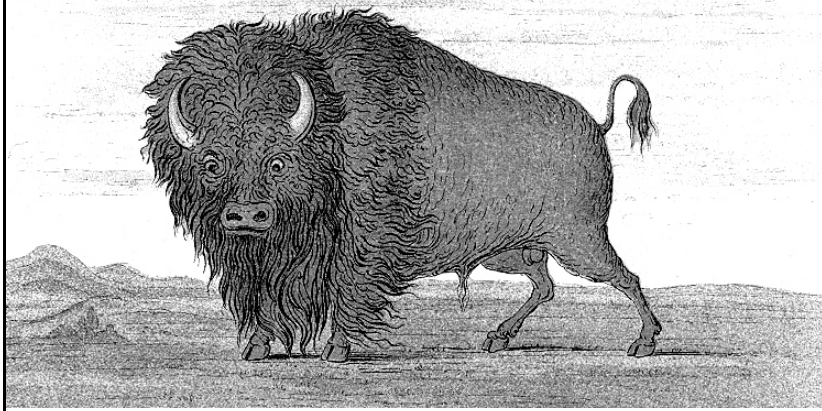


# The Buffalo Film Seminars



Conversations about great films  
with Diane Christian & Bruce Jackson

**JOHN HUSTON** [John Marcellus Huston, 5 August 1906, Nevada, Missouri – 28 August 1987, Middletown, RI, emphysema] was a writer, painter, boxer, actor and, most famously, director. He directed 46 films, acted in 45 and wrote 36 screenplays. His first film is the classic *The Maltese Falcon* 1941. Soon after finishing it, he was in the army, making documentaries for the Department of War. One of those films – *San Pietro* 1945 – is one of the two or three best documentaries made by the US military during WW II. Another – *Let There Be Light* 1946 – so frightened military officials they kept it under lock and key for 25 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, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* 1948 and *The Maltese Falcon* 1941. 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*.



**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; there's a web site devoted to the subject: <http://www.macconsult.com/bogart/legends.html>. 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'd played on Broadway. The studio wanted to give the part to Edward G. Robinson, maybe American's most famous snarly gangster because of *Little Caesar* 1930, but Bogart'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 Howard Hawks' *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.

**WALTER HUSTON** (6 April 1884, Toronto—7 April 1950, Hollywood, aneurism).

**Biography from Leonard Maltin's Movie Encyclopedia:** "A powerful, compelling performer who became the talkie era's first successful character lead, Huston's reputation-as one of America's finest actors-seems to grow with each passing year. A veteran of vaudeville and stock, Huston became a leading star on Broadway during the 1920s...He made his film debut in *Gentlemen of the Press* (1929, shot in Paramount's Astoria, New York, studio while he was appearing on Broadway) and made a strong impression as the reluctant villain Trampas, opposite Gary Cooper in *The Virginian* (both 1929). The following year he played the title role in D. W. Griffith's production *Abraham Lincoln*. Hollywood kept Huston busy over the next few years, in such early talkie classics as *The Criminal Code* (1931), *American Madness*, *Law and Order* (as a thinly disguised Wyatt Earp in a Western parable-cowritten by his son John-with resonance to Prohibition-era gangsterism), *Rain* (all 1932), and *Gabriel Over the White House* (1933, one of his most fascinating roles, as a corrupt president transfigured by an unexplained heavenly influence)...Huston scored his greatest personal triumph in both stage and screen adaptations of Sinclair Lewis's *Dodsworth* playing the retired industrialist who sheds his nagging, unfaithful wife for true love with an American expatriate in Europe....[He] played a bit in his son John Huston's directorial debut, *The Maltese Falcon* (1941, as the mortally wounded ship captain who brings Bogart the Falcon). The role of George M. Cohan's father in *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942) brought Huston his first Academy nomination for Best Supporting Actor. He appeared in John Ford's propagandistic *December 7th* (1942), Howard Hughes's oft-delayed *The Outlaw* (filmed in 1941), played in the Russian-themed *Mission to Moscow* and *The North Star* (both 1943)...Huston was among the all-star cast in David O. Selznick's epic Technicolor Western, *Duel in the Sun* (1946), and finally won an Oscar for his rich supporting role in son John's *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948), as the crusty, cackling old desert rat who leads Humphrey Bogart and Tim Holt to a gold deposit. It was an unqualified triumph for both Hustons. He remained active-and prominent-in such movies as *Summer Holiday* (1948), *The Great Sinner* (1949), and *The Furies* (1950), the last-named completed shortly before his death."

**B. TRAVEN** (Herman Albert Otto Max Feige/Hal Croves/Ret Marut, 23 February 1882, Schweibus-im-Poznam, Prussia— 26 March 1969, Mexico City, prostate cancer). From [www.voiceoftheslug.org.uk/travenhome.html](http://www.voiceoftheslug.org.uk/travenhome.html): "B Traven was the name used by a German writer and storyteller who produced a series of novels in the 1920's and 1930's, mostly set in Mexico. The books were bestsellers in Germany and across Europe in the inter-war years - a fixture on the bookshelves of working class and leftist households along with Jack London and Henri Barbusse. In the English speaking world he was translated late and little read, apart from one book which became famous only as a film - *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. Even during his lifetime the question of Traven's identity came to attract almost as much attention as his books. Since his death, in 1969, it has often seemed the only reason for any interest being taken at all. This outcome was the unintended but probably inevitable result of Traven's obsessive secrecy, and the radical re-inventions of himself which he undertook at least twice. Underneath the confabulations and obscurities behind which Traven hid however, was a life of extraordinary interest, even for those who normally deprecate biographical accounts of literary production." For bio details go to <http://www.voiceoftheslug.org.uk/travenlife.html>

**from Agee on Film: Reviews and Comments. James Agee. McDowell Obolensky NY 1958, "Undirectable Director" [1950]**

Most of the really good popular art produced anywhere comes from Hollywood, and much of it bears Huston’s name. To put it conservatively, there is nobody under fifty at work in movies, here or abroad, who can excel Huston in talent, inventiveness, intransigence, achievement or promise. Yet it is a fair bet that neither money, nor acclaim, nor a sense of dedication to the greatest art medium of his century have much to do with Huston staying at his job: he stays at it because there is nothing else he

enjoys so much. It is this tireless enjoyment that gives his work a unique vitality and make every foot of film he works on unmistakably his.

Huston is swiftly stirred by anything which appeals to his sense of justice, magnanimity or courage; he was among the first men to stand up for Lew Ayres as a conscientious objector, he flew to the Washington hearings on Hollywood (which he refers to as “an obscenity”) and sponsored Henry Wallace (though he voted for Harry Truman) in the 1948 campaign. Some people think of him, accordingly, as a fellow traveler. Actually he is a political man

**FEBRUARY 15, 2005 (X:5)**  
**THE TREASURE OF THE SIERRA MADRE**  
**(1948) 126 min**

Humphrey Bogart...Fred C. Dobbs  
 Walter Huston...Howard  
 Tim Holt...Bob Curtin  
 Bruce Bennett...James Cody  
 Barton MacLane...Pat McCormick  
 Alfonso Bedoya...Gold Hat  
 Robert Blake...Mexican boy selling  
 lottery tickets  
 John Huston...American in Tampico  
 in white suit  
 Ann Sheridan...Streetwalker

Directed by John Huston  
 Script by John Huston  
 Based on the novel by B. Traven  
 Produced by Henry Blanke  
 Cinematography by Ted D. McCord  
 B. Traven...technical advisor (as Hal Croves)  
 Warner Bros.  
 Academy Awards for Best Actor in a  
 Supporting Role (Walter Huston),  
 Best Director (John Huston), Best  
 Screenplay (John Huston); nominated  
 for Best Picture.  
 Selected by National Film Preservation Board  
 for the National Film Registry, 1990

chiefly in the emotional sense: "I'm against *anybody*," he says, "who tries to tell anybody else what to do." The mere sight or thought of a cop can get him sore. He is in short rather less of a Communist than the most ultramontane Republican, for like perhaps five out of seven good artists who ever lived he is—to lapse into technical jargon—a natural-born anti-authoritarian individualistic libertarian anarchist, without portfolio.

Much that is best in Huston's work comes of his sense of what is natural to the eye and his delicate, simple feeling for space relationships: his camera huddles close to those who huddle to talk, leans back a proportionate distance, relaxing, if they talk casually. He loathes camera rhetoric and the shot-for-shot's-sake; but because he takes each moment catch-as-catch-can and is so deeply absorbed in doing the best possible thing with it he has made any number of unforgettable shots. He can make an unexpected close-up reverberate like a gong.

**from John Huston's Filmmaking. Leslie Brill. Cambridge U Press, Cambridge 1997**

Huston's fourth feature movie, and the first he directed after World War II, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* constructs patterns of story and image that recur across Huston's career. It explores characteristic Hustonian themes about personal choice and the possibilities of living honestly and satisfyingly with other people. At the same time, it scrutinizes the contingencies and limits of freedom and embodies an often ironic meditation on wealth.

Like the boll weevil of Leadbelly's song, most of Huston's protagonists spend themselves, sometimes deviously or unconsciously, looking for a home. In *Treasure*, Howard (Walter Huston) and Curtin (Tim Holt) labor toward that goal quite explicitly. Dobbs (Humphrey Bogart), on the other hand, seeks wealth only for economic power—a reductive understanding of human relationships that leads inevitably to his murder. Cody (Bruce Bennett) leaves his home and family in search of the wrong treasure and, like Dobbs, he pays with his life.

The novel of B. Traven in which Huston found the story of his film announces its central irony with a curiously awkward epigraph: "*The treasure which you think not worth taking trouble and pains to find, this one alone is the real treasure you are longing for all your life. The glittering treasure you are hunting for day and night lies buried on the other side of that hill yonder.*" In the letter Cody's wife writes about family, marriage, and home, Huston's film describes its "real treasure." The letter does not appear in Traven's novel; from Huston's insertion of it we can infer its importance. Howard and Curtin read it aloud just after Cody's death and their own miraculous rescue, a placement that increases its poignancy.

Little Jimmy is fine, but he misses his daddy almost as much as I do. . . .I've never thought any material treasure, no matter how great, is worth the pain of these long separations. The country is especially lovely this year. . . .I do hope you are back for the harvest....remember we've already found life's real treasure. Forever yours, Helen.

Commenting on Huston's adaptation of his novel, Traven urged that "after you have run the credit title you offer the audience the same introduction the book has, that is: The real and genuine treasure you are hunting and also the ideal happiness are always and forever on the other side of the mountain—but if you prefer, offer it in the same wording as you find in the book...."

Traven's desire to include the epigraph testifies to his sympathy with Huston's emphasis on the clash of gold with the real treasure of affectionate human relationships. In a subsequent letter, Traven suggested adding the scene in which Curtin hesitates before entering the collapsed mine to rescue Dobbs. This addition, which Huston made, further emphasizes the conflict between gold and emotional commitments.

Communities extend the bonds of families and friendships. In *Treasure*, the Indian village represents an idealized, almost prelapsarian society. When Howard is forced to return to the village to receive its gratitude for reviving an unconscious Indian boy, Huston begins the sequence with a crane shot that he will practically duplicate for the opening of *The African Queen* and *The Barbarian and the Geisha* ('58). The camera tracks through a lush forest canopy then pans to the ground, the site of human activities. In *Treasure*, it comes to rest on Howard, luxuriating in a hammock, a young woman attending him. Behind, children splash in a pond. These archetypal images introduce themes of primitive innocence and human harmony to which Huston will return for the next four decades.

Adversity catalyzes community. Down and out, Dobbs offers a cigarette to Curtin. Rinsing away the blood of their brawl with Pat McCormick (Barton MacLane), the two impoverished Americans agree to pool resources. Before Gold Hat (Alfonso Bedoya) attacks their camp, the three miners decide to execute Cody rather than allow him to share their find. As they prepare to defend themselves, however, all thought of murder disappears and they invite Cody, called "stranger" before, to eat with them. "Come on down, friend."

Conversely, wealth and power destabilize the bonds of friendship and solidarity. As Howard remarks, "So long as there's no find, the noble brotherhood will last. But when the piles of gold begin to grow, that's when the trouble starts."

The most socializing of the main characters, Howard is also the most socialized. He votes to let Cody join the group, and he later offers to finance Curtin's visit to Cody's widow. Among the partners only he can speak enough Spanish to communicate with the Mexicans and Indians. Barriers of language in Huston's films typically signify empathetic as well as cultural gaps. Foreigners in Mexico, Dobbs and Curtin are isolated by their inability to speak Spanish; Howard moves among Indians, Mexicans and Americans as easily as he moves between English and Spanish.

But Howard is neither saint nor altruist. Although he has enough money to make up what Curtin and Dobbs are short when they propose to go prospecting, he never offers to invest more than two hundred of his three hundred dollar stake. Later, he is enthusiastic about the profits he can expect from his exalted position among the Indians. Least reassuringly, he accepts the will of the majority when Curtin and Dobbs vote to kill Cody.

Yet his defects and devotion to his self-interest give Howard's fundamental kindness a plausibility that might be less convincing in a more perfect figure. Huston's aversion to implausibly noble characters is explicit in a letter he wrote Traven: "Let me now mention my chief criticism of the script I have written, It seems to me it's on the black and white side....I would like, if it were possible, to . . .further dramatize the message of your book that all men are subject to certain pulls and temptations and that one man is better than another only in so far as he has the strength to resist."

Howard's weakness allows him to sympathize with others and to help them resist the pull of ordinary human temptation. Such a source of moral authority, in general, is the only secure one in Huston's films. It is also the beginning of hope. As Howard brags, he is truly "a born medicine man."

Wealth creates anger, distrust, and insecurity. The opening sequence of *Treasure* cartoons greed and rage; we see Dobbs compare his lottery number with the posted winners and throw his ticket away in disgust. A few minutes later he dashes water in the face of a boy (Robert Blake) who is trying to sell him part of another ticket. Other incidents amplify the association of wealth with distemper. The Man in the White Suit, though he responds to Dobbs's appeals, finally becomes irritated and delivers a cranky dismissal. (White Suit is played by Huston himself, perhaps making a private joke about the fact that three of his four feature films at that point—and a film that he wrote, *High Sierra* [Raoul Walsh, '41]—star Humphrey Bogart. Huston may be suggesting that, like Dobbs, Bogart is going to have to diversify the sources of his livelihood.) Later in the mining camp, Dobbs explodes when he thinks that Curtin is calling him a "hog." As the mine prospers, the unity of the small group begins to crumble. Each man begins to take care of his own share of gold. Once the "goods" are divided, so is the group. Suspicion escalates. The expressive sequence in which Dobbs misinterprets Curtin's pursuit of Gila monster summarizes the rupture between them. Even after he watched Curtin expose and shoot the poisonous reptile, Dobbs refuses to admit that his suspicions were groundless. The Gila monster twitching as it dies on Dobbs's bags of gold provides *Treasure* with an emblem for the dangers of wealth.

Money delivers the power to buy sex and control people, relations as uncondusive to affection and trust as outright hostility. After Dobbs spends part of the second peso he gets from White Suit, he looks longingly after a passing prostitute. By the campfire, he imagines using his new wealth to command and humiliate barbers, haberdashers, and waiters. In contrast to the homey reveries of his companions, his ends in a whorehouse.

The imbedded moral that human connections are undermined by wealth puts Huston to the left of center as a social thinker. So may the fact, as Naremore argues, that "By selecting Dashiell Hammett and B. Traven as the basis of his first two films [sic], Huston was indirectly declaring his sympathy with the ethos of Popular Front literature in the 1930's...." Yet Huston typically shies away from simple dogma, and *Treasure* does not suggest that wealth is irredeemably evil. Curtin's desire to buy an orchard is constructive, as is Howard's gift of money to help him visit Cody's widow. Even Dobbs uses his money for a common good when he shares his lottery winnings.

The movie partly supports Dobbs—despite the fact that he does not apply his wisdom to himself—when he agrees with Curtin that the destructiveness of gold depends "on whether or not the guy who finds it is a right guy." (Typically, Huston complicates the characters and situations of his sources, and here he shifts these words, Curtin's in the novel, to Dobbs.) But Huston's movie has more intricate lessons to teach. "A right guy" does not escape temptation. No one has such an immunity. Goodness comes from acknowledging and overcoming greed and weakness. Dobbs's denial of his own vulnerability to temptation proves lethal because he cannot overcome what he will not face.

The possibilities that wealth may be turned to good or evil, or that it may be refused, lead to a second fundamental theme of *Treasure*, that of choice. How far does the power to choose

extend, what should guide it, and when does "the Lord or fate or nature" take over? As the crisis the story approaches and choice becomes an issue of life and death, Huston inserts images that give form to the idea of alternatives. These images mostly take the shape of forked trees or cacti prominent in the background as the protagonists wrestle with their dilemmas in the foreground. Graphically they suggest a Y, a figurative fork in the road. In some contexts these Y's also carry overtones of gallows, or of the Cross.

Although there are unemphasized examples earlier, the first prominent Y appears when Dobbs accuses Howard of plotting against him. Throughout the two-shot sequence, a forked tree appears beyond Howard's left shoulder. It suggests, retrospectively, at least—that he faces an important choice: whether to accept the challenge of a half-crazy Dobbs or to ignore it in the interests of peace. Characteristically, Howard chooses peace.

The next emphatic Y appears when Cody arrives. As the partners fret about what to do if the stranger should show up, whether to drive him away or kill him, Cody emerges from behind a large, forked tree. The next morning, Cody himself puts a slightly different choice before them: kill him or take him in as a partner. The alternatives are familiar, but their extremity is new. While the three partners talk, camera placement again conspicuously puts a strongly branched Y, another tree, in the background.

After Howard returns from the village, the Indians reappear to insist that he accompany them once more. The now-familiar Y shapes are again prominent in the background, and Howard—this time under considerable duress—again chooses peaceable fellowship. When he departs, he bifurcates the plot between Curtin and Dobbs. The Y shapes that proliferate during this segment of the film signal not only choices that characters have to make, but also the contrasting directions of their narratives: Howard to a bucolic community, Curtin and Dobbs to desolation and conflict.

As the latter struggle along without Howard's help, the choice-signaling Y appears frequently when the temptation arises in Dobbs to betray Howard and then, after Curtin refuses, to murder his other partner. The locations are dominated by forked cacti, trees, and brush. The dense imagery of bifurcation during these sequences symbolizes both the choices that the characters face and the tension of the plot. Dobbs hides behind a forked tree when he attempts to ambush the drowsy Curtin; there is a bright Y prominent in the dark background as Dobbs waits for his partner to doze off; another looms over him when he struggles with his conscience after he has taken Curtin into the brush and shot him. Forked brush and trees continue to dominate the scene the next morning as Dobbs tries to decide whether to bury his partner.

While doctoring Curtin, Howard muses that Dobbs is "not a real killer as killers go....The mistake was in leaving you two alone in the depths of the wilderness with more'n a hundred thousand between you. That's a mighty big temptation, believe me, Partner." Framed in the doorway behind Howard and Curtin rises another forked tree. In contrast to the cactus and blasted shrubs, however, it is covered with leaves. As it bodies forth the dialectic between condemnation and compassion, its foliage suggests Howard's understanding and, in effect, forgiveness of Dobbs.

The Y appears prominently twice more, when Gold Hat and tow of his band confront Dobbs, and in the last shot of the film. Howard and the Indians ride off in one direction, Howard in

another. As Curtin rides past, the camera pans to the ground and tracks in to a close-up of a small, doubly forked cactus. On it is caught a torn bag, once full of gold dust. Recalling the close-up of the Gila monster, this shot summarizes the tragic and ironic modes of the film. Like the “poor, bare, forked animal” that Shakespeare’s *King Lear* takes to be the essence of man, the small, forked cactus is an image of human dilemmas. If “the Lord, or fate, or nature” takes some choices out of human hands entirely, spheres of action nonetheless remain for decision that have profound consequences. The outcomes of Howard’s time among the Indians, Curtin’s hopeful prospects in Dallas, and Dobbs’s death underscore that consequences follow the forking paths of choice.

Opposing outcomes are often expressed in *Treasure* through a traditional contrast between the demonic and the innocent.

Imagery, dialogue, diegetic sound, and music track evoke the demonic during self-interested actions and evoke the innocent in connection with actions oriented toward another person or a community. The innocent occurs less frequently in Huston’s mostly descending story of temptation and distrust; it is located either in the Indian village or in rare moments, frequently associated with water, of communal serenity. The demonic is evoked by smoke, fire, imprisonment, and settings of isolation and emptiness.

Shots of the ferry carrying McCormick’s laborers introduce images that will be associated with greed, betrayal, and egotism. The boat emits a dismal whistle, gates swing closed, and men disappear into the darkness as if they were crossing to Hades. Between departure and return, a brief sequence of Curtin and Dobbs at work shows them in an infernally hot camp—“It’s a hundred and thirty in the shade an’ there ain’t any shade up there on that derrick.” Steam and smoke billow in the background.

Howard’s declaration that “gold’s a devilish sort of a thing,” is confirmed by imagery. After the three protagonists begin to accumulate gold dust, dark, high-contrast, fire-lighted scenes gradually dominate, and *Treasure* starts to look like a wilderness *film noir*. Infernal images of smoke and flames intensify as Dobbs lies by the campfire after shooting Curtin. From behind the campfire, the camera is focused on his grotesquely shadowed, bearded, dirty face. His self-consuming anxiety mounts, and the expressionistic flames crackle and fill the screen as if they were part of his psyche.

Dobbs has been associated with smoke and heat since the beginning of the film when he watched with disappointment as an urchin snatched up a still-smoldering cigarette butt. After he shoots Curtin, he swelters in the heat of Hades on earth, staggering alone across the desert. Like Milton’s Satan, “within him Hell/ He brings, and round about him...” Only Gold Hat—who shadows Dobbs like a fury throughout the film—attracts equally intense demonic imagery. Like Dobbs, Gold Hat is often shown smoking. In our last view of the bandit, one that recalls the final shot of *The Maltese Falcon*, he glares from behind wooden bars. Through them he spits like a cornered, rabid animal, or like one of the damned.

Another image of the underworld in *Treasure*, the action of digging, is associated equally with gold and with death. In the only sequence in which we see gold ore being taken from the earth, we see the mine collapse on Dobbs—making him figuratively and literally what Gold Hat calls him, “the guy in the hole.” Cody tells Curtin how the *federales* force bandits to spend their last minutes digging their own graves; indeed, Gold Hat and

his comrades do so. By association, gold mining sometimes suggests preparation for burial. After Cody is killed, Huston dissolves to the miners inspecting the proceeds of a day’s work some time later and concluding that the vein is nearing exhaustion. Such editing reinforces connections among digging, gold, and death. The demonic symbolism of digging can also be inferred from its absence. When the protagonists restore the mountain, for example, Huston does not show them at work. By avoiding any shots of them filling their mine, he also avoids showing the act of digging as constructive or healing.

Reversal of aquatic symbolism combines with another motif Huston used throughout his career, that of reflections—in general associated with falsehood, egotism, or danger.

The most striking reflection in *Treasure* comes when Dobbs, near death from thirst, scrambles down to a waterhole. The muddy oasis initially reinforces the association of water with life and civilization, reviving Dobbs and making it possible for him to complete his trip to Durango. When the reflection of the bandit appears on its surface, Dobbs’s prospects—and the symbolic import of the setting—are reversed; the water announces his death.

Huston’s desire to emphasize the operations of fate is reflected in two memoranda in the Warner Bros. Archive. Writing in 1940 about turning W.R. Burnett’s novel, *High Sierra*, into a film, the then-screenwriter argued, “Take the spirit out of Burnett, the strange sense of inevitability that comes with out deepening understanding of his characters and the forces that motivate them, and only the conventional husk of a story remains.” To Traven, Huston explained, “Now as to the three who attack Dobbs being train bandits, let me tell you my reasons for doing this. For one thing, it was my hope that this would also serve to bring out the fate that pursued Dobbs....their destinies are paired in some mysterious way.”

Fate in *Treasure* expresses itself as a perfect chain of causality. Characters; intentions either count for nothing or are reversed. At the waterhole, Dobbs points a revolver at Gold Hat and pulls the trigger, but the gun only clicks. It has no cartridges in its chambers because Curtin removed them after he disarmed Dobbs when Dobbs first tried to kill him. Curtin then returned the gun. But Dobbs later shot Curtin with Curtin’s own gun, so why doesn’t he shoot Gold Hat the same way? Because, in guilt and revulsion, he threw Curtin’s gun at the feet of what he thought to be his partner’s corpse. An alert audience will remember all this. In doing so, it will feel what Aristotle identified as a characteristic pleasure of tragedy, a recognition—in this case a recognition by memory and reasoning. Gold Hat’s nasty laugh conveys his less comprehensive recognition, his contempt and triumph.

For the audience, however, it is the guffaw of a merciless fate. Dobbs will get precisely what he had coming precisely because of what he did.

Nature, fate, and the Lord in Huston’s films for the next forty years are practically indistinguishable. In *Treasure*, the Lord is manifest in what Jameson calls “a mostly uninsistent, earthy religiosity that pervades the film.” Uncorrupted religion as it appears in the villages joins nature and fate to maintain order in the universe. It is strongly associated with community and mutuality and contrasted with self-absorption and materialism.

The problematic relation between personal ethics and social imperatives recurs in Huston’s work from his earliest screenplays. Morality “out here in [the] wilderness” concerns the internal lives

of individuals. Beyond the power of social constraints, characters face moral issues that have a clarity unobscured by civilized coercion. Are conventional values simply conveniences that allow people to live together securely? Or are they part of the coherence and wholeness of the people that hold them?

Huston's films suggest the latter. Characters who contravene their best impulses spiral down to catastrophe; those who honor them, often at great emotional or material cost, affirm at the same time their deepest identities. From Spade's refusal of Brigid at the end of *The Maltese Falcon*, none of Huston's movies for the next forty-six years contradicts the proposition that identity is at once personal and social, and that neither aspect can be ignored or distorted without painful consequences. The sanity, happiness, and life itself of Huston's characters requires values that fuse the communal and the individual.

Making a home requires other people and the world; it also requires the creation or rediscovery of identity. There must be someone to be at home. Self-discovery usually occurs as a re-creation of innocence, a reclaiming of idealism. Curtin experiences the corruption of the world and is fallible character, but he eventually returns to his childhood dream of family and fruit-growing. He achieves an acceptance of fate like Howard's: "You know, the worst ain't so bad when it finally happens."

As Howard and Curtin suffer and recover, so they "wound" the mountain and restore it when they close the mine. The decision to retain this detail from the novel reflects Huston's reverence for the land—less fashionable in 1948 than today. The miners' act of restoration, in which even the venal Dobbs willingly participates, combines with the subsequent windstorm to efface all marks they have made during their "ten months of labor and suffering." The imagery at the end of the film derives both from Traven's novel and from another book of which Huston was especially fond, Ecclesiastes. "All are of dust, and all turn to dust again." "What profit hath he that hath laboured for the wind?"

The closing moments of *Treasure* reclaim it from the nihilistic irony of Dobbs's death. The joke is funny, at least for Howard and Curtin, and the sense of a considerable part of the ending is that of comedy, of a plot that has moved from alienation to community, from conflict to accord.

Howard and Curtin discover what they have been longing for and seem likely to achieve their desires by understanding and

accepting their fate and themselves. ...Like most of Huston's successful characters, Howard and Curtin achieve control of their lives in comprehending how little control they have. That is the happiest and truest outcome of any action, any life, in most of Huston's movies.

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

*The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* was one of the first American films made entirely on location outside the United States. Henry Blanke went to bat for this plan and convinced Jack Warner that it was workable and economically feasible. Warner gave the go-ahead, and then I made an 8,000-mile scouting trip through Mexico with my art director, John Hughes, and the Mexican production manager, Luis Sanchez Tello. We settled on the mountain country surrounding the village of Jungapeo, near San José Purua, as our home base.

One of the reasons I'd wanted to do this picture so much was that I saw the role of the old sourdough, Howard, as being perfect for Dad. I called him as soon as I got the go-ahead on the picture.

"Dad, they're going to ask you to take this part in *Treasure*. I want you to take it. You'll be great. And Dad. . . I want you to take your teeth out for this role."

"Christ, do I have to do that?"

I told him I thought old Howard should be wise, sly and toothless. He agreed, but without any enthusiasm.

There were scenes in which Dad had to speak Spanish. He didn't know the language, so I had a Mexican record his lines, and Dad memorized them. In the picture he spoke Spanish like a native. It was certainly the finest performance in any picture I ever made. *Theatre Arts*, at that time the Bible of the drama, called it the finest performance ever given on the American screen. I agreed and was immensely proud and pleased when Dad won the Academy Award as Best Supporting Actor. *Treasure* is one of the few pictures I don't turn the dial away from when I come across it on television. When he does that dance of triumph before the mountain, cackling out insults at his compadres, the goose flesh comes out and my hair stands up: a tribute to greatness that has happened, with me, in the presence of Chaliapin, the Italian thoroughbred Ribot, Jack Dempsey in his prime, and Manolete.

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- March 8 Andrzej Wajda *Ashes and Diamonds* 1958
- March 22 David Lean *Lawrence of Arabia* 1962
- March 29 John Frankenheimer *The Manchurian Candidate* 1962
- April 5 Sergio Leone *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* 1966
- April 12 Robert Bresson *Lancelot of the Lake* 1974
- April 19 Larissa Shepitko *The Ascent* 1976
- April 26 Akira Kurosawa *Ran* 1985

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