one sensed a Faustian worldliness. I’d know he was giving a good performance as we put it on film but I wouldn’t know how good until I saw him in the rushes.

During the entire filming not one line of dialogue was changed. One short scene was dropped when I realized I could substitute a telephone call for it without loss to the story.

Blanke put me together with the composer Adolph Deutsch. Working with the composer was a privilege afforded only to top directors. This was another example of Blanke’s confidence in me. Deutsch and I ran the picture many times, discussing where music should be used and where not. As with good cutting, the audience is not as a rule supposed to be conscious of the music. Ideally, it speaks directly to our emotions without our awareness of it, although, of course, there are moments when music should take over and dominate the action.

**from Perspectives on Huston, Edited by Stephen Cooper. G.K. Hall & Co. NY 1994**

“Undirectable Director” James Agee (originally published in Life September 18, 1950)

The first movie he directed, The Maltese Falcon, is the best private-eye melodrama ever made....Most of the really good
popular art produced anywhere come from Hollywood, and much of it bears Huston’s name.

“Flitcraft, Spade, and The Maltese Falcon: John Huston’s Adaptation” Stephen Cooper

While it has been remarked that The Maltese Falcon (both novel and film) consists largely of dialogue, but it has not sufficiently been emphasized how much of that dialogue consists of characters’ telling stories.

“John Huston and Film Noir” Keith Cohen

It has been established with considerable force that film noir can be seen as a response to the growing ambivalence about national prosperity, employment, and masculinity in a country that is watching its male population first march off to fight a war it was more or less pressured into, then return to a nation whose work force has been significantly feminized. Stylistically rooted in German expressionist films and ideologically derivative of American “hard-boiled” detective fiction, film noir creates a distinct, fairly easily identifiable, set of films during one of Hollywood’s periods of greatest flourishing.

The noir idiom can be used in a variety of contexts without necessarily leaving its entire ideological baggage intact.

**COMING up in the Fall 2010 Buffalo Film Seminars XXI:**

September 21 Alfred Hitchcock North by Northwest 1959
October 5 Federico Fellini 8½ 1963
October 12 Mike Nichols Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? 1966
October 19 Francis Ford Coppola The Godfather 1972
November 2 Bruce Beresford Tender Mercies 1983
November 9 Wim Wenders Wings of Desire 1987
November 16 Charles Crichton A Fish Called Wanda 1988
November 23 Joel & Ethan Coen The Big Lebowski 1998
November 30 Chan-wook Park Oldboy 2003
December 7 Deepa Mehta Water 2005

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...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: [http://buffalofilmseminars.com](http://buffalofilmseminars.com)
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