

**“The Sound and Color Will Translate . . . to the Visual”:
Sound in the Adaptations of John Huston**

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ABSTRACT

My thesis focuses on the relationship between sound and adaptation in the work of American filmmaker John Huston. By focusing on three films, from three distinct periods of Huston's career, I demonstrate how Huston's use of sound in his adaptations evolved throughout his career. Each chapter focuses on one particular aspect of Huston's use of sound but also comments on other auditory elements present in each film. My introduction serves as an overview of Huston's adaptive process. The main focus of the first chapter centers on Huston's use of speech throughout his adaptation of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. The second chapter focuses on Huston's adaptation of *Moby Dick* and the use of diegetic song throughout the film. The final chapter centers on Huston's adaptation of Flannery O' Connor's *Wise Blood* and focuses on Alex North's non-diegetic score's adaptive elements. My conclusion centers on Huston's final film, *The Dead*. In one scene, Huston combines the elements that have been discussed throughout the thesis and illustrate the power of Huston's use of sound in his adaptations. While Huston is not the first director to use sound as an adaptive element in his work, I believe the critical discussion of his film adaptations has neglected his use of sound in adapting literary texts. I hope my project will lead to more work being done on Huston's use of sound since my study only focuses on three of Huston's thirty-seven films.

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INTRODUCTION

HUSTON, SOUND, AND ADAPTATION

“Compared with John Huston, I’m still in seventh grade—but I’m moving up.”

Sam Peckinpah

Over the winter holidays of 1964, John and Elaine Steinbeck visited St. Clerans, the Irish home of the American filmmaker John Huston. During their time together, Huston and Steinbeck “would often sit in the Japanese bath together talking for hours about politics, the theater and literature” (Grobel 560). Strangely enough, when not discussing politics and literature, their conversation turned to the supernatural. Huston and Steinbeck were convinced that St. Clerans was haunted by a ghost they named Daly. According to Elaine, after seeing the ghost himself, Steinbeck began drafting a “short novel that could be turned into a screenplay” (Grobel 560). In a later letter to Huston, Steinbeck wrote of his intention of having Huston adapt his potential narrative to the screen. He wrote, “I’ll write the little tale as well as I can and we will see whether the sound and color of it will translate to the visual” (Grobel 560). While the novel or the film were never made, Steinbeck’s remarks point to Huston’s ability to adapt both the auditory and visual aspects of a literary text to the screen. Steinbeck understood that if anyone could convey the sound of his ghost story to the visual art of filmmaking, it was John Huston.

Huston created some of the greatest films of the American cinema. In Huston’s long career as a filmmaker, he directed thirty-seven pictures. These films were made in nearly every genre of cinema, including westerns, musicals, biopics, horror films,

documentaries, and action and adventure films. The only major genre that Huston avoided was science fiction.¹ While Huston built a reputation as a diverse filmmaker, most of his films could be combined under the umbrella of adaptation. Of Huston's thirty-seven directorial films, thirty-four were adaptations, most of these films finding their origins in American novels, short stories, and plays.

While the critical study of Huston's work has seen a resurgence over the past decade marked by the 2014 updating of Lawrence Grobel's 1989 biography *The Hustons: The Life and Times of a Hollywood Dynasty* and the publication of 2017's *John Huston as Adaptor*, Huston was not always placed in the upper echelon of American directors. Many critics, like Andrew Sarris, initially attacked Huston for not displaying aspects of an auteur director.² For critics like Sarris, the director was the author of the film, and a great director would have a personal aesthetic that would be clearly evident throughout his filmography. Huston fought against this idea of filmmaking, instead believing that no "filmmaker should—though many do—consciously strive to maintain a permanent style in all his films." He believed that if a director developed his own personal style and forced it on to every film he made, the director would be making "the same picture over

¹ Even so, Critic Nathan Ragain argues that Huston's adaptation of *Moby Dick* borrows heavily from the Cold War science fiction film.

² Sarris famously placed Huston in the category of "Less Than Meets the Eye" in his book *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*, proclaiming that "Agee was as wrong about Huston as Bazin was about Wyler, but Huston is still coasting on his reputation as a wronged individualist with an alibi for every bad movie" (269).

and over again” (Bachman).³ Later in his career, when critics began discussing Huston from a stylistic perspective, he noted that it was a “curious thing that so many people ascribe to me a distinct style.” He went on to note that he was “not conscious of any such thing.” Instead of trying to pursue his own personal style of filmmaking, Huston felt that it was “a matter of spontaneous sensitivity” that created the aesthetics of a film (Lautot 17). For Huston, the film was what was important, not his individual style or ego.

While a distinct personal aesthetic is not evident in the cinematic style of each of his films, an auteur-like style exists in how he selected projects. For Huston, “most films, not all, but most of my films have been labors of love.” He “made them because [he] was interested in what the author had to say” (Bachman). He was a reader of American literature, and that literary history influenced the films he made. In an interview, Huston was asked how he selected projects and replied, “I don’t start off by saying I’m going to make a film. But some idea, some novel, some play suggests itself, very often it’s something I read twenty-five, thirty years ago when I was a child. And I’ve played around with it in my thoughts for a long time” (Bachman). From the beginning of his career Huston worked almost exclusively on projects to which he had a personal connection.

Once he had a project in mind, he would begin work on the screenplay. As a screenwriter, Huston seldom worked alone. He would work with either another screenwriter or, if he were working on an adaptation, he would try to work with the writer

³ The following quotes from Huston are compiled from an audio featurette from The Criterion Collection’s 2016 Blu-ray and DVD release of Huston’s *The Asphalt Jungle*. The featurette was “edited together from several undated audio interview conducted by film critic Gideon Bachman.”

of the original text. His writing process was simple. He would work “closely with the writer or share in the writing.” Huston described his process as follows: “The writer will do a scene; I’ll work over it. I’ll do a scene; the other writer will work over it. We’ll trade them back and forth until we are both satisfied” (Bachman). Sometimes this process would last two weeks, and other times it would take up to a year and a half.

In relation to the fidelity between Huston’s adaptation and the original texts that his films were based on, Huston’s goal was to be “as faithful to the original as [he] possibly” could. He believed that when adapting something to the screen, that one cannot “avoid interpretation, but one doesn’t seek to interpret.” He wanted to get as “close to the original idea as you can get.” He said that the process of adaptation fascinated him and that it was his fascination “for the original that [made him] want to [make it] into a film” (Bachman). While Huston might not have felt a responsibility to maintain a personal aesthetic through each of his films, he did feel a responsibility to represent faithfully the work of the author he was adapting.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore Huston’s method of adaptation, specifically focusing on his use of sound in the adaptive process. I have selected three films to help illuminate the ways that Huston used the sound track to help adapt American literature. These films include *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948), *Moby Dick* (1956), and *Wise Blood* (1979). I have selected these films because I believe they represent three distinct periods in Huston’s career and illustrate how Huston’s use of sound evolved over time. While sharing Huston’s exemplary use of sound, each film includes a unique sound track that Huston molds to fit the text he is adapting. The adaptive quality of Huston’s sound tracks is seldom discussed in the critical literature

surrounding Huston's work. Through my thesis, I hope to shine a light on an aspect of Huston's filmmaking that generally lurks in the shadows.

The thesis contains three chapters and a conclusion.

Chapter One explores Huston's adaptation of B. Traven's novel *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. Widely considered by film critics to be one of Huston's greatest accomplishments, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* embodies Huston's process of adaptation at the beginning of his career. With this film, Huston forms a bond between sound and adaptation that he solidifies throughout his evolution as a filmmaker. Throughout the film, Huston utilizes Max Steiner's score, translated dialogue, and laughter to translate Traven's text into cinematic language.

My analysis of Huston's connection between adaptation and sound continues in my second chapter through a discussion of Huston's adaptation of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. While not held in such critical esteem as Huston's earlier films, *Moby Dick* marks a turning point in Huston's career where he begins to move away from studio production. My analysis will focus on Philip Sainton's musical score, the moments of diegetic music that are sprinkled throughout the film, and Orson Welles's performance as Father Mapple.⁴ I argue that Huston is using a combination of sound elements throughout the film to recreate the world of *Moby-Dick*. While his adaptation is not

⁴ In their textbook *Film Art*, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson define diegetic sound as any "sound that has a source in the story world [of the film]." These include "the words spoken by characters, sounds made by objects in the story, and music represented as coming from instruments in the story space." Nondiegetic sound "is represented as coming from a source outside the story world." The most commonly used nondiegetic sounds include "music added to enhance the film's action" (284)

perfect, it manages to convey the romantic perspective of both Melville's novel and nineteenth-century American literature in general.

As Huston aged, he began making smaller-budgeted independent films outside of the studio system. In these later films like *Wise Blood*, *Under the Volcano* (1984), and *The Dead* (1987) sound continued to play a large role in Huston's adaptive process. The final chapter of this thesis focuses on Huston's 1979 adaptation of Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. In this film, Huston uses sound to create a thematic link between the source novel and his film. The struggle between faith and rebellion that is at the center of O'Connor's novel is internalized within Alex North's musical score. Through his adaptations of "The Tennessee Waltz" and "Simple Gifts," North blends the secular music of the American south with traditional church music.⁵ The blending of Southern culture and religion in the sound track of Huston's film is the primary focus of my final chapter.

In the conclusion of my thesis, I present a brief analysis of Huston's final film *The Dead*. Based on James Joyce's short story, Huston's film that was released two months after his death is the summation of Huston's career and his relationship to adaptation and sound. Each of the aspects that were discussed in my previous three chapters appear together as Angelica Huston walks down the stairwell at the conclusion of the film.

⁵ In the opening credits of the film North is listed as both a composer and an adapter of the film's music.

CHAPTER ONE

LEITMOTIF, LANGUAGE, AND LAUGHTER: SOUND AS ADAPTATION IN JOHN HUSTON'S *TREASURE OF THE SIERRA MADRE*

In “Undirectable Director,” James Agee presents Huston’s film *The Treasure of the Sierra Of the Sierra Madre* as “the clearest proof in perhaps twenty years that first-rate work can come out of the big commercial studios” (256).⁶ Despite only finding marginal financial success during its initial run, it would leave a permanent mark on American cinema. The origins of Huston’s film are traced 20 years before the premier of the film with the publication of a unique novel by a mysterious author whose true identity still remains a mystery to literary historians. While many investigations have been made into the identity of the original author of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, all we have is an initial and a name: B. Traven. *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* was originally published in German as *Der Schatz der Sierra Madre* in 1927 and “was incredibly popular on a global scale and circulated widely in numerous editions. It was translated into at least thirteen languages and was adapted to a series of books for young adults” (Fojas 199). After reading the novel, following its translation into English in 1935, Huston began work on his adaptation.⁷ When America joined in the Second World War,

⁶ The film will henceforth be referred to as *Sierra Madre*.

⁷ In his article “In Search of ‘The Treasure of the Sierra Madre,’” Robert Ginna presents a more complicated version of the creation of *Sierra Madre*’s screenplay. He presents a summary of each of the attempted screenplays that were crafted while Huston was at war. He proves that previous drafts of the script were written by Henry Blake, Arthur Arent, Norbert Faulkner, Walter Gorman, and Robert Rossen and hints that these might have influenced Huston’s screenplay.

Huston was forced to put the project on hold while he served as a filmmaker in the United States Signal Corps. The eventual 1948 film served as Huston's return to Hollywood and cemented his place among the pantheon of American filmmakers.

With *Sierra Madre*, Huston drew from his previous work adapting *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *In This Our Life* (1942) to the screen. In each film, he crafted cinematic versions of the original novels that closely resembled the visions of the original authors. Like many directors before him, he primarily focused on adapting the narrative and visual components of the original text to the screen. In these early scripts, Huston took great care to authentically translate his literary source into cinematic language. In many cases, he lifted dialogue and location descriptions directly from the source novel. This mode of adaptation created authentic screen representations of both *The Maltese Falcon* and *In This Our Life* that rarely differed significantly from their original novels.

While Huston's adaptation of *Sierra Madre* would maintain a similar relation to Traven's novel as his previous adaptations, in this film Huston began to focus on both visual and the auditory elements within his adaptation. In his film, Huston maintains the basic narrative structure of Traven's novel, while transforming literary elements into both a visual and an auditory cinematic language. Huston wanted his film not only to look like Traven's novel but also to sound like it. If *The Maltese Falcon* illustrated Huston's ability to translate a novel to the screen visually, *Sierra Madre* illustrates Huston's ability to translate a novel into a distinctly cinematic language that includes both the visual and auditory components of that language.

Throughout the film, Huston uses a combination of music, dialogue, and laughter to translate the narrative of Traven's novel to the screen, but also to expand that narrative.

Sierra Madre marks the beginning of Huston's path toward creating a connection between a cinematic art and the written text that encompasses both auditory and visual components. This utilization of the sound track in creating a cinematic adaptation is not entirely unique to Huston. Many classical Hollywood directors, including John Ford, Frank Capra, and Victor Fleming, used sound to enhance their cinematic adaptations. While these other directors have focused on sound in their adaptations, Huston's filmography is especially ripe for study because of both the quantity of adaptations he created and the quality of those adaptations. Huston's ability to deploy sound as a significant part of his adaptation process would evolve throughout his career and the foundations of his technique were laid through his use of sound in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*.

The film opens with American Fred Dobbs (Humphrey Bogart) walking the streets of Tampico, Mexico, begging fellow Americans for change. Like many other American veterans following the First World War, Dobbs came to Mexico after the war expecting to find a job in Mexico's growing oil economy. He tirelessly walks the streets of Mexico trying to find the path to a better existence. After a brief meeting with Bob Curtin (Tim Holt) on a park bench, Dobbs is shown a possible path when Curtin offers him a job setting up an oil rig by businessman Pat McCormick (Barton MacLane). Upon arriving at the job site, Dobbs reconnects with Curtin, and they become fast friends and partners. After completing the job, McCormick attempts to cheat Dobbs and Curtin out of their money, which leads to a physical altercation between the three men in a local cantina. Following this altercation, Dobbs and Curtin rent two cots in "l'Oso de Negro," a local inn that has become a common stamping ground for Americans living in Mexico.

There they meet Howard (Walter Huston); Howard convinces them to go into the prospecting business, and they quickly leave town, hoping to strike it rich mining for gold in the Sierra Madre. After setting up camp, the three men spend several weeks mining for gold and solidifying their fortunes. Following an altercation with some bandits led by the notorious Gold Hat (Alfonso Bedoya), the men begin to break up their camp and return to civilization. On their way back to society, Dobbs becomes overwhelmed with greed and attempts to kill Curtin for his gold. Alone in the wilderness, Dobbs is eventually found by three bandits, including the previously mentioned Gold Hat, who murder him and steal his burros. Not knowing Dobbs's sacks of dirt were sacks of gold, the bandits attempt to sell the burros to a nearby village. Recognizing the burros' brands, the leader of the village has the bandits executed for theft. Upon learning about the death of Dobbs, Curtin and Howard, who have been living in a small Mexican village, return to the site of the burro's theft and laugh as they realize all their work has been blown into the wind and returned to the dust of the desert.

While the plot of the novel is essentially the same as the film, major differences exist between the two texts. In "*The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*: B. Traven, John Huston and Ideology in Film Adaptation," John Engell argues that "though Huston's screenplay and film are faithful to the book in most particulars, the transition from verbal to visual narrative shifts the ideological center of the text" (245). For Engell, both Huston and Traven are arguing for a solution to the problem of greed in a capitalistic society, but their solutions are ideologically different. In Traven's version the solution lies in "the myths of the primitive commune," while Huston envisions the solution in "the myths . . . [of the] Jeffersonian citizen-owner." The differences in the representation of Bob Curtin

in each text illustrate this distinction. At the end of the film, Howard tells Curtin to take the money from the burros and the hides, and go back to Texas where he can inform Lecaud's significant other of his death. Curtin thinks about the proposition and agrees. At the conclusion of the novel, Curtin stays with Howard in the Mexican village where they can live well without the need of gold or money. Despite the endings being only slightly different, their differences have significant ideological implications. By changing the ending of the novel, Huston creates a version of the narrative that more closely resembles the American dream than the German anarchism evident throughout Traven's fiction. Huston's ending allows Curtin to return effectively to society with a pocketful of gold and a story to tell. In contrast, Traven's conclusion ends the capitalistic cycle. Howard and Curtin reject the calling of civilization and both remain in Mexico where they can exist without the burden of gold.

In her article "Of Borders and Bandits," Camilla Fojas expands on Engell's argument by arguing that Huston inadvertently created the image of the Mexican bandit with his screen adaptation of the novel and thus contributed to an entire ideology surrounding the role that Mexicans play in American cinema. In the novel, there is never just one group of bandits. There are political bandits, religious bandits, and simply bums. In order to create stronger characters and compress the narrative, Huston simply combined these various groups into one group of bandits under the direction of Gold Hat that seems to follow Dobbs, Curtin, and Howard throughout the film. In the film, Gold Hat is used as a double of Dobbs character. They seem to be fatally attached to each other throughout the film until Gold Hat finally kills him. For Fojas, this creates a strange dichotomy within the film in that Huston appears to be critical of the bandit characters

while also establishing the modern bandit stereotype. Like Engell, Fojas argues that Huston's film is complex and ideologically contradictory; this is amplified through the juxtaposition of Huston's film and Traven's original novel.

Initial reviews applauded Huston's adaptation. In *The New York Times*, Bosley Crowther noted that Huston had created "a most vivid and exciting action display" that aesthetically borrowed heavily from "the same sort of ruthless realism that was evident in his documentaries of war." *Variety* film critic Herm Schoenfeld noted that Huston's film was just "what the doctor ordered" in reaction to "an over-diet of films that [looked] too much alike." He further stated that the film "moves out of the class of simple entertainment [and] into the realm of vivid experience," predicting that *Sierra Madre* would "take its place in the repertory of Hollywood's great and enduring achievements." While these and other contemporary reviews applaud the visual and narrative aspects of the film, few mention the sound design of the film outside of passing, usually negative, references to Max Steiner's score. These initial reviewers were correct in noting that *Sierra Madre* was unlike anything they had seen before, but it was also unlike anything they had ever heard.

Throughout the film, Huston takes full advantage of the sound design of his film to create something that is truly unique from both the perspective of 1940s American cinema and general film adaptation. It is important to note that Traven's novel is full of verbal references to sound. He describes the sound of trains, voices, and footsteps throughout. It is clear that Huston was aware of this when he was crafting his screenplay and that sound played a key role as he adapted the novel. Huston manages to maintain fidelity to Traven's original text in both the visual and auditory aesthetics of his film.

The musical score of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* is an example of the “classical Hollywood score,” as defined by Kathryn Kalinak. Such scores during the Golden Age of Hollywood were “steeped in a late nineteenth-century romanticism that was several decades out of date in the concert hall” (Cooke 78). Of these early classical film composers, *Sierra Madre*’s composer Max Steiner was one of the most prolific. Like many film composers of his era, Steiner worked at an alarmingly fast rate. From 1947 through 1948, while he was working on the score for *Sierra Madre*, Steiner “scored no fewer than 22 features and by the time of his retirement in 1965 . . . had composed in excess of 300 film scores” (Cooke 92). This was the common time pressure under which Steiner and many of his contemporaries worked. Studio era composers were generally given four to six weeks to complete a project, and it was not unusual for a film composer to be working simultaneously on five to six films. They were able to work on so many films because they generally had three or four orchestrators working alongside them who would orchestrate and expand the composer’s first score drafts. Steiner’s background and composition style could be seen as typical of the common studio film composer during this period.

Like many of his contemporaries, following a brief career in both New York and Europe as a composer and conductor, Steiner joined the music staff of the RKO studio in 1929. Generally Steiner’s and his contemporaries’ work followed the same pattern:

At the drawing up of his cue sheet, he sketched out themes for the principle characters and narrative topics . . . Next he paid special consideration to those scenes where music might serve a useful function in quickening or slowing the dramatic pace; then he reviewed each reel in turn and composed specific cues

with the aid of a stopwatch. His detailed short-score sketches were then passed on to trusted orchestrators, principally Bernhard Kaun at RKO and Friedhofer at Warner Brothers. (Cooke 93)

After working on several films, Steiner created his most significant score with 1933's *King Kong*. Steiner's score for *Kong* revolutionized the film industry. Cooke notes that Steiner's score "almost single-handedly marked the coming-of-age of nondiegetic film music: it established a style and technique of scoring that was not only much imitated during the Golden Age, but continues to be reflected in mainstream narrative scoring practices to the present day" (88). Because of the success of films like *King Kong*, Steiner's scores became a standard for film composing during the Golden Age of Hollywood.

While Steiner's scores for films like *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *The Informer* (1935), and previously mentioned *King Kong* have been praised by critics, the same cannot be said for Steiner's score for *Sierra Madre*. Upon release, some contemporary reviewers attacked Steiner's score. In his otherwise glowing initial review of the film in *The Nation*, James Agee notes that the one aspect he "furiously resents is the intrusion of background music." Agee thought Steiner's score detracted from the realism that was being presented on screen. He goes as far as to say that "there shouldn't be any" nondiegetic music in the film. Agee's opinion on the use of music is reflected in contemporary critics like Christopher Palmer who see the music as being melodramatic and too romantic. Palmer notes that Steiner's score is full of "routine Spanishry which may superficially suggest a Mexican location but fails to give any intimation of the mood of the film or the true role of the natural background, which is anything [but] colorful or

picturesque” (35). Palmer believes that Steiner’s workload during this period led to what he views as an uninspired score. Using this same quotation, Cooke expands Palmer’s critique of Steiner’s score by adding a critique of Steiner and Huston’s later collaboration, *Key Largo* (1948). He notes that Steiner’s work with Huston “contains many crudities and clichés, such as the saccharine modulations to the major when a sick child recovers in *Sierra Madre* and after the villain dies at the climax of *Key Largo*—a film replete with predictable stingers and melodramatic orchestral flourishes” (Cooke 92). For these critics, Steiner was simply a product of his time, and thus his scores are not as unique as those of modern composers.

While the critical community has seemingly dismissed Steiner’s score for its romantic and melodramatic qualities, the score has its own merits from the perspective of adaptation. Through his score, Steiner attempts to create fidelity to Huston’s vision, which in turn is a reflection of Traven’s novel. While being thematically centered on greed, both Huston’s film and Traven’s novel are also about Mexico. This vision of Mexico is present throughout Steiner’s score in his use of “guitar, marimbas, accordion, xylophone, Mexican drums and shakers, saxophone, harmonica, and five mandolins” (Lysy). Through the addition of these instruments to the traditional symphonic orchestra that provided the common orchestration in classical Hollywood scores, Stein created an auditory link to the source text. While the music might not strive to form a thematic link to the source in the same ways that later Huston films do, Steiner’s score, whether directly or indirectly, creates fidelity with Traven’s novel.

While the musical score does not carry the same gritty realism as the source material, Steiner’s score does create thematic links through his use of silence. In the

scene in which Dobbs and Curtin fight Pat McCormick in the cantina, Steiner and Huston make an interesting decision and allow the fight to take place without musical accompaniment. As Dobbs and Curtin approach Pat outside the cantina on the street, a light Spanish melody of guitars, trumpets, and marimba underscores their conversation. As the three men enter the cantina, the volume of the music decreases, adding emphasis to the dialogue while matching the space of the empty room. The music decrescendos throughout the scene until Curtin finishes the line, “We want what’s coming to us and we want it right now.” At that moment, the music returns to silence. This moment of musical silence increases the tension and emphasizes the shock the audience feels when Pat breaks the bottle across Curtin’s face. The only sounds the audience hears in the ensuing fight are the sounds of the punches landing on each of the characters and the sound of objects crashing to the ground. This discontinuation of the musical track adds realism to the scene.

To my knowledge, no critics have written about Steiner and Huston’s use of musical silence in this scene. It is especially interesting since Cooke describes and applauds a similar scene with Steiner’s earlier score for *King Kong*. He notes, “strikingly, the climactic aero plane attack launched on Kong as he sits astride the Empire State Building takes place without music” (88). He then adds that “when the music returns it is all the more effective.” (88) In the cantina fight scene, the opposite is true. When the music disappears, the fighting becomes more effective. It becomes real. The lack of nondiegetic music emphasizes Huston’s realist aesthetic. While I agree with Agee that the score is sometimes overbearing, I also see the inherent genius in Steiner’s work. Through the selective use of realistic sound, Huston, with the help of Steiner, is able to

create something that both maintains fidelity to the original text and creates a sellable product for the studio system.⁸



Figure 1.1 The silent cantina fight

As Huston matured as a filmmaker, his use of music became more precise in his films. When he adapted W. R. Burnett's novel *The Asphalt Jungle*, Huston choose to include only diegetic music in the film. The only time the audience hears music is when music is being played on the radio. The audience only hears what the characters hear. At that time Huston felt that was the way Burnett would have wanted his novel to be adapted. Traven's characters in the novel were not surrounded by an ever-present

⁸ An image of the fight is shown in figure 1.1.

orchestra that plays music at all time. By employing only diegetic music, Huston remained true to the original novel. While Huston's use of music in later films, like *The Asphalt Jungle*, is heavily discussed by critics and reviewers alike, it is important to note that the foundations of this realist sound aesthetic are found throughout *Sierra Madre*.

Speech plays a large role in Huston's body of work. In nearly every one of his films, a language other than English is spoken and in every incident subtitles are not used. This lack of subtitles illustrates an interesting aspect of Huston's adaptation theory. He is using untranslated dialogue to reflect on the screen what is occurring in the readers mind when they read the text. When an author translates dialogue into English for an English speaking audience, the reader understands that these characters are actually speaking in their native language within the text. The dialogue is needed to continue the narrative and thus is translated into English. When Huston adapts novels to the screen, he does not have to worry about conveying translated dialogue because he can tell his story visually. The characters' actions allow the audience to follow the narrative visually. Unlike the characters of his source texts, Huston's cinematic characters do not have to speak English. They can realistically communicate in untranslated native speech and the audience can follow the narrative visually. This is especially clear through Huston's use of the Spanish language in *Sierra Madre*.

In the film, Huston's Mexican characters often speak "untranslated Spanish dialogue" (Fojas 198). The only time they speak English is when they are directly speaking to one of the American characters. This creates a sense of realism in the filmic text that is not present in Traven's novel. Traven is forced to translate the language of the Spanish characters into English because he does not have the benefit of visualization that

Huston has when he is crafting his cinematic adaptation. Because of this lack of visual representation, Huston's film appears to be more realistic than Traven's novel. While Traven never directly commented on Huston's use of the Spanish language in his adaptation, I feel that Huston's lack of subtitles adds realism to the adaptation that Traven would have supported. This is especially clear when one analyzes the scene in which the bandits return to the village following their murder of Dobbs.

In the novel, Traven does a form of internal adaptation in which he translates the Spanish dialogue into English. When the reader reads the text, he or she understands that in the world of the novel those characters are speaking Spanish because Traven inserts well-known Spanish words into the dialogue of the characters. When Gold Hat speaks to his men during their altercation with the prospectors, he says, "Ay caramba, chingue tu madre . . . Ven aca, come here all you muchachos. Here you will see a great sight. Hurry. Our little birdie is sitting on his eggs, waiting to hatch, Who ever would have thought them gringos and cabrones would use a skunk-hole for their headquarters?" (160) The insertion of the Spanish words into the text implies to the reader that this conversation is actually occurring in Spanish and not in the English they are reading. In the film, Gold Hat delivers this line of dialogue in Spanish.

In the film, easing the reader in and out of Spanish dialogue is unnecessary because of the visual aspect of the medium. An example of this occurs in the trial of the three bandits that occurs at the end of both the novel and the film. In the novel, Traven removes his previous mode of partially translating the text into Spanish and instead writes the entire sequence in English. Since there are no American characters in this part of the novel, the translation problem that was existent in the previous Gold Hat

interaction does not exist. The characters' speech is delivered in English while the reader understands that these interactions are actually occurring in Spanish. In his version of the scene, Huston flips this convention on its head and instead of either giving subtitles or translating the dialogue into English; he allows the narrative to be conveyed visually. The audience sees the brands on the donkeys as the camera follows the young boy as he moves between the animals and thus understands that the boy knows that the animals are stolen.⁹ As we watch the bandits go from discovery to their eventual execution, we fully understand everything that is occurring narratively on screen.



Figure 1.2 Mexican child inspects the brands of the burros

⁹ An image of this Mexican child appears in figure 1.2

From the perspective of fidelity of adaptation, I see this as being an optimal way of adapting the scene. In many ways, it is truer to the text than if Huston had simply given the characters Traven's English dialogue. By adding those select Spanish words into the dialogue of the scene, Traven wanted his audience to understand that his characters were actually speaking Spanish. This means that the changes that Huston made in speech better represents Traven's text than if he had directly transposed Traven's dialogue to the screen.

While *Sierra Madre*'s existence as an early marker of the sound adaptation aesthetic that would come to define the score of Huston's later adaptations, the link between acting and sound is clearer in the film. This link is exemplified in the acting of both John Huston's father, Walter Huston, and Humphrey Bogart.

Huston once remarked of his father's performance in the film was "the finest performance in any picture I ever made" (Huston 148). Both Huston, in his autobiography, and the film critics of the time point to the scenes of Walter's laughter. Huston notes his father's performance -- when "he does that dance of triumph before the mountain, cackling out insults at his compadres" -- gives the director "goose flesh" and makes his "hair stand up" (148).¹⁰ He compares it to the times he was "in the presence of Chapaliapin, the Italian thoroughbred Ribot, Jack Dempsey in his prime, and Manolete" (Huston 148). For both the critics and Huston, these scenes of laughter were like seeing an actor at the peak of his career. Why are these scenes of laughter so interesting? How

¹⁰ This dance was not the first time Walter Huston had performed it in character. For the film, he used the dance that Eugene O'Neil taught him when he was performing in *Desire Under the Elms*.

does Huston use laughter throughout his film? How does that laughter function in the novel?

Whether it is referenced in dialogue,¹¹ as description,¹² or as a verb,¹³ laughter is present throughout the novel. Laughter or a version of the word is used at least forty-five times in the novel. It is used in two ways: either to remove tension that has been building in an argument or, interestingly enough, to add tension to a scene. In many ways the laughter in the novel acts as a parallel to the gold the men are looking for. It has a seemingly mystical power to both solve men's problems yet also be connected to their eventual downfall. As the novel progresses, and gold becomes more prevalent in the narrative, laughter becomes more infectious. And like gold, it eventually drives men to their darkest actions as personified in the character of Dobbs.

Laughter serving as a release of argumentative tension is associated throughout the novel by Howard's laughter. An example of this occurs when Dobbs and Curtin are arguing and Dobbs has pointed a gun at Curtin. The argument begins when Curtin comments on the fact that Dobbs has the habit of "moving the skin of his forehead upward and so wrinkling it when speaking" (Traven 97). While this habit did not initially annoy Curtin, it became especially annoying to him after weeks of physical labor. When they first arrived at the campsite, Curtin "and the old man and found this sort of frown rather jolly for the comic impression it made when used with certain phrases. Then they

¹¹ "Listen you, you, if you don't want me to sock you, don't laugh" (Traven 32).

¹² "His laughter was heartier than it was meant to be, for it carried all the anxiety that he now wanted to blow off" (Traven 173)

¹³ "Pretty place, I have to say," Curtin laughed (Traven 71).

had come to crack jokes about it, with Dobbs good-naturedly joining in” (Traven 97). Then one night, Curtin finally snapped and yelled at Curtin, “you cursed dog, if you for once don’t drop that nasty frown of yours, by god I’ll smash your head with this stone” (Traven 97). This altercation led Dobbs to pull a gun on Curtin and Howard to step in between them.¹⁴ After settling the feud between the two men, Traven simply writes, “Howard laughed” (Traven 97). This laughter removes the tension from the scene. The three characters are brought back together with the laughter serving as a kind of restorative medicine to the men.

Like gold, the effect of laughter in the novel is a dual-sided figure. At some points it represents the relief of tension, but at others the escalation of violence. While Howard’s laughter represents the healing qualities of both gold and laughter, Dobb’s laughter is linked to insanity and greed. This is especially clear at the conclusion of the novel when Dobbs slowly loses his mind. As the two men cross over the mountain, they become angry at each other and are described in animalistic terms. Past friends Dobbs and Curtin “no longer spoke to each other in the usual manner. They bellowed at each other, howled like wild beasts, and cursed themselves and the rest of the world for the hard job they had undertaken” (231). As Dobbs’s anger and irrational resentment towards Curtin grows, he begins to laugh. Curtin understands that “something was wrong with Dobbs” when he pushed Curtin and “laughed in a curious way” (235). This push causes Curtin to nervously laugh to himself, which causes Dobbs to “[break] out into bellowing laughter”

¹⁴ While this scene is not shown in the film, it closely resembles the sequence in which Dobbs accuses Curtin of trying to steal his gold from under a rock. In his innocence, Curtin tries to defend himself by explaining that a Gila monster had climbed under the rock and Dobbs has to decide if he wants to reach under the rock to prove himself.

(235). Throughout subsequent ten pages Dobbs's laughter is constantly described. He has to "hold his belly" as he roars with laughter; later Traven describes his laughter as becoming "hysterical," and finally he continues to laugh until he eventually shoots Curtin (235). As Dobbs leaves the campsite where Curtin's body was left, he was "sure he heard laughter behind him in the deep darkness of the bush" (248). Dobbs is haunted by laughter. He kills his friend in a moment of irrational greed, and the guilt manifests itself as Curtin's laughter.

This greed and the power of laughter is reflected throughout the film, but in nowhere as powerful a moment as when Dobbs loses his mind at the end of the film. He lies in front of a fire, and as he laughs to himself; the flames engulf the camera. We are truly watching a man as he falls into the pits of madness. From his first appearance in the novel, Howard warns that "gold is a devilish sort of a thing . . . it changes your character entirely. When you have it your soul is no longer the same as it was before" (Traven 50). Dobbs has become the physical embodiment of Howard's initial warning against prospecting and this is reflected in his laughter. What separates Huston's film from Traven's novel is that the audience actually hears Bogart's laughter. Huston is building off the auditory descriptions that are given in Traven's novel.

The laughter of Howard is also on display throughout the film. In the novel, when Howard and Curtin return to the place where the burros were stolen and they realize that their gold is gone, Howard laughs and proclaims to the wind, "Anyway, I think it's a very good joke—a good one played on us and on the bandits by the lord or by fate or by nature, whichever you prefer. And whoever or whatever played it certainly had a good sense of humor. The gold has gone back to where we got it." For Howard and Curtin this

laughter serves as a way of conquering the greed that comes with mining for gold. As Fojas notes in her chapter on the film, “his laughter marks the absurdity and the contradictions of capitalism, a system that devalues labor over that which it produces” (207). Through Walter Huston’s performance, this ideological comment that is alluded to in the novel is made concrete. The image of Walter Huston laughing at the conclusion of the film adapts thematic elements of Traven’s novel to the screen.¹⁵ The laughter not only translates something that occurs in the novel but also transforms the thematic element into cinematic terms.



Figure 1.3 Howard laughs

¹⁵ An image of Howard laughing appears in figure 1.3.

In *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, Huston expertly transferred Traven's novel into a cinematic language. He did this not only through the use of a realist aesthetic but also through his use of Steiner's score, untranslated Spanish speech, and laughter. *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* stands as an early example of Huston's ability to create an adaptation while maintaining the most respect for the original text. This goal of authenticity and fidelity to the original text would remain important in Huston's theory of adaptation in his future work as a filmmaker.

CHAPTER TWO

MUSIC, PREACHING, AND SONG IN JOHN HUSTON'S *MOBY DICK*

"It almost worked. The film is almost magnificent."
Ray Bradbury

Between *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948) and *Moby Dick* (1956) Huston directed and co-wrote seven films. He experienced a mixture of both financial and critical success with films like *Key Largo* (1948), *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), *The African Queen* (1951), and *Moulin Rouge* (1952) and disappointment with *We Were Strangers* (1949), *The Red Badge of Courage* (1951), and *Beat the Devil* (1953). Outside of filmmaking, Huston became an increasingly political figure in American culture as he witnessed the political scapegoating that occurred in Hollywood during the red scare of the late 1940s and 1950s. In reaction to the American political climate he helped found "The Committee for the First Amendment," a group of Hollywood figures protesting the House Committee on Un-American Activities' war against the perceived threat of communism in Hollywood. Growing disgusted by American politics, Huston began shooting films outside the United States, eventually emigrating from America and building an estate near Galway, Ireland in 1953, where he would live until later settling in Mexico.¹⁶ From his new home in Ireland he began work on the largest project of his career: adapting Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* to the screen.

Like *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, and *The Red Badge of Courage*, the motivation for Huston's adaptation of *Moby-Dick* was based in a

¹⁶ He would shoot *The African Queen* in the Congo and Uganda, *Moulin Rouge* on the streets of Paris, and *Beat the Devil* in northern Italy.

personal relationship to the text. In a 1985 interview with *Playboy* magazine, Huston stated the he “had read [the novel] twenty years before [he] made [the film]” and had found the novel fascinating (Grobel 174). This was not a studio script that was handed to Huston, but a personal project that he had originally envisioned creating with his father in the Ahab role. Unlike *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, Melville’s novel had previously been adapted to both the screen and stage. While there had been two previous attempts to adapt Melville’s encyclopedic novel, each had moved away from both the narrative and the themes at the core of Melville’s work.¹⁷ These earlier adaptations were more of a vehicle for John Barrymore than for Melville’s prose. To help him construct the film, Huston hired renowned science fiction writer Ray Bradbury, who had published *Fahrenheit 451* in 1953, to co-write the script.¹⁸ Huston wanted to create a faithful adaptation of the novel that would be true to the narrative and thematic elements of Melville’s novel while resonating with critics and audiences.

Despite Huston’s high ambitions for the film, the production proved to be more taxing than originally expected. The budget was set at \$2.2 million and Huston doubled that figure by the end of production. The source of the strain can be found in Huston’s

¹⁷ In *The Sea Beast* (1926) and *Moby-Dick* (1931), Ishmael is removed from the narrative and replaced by a young Ahab who eventually defeats the white whale and returns to Nantucket to marry the love of his life, the daughter of Father Mapple. Huston’s earlier adaptation, *The Maltese Falcon*, had also been preceded by two previous cinematic adaptations: *The Maltese Falcon* (1931) and *Satan Met a Lady* (1936).

¹⁸ This was not the first time Huston had called on the help of a famed co-writer. He had previously worked with James Agee on *The African Queen* and Truman Capote on *Beat the Devil*. At the time, Bradbury appeared to be a strange choice as screenwriter for the film because he had never read Melville’s novel and was only known for his science fiction work. Bradbury was up for the challenge and by the time he completed his screenplay, he had “read the book eight more times, wrote thirty outlines and twelve hundred pages over seven months before he produced his final draft” (Grobel 417)

attention to detail. He attempted to depict realistically the world of nineteenth-century whaling. He wanted the vast majority of the film, like the novel, to take place on the ocean and was determined to shoot on the water using an actual nineteenth-century ship.¹⁹ In a 1978 interview he described the shooting of the film as “the most perilous film I ever made We encountered the worst weather in maritime history for those waters We were dismasted twice; and how we missed anyone getting killed I’ll never know” (Thomas 88). Undeterred by its rocky production, Huston’s adaptation was released on June 27th, 1956.

The film’s troubled three-year production did not yield any true “success at any level: artistic, critical, or financial” (Callow 171). Despite the general backlash against the film, some reviewers, like Bosley Crowther, found great worth in the film, concluding, “This is the third time Melville’s story has been put upon the screen. There is no need for another, because it cannot be done better, more beautifully or excitingly again.” Later in life, Huston viewed the film’s reception as “one of the biggest disappointments [of his] career when the critics and public did not respond to *Moby Dick*” (Drew 96). He believed the film failed because of the viewers’ inability to accept Peck in the role of Ahab, but ten years after the release of the film Huston said, “I liked him and I liked the film. Still do” (Drew 96). This general rejection of Huston’s vision for *Moby-Dick* continued in the literary criticism surrounding the film.

¹⁹ While the earlier cinematic adaptations framed the narrative around Nantucket in order to save from either shooting on water or building elaborate sets, Huston wanted to shoot his film aboard an actual nineteenth-century vessel. The ship they used to portray the *Pequod*, the *Reylands*, was constructed in 1887 and eventually sold as the *Moby Dick* to RKO Pictures in 1948. It was also used in *Treasure Island* (1950).

Historically, literary critics have not looked kindly on Huston's adaptation. In 2017, Nathan Ragain noted, "with the exception of Metz, most critics have considered Huston's adaptation to be an ambitious failure" (212). Many of these past critics point to Bradbury and Huston's truncated narrative and the removal of Ishmael's singular voice as the adaptation's chief sins. David Lavery criticizes both Huston's adaptation and the 1998 television miniseries starring Patrick Stewart as Ahab for not "making the slightest attempt to render Ishmael as the novel's central intelligence, nor capture even a trace of the book's wicked, often blasphemous humor, nor fully engage Melville's complex metaphors" (95). Lavery draws from Roland Barthes to connect cinematic adaptation and the reading experience. For Barthes, reading is an individual experience in which every reader tends to read at a different speed while choosing to skip over parts that they find uninteresting. Lavery compares this to the adaptation process by noting that "no two readers of *Moby-Dick*, nor the same reader reading subsequently, nor two screenwriters preparing, forty years apart . . . skip the same passages or discover the same text" (94). This leads Lavery to the conclusion that while each adaptation had moments of greatness, each film misses the point of the novel in different ways, depending on who is creating the adaptation.

While Lavery's contention may be true, no adaptation is made in a vacuum. Huston and Bradbury were aware of the previous adaptations of *Moby-Dick* when they wrote their screenplay, and future adapters of Melville's novel would be aware of their film. The existence of multiple adaptations complicates Lavery's argument. When Huston and Bradbury adapted *Moby-Dick*, they were not working exclusively from Melville's novel alone, but his biography, Melville's other texts, half a century of literary

criticism, and the previous adaptations of the text. Even if they were not conscious of the other influences, more than just the novel influenced their adaptation.

While there will never be an adaptation that maintains complete fidelity to the novel because it is too expansive and complicated to be realized fully in a cinematic form, is that the goal of cinematic adaptation? Lavery's contention that *Moby-Dick* is an unfilmable novel in its entirety is only correct in part; aspects of the film can and are translated into a cinematic language quite well. Lavery points to five key elements of the novel that were changed for the film: the removal of "the mysterious Fedallah and his crew entirely," the reordering "of several key scenes," the significant changes made in relation to "Queequeg's realization of his death", the "[recasting] of the ending," and Ahab's eventual death (97).²⁰ Huston and Bradbury wanted to create a film that maintained the narrative of the novel while instilling some of Melville's deeper themes to their audience. They wanted to craft a film that embodied what they viewed as Melville's vision and distill that into a two-hour film. In order to do this they had to cut and combine parts of the narrative while translating the more thematic elements into a cinematic language. This includes the rendering of some aspects of the novel visually and others sonically.

Despite the film's failure to achieve critical or commercial success upon release or to receive the immediate approval of literary critics, Huston's use of sound in his adaptation is ripe for critical discussion. While sound played an important role in his previous adaptations, *Moby Dick* is unique among his films in the lengths he took to

²⁰ These changes include the *Pequod's* meeting with the *Samuel Enderbey* which is moved to the first half of the film and delaying the St. Elmo's fire scene to after the Rachel's captain asks Ahab for help finding his son. (Lavery 97)

reproduce the sound of the novel's historical period. In the same way he used laughter, Max Steiner's score, and untranslated Spanish speech to help adapt Traven's *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, he uses sound in *Moby Dick* to take his audience inside the novel. Through both nondiegetic and diegetic music, Huston attempts to transform his film into a faithful representation of both Melville's time and his work. Terence Martin notes that an American Romantic writer, like Melville, has "the latitude to adjust or reflect reality, to fashion . . . a subjunctive world of fiction different in kind from the socially structured world in which we live but implicated . . . in its desires and fears" (73). The romantic quality of Philip Sainton's score and the diegetic songs that are sung by characters in the film combine to create a merging of realism and romanticism that is at the heart of both Melville's novel and perhaps American Romanticism as a cultural project. My analysis focuses on the soundtrack's use of diegetic music, Sainton's score, and speech. These three components of *Moby Dick*'s soundtrack, seldom discussed in relation to Huston's adaptation, are best embodied in the chapel sequence where Orson Welles as Father Mapple delivers the Jonah sermon.

Huston's adaptation is far from perfect, but he at least attempted to remain true to more elements of Melville's novel than previous filmmakers. This is clear from the opening of the film where Ishmael (Richard Basehart) walks across an open field as his voice is heard reciting the famous line "Call me Ishmael." While the narrative focus shifts from Ishmael to Ahab once the men leave New Bedford, the beginning of the film is presented from Ishmael's perspective. Warner Brothers's earlier attempts at adaptation shifted the narrative from Ishmael's to Ahab's perspective. Both the 1926 and 1931 adaptations combined Ishmael and Ahab into a single character who eventually triumphs

over the whale and returns home to his fiancé. While Melville's Ahab has a wife and children, these films create a romantic double for Ahab to function as an explicit encouragement for Ahab to return home after defeating the whale.²¹ Huston's focus was on translating the bulk of the Melville's narrative and philosophical themes into a succinct film.

In "'The Thing Behind the Mask': Period, Pacing, and Visual Style in John Huston's *Moby Dick*" Nathan Ragain argues that Huston's and Bradbury's changes to the novel add to the quality of the adaptation. For Ragain, these narrative and plot differences between the novel and Huston's film relate to the culture in which the film was produced. Throughout his chapter, he argues "Huston is faithful to the text by being unfaithful" (213). He believes that the discrepancies between Melville's novel and Huston's film can be explained through an analysis of the period in which the film was produced. He explains that "anachronism like Bikini Atoll bespeak a fidelity to the text that filmic transcription would not, in that one cannot faithfully adapt a novel like *Moby-Dick*, which is so embedded in its late-Jacksonian period, without also embedding itself in its own postwar period" (213).²² The additions that Huston and Bradbury make to the film make it more relevant to modern audiences. By blending elements of science fiction cinema

²¹ While critics have attacked the USA Network produced mini-series of *Moby-Dick*, the viewer is treated to a brief scene of Ahab and his family that adds an emotional connection to Ahab that is not present in other adaptations of the novel.

²² In Huston's film, when Ahab shows Starbuck his charting of Moby Dick's path, the whale and the *Pequod* meet at the Bikini Atoll. The Bikini Atoll being an obvious reference to the islands where the United States tested nuclear weapons from the late 1940s through the 1950s. Ragain uses this reference to further his argument that Huston's film is actively commenting on the political landscape of the 1950s.

and the Cold War with Melville's novel, Huston creates a unique experience that embodies both Melville's ideals and the cultural moment that produced the film.

While many critics, including Lavery, argue that Huston's film disregards the philosophical and historical elements of Melville's novel, I argue that they are simply coded into the cinematic language of the film. Huston does not successfully translate all of the digressive elements of the novel to the screen but actively seeks to convey the presence of those elements into the film. His camera lingers on images of the ship and of the men going about their regular duties. Through this lingering, "the film achieves a kind of realism (and fidelity to the novel) with its surprising visual attention to the stuff and the labor of whaling, much of it shot on location" (Ragain 215). We see men tie knots, sand the deck, and watch how oil is created from the blubber of the whales. In film, these historic actions do not have to be described, as in Melville's novel, but simply shown visually. Through these scenes, Huston translates the historical detail of Melville's novel to the screen.

This translation of philosophical and historical digressions in the novel also applies to the speech of the characters. An example of this occurs when the men on board are telling Ishmael about the history of naming whales. Huston is attempting to translate the novel's digressions into a cinematic language. While he does not have the space to fully translate Melville's humor to the screen, he does capture some of the "blasphemous humor" that Lavery argues is absent in the film. Ishmael still delivers the "better to sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian" line to humorous effect. These examples show that Huston was attempting to translate thematic elements of the novel into the speech of his characters.

While much has been written about the lengths Huston and his cinematographer took to convey the look of nineteenth-century whaling paintings on screen, few critics have noted the equal work Huston and his composer Philip Sainton took to replicate the sound of the nineteenth century for the film.²³ Within the dialogue of the characters and through the music of Phillip Sainton, Huston's adaptation truly separates itself from the previous adaptations of Melville's novel. While the first adaptation was made at the end of the silent period and the 1931 film that followed was basically an early sound remake, when placed next to Huston's adaptation, the difference in the sound design in the projects becomes abundantly clear. The score of Huston's film reproduces the blending of romantic and historical details that occurs throughout Melville's novel.

Following *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, Huston became more selective in which composers he would work with on films. If he were working on an adaptation, he would try to find the composer who best fit the source he was adapting. He rarely worked with composers multiple times, the exception being Alex North, whose work I analyze in the following chapter. For this film, Huston wanted a composer who could convey the sound of the nineteenth-century in the same way that he hoped his newly invented film stock would convey the colors of nineteenth-century New England. Huston understood that music would play a large role in his adaptation. As literary critics have noted, music and sound are central to Melville's text. Sterling Stuckey notes in his book on the

²³ Ragain notes that "Huston is visually attempting to be faithful not only to Melville, but to the 1850s as a distinct period" (215). This search for realism led Huston and his cinematographer Oswald Morris to push the bounds of cinematic Technicolor technology. Huston had Morris "desaturate the film's color by combining [the Technicolor print with] a black-and-white negative, which while correcting the hyperrealism of Technicolor, was aimed at recreating the look of the period's whaling books" (Ragain 216).

influence African art and music had on Melville's novel writing, "Melville's use of music—within the context of dance—in *Moby-Dick* is one of his most remarkable literary achievements" (81). For Stuckey, Melville's novel was "a rare demonstration of how music can meet needs of craft of a great writer" (81). It would be impossible to adapt Melville's novel without the correct composer. He found his composer in the form of Philip Sainton, a French composer who had never created a film score and would never write another.

Sainton was born in 1892 in Argues-le-Bataille, France. He began his career as a violinist studying at the Royal Academy of Music in London. Following the First World War, he began drafting music for various orchestras in England. In his work, Sainton attempted to translate the sea and nautical elements into a musical form. By 1923, he was presenting his *Sea Pictures* throughout Europe. These were a series of symphonies that embodied his work on creating sea-based orchestrations. By the 1940s, he had followed up those pieces with several sea-based tone poems. While these works may make Sainton appear to be an ideal choice to compose music for *Moby Dick*, it was actually through his orchestrations of Jack Gerber's "Fiesta" that Huston first became aware of his work. Upon hearing "Fiesta," Huston became "sufficiently interested" in meeting Sainton and discussing his adaptation of Melville's novel. Huston wanted a composer who could faithfully adapt the sea to the screen.²⁴ He was interested in expanding his adaptation to an auditory dimension that would have been impossible for a studio composer like Max Steiner. While Sainton had "entertained secret hopes that someone would some day ask

²⁴ This thematic link between sound and adaptation in a composer's score is further discussed in the following chapter.

[him] to do the score for a film,” he was reluctant to work in Hollywood because he “knew . . . fellow-composers who had been forced by film companies to work within time-limits that . . . [he] found intolerably constricting” (Sainton). If he were to begin working in Hollywood, he would need to find a director who would leave him “within reasonable limits, free to write . . . at [his] own pace and in [his], own time.” When Huston told Sainton that “[he] must treat *Moby Dick* just as if [he] were writing an opera,” he knew that he had found that director in Huston (Sainton). Apart from the hiring of Sainton to construct the score, Huston also cast “many performers of traditional sea music” throughout the film to supplement Sainton’s score (Peloquin 114). A. L. Lloyd served as a “folklorist and sea music consultant for the film,” the famed “Trinidadian Calypso singer” Edric Conner played the role of Daggoo, and Alf Edwards played concertina in the Spouter Inn scene (Peloquin 114). What emerged from Sainton and Huston’s collaboration was a blend of a non-diegetic score whose Romantic tendencies resembled a classical Hollywood score and diegetic music that evoked a realist depiction of nineteenth-century whaling music.

While most critical writing on Huston’s film ignores Sainton’s score, Raigan argues that the music in the Spouter Inn scene borrows heavily from the musical styling of 1930s Universal horror films. He notes that Ishmael’s revelation that Queequeg is a foreign cannibal selling shrunken heads is met with “a crescendo in both the thunder and the ominous soundtrack that had commenced upon Queequeg’s entrance” (218). While Raigan argues that this scene reflects the science fiction genre of the 1950s and the horror films of the 1930s, Sainton’s score also builds on the Romantic and emotional qualities of the scene in the original novel. As Queequeg approaches the bed, Ishmael writes, “I was

now as much afraid of him as if it was the devil himself who had thus broken into my room at the dead of night. In fact, I was so afraid of him that I was not game enough just then to address him, and demand a satisfactory answer concerning what seemed inexplicable in him” (Melville 34). The fear that Ishmael feels as he watches Queequeg watch him is palpable, and Sainton reflects that fear in his score. Instead of simply representing the generic conventions of 1950s American cinema, the music serves as a link to the emotional resonance of the original scene in the novel.

Throughout the film, diegetic music and Sainton’s nondiegetic score are mixed, linking the music of the film to the romantic nature of Melville’s novel. The diegetic music that sailors sing and the musicians play onboard the *Pequod* and in New Bedford, along with the songs that are sung by the sailors themselves throughout the film, build on the realism of the novel, while Sainton’s score seems to be commenting on the Romantic qualities of the novel. Despite past critics’ disdain for Sainton’s non-diegetic score, I believe there is an interesting juxtaposition between realism and Romanticism throughout the score that might have more bearing on Melville’s novel than Huston’s film.

In several scenes diegetic and nondiegetic music is juxtaposed on the film’s soundtrack. An example of this occurs early in the *Pequod*’s voyage when the men first set out after a whale. As the men row toward the whale, they sing. Daggoo leads the men in the chantey “Hitch.” Historically a song of this sort would have helped the sailors row as a team. At the moment the whale is harpooned, Sainton’s Romantic score replaces the diegetic singing. While this could be viewed as Sainton’s score encroaching on the realistic elements of the adaptation, the shift illustrates the emotional connection that the men feel to each other and nature when hunting the whale. Their camaraderie is reflected

in the music that accompanies the scene. Through the hunting of the whale, they have been joined together with both each other and nature. This attraction to water and nature is central to Melville's film, and Huston articulates this on screen through the juxtaposition of diegetic and nondiegetic music.

Another example of this blending of diegetic and nondiegetic music occurs during the chapel sequence in the beginning of the film. The sequence opens with the congregation singing "The Ribs and Terrors in the Whale." The source of this hymn, David Battenfeld notes, "is the rhymed version of the first part of Psalm 18, as found in the psalms and hymns of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church, the Church in which Melville was brought up" (564). In his analysis, Battenfeld charts the changes Melville made in the psalm to morph it into a hymn about Jonah and the whale. The adaptation of this song was of great importance to Huston, who used the hymn as a tool to audition Sainton for the role of composer.²⁵ Building on his past compositions of sea music Sainton set out to compose a tune that "might well have been sung by fisher folk a hundred years ago." In the film, Huston uses the first three verses of Melville's hymn:

The ribs and terrors in the whale,
Arched over me a dismal gloom.
While God's sun-lit waves rolled by,
And left me deepening down to doom.

I saw the opening maw of hell,
With endless pains and sorrows there;
Which none but they that feel can tell—
Oh, I was plunging to despair.

²⁵ Since Sainton had no experience working in composing music for cinema, Huston tested Sainton's ability as a composer by asking him to compose music for Melville's hymn. Upon hearing Sainton's adaptation, Huston commissioned Sainton to write the film's score.

In black distress I called my God,
When I could scarce believe him mine,
He bowed his ear to my complaints—
No more the whale did me confine. (Melville 48)

Sainton's score resolves the final line of Huston's shortened version of the hymn to musically adapt Melville's final stanzas of the hymn in which God saves Jonah from the whale. Sainton's score alleviates the need for the last two stanzas through orchestration. His version resolves musically at the moment Jonah breaks from the whale, while Melville's hymn resolves with Jonah giving glory to God.

Aside from replacing the two final stanzas from Melville's hymn with Sainton's score, Huston adds a stanza that occurs before Melville's first stanza:

The will of God I did deny
And so my Sacred duty fled
Oh, my Lord's awful penalty
Is not to die and yet be dead

Unlike Melville's original hymn, it is unclear where this stanza originates. It does not appear in Bradbury's published screenplay, which recounts the hymn as follows:

The ribs and terrors of the whale,
Arched over me a dismal gloom,
While all God's sunlit waves rolled by,
And lift me deepening down to doom.

In black distress I called my God,
When I could scarce believe him mine,
He bowed his ear to my complaints—
No more the whale did me confine. (30)

Apart from missing the first verse of unknown origin, the published screenplay is also missing the third stanza that is sung in the film. This leads me to the conclusion that either Sainton or Huston added these verses to the scene either after Bradbury had completed his draft of the screenplay or in post-production. While Melville's hymn

begins with Jonah already inside the whale, Huston's version shifts the focus of the hymn from Jonah's redemption to Jonah's betrayal of God, eventual punishment, and final redemption. With the addition of one verse, Huston and Sinton adapt the whole of Jonah's narrative into a four-verse hymn. This final cinematic version of the hymn becomes a combination of Melville's adaptation of Psalms 18, Sinton's orchestration of Melville's hymn, and Sinton or Huston's addition of a new verse. This combination of various elements embodies the complex role sound plays in Huston's adaptation.²⁶



Figure 2.1 The congregation sings

Diegetic sound and music is central to Huston's adaptation of the character Pip (Tamba Allen). In Huston's film Pip is almost always shown with a small tambourine. While Sterling Stuckey notes that the tambourine functions as "a reflection of the power of black dance nationally" at the time of the novel's publication, Pip's tambourine takes

²⁶ An image of the congregation singing appears in figure 2.1.

on other thematic and narrative qualities in Huston's film.²⁷ As the film progresses this tambourine forms a symbol of the crew's impending doom at the control of Ahab. Early in the film as the men dance together on the deck of the *Pequod*, Pip is happily beating the tambourine along to the music that the men sing. Later, when Queequeg is reading his prophecy, he uses it as the sole musical sound as Pip violently beats the tambourine. Then, when the men first set out to kill Moby Dick, Pip sits in the back of the boat while the men row. This scene lacks Sainton's romantic melody that accompanies the previous chase sequences and is replaced by Pip's slow taps on his tambourine as they approach what could be their impending doom. Throughout the film Pip's tambourine and the music it produces function as a symbol of the fate of the sailors. It is the auditory marker of their darkening emotions.



Figure 2.2 Pip plays his tambourine as Queequeg's coffin is constructed

²⁷ An image of Pip and his tambourine are is shown in figure 2.2

Besides the film's score, Huston uses speech to make a realistic adaptation of Melville's novel, particularly through his version of Father Mapple. While much has been written in both film reviews and criticism about Gregory Peck's performance as Ahab, I would like to focus on another performance in the film: Orson Welles's performance as Father Mapple. Hiring Welles in 1956 was considered a controversial move in Hollywood. Huston biographer Jeffrey Meyers quotes film producer Harold Mirisch as warning Huston that "none of the Hearst papers throughout the country will give the picture whatsoever if Welles is in it" (215).²⁸ While the casting choice was controversial, it is hard to imagine anyone else embodying Father Mapple better than Welles in 1956. Before being cast in the film, Welles had been working on his own stage adaptation of Melville's novel titled *Moby-Dick Rehearsed* that would premier on the West End in 1955 (Callow 172).²⁹ Welles and Huston had a connection to Melville's text because they were each actively attempting to adapt it to different media. The moment Welles steps into the chapel the film takes on a theatrical lens. If the sermon functions in the novel, as Dawn Coleman argues, as a "play-within-a-play whose meaning redounds to the novel as a whole," then who better to play Mapple than one of the leading stage actors of the twentieth-century (140)? Hence, hiring Orson Welles, like hiring Sainton, was a stroke of adaptive genius. While reminiscing about the films of *Moby Dick*, Huston said that

²⁸ After fifteen years, Welles was still receiving blowback from his creation of *Citizen Kane*.

²⁹ In his latest volume of Welles's biography, Simon Callow writes that Welles's play was "an exercise in pure theatre, celebrating the artifice and imaginative scope of the stage, presenting the piece as a rehearsal-room-run-through of a dramatization of the novel, given by an American nineteenth-century theatre company (172).

Welles's performance was "marvelous...the finest thing in the film as far as I'm concerned" (Lord 55). In Huston's film both Sainton's musical score and Welles's delivery of the sermon combine to faithfully adapt Melville's initial vision.

In the film, the scene begins with an establishing shot of the exterior of the chapel. Ishmael's voice-over informs the audience that "in this same New Bedford, there stands a whaleman's chapel and few are the fishermen shortly bound for the Indian Ocean or Pacific who fail to visit there."³⁰ The frame dissolves into an interior shot of Melville's "congregation of sailors, and sailors' wives and widows" (42). Unlike the chapel in Melville's novel where "a muffled silence reigned...each silent worshipper seemed purposely sitting apart from the other, as if each silent grief were insular and incommunicable," the congregation of Huston's film is already singing "the ribs and terrors in the whale" from the moment the audience is brought into the chapel (43). The beginning organ notes play as the dissolve into the church begins. It is presented as if the music is eternally playing in the chapel until Father Mapple makes his appearance. The camera cuts to Starbuck standing in a pew with his wife and two sons. The sons are playing as the dark hymn is sung. As the song returns to "the ribs and terrors of the whale," the camera cuts to a memorial plaque of Captain Seth Culp. While none of the three plaques that are listed in Melville's novel are shown, they closely resemble the memorial plaques that are listed in the text. The camera pans down the aisle of the church focused on the wall of memorials while the singing continues. People walk in front of the

³⁰ This is a slightly abridged version of Melville's original chapter opening which reads: "In this same New Bedford there stands a Whaleman's Chapel, and few are the moody fishermen, shortly bound for the Indian Ocean or Pacific, who fail to make a Sunday visit to the spot. I am sure that I did not" (43).

camera as it slowly pans down the aisle, focused on the memorials on the wall. We see the men, including Ishmael, who will board the *Pequod* later that day. The song foreshadows the deaths that only Ishmael will escape. Without cutting, the camera stops at the foot of the ship pulpit, and Welles solemnly enters the church and climbs the rope ladder into his pulpit. When he gets to the top of the pulpit, he pulls up the rope and approaches the lectern.³¹ The camera tilts up and dollies back, presenting the ship pulpit that has yet to be seen. The camera cuts to the congregation as they sing the final lines in the hymn and sit down.



Figure 2.3 Father Mapple delivers his sermon

³¹ Father Mapple is shown at his lectern in figure 2.3

Throughout this introductory scene, the congregation sings. In the novel, the congregation does not start singing until Mapple mounts the pulpit. By moving the song to the beginning of the scene, Huston creates a cinematic moment that is impossible in the written word. He uses the song as a background to the memorials on the walls. As the camera dollies down the aisle focusing on the memorial plaques, the lyrics of the hymn allude to the death of those memorialized. The diegetic singing of the hymn adds to the emotional core of the scene and enables Huston to embody in a visual art form the same feeling that Melville's readers could have had.

At the turn in the sermon, Father Mapple "drooped and fell away from himself for a moment: then lifting his face to them again, showed a deep joy in his eyes" (Melville 54). This moment from the novel is both shown in the face of Welles as he delivers the line "delight is to him." This shift from the narrative of Jonah's sin to his redemption is also crafted into the music. When Mapple says, "and eternal delight shall be his," Sainton's score enters the scene. The first several bars of music reprise the hymn sung earlier in the scene, but when the music should go down to "arched over me a dismal gloom," Sainton instead brightens the music and transposes it into a different mode. This transposition adds to the hopefulness of Mapple's concluding statements, providing an auditory analog to the "deep joy" that Ishmael describes in Mapple's eyes at the end of his sermon.

Throughout the film, Huston uses sound to draw his audience into both Melville's novel and the historical moment in which *Moby-Dick* is set. Sainton's score and historically accurate nondiegetic music combine both to convey an historical period realistically on screen and to evoke the Romantic and Realistic elements that are central

to Melville's novel and American Romanticism. The power of Huston's sound design is exemplified in the chapel sequence in the beginning of the film. These auditory elements combine to evoke both the narrative and thematic elements that are at the core of Melville's novel. While it might not be a perfect adaptation, it is, as Bradbury once said, "almost magnificent."

CHAPTER THREE

THE SOUND OF THE SOUTH: SOUTHERN CHRISTIANITY AS SOUND IN JOHN HUSTON'S *WISE BLOOD*

In a 1981 interview with John Huston, Peter Greenberg asked, “The movie *Wise Blood* didn’t exactly make you rich ... did it?” to which Huston replied, “No, but it was one of the finest movies I think I’ve ever made” (Greenberg 104). Huston’s 1979 adaptation of Flannery O’Connor’s 1952 novel indicates a change occurring at the end of Huston’s career to a more personal and independent style of filmmaking.³² Following *Moby Dick* (1956), Huston was free to work on any project he wanted. He began to select projects while being “less concerned with having to make a buck” (Grobel 158). With this freedom, he began moving between large budget productions like *The Bible: In the Beginning* (1966) and smaller studio films like *The Misfits* (1961).³³ As time passed, Huston focused primarily on smaller budgeted films only, occasionally returning to big-budget productions with films like *Annie* (1982) and *Prizzi’s Honor* (1985). Unlike his previous films, *Wise Blood* was made entirely outside of the studio system for \$1.6 million. With *Wise Blood*, Huston joined the ranks of independent filmmakers like John Cassavetes who were actively changing the way films were made in America in the late 1960s and 1970s. Combined with his two later films, *Wise Blood*, *Under the Volcano*

³² Like Huston’s move to Ireland before beginning work on *Moby Dick*, this third sequence in Huston’s career is marked by a move to a foreign nation. Following the Mexican production of *Night of the Iguana* (1964), Huston would stay behind and build a small house “close to the city of Puerto Vallarta” where he would live out the rest of his life (Ciment 136).

³³ *The Bible: In the Beginning* was budgeted at eighteen million dollars while *The Misfits* had a budget of four million dollars.

(1984), and *The Dead* (1987) form a trilogy of independent adaptations that are among Huston's smallest and most personal films, but also some of his best.

While the source of many Huston adaptations lay in his personal relationship to a text, *Wise Blood*'s cinematic origins lay closer to the author of the original novel. Huston had never read O'Connor's novel until "a young man named Michael Fitzgerald came down to Puerto Vallarta and brought [me] a copy of the book" and an early draft of his screenplay. After reading both the novel and Fitzgerald's screenplay, Huston became enamored with O'Connor's prose. In a later interview he remarked, "It is a wonderful and fascinating book. As fascinating as she is herself" (Cimet 137). He felt a personal attachment to the way O'Connor blended styles and emotions in her writings, noting "Many writers that we know are sometimes funny, sometimes awful, sometimes strange, but she could do all three at the same time" (Cimet 138). This was not a novel that Huston felt compelled to adapt out of a personal connection to the text like *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* or *Moby Dick*; instead, its impetus was found in the personal history of the film's two screenwriters.

Traditionally, cinematic adaptations are made when either a director or production company takes an interest in a novel for either artistic or commercial purpose. From a production viewpoint, Huston's adaptation of *Wise Blood* stands in radical opposition to this convention. Instead of resting in the hands of a producer or director, the impetus of *Wise Blood*'s adaptation lay in the hands of the film's screenwriters: Michael and Benedict Fitzgerald. Sons of poet and translator Robert Fitzgerald and literary editor Sally Fitzgerald, Michael and Benedict grew up in O'Connor's literal shadow. When they were children, Flannery O'Connor boarded in the Fitzgerald household from 1949 to

1951. During this period, O'Connor wrote the first drafts of *Wise Blood*, and each night their father and O'Connor would read and critique each other's work.³⁴ This two-year relationship formed a lifelong bond between the Fitzgerald family and O'Connor; before her lupus diagnosis, O'Connor would frequently visit the Fitzgerald family. Following her death, Robert became her literary executor and Sally compiled her letters and essays for future publication. This unique relationship between the Fitzgerald family and O'Connor led to Huston's adaptation.

From its inception, Huston's *Wise Blood* is unique because its development lay in the hands of those who were close to the original source material. Because Michael and Benedict had the blessing of their father to create the film, the film began at the source of the novel and not in the mind of a director or a studio producer. The people who worked on the film knew Flannery O'Connor: Sally Fitzgerald, who considered O'Connor her greatest friend, produced and designed the costumes for the film. This personal connection to the source material separates Huston's *Wise Blood* from both his other adaptations and many cinematic adaptations in general. This was a production based on love for O'Connor's work by some of her closest friends, not studio executives who thought they could make a profit.³⁵ The men and women who worked on the film understood that they were not making a film that would smash box-office records; it was

³⁴ When the Fitzgerald's were away on business, Flannery would serve as babysitter and temporary guardian of the two young boys.

³⁵ Even at its two million dollar budget, Huston was worried that the film would never be made because "financing for a picture like that isn't easy to come by because it's not box office. It never had a chance to be box office" (Greenberg 105).

not a directorial passion project but a collective passion project of those close to O'Connor.

While Huston did not have a history with O'Connor's work, it is important to note that his literary taste already connected with O'Connor's work in many ways. From a literary perspective, Huston tended to favor unique pieces of American literature, of which O'Connor's work is certainly a part. Narratively, Michael Bernstein argues that while Huston may not have read O'Connor's novel before working on the film, many connections exist between Huston's previous films and *Wise Blood*. Bernstein links the film's "uncanny conjunction of O'Connor's distinctive view of Southern male identity gone awry with Huston's much-appreciated debunking of American masculine ethos" (139). The film also continues the theme of a confrontation occurring between masculinity and religious belief that is central to the narratives of *The African Queen* (1951), *Moby Dick* (1956), *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison* (1957), and *The Night of the Iguana* (1964).

Since Huston did not write the screenplay, Huston's work as a director is focused on the cinematic language of the film as opposed to the narrative elements of the adaptation.³⁶ In Huston's *Wise Blood* sound functions as an important link to the source novel. While the sound design of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* built on Traven's original novel and *Moby Dick*'s sound design functioned as an immersion in Melville's time period, *Wise Blood*'s sound embodies thematic and narrative elements of

³⁶ As Huston grew older, he moved away from writing and co-writing his own screenplays. From *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) through *Heaven Knows, Mr. Anderson* (1957), Huston was credited as either writer or co-writer of ten films. Following 1957, Huston would co-write only three of the films he directed including *The Night of the Iguana*, *The Kremlin Letter* (1970), and *The Man Who Would be King* (1975).

O'Connor's vision of the world. The sound does not try to take the viewer back to a particular time, but instead motivates the viewer to explore the thematic space of the novel. The film's sound track reflects Motes's attempted rejection of Southern Protestant Christianity while establishing the distinctly Southern setting of the novel. This experience is achieved through a combination of on-location shooting, the utilization of local talent, and Alex North's musical score.

Huston's film opens with a sequence of black-and-white still photographs that play behind the opening credits. These images set the tone of how the film represents Southern Protestant Christianity as a blend of the grotesque, comical, and authentic. A Dairy Queen billboard asks people to come to Christ, a porch has a rug between its wooden posts that features a stitching of "The Last Supper" in front of a confederate flag, a tombstone features a small plastic phone with an epithet that reads "Jesus Calls." This is the south as envisioned through O'Connor's prose. Following the opening credits, Hazel Motes (Brad Dourif) enters the film buying a suit from a Southern store after returning home from the war.³⁷ He then visits his childhood home, visits a local prostitute, and eventually winds up walking the streets of Taulkinham. On the street, he witnesses the supposedly blind-preacher Asa Hawks (Harry Dean Stanton) and his daughter Sabbath Lilly (Amy Wright) attempt to disrupt a potato peeling demonstration by handing out religious tracts. The blind preacher and his daughter remind Motes of his own father's (John Huston) ministry and begins to rebel against their religious beliefs by preaching his own gospel: the gospel without Jesus Christ. Seeing the financial potential of Motes's

³⁷ Since the film appears to be set in 1973 the audience assumes that he has returned from Vietnam, but his dress is indicative of the uniform of soldiers returning from World War Two or the Korean War.

gospel, local radio preacher Hoover Shoats (Ned Beatty) tries to convince Motes to monetize his gospel. When Motes resists this corruption, Shoats creates his own replica (William Hickey) of Motes to lead his version of the church. In an act of rage, Motes murders the false prophet, returns home to his boarding house, and blinds himself. The action of blinding himself transforms him into an authentic saint of a kind of Southern Protestant Christianity. He does what the initial blind preacher was unable to do and becomes an authentic martyr for the faith. After several weeks, Motes leaves the boarding house until police find him. He is brought back home where he is placed on a bed and is unresponsive. Huston described O'Connor's novel as being the "drama of a young man who is trying to rebel...He was captivated by the idea of Christ when he was a child, which made him suffer. He tried to cure himself by denying the existence of God. It is courageous rebellion but he fails, the flag in his hand" (Ciment 138).

Throughout Huston's career, he sought to shoot films on-location, and *Wise Blood* was no exception. When asked if there were "any movies you would have done on a back lot?" Huston replied, "Heavens, no. If I have a trademark at all, it's that I prefer to make my movies where they happen...the point is that in a sense, it's easier to just do it than to fabricate it" (Greenberg 112).³⁸ By shooting the film in Macon, Georgia, which lies 30 miles southwest of O'Connor's Andalusia Farm in Milledgeville, Georgia, Huston takes the film into O'Connor's backyard. While scouting locations for the film, Huston viewed himself as discovering "a new region...not only... a new geographical area, but...a side of American life that [he] did not know" existed (Ciment 137). The film featured a

³⁸ It should be noted that location shooting also allowed Huston to save money. On *Wise Blood* in particular, it would have been impossible to recreate Georgia on a studio set while maintaining the film's two million dollar budget.

“crew...of only twenty-five persons” who all worked for the minimum union wage (Huston 369). In his autobiography, Huston notes that it was the smallest crew that he had every worked with by half (369). This led to the family-like structure that existed around the film. Everyone’s family had to work on the film due to a lack of funds. Huston wrote that, “He [production manager Tommy Shaw] had three of his children working on the picture—one in the office and two on the set. My son, Tony, was second assistant. Michael Fitzgerald’s mother and his wife, Kathy, did the clothes and the interiors” (Huston 369). This combination of a small family-based production and location shooting gave the film a distinct Southern authenticity. The sound of the city seems to be intertwined in the narrative of Huston’s film. The character of Macon, Georgia embodies the film. Both the novel and film treat the South as a character unto itself; to make this film on a film set in Hollywood would deprive it of its local charm and the connective tissue that links it to O’Connor’s novel. The sounds of the busy downtown area and the rural farmland are as much a manifestation of O’Connor’s worldview as her characters. Without location shooting, part of O’Connor’s vision would be lost.

Along with shooting the film on location in Macon, Georgia, Huston assembled the majority of his cast from local actors and non-professional actors from Macon.³⁹ This focus on local casting filled the film with interesting characters that could have walked out of O’Connor’s prose. The men and women of the film look and sound like O’Connor characters because they inhabit O’Connor’s literal world. Characters speak with their

³⁹ The exceptions being Brad Dourif, Harry Dean Stanton, Ned Beatty, William Hickey, and himself.

own accents, lending an authenticity to Huston's adaptation that could not have been replicated with a Hollywood cast.⁴⁰



Figure 3.1 Motes preaches to the citizens of Taulkinham

This level of authenticity extends to the sound of the film through Huston's hiring of Alex North to compose the musical score for the adaptation. North was born in 1908 in Philadelphia where he learned to play the piano from his older brother. Upon graduating from Juilliard in 1929, North studied musical composition in Russia, eventually graduating from the Moscow conservatory of Music in 1933, becoming the first American member of the Union of Soviet Composers. In 1935, North came back to the United States to study under composer Aaron Copland and began successfully writing theatrical music in New York City. In 1949, Elia Kazan hired North to write the

⁴⁰ The citizens of Macon, Georgia are shown in figure 3.1.

incidental music for the original production of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. This collaboration led Kazan to bring North to Hollywood to write the score for his cinematic adaptation of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951).

With his score for *A Streetcar Named Desire*, North brought jazz to the forefront of film composition because it was one of the first films to feature a score consisting entirely of jazz music. While jazz was central to the score to *Streetcar*, it is important to note that North's use of jazz "was enabled, even imposed, by the fact that the film was set in New Orleans" (Henderson 98). The music served a narrative and thematic purpose in the film. It established the setting of New Orleans, while actively commenting on the actions of the characters on screen. Characters do not have to discuss Blanche's sexuality because North's jazz saxophone tells the audience everything they need to know. This ability to change style of music based on the narrative setting of the film and add thematic understanding to the work would become a distinctive feature of North's future work in film composition.

North first collaborated with Huston on his 1961 film *The Misfits*. Arthur Miller, who adapted his own short story into the film's screenplay, brought North into the production after previously collaborating with him on *Death of a Salesman*. While Huston worked with many great composers throughout his career, North would go on to write the score for four other Huston adaptations and become the filmmaker's favorite composer.⁴¹ He would later write in a letter that "[North] is the first composer of my

⁴¹ Throughout his career, Huston worked with "Max Steiner (three films), Maurice Jarre (three films), Adolph Deutsch (two films), Jerry Goldsmith (two films), George Auric (two films), Dimitri Tiomkin, George Delerue, Miklos Rozsa, George Antheil, Hugo Friedhofer and many others" (Henderson 159). The other four films that Huston and

choice in motion pictures. I venture to say this openly so that he may better appreciate the extent and depth of my gratitude. Many scenes in pictures I have made would seem listless, lifeless even, without his musical comment” (Henderson 159). Huston collaborated many times with North because they had a similar view of adaptation. As opposed to the studio composing of Max Steiner and the specific composing style of Philip Sainton, North was like a chameleon of musical styling. His film music took the form of whatever film he was working on. *The Dead*’s musical score revolves around Irish folk melodies and chamber music, *Prizzi’s Honor*’s score is based on Italian opera, and *Wise Blood*’s score is indicative of O’ Connor’s Southern roots.

While Sanya Henderson and other critics have closely analyzed North’s scores for *The Dead* and *Prizzi’s Honor*, *Wise Blood*’s score is rarely discussed.⁴² To my knowledge, the only critic to examine North’s score closely is Matthew Bernstein. In his analysis of the film he notes that “the music functions most prominently of all among all the film’s stylistic elements” (157).⁴³ This lack of critical discussion of North’s score could be based in the fact that it appears to be a simple score based on two main folk-based themes, but upon close reading it becomes obvious that *Wise Blood*’s score may be more complicated than it initially seems.

North would collaborate on were *Wise Blood*, *Prizzi’s Honor*, *Under the Volcano*, and *The Dead*.

⁴² Following his death in 1991, his New York Times obituary listed *The Misfits*, *The Dead*, and *Prizzi’s Honor* inside his list of notable film scores. *Wise Blood* did not make the cut (Associated Press).

⁴³ Despite his claim that North’s score is central to the film, Bernstein only discusses the sound track of Huston’s film for two paragraphs of a twenty-page chapter.

North's score functions as a thematic link between O'Connor's depiction of Southern Protestant Christianity and Huston's visual compositions. Similar to the effect that on-location shooting and casting had on the film, North's score creates an auditory link to O'Connor's novel that adds an air of regional authenticity to the production. After discussing the novel with Fitzgerald and Huston, "North decided to score this picture in the style of folk, country music, using the popular tune "Tennessee Waltz" as a main theme for numerous variations" (Henderson 82).⁴⁴ While the majority of the score is based on "Tennessee Waltz," North borrows from traditional folk music, most notably the Shaker hymn "Simple Gifts."⁴⁵

Generally associated with Motes's religious endeavors in the film, "Tennessee Waltz" is the most commonly quoted song throughout the score, while "Simple Gifts" haunts both his personal history and the history of his environment. The film's opening credits embody North's use of "Tennessee Waltz." As the music plays over images of southern Protestant Christianity, North's adaptation of "Tennessee Waltz" reinforces

⁴⁴ "Tennessee Waltz" is a country music song featuring lyrics by Redd Steward and music by Pee Wee King that was originally written in 1946. The song became a massive hit with Patti Page's 1950 recording. This would have been the recording that appeared in O'Connor's 1953 short story "A Good Man is Hard to Find" when the family stops to eat at The Tower diner. In the story, O'Connor writes, "The children's mother put a dime in the machine and played "The Tennessee Waltz," and the grandmother said that tune always made her want to dance. She asked Bailey if he would like to dance but he only glared at her. He didn't have a naturally sunny disposition like she did and trips made him nervous. The grandmother's brown eyes were very bright. She swayed her head from side to side and pretended she was dancing in her chair" (141)

⁴⁵ While Joseph Brackett originally wrote "Simple Gifts" in 1848 as a Shaker hymn, the song came to prominence in American culture following Aaron Copland's use of the song in his 1944 ballet *Appalachian Spring*. Mervyn Cooke notes that Copland's ballet "offered film composers a distinctively American sound which increasingly permeated Hollywood films with domestic settings and provided a sharp and timely contrast to the turgid and stereotypical gestures of the conventional romantic-melodramatic score" (124).

O'Connor's blending of religious iconography, humor, and elements of the Southern gothic. By transforming the country song into a hymn, North adapts a thematic element of O'Connor's prose into cinematic language. While "Tennessee Waltz" embodies Motes's hopeless fight against his religious upbringing, "Simple Gifts" represents his past and his father. In addition to these two main themes, several other themes appear throughout the film, notably the comedic theme that accompanies Enoch Emory and the carnivalesque music that plays during Motes's flashbacks to his childhood.

Throughout the film, North's variations on Southern music are transformed into leitmotifs and themes that are constantly evolving. Displaying an expert control of the score, North blends themes, changes tempo, and subtly changes the instrumentation of those themes throughout individual scenes. North's score is not made up of several individual leitmotifs; instead, it is an ever-changing blend of different themes that change to match events occurring on screen. Through an analysis of an early scene in which Motes returns to his family home, it becomes clear that North's score is a complex and evolving piece of music. Tempo, instrumentation, and themes fluctuate throughout the scene to create a subjective link between Motes and the soundtrack.

The "Tennessee Waltz" theme that begins when Motes first enters the house is noticeably slower than the music that plays over the opening credits. While the basis of the theme is the same, it takes on a different connotation in this scene. The slower tempo conveys a slower time in Motes's past, while the faster paced tempo of the opening credits embodies Southern Christianity. In the novel, this scene occurs during Motes's "half-sleep" on the train that seems to be the combination of a flashback and a dream where the boundaries between reality and illusion are blurred (O'Connor 19). The slow

tempo of the music alludes to this dream-like state. While the theme of the opening credits signals the reality of Southern religion, the slower theme suggests the more surreal elements of O'Connor's prose.



Figure 3.2 Motes walks through his childhood home

When Motes first enters his home, the instrumentation is made up of simply a guitar and a mandolin, but as he climbs the stairs and looks into the living room of the house, the music swells with addition of the violin.⁴⁶ This creates an emotional tension in the scene that would not be possible without North's arrangement. As he returns down the stairs, the music instrumentation becomes sparse, as the guitar, banjo, and mandolin take back the control of the sound track while the violin fades away. As Motes takes some paper off the wall to write a note for any future visitors, the instrumentation

⁴⁶ Motes's childhood home is shown in figure 3.2.

changes for a fourth time: an electric piano enters into the sound mix playing staccato chords under a flute or clarinet. An electric guitar fades into the mix and the score becomes a melodic duet between the clarinet and guitar. The changing instrumentation adds to the emotional elements of the scene and enables the audience to understand what is occurring inside Motes's mind without using narration.

Further connections are made to the novel, through the changing of musical theme at the conclusion of the scene. When Motes exits the house and the film cuts to him walking through the family cemetery, a trumpet enters the mix for the first time as it plays the melody of "Simple Gifts." This is the first time the melody of "Simple Gifts" enters into the film. As he stands over his father's grave, the "Tennessee Waltz" variation transposes into the "Simple Gifts" variation. This signals a shift in Mote's subjectivity from thinking about his family in general to thinking about his father above his grave. While the lyrics are not used in the sound track of the film, they are applicable to the scene. The first lines of Elder Joseph's lyrics read "'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free/ 'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be." Huston uses North's rendition of Elder Joseph's song because he believes his audience may be aware of the song's lyrics. North's score adds a layer of depth to the images it accompanies. This becomes more interesting later in the film when "Small Gifts" reappears at the conclusion of the film signaling his failure to remove his father's influence from his life.

This infusion of music and thematic elements in the soundtrack of the film continues in the final scene of the film. While Huston uses sound in earlier scenes to create an authentic version of Southern culture, the final scene of the film appears to focus on the more surreal elements of O'Connor's work.

In the scene, two police officers carry Motes into the boarding house from their police cruiser where they lay him on the bed in the front bedroom. The landlady then delivers a brief monologue directed at Motes. As she walks to the edge of the bed, she says, “Well, Mr. Motes, I see you’ve come home. I knew you’d be back and I’ve been waitin’ for ya.” At that moment she sits down on the end of the bed saying, “You can have it any way you like—upstairs or down. Just however you want it—and me to wait on you. If you want to go on somewhere, we’ll both go. Won’t we, Mr. Motes?”⁴⁷ As the camera dollies around the actress and backs toward the door, the film speed slows down. The audio remains at the same speed, and the video turns into a slow motion shot in which the dialogue does not seem to be coming from the characters on screen.⁴⁸ As the camera continues to back out of the room, the landlady repeats “Mr. Motes?” three times. After the landlady asks for Motes three times, there is a split second of silence, followed by the subtle sound of birds. Then, as the camera lingers on the image of Motes in bed and the landlady sitting by his side, “Simple Gifts” enters back in North’s score. The sound of the melody brings the audience back to the beginning of the film as Motes stares at his father’s grave. As Elder Joseph’s lyrics imply, “to turn, turn will be our delight, / Till turning, turning we come ‘round right;” The circle is complete and Motes’s attempted running from God and his father has failed. This musical cue that is only present for several seconds, before the “Tennessee Waltz” variation from the opening

⁴⁷ In the novel, the landlady says, “I knew you’d come back...And I’ve been waiting for you. And you needn’t pay any more rent but have it free here any way you like, upstairs or down. Just however you want it and with me to wait on you, or if you want to go on somewhere, we’ll both go” (O’ Connor 231)

⁴⁸ This slowing down of the film stock is especially noticeable if one focuses on the hand movements of the landlady.

credits is played over the closing credits, cementing Motes's authentic transformation into a saint.⁴⁹



Figure 3.3 Motes is laid to rest

Why does Huston slow the film speed, but continue the audio at a normal speed? While the film leaves Motes's exact time of death ambiguous, O'Connor is clear in the novel that "he died in the squad car but [the police officers] didn't notice and took him on to the landlady's house" anyway (231). Whether Motes is dead or not in the film is inconsequential because the landlady seems to have a connection to the body in both versions. In the novel, she stares into his "deep burned eye sockets" with her eyes shut, feeling "as if she had finally got to the beginning of something she couldn't begin, and she saw him moving farther and farther away, farther and farther until he was the pin

⁴⁹ Motes's death is shown in figure 3.3.

point of light” (231-2). This slowing of visual time while maintaining a constant audio speed hints at the surreal elements of O’Connor’s ending. The audience is not seeing reality but instead a breakdown between the audio and visual components in the scene. In the same way, time seems to be expanding at the end of the novel. It is as if time has stood still as the landlady stares into her tenant’s blind eyes. Huston replies to the inadaptable ending of the novel with his own distinctly cinematic ending. They convey the same illusion involving time, but each is inherently connected to its medium and thus is a near perfect moment of adaptation. The ending of the film manages to be distinctly cinematic, while maintaining fidelity to O’Connor’s literary vision.

In his autobiography Huston wrote, “Nothing would make me happier than to see this picture gain popular acceptance and turn a profit. It would prove something. I’m not sure what ... but something” (370). Huston’s final film is a triumph of an adaptation. By basing every aspect of the film’s production in Macon, Georgia, Huston managed to translate O’Connor’s literary world into a cinematic experience. He not only captures the narrative structure of her work, but also conveys the thematic elements of the text through both visual and auditory language. In particular, North’s score for the film illustrates O’Connor’s view of Southern Protestant Christianity. North’s ever-changing adaptation of “Tennessee Waltz” embodies Huston’s view of O’Connor’s prose: “sometimes funny, sometimes awful, sometimes strange” (Cimet 138).

CONCLUSION

DESCENDING THE STAIRWELL: SOUND IN THE CINEMA OF JOHN HUSTON

Following the critical success of *Wise Blood*, Huston experienced a resurgence of his career in the 1980s. This included a return to large budget studio production with *Annie* (1982), a moderately priced star vehicle in the form of *Prizzi's Honor* (1985), and two low-budget passion projects with *Under the Volcano* (1984) and *The Dead* (1987). With the exception of *Annie*, these films were critical successes with the four films garnering a combined fourteen Academy Award nominations with Huston's daughter Angelica Huston winning one for her performance in *Prizzi's Honor*.⁵⁰ These films continued the pattern that was set throughout Huston's career; each film was an adaptation that utilized sound in its adaptive process. Music and sound are central to each of these films. Alex North continued to work alongside Huston writing the scores for *Prizzi's Honor*, *Under the Volcano*, and *The Dead*. These final adaptations are Huston's most personal films and are symbolic of his power as a literary adaptor.

When Huston began work on his final film, he adapted the prose of an author whose writings inspired him throughout his life. As a teenager studying painting in Paris, Huston fell in love with the writings of James Joyce. When Huston returned to America to begin his film career in the 1930s, his suitcase contained a contraband copy of *Ulysses*. Considered by many to be unfilmable, the modernist prose of Joyce stayed with Huston

⁵⁰ Huston's son would be nominated for best-adapted screenplay for his work on *The Dead*. Huston directed both his father and his daughter to academy awards and directed his son's nominated script.

throughout his life until he began an adaptation of one of Joyce's most revered stories at the age of eighty. To adapt Joyce to the screen, Huston built on a lifetime of cinematic knowledge. This included a reverence for and awareness of how sound functions in cinematic space that became increasingly relevant as Huston's career developed. Huston's use of non-diegetic score, diegetic song, and accented speech to adapt literary prose throughout his career culminates in the stairwell sequence of *The Dead*.

As Greta (Angelica Huston) descends the stairs of the Irish home, she lingers in the stairwell in front of a stained glass window. Gabriel (Donal McCann) watches from below; Greta pauses, looks up, and listens as D'Arcy (Frank Patterson) sings "The Lass of Aughrim" off screen. As the tenor sings the line, "Oh Gregory don't you remember, / One night on the hill," Greta's face becomes forlorn as she closes her eyes and slowly lowers her head. Huston cuts to a medium-close up of Gabriel as he stares silently at his wife. The film then cuts back to Greta in a similarly framed medium-closeup as she slowly moves her head in rhythm with eyes forcibly shut as she holds back tears and breathes heavily. We see Gabriel again in a long shot, his gaze frozen upon his wife. Huston cuts between Gabriel and Greta in a similar fashion for three more shot/reverse shots, before focusing on a medium-close up of Greta as her eyes open, and she looks into the distance. As the line "My babe lies cold within my arms" is sung, Greta's gaze darts up the stairs. Tears swell in her eyes, which then close, and she begins to sway her head again in rhythm with the tenor's voice. After cutting to a reaction shot of Gabriel, North's score enters the film as D'Arcy repeats the song's refrain and Greta subtly nods her head. As D'Arcy's voice fades out, Greta briefly shakes her head as she exits a trance-like state of remembrance and continues down the stairwell.

In the story, Gabriel asks himself, “What is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of” (Joyce 182)? This scene stands as the embodiment of Huston’s work as an adaptor of literary works. He builds on Joyce’s text to make the adaptation the cinematic embodiment of Joyce’s narrative. In Joyce, Gabriel stands at the bottom of the stairs imagining how he would translate the image of his wife to a visual medium. Joyce writes, “if he were a painter he would paint her in that attitude. Her blue felt hat would show off the bronze of her hair against the darkness and the dark panels of her skirt would show off the light ones. *Distant Music* he would call the picture if he were a painter” (182). This scene in Huston’s film provides the cinematic translation of Gabriel’s imagined *Distant Music*.

Like Gabriel, Huston is trying to translate the beauty of the scene he is witnessing into another medium. While Gabriel imagines painting the image of his wife so that sound is conveyed in his art, Huston is adapting Joyce’s depiction of Gabriel’s idea into the images and sounds of cinema. In adapting this scene, Huston utilizes the same auditory techniques that he perfected throughout his career. Like the traditional sea musicians that inhabit Huston’s adaptation of *Moby Dick*, Huston hired the famed Irish tenor Frank Paterson to play the role of Bartell D’Arcy, which brings a level of authenticity to the film’s depictions of Irish music.⁵¹ Musical performance is a key theme throughout Joyce’s story, and by using an actual Irish tenor in the film, Huston’s film gains the same fidelity to Joyce’s text that his *Moby Dick* did with Melville’s. Another

⁵¹ Paterson would only appear in one other film playing the tenor who sings “Macushla” in Neil Jordan’s *Michael Collins*. (1996) His voice also played a significant role in Joel and Ethan Cohen’s *Miller’s Crossing* (1990) in his performance of “Danny Boy” and “Goodnight, Sweetheart” on the film’s soundtrack.

key auditory factor in Huston's adaptation is his casting of Irish actors. These men and women translate Joyce's dialogue to the screen in an authentic fashion that could be compared to Huston's use of Mexican actors in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. As the sequence ends, Huston builds on the emotion of the scene through the addition of North's score. The presence of North's added orchestral accompaniment to D'Arcy's singing blends diegetic and nondiegetic sound while triggering the emotions of the audience. Like the addition of North's score at the conclusion of *Wise Blood*, this added emotion links the audience to both Gabriel and Greta. North's score acts as a link between the audience and the characters on screen. As Greta walks down the stairwell, these distinct auditory elements combine to successfully adapt Joyce's prose to the screen.

As in Joyce's story, Huston's film ends with Gabriel looking out his and Greta's bedroom window as snow falls over Ireland. In his screenplay, Tony Huston adapts the final three paragraphs of Joyce's text into an internal monologue that McCann delivers over shots of the snow-covered Irish countryside as North's orchestration of "The Lass of Aughrim" plays. Huston visualizes the snow "falling on every park of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves ... falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried" (Joyce 194). We feel the cold in the air as Huston cuts between vacant landscapes. In the final image, Huston's camera lingers on snow-covered brush at the edge of the ocean. The camera slowly tilts to the sky and as snow falls upon the lens of the camera, McCann evokes the final words of Joyce's tale as the snow continues "falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead" (194). As the

final notes of “The Lass of Aughrim” play, the screen fades to black, and Huston’s career ends.

The credits that follow Huston’s final adaptation do not contain Huston’s name. He, like Michael Furey, had joined the dead. Traditionally, when a film ends the first name that is credited is the director’s. For many critics, reviewers, and filmgoers, the director is the author of the film. He or she is the creative center through all stages of production, and Huston’s lack of a distinct authorial voice was one of the reasons critics like Andrew Sarris refused to admit him into the pantheon of American filmmakers. Huston’s name does not enter the credits at the end of the film because *The Dead* is not Huston’s film; it is Joyce’s. Huston was not concerned with creating John Huston’s version of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *Moby-Dick*, *Wise Blood*, or *The Dead*, but rather wanted to bring the prose of the works he adapted to the screen and nothing more. While Huston’s lack of authorial presence in his films may have kept him out of Sarris’s Pantheon, it allowed him to craft his adaptations to the voices of those whose work he adapted. Every film Huston made was different than the one before it. Because of this he had to change his technique with each film. This included Huston’s skilled and varied use of sound, appropriate to the source, throughout his adaptations.

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