

Editors' Introduction

Huston as Reader

DOUGLAS MCFARLAND AND WESLEY KING

In his seminal study, *John Huston's Filmmaking*, Lesley Brill acknowledged the importance of literary adaptation to John Huston's body of work. As Brill pointed out, "it is difficult to imagine any other director . . . transforming works so effectively from such a wide variety of writers," especially considering that much of the literature Huston adapted "is manifestly resistant to such translation" (5–6). But where Brill was setting out to establish Huston as more broadly comparable to the likes of Ingmar Bergman, Alfred Hitchcock, Stanley Kubrick, and Akira Kurosawa, this book focuses on how the director was unique in his engagements with literature. It is significant that thirty-four of his thirty-seven films were adaptations of literary works. In order, therefore, to more fully understand Huston as a filmmaker, we need a better and more comprehensive account of the centrality of adaptation to his work. We argue that Huston maintains a sophisticated and at times intense relationship with the materials he chooses to adapt. To put it differently, Huston's adaptations are serious interpretations of literary works that could only be made by an astute reader of literature. It is Huston's competence as a reader of literature, as well as his skill in the medium of film, that distinguishes him as an adaptor and, indeed, as a director. *John Huston as Adaptor* explores through Huston's films an approach to adaptation studies that has been largely overlooked. How an adaptor reads, the

works to which she is drawn, and how her literary interpretations can be brought to the screen without relegating film to a subservient role are the issues that are addressed in the book.

Our assertion that adaptation is germane to understanding Huston's status as a filmmaker necessarily raises the question of the relationship between adaptation and authorship. The title of our collection of essays, *John Huston as Adaptor*, implicitly makes the case that Huston needs to be understood as the author of his films. Although this assessment will be qualified to some extent in several chapters in the collection, the understanding that Huston *authorizes* his films does represent our primary approach to him as a filmmaker. The first to seriously address the relationship between authorship and adaptation were the film critics of *Cahier de Cinema* and the New Wave filmmakers that the journal spawned. In his essay on film adaptation, André Bazin, the founder of *Cahier de Cinema*, argued that there was a deep-seated hierarchical relationship between the source of adaptation and the adaptation itself: "The nineteenth century, more than any other, firmly established an idolatry of form, mainly literary, that is still with us today" (45). To be more specific, in the early years of cinema and on into the 1930s and 1940s, this "idolatry" was manifest in three strategies: to legitimize film as a medium by drawing upon canonical works of literature; to disseminate and inculcate a cultural ethos based on those canonical works; and to turn the commercial successes of popular fiction into the commercial successes of film adaptations. The New Wave filmmakers that Bazin influenced sought to reverse this relationship by selecting materials of limited cultural value in order that their own cinematic signatures would not be erased, or to put it more forcefully, that their authorial identity have precedent over source materials. The awareness of the director as one who authorizes his own work hinges on adaptation. Dudley Andrew succinctly points this out in his overview of François Truffaut: "The cinema *d'auteur* that [Truffaut] advocated was not to be pitted against a cinema of adaptation; rather one method of adaptation was to be pitted against another. In this instance, adaptation was the battleground, even though it prepared the way for a stylistic revolution, the New Wave, which would for the most part avoid famous literary sources" (35). As Andrew argues, emphasis in the adaptation process shifted from the cultural cache of the source to the *mise-en-scène* fashioned by the filmmaker. Style became the marker of authorship. The veneration of Hitchcock, especially by Truffaut, reflects this. Hitchcock was often dismissive of his source material, sometimes not even bothering to read the original work but simply having the plot described to him. Hitchcock may very well have read for pleasure, but that pleasure in reading would seem to have made little if any contri-

bution to his filmmaking. Although themes appear and reappear in his work, Hitchcock asserts his authorship through a style of filmmaking.

We point this out because Huston has been excluded from the ranks of *auteurs* in large measure because his films do lack a consistent visual style, failing to fulfill the fundamental requirement for authorship. Brill circumvents this problem by arguing that Huston's signature is expressed in thematic content, not style. Although Huston does clearly return to issues and character types throughout his work, we are arguing that adaptation as an approach to filmmaking is the salient element in his authorship. Moreover, what distinguishes Huston as an adaptor is Huston as a reader. Huston once asserted that a director of films should be "well read, widely read, and even deeply read" (*Interviews* 88). He was all of the above. By his own account, Huston was a voracious and sophisticated reader all of his life, boasting in his autobiography that he owned a contraband copy of *Ulysses* before Judge Woolsey lifted the ban in 1933. This deep engagement with literature is borne out in the body of Huston's work. His adaptations range from the noir fiction of Dashiell Hammet and W. R. Burnett to the formally sophisticated modernist works of Flannery O'Connor and Malcolm Lowry. But when Huston said that a director should be well read, he did not mean that a repository of literary works should be on hand, from which the director might readily draw material for adaptation. Huston himself made this point clear: "I never read looking for material. I only read for the joy of reading" (66). This "joy" constitutes the intellectual and emotional basis for Huston as an adaptor. And as ephemeral a quality that "joy" might be, it is his authorial signature.

This encounter between reader and text that Huston deems fundamental is energized by his veneration for many of the novelists whose work he adapted. Having written the screenplay adaptation of *High Sierra* (1941), Huston asserted that he considered Burnett one of the "most neglected American writers" and that "more than once [Burnett's works] had me breaking into a sweat" (*An Open Book* 78). In Burnett's novels, Huston was undoubtedly attracted to figures like Roy Earle in *High Sierra* or Dix Handley in *The Asphalt Jungle* (which Huston adapted in 1950), who, as Brill has described them, had "reached the end of their emotional endurance . . . desperate to make a place for themselves in the world" (94). However, it is the intense experience of reading Burnett, not Burnett's particular thematic concerns, that Huston emphasized in praising his work. The pleasure of reading that Hitchcock so easily dismissed becomes for Huston the crux of his approach to filmmaking.

Such intense engagement is apparent in his adaptation of *Moby Dick* (1956). It has been suggested that Huston was a generic storyteller with no particular visual style—criticisms which the chapters of this volume

address and reject—and that he was often more concerned with turning literature into something that could be easily consumed by a general audience. With *Moby Dick*, Huston most certainly reduced Herman Melville's novel—which is itself an eccentric, relentlessly allusive, and baroque farago—to a linear narrative with a dramatic climax. But although the film makes the novel more accessible, it also registers something else: those elements of Huston's experience of reading which had him "breaking into a sweat." Huston's own maniacal obsession with finding the right cinematic grammar and syntax, a vernacular around which to focus the story, might very well mirror Ahab's single-minded obsession.

To suggest, however, that Huston is ultimately more faithful to his experience of reading *Moby-Dick* than to the particularities of the novel itself should not belie the fact that Huston was an intellectually astute reader of literature, especially modernist literature. In an interview at Cannes for the premiere of *Under the Volcano* (1984), Huston revealed that he had read Lowry's novel some thirty-five years earlier when it was first published and that he had recognized the novel's excessive and undisciplined use of modernist literary conventions. Because of his knowledge of modernist aesthetics—which influenced his adaptation of *Wise Blood* (1979), for example—Huston's more disciplined approach to Lowry's novel was less a strict adaptation than an interpretation. Indeed, it is because of Huston's visceral encounters with literature that his films try to balance a deep respect for the original text with the potential ways that literature, through adaptation, can speak to new sociopolitical contexts. *Moby Dick*, for instance, responds to Cold War anxieties; *Prizzi's Honor* (1985) and even Huston's adaptation of *The Dead* (1987) reflect the feminist backlash against the Reagan/ Thatcher agenda. Moreover, Huston's own experience as a filmmaker speaks to the way adaptation can be a politically risky endeavor. Although his battles with producers and studio heads did not reach the levels of those experienced by Orson Welles, Huston's *Red Badge of Courage* (1951), because of its challenging antiwar message, was dramatically recut without his knowledge in order to make the film more palatable to post-World War II audiences.

Although Huston did not cultivate a consistent visual or narrative style, he did, however, experiment with styles from auteurist cinema in adaptations such as *The Night of the Iguana* (1964) and *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1967). Also, from the range of literature that he adapted, unique concerns emerge, from the existentialist questions that drive *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) to an abiding interest in psychoanalysis. This latter interest was also deeply literary. In discussing his film *Freud: The Secret Passion* (1962), an adaptation of *Studies on Hysteria*, Huston asserted that "the descent into the unconscious should be as terrifying as Dante's

descent into Hell" (*An Open Book* 294). Films like *The Dead* and *The Man Who Would Be King* (1975), which in Huston's rendering emphasize the anticolonial theme, exhibit something akin to a personal signature, especially when considered in light of the fact that Huston became an Irish citizen in 1964.

The chapters in this collection take a wide range of critical approaches to Huston's adaptations. Thomas Leitch makes the case that the films of John Huston, the quintessential Hollywood adaptor, demand thoughtful engagement by adaptation scholars. He argues that as director, writer, and adaptor, Huston should be taken as seriously as those directors typically classified as auteurs. Accordingly, the collection then proceeds to take the contours of Huston's work as a new model for adaptation studies. To do so, the chapters are organized into three areas: "Aesthetics and Textuality," "History and Social Context," and "Theory and Psychoanalysis."

Although every chapter in the collection approaches Huston's work through the critical topoi of *text*, *history*, and *theory*, the first section of the volume, "Aesthetics and Textuality," directly centers on how Huston's adaptations are acts of interpretation. The chapters in this section pose the essential question of adaptation studies: How does the translation from the page to the screen shape, enrich, and fundamentally alter the written text? Although known for his fidelity to the source, these chapters show how Huston's aesthetic was often powerfully and meaningfully *unfaithful*. For instance, Murray Pomerance argues that Huston draws out the eccentricities of characters not fully developed in Burnett's *Asphalt Jungle* through a visually lyric sensibility that focuses on objects and details not as they necessarily contribute to a narrative arc, but as discrete expressions of subjectivity. In his chapter on *Under the Volcano*, Douglas McFarland argues that Huston replaced the densely complex aesthetics of the novel into a linear and spatially unified narrative not to make it more accessible but to offer his own modernist style described by Gérard Genette as "showing" rather than "telling." Other chapters such as Robert L. Colson's on *The Dead* show how Huston adapts Joyce's unique use of narrative focalization, while Steven Rybin argues that in *The Maltese Falcon* Huston creates a patterned play between figures and objects, utilizing close-ups and deep focus to create an existential space of assertion and detection. And Jonathan C. Glance in his analysis of *The Man Who Would Be King* explores the relationship between film and screenplay.

Our largest grouping, "History and Social Context," builds on the first by emphasizing the dynamic between text and contexts: historical, political, and social. Wesley King and Douglas McFarland argue that this dynamic is evident in *The African Queen* where Huston's apparent

departure from the gender issues of the novel are reinforced by his casting of Katherine Hepburn in the lead role. R. Barton Palmer argues that Huston's adaptation of *The Night of the Iguana* is the product of two quite different trends that found increasing success in Hollywood in the 1950s: the blockbuster production and the small-scale adult film. In tracing the film's production history, Palmer shows how Huston fused the two into a single film. Dale M. Pollack reveals how *The Red Badge of Courage* was compromised by MGM executives, as well as Huston's own postproduction missteps. And whereas Tom Dorey focuses on the construction of masculinity in *Fat City*, Betty Kaklamanidou addresses gender politics of the 1980s in *Prizzi's Honor*. Alan Woolfolk charts Huston's transformation of the tough and ruthless working-class detective Sam Spade into a more inwardly complicated and self-possessed Baudelairean dandy, while Camilla Fojas examines the popular image of the bandit in the context of the sociopolitical border relations between Mexico and the United States when Huston adapted *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. Finally, Nathan Ragain argues that Huston shifts the 1850s context of *Moby Dick* to the 1950s, by utilizing the techniques and capturing the ethos of science fiction during the Cold War.

Where the second section offers a panorama, the third, "Theory and Psychoanalysis," provides a tighter focus on a central motif in Huston's work: his representations of perception and the psyche. More theoretically oriented in their engagements, these chapters interpret Huston's adaptations through questions provoked by psychoanalysis and other studies of desire. This is a critical interest, which—at least since his biopic on Freud—Huston himself shared. David Sigler notes that Huston's *Freud: A Secret Passion* is essentially an adaptation of Freud's and Breuer's *Studies on Hysteria*. While ostensibly a biopic, Sigler argues that Huston turns his back on Freud's biography to grant psychoanalytic ideas biographies of their own. Kyle Stevens looks to the psychosexual elements of Huston's adaptation of Carson McCullers's *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. Stevens demonstrates how the film's rhetorical strategies, such as its use of color and rhythm, elucidate an ideological critique of contemporary sexual politics. And finally Wesley King, drawing upon Lacanian psychoanalysis, argues that although Huston and screenwriter Benedict Fitzgerald deliberately avoided many of O'Connor's symbolic motifs in their adaptation of *Wise Blood*, the film approaches symbolism in a way that explores the depths of the unconscious.

Taken together these chapters demonstrate that adaptation is the salient element in Huston's identity as a filmmaker and that his deep and early attraction to the experience of reading informed his process of adaptation. It has been recognized that Huston was a writer before he

became a director. Indeed, prior to directing his first film Huston had written several screenplays, and he wrote or contributed to the screenplays for the vast majority of his own films. But the path he took to both writing and directing began with an intense attraction to the experience of reading, and it is the depth and breadth of his reading that set him apart from other directors.

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