

28 TFF

TORINO FILM FESTIVAL

Thursday, December the 2nd, 11:00 am, Massimo 3

John Huston

Conference on John Huston's film with Rui Nogueira, Michel Ciment, Morando Morandini, Jim Healy, Michael Fitzgerald and Emanuela Martini. featuring, Tony Huston, Joe Lansdale, Kate O'Toole, Wieland Schulz-Keil and Roberto Silvi.

Emanuela Martini: One of the main reasons that pushed me and Amelio to choose this retrospective was that John Huston was considered, mostly by Italian review, too much as the classic director. Actually he really isn't part of that generation, first of all because he's younger, but mostly there's a difference in style and language. Ever since *The Mystery of the Falcon* Huston had invented and renewed many things and kept on doing it right to the top of his long career. What's unusual is that in the last twenty years his career has been committed to total freedom, and independence of film and the relationship between film and innovation in the spirit of the Seventies and Eighties. French and Italian review have a different opinion therefore I'd like to hear Michel Ciment talking about the love of "Positif" for John Huston.

Michel Ciment: I was very young back then. The first dossier on John Huston was published in 1952, on the third edition of the magazine in a forty five page article. In that period Huston was shooting *Moulin Rouge* and had already ten movies on his back, thus he had pretty much established as an author. Actually the concept of author was already known in the Twenties and therefore wasn't invented by Cahiers. There was a group of people writing script among which Huston and Walsh, who then established themselves as authors. Huston was a big fan of Noir and with his *The Mystery of the Falcon* he practically invented the American equivalent, Detective movie, to which he added on ten years later *The Asphalt Jungle*. Kubrick is Huston's son in this sense. Back then "Positif" was very left handed, while Cahiers had a more Christian and conservatory organization, from this difference came the contrast between Huston and Hitchcock. We were defending Huston for his independent attitude from religion and ideology, as you can notice in *Moby Dick* and for the dissent from McCarthyism causing him to stay away from the U.S., spending long time in Mexico and Ireland. He was free of mind and had an open mentality therefore he shot a lot of film in Mexico confronting himself with different cultures. *The Dead* was filmed in the States but talks about Ireland and this sums him up well. Also some of his innovation in style, such as the use of color in *Moulin Rouge* and *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, are part of his extreme vitality and love for discovery. He was a marvelous story teller, a patriarch who loved being surrounded by his numerous family and who loved bringing on screen not only the great masterpieces yet the small oeuvres too.

Morando Morandini: For many years he was considered an amateur doing armature stuff just to have fun and travel the world at somebody else's expense. Some would call him

a great amateur, anyway a strange definition for someone who's directed thirty eight fiction movies in less than fifty years (among these I recall Independence, eight days of well paid work for a half-hour short), eventually directing The Dead when he was Eighty on a wheelchair breathing from an oxygen mask. Nevertheless we should remind his work as actor (over forty interpretations) and scriptwriter (writing up to twenty two scripts for other directors, among which High Sierra by Raoul Walsh in 1942, same year Huston was debuting as a director). Once Huston wrote: "I'm always working, I'm more and more busy. I don't think making film is a job, just as a painter doesn't consider himself working when he's painting". Blessed is the one who finds his trade for his work won't be work anymore". I can add on, I too get upset when I get asked if I still like going to film, a question they'd never ask a Music or book reviewer.

Huston has undoubtedly had an unequal career: his film is a mix of good movies, extraordinary movies, bad movies, risky commitments, works on commission, big Stars and unknown actors, high costs and low costs, production muck ups, some happy and blatant hustling, a hard acceptance of narrative templates and a total love for Hollywood Action. Although in different ways, all thirty eight are action movies. For North American like him, still tied to Europe and Ireland by a love-hate relationship peculiar of Gertrude Stein, Hemingway and Scott Fitzgerald Lost Generation, used to Hotel rooms since he was a child, traveling was a way of being, even before searching for adventure and discovering sex. Because of his job he had to travel through the most extreme parts of the world and never got sick, also when his staff had fever shivers. The secret to stay healthy was: little food and loads of alcohol. However the romance of peril never made him less responsible professional: he could claim he never lost a man or an animal during shooting. He once answered back to a journalist remarking the camera only had two positions: standing or sitting. The difference of styles in his movies tell him wrong. One of his abilities was to adapt language to the nature of the subject. In contradiction to his being an amateur we can mention his thorough use of color. Many – right wing formalists – would say his wasn't author film, others – left wing formalists – who escaped the McCarty inquisition traveling to Africa with the excuse of shooting The African Queen and finding a compromise with the American Legion which had boycotted Moulin Rouge. Maybe James Agee was right after all when he described Huston in two words writing he was less Communist than the most retrograde Republican since he could technically be defined an anti-authoritarian anarchist individualist and a libertarian without portfolio. Just the fact that in 1942 thirty six year old Huston wears Lieutenant uniform and, sent to Alaska, he shoots Report From The Aleutians, first of three war documentaries, which has him promoted to Captain and sent to England he meets Lieutenant Colonel Frank Capra who was shooting a movie on the Africa landings, would be enough to explain the complexity of this man. A few days later Capra deployed him to Italy, where he created The Battle of San Pietro, released in a thirty two minute edition, out of a sixty minute original. According to the reviewer Eugene Arch, to whom it was the best movie on the WWII, Huston tries to analyze the nature of war portraying an exhausting battle against an impregnable target. When I watched it for the first times in the Nineties, in the second edition of "Castoro" I wrote it was the most solemn protest against war, a particular movie to be promoted by the Department of War. According to Huston it was Marshall who allowed release. Huston declared there are two versions of the movie, however both had been rightly cut because they contained the interviews with the young soldiers before the battle and he had later edited the movie running them on the footage of the laying dead bodies after the battle and it would've been too hard on the families. Let Be There Light instead is about mental therapy used on veterans, still it was uncomfortable for the Department of War and was censured with the excuse of not respecting the fallen. In his biography Huston he'd shot thousands of meters of film to be sure to catch the extraordinary changes that sometimes happen and it's been the pest experience in his life. He believed censorship was to

maintain the myth of the Warrior, the Hero who despite he dies or gets wounded maintains his spirit intact. Voice off in the movie starts reporting that almost 20% of losses are due to neural-psychiatric nature: those few were one out of five.

Rui Nogueira: I interviewed Huston in 1970 when I was in Paris and loved artists like Errol Flynn. Huston belongs to the same adventure men category. I asked my friend Bernard Tavernier to follow me to the interview: I was literally in love with Reflection in a Golden Eye and Tavernier, who's a man of great spirit, made Huston laugh. I remember when he did the imitation of Bogart, Huston laughed so loud you couldn't not laugh too. Still now, when I have a bad day, I listen to that interview only to hear him laugh. Huston was the mission impossible man, just think about amazing movies like Under the Volcano. The Cahier had to change their mind on him; The Dead is effectively a Great Movie. I remember one day I got called up by a writer I love particularly, Antonio Tabucchi, who told me they were coming to Paris, where I was living. He asked me if I had a copy of The Dead he could watch and naturally I was extremely happy to, after the movie he realized he'd never seen it and liked very much.

Michael Fitzgerald: Regarding the justice of European review on Huston, I'd like to remind John wasn't interested in what reviewers thought. He was more interested in showing his movies to people in the trade, such as editors and technicians, people he liked and trusted. If they liked it, he was happy: if he only knew reviewers were calling him an amateur he would've broke out laughing! The first time I tried to make film, I remember I went to see Sam Spiegel, who is the producer of different movies of his from the Fifties and since I didn't know how to find John I asked him and he told me – I was twenty five – John was a professional who became an amateur and I thought: perfect, that's just what I needed.

Michel Climent: I want to tell you an anecdote. When Huston was shooting Fobia he paid the ticket from London to Toronto for a journalist who asked the usual question: Which one do you think is your best movie? He answered he didn't know which one was the best, but he knew the one he was making was the worst!

Jim Haley: The first time I watched Fobia I recognized a pure sense of film grammar. Except for the grotesque in some parts, it reveals a precise planning of spaces so you always know where you are and what's happening.

Tony Huston: When he made film he was a great professional. However as soon as it was finished he'd forget about it. He'd also say no reviewer had ever written about his way of using the camera.

Roberto Silvi: The final cut of The Dead was 83'20", however during a projection with the troupe John called me up to cut one more scene therefore the final is 82' and he was right because the movie was a lot better without! He was really great at judging material. I worked with him on Wise Blood, Escape to Victory, maybe a minor movie since he didn't understand much about soccer, anyway a good entertainment movie, Under the Volcano and The Dead which has been a magnificent ending to his career.

Wieland Schulz-Keil: I met John Huston on the set for Annie and whoever was on his set would see he had an incredible way of working only with his presence. During The Dead it was really hard to find him an insurance since he was so old and sick, even Carol Russell found an insurance. When he came to visit the set he saw John sitting on a chair chatting, he looked tired, but he really only had great respect for what was going on on set

in front of his camera. His method was quite different from Otto Preminger's, who's search control over every single detail. On John's set there was a certain degree of normality. Moreover he hated having to fire people hence he tried in every way to not have to do it, just like in *Under the Volcano* in which the camera operator wasn't good enough. Russell anyway was startled at seeing such a set in which nobody was actually directing.

Tony Huston: His way of putting all of his troupe at ease was incredible: I remember in the first rehearsal of *The Dead* the Irish actors were all very excited by the idea of working with my Father. Thus he faked falling to sleep just to wake up when the reading was finished!

Kate O'Toole: Yes, his was an invisible directing technique. During the first rehearsal of *The Dead* we were all asking ourselves how was he going to direct the movie in his health conditions: he had to breathe from an oxygen mask, but after half an hour of shooting, he'd wake up and start to walk up and down the set. He was so confident in himself he already knew if it was a good one or not and he wouldn't have the actors redo it.

Joe Lansdale: I feel absolutely involved in Huston's work: his movies have influenced me as a narrator. I believe the secret is in his love for story. He often inspired himself to great authors, as in *Moby Dick*. He had a bliss for story telling: in fact he made them better by bringing them on screen *The Treasures of the Sierra Madre* and *Wise Blood*, that is nevertheless my favorite book. You can understand he liked the sound of language and how stories were told; he was one of the few directors who didn't make mistakes when bringing a book on screen. Some would compare him to Hemingway and I think it's a guessed comparison: the way he taught me to write stories.

Michel Climent: Huston called his autobiography an "open book". Americans liked his film but rarely they're willing to help who makes film. However I must object to what Michael says: Actually reviewers usually work to destroy, the real artist doesn't really care, the problem is if reviewers quit writing about you, then you're finished. Just like happened to Vermeer the painter, who was discovered only years later by a critic and now he's a great classic.

Michael Fitzgerald: I just wanted to close off remembering that John would show the movie to his family and friends, the people who were most important to him, to have their feedback on it. When *Wise Blood* was released I remember him saying not to get used to it, because no other movie would be so successful. Actually a great piece of advice.