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A Certain Autonomy: Music in the Films of John Huston

Richard Ness

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Introduction

“I hate decorative music. I want the music to help tell the story, illustrate the idea, not just to emphasize the images. That means that it must have a certain autonomy.” (John Huston)¹

- ¹ In his autobiography *An Open Book*, John Huston summarizes his own career with the observation: “I’m not aware of myself as a director having a style” (Huston 361). It is an assessment shared by a number of critics writing about his work, and those critics who have identified any consistencies in Huston’s films have tended to focus on similarities of content and thematic issues more than on formal elements.² If critics have had difficulty determining a consistent visual style in the director’s work, even less attention has been given to Huston’s use of music and aural elements. While some scholars have cited Huston’s films as textbook examples of what is considered the classical visual style of Hollywood cinema,³ few have noted that, by contrast, Huston’s approach to music often defies or modifies the conventions of film scoring identified by film music theorists Claudia Gorbman, Kathryn Kalinak, and others, such as assigning motifs to specific characters, using music to signify emotion and illustrate or interpret narrative actions, and employing music to provide formal continuity by bridging transitions or gaps in the narrative. (Gorbman 1987; Kalinak 1992; Karlin 1994). This becomes evident when examining several aspects of Huston’s use of music and sound, including his choices of composers, the application of the leitmotif technique, the use of music to establish conflicts between cultures, the interaction of sound and silence, the treatment and placement of diegetic and non-diegetic aural elements, the

incorporation of songs, and his use of music to emphasize the psychological dimensions of his characters. A consideration of these concepts not only demonstrates Huston's often deliberate defiance of traditional scoring methods, but contradicts the charge made by some critics that the director was indifferent to technical considerations.

- 2 Perhaps one reason for the lack of attention to the music in Huston's films is that the director's varied and often eclectic choice of composers has not resulted in a definable Huston sound, unlike the collaborations between Alfred Hitchcock and Bernard Herrmann, Federico Fellini and Nino Rota, or François Truffaut and Georges Delerue, to cite but a few examples among Huston's contemporaries. Even in cases where Huston worked with the same composer on more than one project, the films have often been radically diverse. It is difficult to imagine more dissimilar works than *Freud* (1962) and *The List of Adrian Messenger* (1963), both scored by Jerry Goldsmith; *The Bible* (1966) and *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1967), scored by Toshiro Mayuzumi; or the five Huston films scored by Alex North, the settings of which have included the contemporary US-American West of *The Misfits* (1961), the Gothic South in *Wise Blood* (1979), the domain of the modern Mafia for *Prizzi's Honor* (1985), wartime Mexico in *Under the Volcano* (1984), and the Dublin of James Joyce's *The Dead* (1987). Yet even in such disparate works, connections that reflect common interests of both the director and his chosen composers can be found. The aforementioned Goldsmith-scored films share a concern with unraveling mysteries and penetrating deceptions or disguises,⁴ while Maurice Jarre's scores for *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* (1972) and *The Man Who Would Be King* (1975) play on a kind of mock-heroism that emphasizes both the ambitions and weaknesses of the protagonists.⁵ In the seemingly diverse films scored by North, there is a shared interest in the concept of home or of familial relationships, and the thematic considerations are supported by music that becomes reflective and nostalgic while establishing a sense of a specific time and place.
- 3 The director himself has had little to say regarding the scoring of his films. In his autobiography, Huston discusses his working methods almost solely in terms of the visual elements. His only reference to the function of music in films occurs in his discussion of the scoring of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), in which he states: "As with good cutting, the audience is not as a rule supposed to be conscious of the music. Ideally, it speaks directly to our emotions without our awareness of it, although, of course, there are moments when music should take over and dominate the action" (Huston 80).
- 4 Huston's lack of comment on the aural aspects of his films has led some critics to accuse him of indifference. Indicative of this attitude is an article by Eugene Archer in *Film Culture* in which the author criticizes Huston for devoting little attention to music; he notes as an example that "*Moby Dick*, which crucially depends upon music to sustain its climax, is weakened by a dissonant score which underlines irrelevant comic points while reducing the tempo of climactic moments" (Archer). The latter comment is contradicted by Mark Evans, in *Soundtrack: The Music of the Movies*, who claims that composer Philip Sainton worked closely with Huston on *Moby Dick* to carefully develop the major themes in order to meet the director's musical requirements, and observed that "the score runs the gamut from impressionistic sea paintings to music of raging fury" (Evans 165). Sainton himself, in a radio discussion at the time of the film's release, claimed that "John Huston has a great understanding of music and was able to give me a vivid idea of the kind of sound or music he wanted for the majority of the scenes [...]. Although he has no technical knowledge of music, Huston is urgently aware of the

effects music can create.”⁶ Sainton’s comment suggests that, far from being indifferent, Huston gave careful consideration to his use of music, and he often seemed to make a conscious effort to avoid obvious musical choices. Commenting on the seemingly incongruous selection of a Japanese composer to score the Southern-based drama *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, Huston, in an interview with Rui Nogueira and Bertrand Tavernier, noted: “I think what he did in *Reflections* goes incredibly well with the film. There is not the first Southern theme, not the first Stephen Forster (sic) tune” (Nogueira and Tavernier 211).

- 5 In his autobiography, Miklos Rozsa discusses his sole association with Huston on *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) and indicates the director’s involvement with the composing process:

I wrote the prelude and asked Huston to come and hear it. He didn’t like it. He said it was doing what innumerable preludes had done already, telling the audience that what they were going to see was super-colossal, tremendous, fantastic, the greatest picture of all time; and then came—just a picture. What he wanted was a tense but quiet opening, and that is what the picture has now. (Rozsa 144)

- 6 Rozsa’s account testifies to the director’s acute understanding of the function music should play in his films, as well as his desire to break with the traditional scoring methods described by Gorbman and Kalinak. His unconventional style is demonstrated in the finished film, in which Rozsa’s entire non-diegetic score consists of a few minutes of music appearing only in the opening and ending scenes.⁷ More evidence of Huston’s defiance of film music conventions can be provided by examining in depth several of the specific scoring techniques identified at the beginning of this article.

Variations on a Thematic Approach: Motifs and Themes in Huston’s Films

- 7 One of the most foundational structural elements in film scoring (and one that was particularly common at the time Huston began his directorial career) is the use of leitmotifs,⁸ which allow audiences to make musical associations with specific characters or places and bring a sense of structural unity to the score. While the scores in Huston’s films make use of motifs at times, such musical signatures usually are associated not with specific characters or locations as much as with abstract ideas or thematic concepts. This approach is evident in Huston’s first film, *The Maltese Falcon*, in which Adolph Deutsch’s score avoids establishing a recognizable theme for each of the principal characters. The closest the score comes to a recurring motif is an eight-note theme for the title object that Martin Marks describes as having a “mysterious shimmer” and making use of harmony consisting of “complex chords with no clear tonal center,” which ultimately make it “as hard to pin down as the falcon itself” (Marks 179). The theme is associated not only with the falcon, but, more abstractly, with the obsessive behavior of those trying to possess it.
- 8 The status Warner Brothers gave to Huston’s first directorial effort is indicated by the assigning of Deutsch, who at the time was mainly scoring lower budget productions, rather than one of Warner’s top composers, such as Max Steiner or Erich Wolfgang Korngold, to the project. The success of the film elevated Huston to the top rank of directors at the studio. For his next project, he was assigned the melodrama *In This Our Life* (1942), starring the studio’s leading actress Bette Davis as a woman named Stanley

who steals her sister Roy's lover. The film was scored by Steiner, a composer known for his prominent use of leitmotifs. In his liner notes for the RCA release *Classic Film Scores for Bette Davis*, Tony Thomas claims that

the real artfulness of this score is his delineation of the two main characters. [...] Stanley is destructive, petulant and mean, and Steiner characterizes her with a fragmentary theme based on a two-note motif that is an ingenious bit of film scoring [...] The theme for Roy, on the other hand, suggests a well-adjusted, warm woman. (Thomas, liner notes)

- 9 But the use of these motifs is actually more complex than Thomas suggests. The romantic theme he equates with Roy is associated throughout the film with the potential for positive romantic resolutions, as opposed to the lack of resolution provided in Stanley's theme (which Thomas connects to the unresolved nature of her life). A more character-specific motif associated with Roy is a playful twelve-note pattern, introduced in the strings when Roy talks to Peter about wanting to make a home for him as he is packing to leave her [13:40-15:20]. A darker version of the motif is heard when she acknowledges that they agreed their marriage would have "no strings" (an ironic word choice given Steiner's typically lush orchestration) [15:40-16:22]. The Roy motif is heard again when she arrives at Stanley's apartment after the suicide of Roy's husband with whom Stanley has run off [50:25-54:45], and later when she visits the mother of a man falsely accused of a hit-and-run Stanley committed [1:13:10-1:14:53].
- 10 Steiner's score for *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948) also extends the leitmotif concept beyond character association, and the motifs, while immediately recognizable, are used with increasing complexity as the score develops. Perhaps the most recognizable piece of music in the score is a theme first associated comically with elderly prospector Howard (played by the director's father Walter Huston) [25:27-26:48]. Rather than simply providing another example of Steiner's familiar "mickey-mousing" technique,⁹ the theme gradually becomes identified with the camaraderie of Howard and his two American partners, Dobbs and Curtin, as evidenced by its triumphant use when Curtin makes the decision to rush into a collapsing mine to save Dobbs [37:54-38:39]. The versatility of the theme is later demonstrated when it is treated as a dirge during Dobbs's trek after he has attempted to kill Curtin [1:47:34-1:48:01].
- 11 Another major theme in the score ("Texas Memories") becomes associated with Curtin's longing for a rural communal existence. The first appearance of the theme [40:01-40:50] is motivated by Curtin's reference to listening to the sounds of guitars at night while working as a peach picker, a moment which breaks down traditional definitions of diegetic and non-diegetic sound, since the source is identified in the dialogue but not visible on screen. The theme appears at two other points: during a reference to the harvest in Cody's letter [1:15:37-1:16:32] and in the finale when Howard suggests that Curtin contact Cody's wife about trying to get a job harvesting fruit [2:04:24-2:04:57]. The brief melody serves as a nostalgic reflection and also provides a link between Cody and Curtin.
- 12 Following Huston's departure from Warner Brothers, the scores for his films show less reliance on character associated themes. The principal motifs in *The African Queen* (1951), scored by Allan Gray, are identified with the title object and with the romance that develops between missionary Rose Sayer and steamer captain Charlie Allnutt, rather than with the individual characters, while the unifying element in Georges

Auric's rather sparse score for *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison* (1957)—the Huston film that most closely resembles *The African Queen*—is a sprightly scherzo construction that becomes associated with the actions of characters running up or down a hill on the island where the action takes place; it receives its most striking variation in the treatment that accompanies the flight in the rain of nun Sister Angela from drunken Marine Allison [1:23:11-1:24:14].

- 13 Alex North's first collaboration with Huston, *The Misfits*, makes more traditional use of a main theme, but what is of particular interest is the manner in which North enables the theme to fluctuate between diegetic and non-diegetic aspects of the scoring to emphasize the various characters' need to connect with one another. Diegetic uses of the theme occur in early scenes, including a muzak treatment heard in the diner where showgirl Roslyn Taber and her friend Isabelle Steers go after Roslyn's divorce [10:50-15:53], and a jazz variation as Roslyn dances with truck driver Guido and comments that "We're all dying" [26:36-28:15]. Later, the theme gradually replaces the source music from a bar as rodeo cowboy Perce Howland and Roslyn talk outside and he tells her about his mother [1:06:24-1:10:50]. The versatility of North's theme is demonstrated in the eerie treatment it is given in the scene in which Roslyn dances around a tree [28:35-29:24], and in the dramatic scoring in which the theme is combined with a propulsive ostinato as Guido drives recklessly while drunk [1:12:54-1:14:55]. Even the film's conclusion [2:04:01-2:04:46] defies scoring conventions, since North does not provide the expected recapitulation of his main theme and the unresolved quality of the concluding music reinforces the visuals (which do not even provide a traditional card announcing "The End").
- 14 A more monothematic approach is evident in many of the scores for later Huston films, including *The List of Adrian Messenger*, *Sinful Davey* (1969) and *A Walk With Love and Death* (1969). Like his mentor Alex North, Jerry Goldsmith demonstrates an ability to provide a wide range of variations on a single theme in his score for *The List of Adrian Messenger*. In the first few minutes, the main theme is given a jazzy treatment that sets up the tongue-in-cheek mystery to follow [0:12-1:07]; it is then transformed into a suspense cue as an elevator is rigged to crash [1:07-2:07], plays in a more traditional arrangement during the opening credits and into the next scene [2:07-4:25], and finally emerges in a regal variation for the first fox hunt [4:26-5:02]. Ken Thorne's *Sinful Davey* provides a more traditional use of the leitmotif concept, with its primary theme being a ballad associated with the hero that is put through a wide range of variations, including a scherzo during a chase through a marketplace [13:17-15:54], a suspenseful treatment when the highwayman hero Davey is trapped in a doctor's office [17:11-18:34], and even, in an echo of *Adrian Messenger*, being woven into the music for a fox hunting scene [1:14:27-1:15:56]. While both the story and score of *A Walk with Love and Death* suggest an attempt to capture some of the atmosphere of the previous year's *Romeo and Juliet* (Franco, Zeffirelli, 1968), with its popular love theme by Nino Rota, rather than just reinforcing the romance of the two lovers, Georges Delerue's main theme serves to establish their isolation from the oppressive forces around them. The principal motif becomes associated with the love between Heron and Claudia, and appropriately takes precedence in the conclusion of the film, providing poignant comment as the lovers face the inevitability of death [1:24:34-1:30:08]. The increasingly monothematic approach to scoring in Huston's films culminates in Jarre's score for *The Mackintosh Man* (1973), where the entire score (with the exception of some source music during a party scene) is based on a single theme, with its recurring use pushed almost to the point of

parody.¹⁰ This last example indicates that even while acknowledging such a fundamental approach to film scoring as the use of character-associated themes, Huston did so in a way that was intended to make the audience aware of these conventions, rather than affording them the invisibility that Gorbman has identified as a trademark of classical film music.

Music as Signifier of Cultural Conflict

- 15 The atmosphere of musical parody suggested in the score for *The Mackintosh Man* is also evident in Jarre's scores for *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* and *The Man Who Would Be King*, and the latter's juxtaposition of British colonial songs with traditional Indian instrumentation demonstrates another characteristic of the scores for Huston's films. Many of these scores make use of conflicting elements that reflect a clash of cultures or ideologies, and this conflict is often established during a film's opening credits. Indicative of this approach is Bronislau Kaper's score for *The Red Badge of Courage*, which combines traditional folk tunes with more contemporary scoring that expresses the hero's state of mind. A sense of conflict is established at the outset, as Kaper weaves folk pieces in a fugue-like arrangement—the music even conflicts with the MGM lion, as drum beats combine with the animal's roar during this opening trademark. Hugo Friedhofer's score for *The Barbarian and the Geisha* (1958) is founded on a heroic main theme that dominates a more romantic motif. As William Darby and Jack Du Bois observe in *American Film Music*,

Friedhofer consciously subsumes his romantic melody to his main theme to continuously suggest the dominance of one plot element over the other. This arrangement can be heard in the opening credit sequence [...]. We hear the romantic theme, rendered by a harp, only within the larger contours of the main theme. (Darby and Du Bois 213-14)

- 16 In his score for *The Unforgiven* (1960), Dimitri Tiomkin makes little use of Western music conventions¹¹ and employs structural elements that recall 19th-century symphonic techniques, reflecting the European ancestry of its two dominant families. The European flavor of the score is justified directly in the film in an early scene in which rancher Ben Zachary brings home a piano on which his mother Mattilda plays a Mozart piece [16:48-18:08]; the piano becomes a symbol of the clash of cultures when the family hauls it outside their sod house and Mattilda plays it to drown out the war drums and wood pipes of the Kiowas who are preparing to attack [1:42:45-1:44:03]. Although the use of musical cues to telegraph to the audience certain ethnic characters or cultural groups is a common practice of film scoring (to cite an obvious example, one need only think of the use of "Indian" war drums and chants to indicate the presence of Native American characters in old westerns), Huston's films seldom resort to such devices and instead employ ethnically-associated music in a more complex way to comment on the conflicts between or among cultures.

The Eloquence of Silence

- 17 In addition to dramatizing conflicts within the scoring, Huston often establishes a conflict between the music and other aspects of the aural track. The music in many of the scores becomes conspicuous, not just because of how it is used but also of how it is

not used. While the decision to use background music only at the beginning and end of *The Asphalt Jungle* may constitute the most extreme example of limited scoring in Huston's films, in many of them silence becomes as significant an element of scoring the films as the compositions themselves. Huston's understanding of the importance of when not to underscore is evident as early as *The Maltese Falcon*. Contrary to the tendency of the time, Huston uses the background score sparingly, keeping the emphasis on dialogue.¹² Gutman's lengthy discussion of the history of the falcon, for example, contains no supporting music, and the score only emerges when Spade begins to pass out [1:02:40-1:03:56]. Even Steiner's scoring of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* is relatively sparse during the first reel, relying mainly on source music to establish the atmosphere of the Mexican town, Tampico [1:12-7:36]. In the opening credits sequence of *The African Queen*, Huston again defies convention by replacing traditional title music with natural sounds after an initial fanfare, emphasizing the power of nature [25].

- 18 In all of Huston's films, there are instances of set pieces presented in silence, or with music only emerging at key points for dramatic emphasis. The battle scenes in *The Red Badge of Courage* are largely unscored, with music appearing in the climactic fight only during the rousing final charge [59:53-1:00:48]. Several scenes in *Beat the Devil* (1953) are accompanied only by the sound of bells, while several major set pieces in *The Mackintosh Man*, including the prison break [32:07-35:08] and a car chase [1:08:11-1:12:09], are presented without music. In *Moulin Rouge* (1952), the first exterior shot following the scored credits is presented in silence, and source music is heard only after the camera moves inside the club [2:40]. In his analysis of the score for *The Unforgiven*, Ben Winters notes that the scene in which Abe Kelsey explains Rachel's background to Zeb Rawlins is unscored (Kalinak 88), and the climax of *The Misfits*, involving the rounding up of a herd of wild mustangs to be sold as dog food, is presented in alternately scored and silent sections, with silence used particularly to emphasize the personal conflict of troubled cowboy Guy Langland and the traumatic response of Roslyn to the roping of the animals [1:40:26-2:01:06].¹³ In *Freud*, Goldsmith emphasizes the initial failure of the psychiatrist's patient Cecily's attempt to walk by choosing not to score the scene, but provides music later when she has her breakthrough [1:40:58-1:43:18].
- 19 Death in Huston's films is often silent. Benjamin Frankel's delicate woodwinds cut off to announce the passing of the poet Nanno in *The Night of the Iguana* (1964) [1:48:06-1:48:17]. In *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, the music swells in a Rozsa-esque construction in the final scene [1:46:44-1:47:47], but stops abruptly when Army major Weldon Penderton throws open the door to his wife's room, returning as the camera begins to pan wildly after he shoots Private Williams [1:48:13-1:48:55]. Silence emphasizes the brutality of the moment when Heron runs down and bludgeons a serf in *A Walk With Love and Death* [1:00:07-1:00:16], and only after he cradles the dying man does music enter to provide mournful comment [1:00:28]. In *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean*, the death of Maria Elena is signified by the end of the theme that has been playing on her music box. The discovery of the body of the flute player in *Under the Volcano* is unscored, with the sound of a wood flute appearing after a comment is made that it is too late to help him [1:10:14]. Such moments strongly illustrate Huston's principle, stated in an interview with Gideon Bachmann, that music has its greatest impact when used economically, and the deliberately placed moments of silence in his films allow the music to have greater impact than if the scenes were fully scored.

The Integration of Non-diegetic Sound

- 20 One particularly striking use of the juxtaposition of silence with natural sounds also provides perhaps the most direct delineation of the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic elements in all of cinema. During the opening of *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison* (1957) [0:20-2:32], music is heard only when a written credit appears on the screen; as each credit fades, the music gives way to natural sounds and returns only when the next credit appears, thus equating non-diegetic music with the non-diegetic visual element of the written credits. As indicated in North's handling of the main theme in *The Misfits*, the music in Huston's films often shifts between non-diegetic background scoring and music that is part of the physical environment. The early diegetic music in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* [1:12-7:36; 10:07-10:55; 14:16-15:59] or the folk tunes played on harmonica in *The Red Badge of Courage* [for example, from 5:36-6:52] are intended to stand in marked contrast to the non-diegetic dramatic scoring, which in both of these films is used to externalize the inner conflicts of the lead characters. Source music becomes an important part of establishing the setting and atmosphere of *Moulin Rouge* and *The Dead*. The dominance of source music in the 1952 musical biopic's lengthy opening scene increases the impact of the entrance of the background score at the moment when Toulouse-Lautrec first stands up [18:56]. In the 1987 adaptation of James Joyce's famous story, which Pauline Kael has described as being "about the music that men and women make, and especially about the music of Irish voices" (Kael 404), non-diegetic music appears only briefly, and significantly, during the lengthy party scene, when spinster Kate reflects on a young English tenor named Parkinson [45:40-46:25]. A brief instrumental passage also acts as a coda to the singing of "The Lass of Aughrim" before being replaced by a dance tune [1:04:06-1:04:17]. Nondiegetic scoring dominates the last section of the film, but it is made up of tunes previously heard as source music and for which specific associations have been established.
- 21 A key element in Huston's films, both visually and musically, is the use of jukeboxes or other devices to provide a motivated musical source. A jukebox figures in a significant scene in which Stanley dances while getting drunk at the Southside Tavern in *In This Our Life* [1:07:38-1:08:51]. The only music in *The Asphalt Jungle* other than Rozsa's prelude and finale comes in the form of source music. The dynamic opening score gives way to jukebox music as a fleeing fugitive enters a diner [2:33]; more prominent is the later use of a jukebox that leads to Doc's capture as he delays his exit from a nightclub to watch a girl dance [1:39:55-1:41:09]. A variation on this approach is provided in *The Misfits*, as Roslyn gyrates in a bar while playing paddle-ball [53:04-55:24], and in *The Night of the Iguana*, when teenager Charlotte Goodall dances with the two beach boys at a cantina, leading to a fight between the boys and the bus driver, carefully choreographed to the source music [1:11:53-1:12:46, 1:13:12-1:14:30]. The most extensive employment of the jukebox concept occurs in *Fat City* (1972). The constant use of motivated songs on the soundtrack causes a rare non-diegetic moment, in which a guitar and horn arrangement of Kris Kristofferson's song "Help Me Make It Through the Night" (1969) is heard during a scene involving field workers, to be even more noticeable [20:06-22:04].¹⁴ Even Huston's period films occasionally employ an antique version of the jukebox motif, as demonstrated by the music box that the Judge presents to the Mexican girl

Maria Elena on her deathbed in *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* [1:32:53-1:33:45], or the accordion that instigates a sing-along in a tavern in *Moby Dick* (1956) [6:23-8:11].

- 22 As with the use of silence, the acknowledgement of source music acts to increase the dramatic impact of the non-diegetic scoring. An indication of Huston's philosophy regarding the use of diegetic and non-diegetic music is indicated in a discussion recounted in Goode's *The Making of the Misfits*. At a meeting with Huston, writer Arthur Miller and other members of the production team prior to writing the score, North commented, "The source music should be interwoven against the personal music," and in keeping with the director's tendency to reject obvious music choices, the composer noted, "The only thing I'm trying to avoid is 'cue' music, where music comes in on a specific line." In discussing the handling of the music in an early scene in a bar in Reno, Huston observed, "My feeling is against any outside comment in that scene in back of the saloon. If they're playing some godawful hoe-down music in that bar, that might be the best comment. If you make a comment against a comment on the screen, you're in trouble." Reinforcing Huston's concern with having the music reiterate what was already apparent in the dialogue and visuals, North concluded, "There is so much that is said so right on the screen that to duplicate it in music would be a mistake" (Goode 298). In the final film, the "godawful hoe-down music" from the bar is gradually replaced with the main theme as Perce reveals his background to newly divorced Roslyn, and the subtle blending of source and personal music provides one of the most poignant moments in the film. The discussion of the *Misfits* score suggests that, at a time when the diegetic and non-diegetic aspects of a film's score often were regarded as separate entities (with the former even often dependent on material that was owned or could be cheaply licensed by the studio), Huston regarded them as equally significant elements that should be integrated in creating the soundscapes of his films.

Song Interludes and Vocal Performances

- 23 One aspect of Huston's integration of source music into the overall score that deserves special attention is his use of songs. With the obvious exception of *Annie* (1982), Huston's single foray into the film musical, the director was seldom given to staging production numbers. The song number in *Moulin Rouge* becomes a natural element of the overall flow of the opening scene (despite its establishment at the beginning of the film the song, which became a popular success, surprisingly is not used as a dominant musical motif in the background score) [10:34-14:05]. More intrusive—and perhaps deliberately so—is the cloying song interlude in *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* [51:20-53:23], which is presented in such an overt way that it seems intended as a parody of the "Raindrops Keep Fallin' On My Head" number in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (George Roy Hill, 1969). In other instances, Huston has used songs not as set-pieces, but as an outgrowth of the dramatic action, often employing them for ironic counterpoint or to reinforce a central theme.
- 24 Huston's ability to incorporate popular or recognizable tunes for ironic comment (as opposed to the kind of obvious "cue" music he objected to in his discussion with Alex North about the scoring of *The Misfits*) is evident as early as *In This Our Life* (1942), when a fight between Stanley and Peter is accompanied by the song "Blues in the Night" on the phonograph Stanley is constantly playing [42:48-43:36]. Although the tune is first heard in an instrumental version, audiences of the time would doubtless have been

familiar with the lyrics and the observation that “a woman’s a two-face” is certainly a fitting description of Stanley. Huston employs the song again after Peter’s death, as Stanley decides she has mourned long enough and dons a bright dress to go out [54:49-55:30]. Similar ironic statements are made by the songs heard on car radios and jukeboxes in *Fat City*, especially the muzak version of “You’ve Got a Friend” heard in the car as Faye talks to Ernie about losing her virginity to him [25:01-26:31].¹⁵

- 25 More subtle than these deliberately ironic comments are familiar tunes that are used to define characters or provide insight into their feelings. The conflicting personalities of the two leads in *The African Queen* are reinforced by the songs which bookend the film, opening with the singing of a religious hymn that reflects Rose’s missionary work [1:33-5:25] and ending with Charlie singing a sea shanty [1:44:03-1:44:18]. The use of character associated songs is also evident in *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison*, through Allison’s singing of “Don’t Sit Under the Apple Tree”; the tune is woven into the background scoring at key points to express the deeper connection that develops between Allison and Sister Angela. This connection is also expressed in the score’s coda after Sister Angela has accompanied the stretcher carrying the wounded Allison down the hill to the beach. The final cue combines a sprightly march with a more somber reflective theme underneath that reinforces the distinct personalities of the two main characters and indicates their inevitable return to their respective callings, although the intertwining of the two themes also suggests the unification of their spirits [1:45:37-1:46:00].
- 26 In many films, Huston incorporates songs that emerge organically as part of the dramatic action. A tense scene in *Key Largo* (1948) involves racketeer Johnny Rocco goading alcoholic former showgirl Gaye Dawn into performing the song “Moanin’ Low” by promising her a drink, and then humiliating her [56:54-58:27]. By contrast, the rendition of “Arrayed for the Bridal” by aging music hall performer Julia in *The Dead* serves as a nostalgic recollection, and Huston reinforces the notion visually by incorporating shots of various mementos in an upstairs room during her performance [30:10-32:21]. In *A Walk With Love and Death* (1969), Heron’s visit to the castle Dammartin where he will meet Claudia is instigated when he meets a servant in the woods singing a song about a lover who has gone off to war [8:03-9:14], and the conflicting forces in the film are represented vocally through the chant heard during a religious procession [18:07-19:10], and a song associated with the knights [54:01-55:04]. If, as indicated earlier, death itself is usually silent in Huston’s films, remembrance of, or reflections on, it often occur through song, as in the battle remembered in war correspondent Hugh Firmin’s song about the defense of Madrid sung at an outdoor cafe in *Under the Volcano* [1:13:42-1:15:20], the haunting rendition of “The Lass of Aughrim” which reinforces Gretta’s recollection of a long dead lover in *The Dead* [1:01:41-1:04:17], the uses of “John Brown’s Body” (sung in a particularly effective moment by a dazed soldier) [31:50-32:33] and “When Johnny Comes Marching Home” in *The Red Badge of Courage* [10:37-11:14], and soldier of fortune Daniel Dravot’s dramatic delivery of “Minstrel Boy” as he prepares to meet his fate near the end of *The Man Who Would Be King* [2:03:29-2:04:18]. Like the other musical elements in his films, Huston does not employ songs merely as a background element, but incorporates them in places where they make a significant (and perhaps in the case of *Judge Roy Bean* satiric) contribution to the narrative.

Psychological and Physical Music

- 27 The selectivity with which Huston uses music in his films has resulted in scenes of particularly strong dramatic impact. Perhaps nowhere is Huston's use of music to reinforce physical action and psychological states more evident than in the climactic round-up of the wild horses in *The Misfits*. One extended cue begins with a solo horn as Guido expresses his love for Roslyn, then carries over to the roping of a mare, and climaxes as Roslyn runs into the desert and screams [1:48:57-1:51:43]; the musical linking of the actions suggests that they all contribute to the heroine's anxiety. In his analysis of the scoring of this scene, which he describes as a four-act ballet, Irwin Bazelon comments on the highly stimulating nature of the action music, but adds: "North's music captures something more: it conveys a feeling of the romanticism and high adventure of yesteryear and touches upon the loneliness of aging cowboys whose way of life has passed" (Bazelon 80). During Gay's final confrontation with one of the horses the music emphasizes his internal struggle as much as the external action of roping the animal.
- 28 In keeping with Huston's interest in externalizing the psychological states of his characters, music becomes particularly effective in portraying the potential madness of his characters. Notable examples include: the frenzied theme that reaches a crescendo as the deranged Dobbs stares into the flames of the campfire in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* [1:39:13-1:40:06]; the scoring of the soldier Jim's madness in *The Red Badge of Courage*, which begins softly but becomes increasingly agitated, giving way to driving percussion supported by sustained string lines as he runs up a hill, cutting off momentarily as he reaches the top, and ending on a plaintive horn solo as he collapses [35:31-36:36]; the quietly repeated pattern which conveys Brother Samuel's breakdown in *The African Queen* [13:10-14:40]; Auric's alternating of darker and lighter passages in *Moulin Rouge* as Toulouse-Lautrec first contemplates suicide and then is seized with inspiration, ending with the positive theme dominating as he walks out the window into the sunlight [1:07:22-1:11:36]; and Goldsmith's Herrmannesque scoring of the prologue in *Freud*, which equates the atonal effects and electronic sounds with the mysteries of the human psyche [1:43-3:08].
- 29 In a few rare instances, Huston also allows the music to comment directly on the physical action. Among the more interesting examples of this approach are Dimitri Tiomkin's score during the preparations of tanks and other artillery for the attack on the title location in *San Pietro*¹⁶ [17:07-17:42]; the accelerating music accompanying would-be uranium thieves Billy and Petersen chasing their runaway car down a mountain road in *Beat the Devil*, concluding in a downward spiral as the car goes off a cliff [35:45-36:31]; the extended hunt of the title character in *Moby Dick* [1:44:45-1:53:41]; the chase of the sea turtle in *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison* [17:34-21:30], with the aforementioned scherzo supported by an ostinato figure that anticipates John Williams's famous *Jaws* theme; the weird metallic sound when assassin Brougham is impaled on the threshers at the end of *The List of Adrian Messenger* (1963) [1:33:34-1:33:53] (providing this score's equivalent of the shower murder music in *Psycho* [1960]); the sprightly variation on the main theme that accompanies a broken string of pearls rolling down a drainpipe in *Sinful Davey*; the harsh strings heard when KGB officer's wife Erika scratches the back of intelligence agent Rone prior to their violent lovemaking in *The Kremlin Letter* (1970) [1:22:15-1:22:52]; and the *danse macabre* that

accompanies the dancing skeletons in the opening credits of *Under the Volcano* [:20-3:14] (a sequence which ends comically on an elongated skull with a wide Huston-esque mustache as the director's credit appears). Even in such instances where the music seems to be performing mainly a descriptive function, its careful placement and selective instrumentation add its own accents rather than just reinforcing what already is visibly evident on the screen.

Conclusion

- 30 While such varied moments may not have established a recognizable “Huston sound,” they demonstrate the director’s commitment to employing music that is significantly descriptive, rather than merely decorative. More than simply reinforcing the visual elements, the music in Huston’s films, at its best, provides a psychological dimension to the characters and incidents beyond what is conveyed in the visuals and through dialogue. If Huston’s visual style has been described as classical, his musical style is often unconventional. In his eclectic choice of composers, his willingness to experiment with more modern musical forms, and his unusual application of traditional film scoring techniques, Huston challenged established approaches to film music and anticipated practices that have become more common in film scoring in recent years. Despite his own limited observations on the subject, an examination of the music in Huston’s films indicates that the director regarded it as an equally important aspect of the narration, which could be selectively but deliberately employed to provide contributions that could not be achieved through the other communicative elements of film, allowing the music in his films to achieve the “certain autonomy” that the director desired.

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NOTES

1. Gideon Bachmann, "How I Make Films: An Interview With John Huston." *Film Quarterly* 19.1 (1965): 3-13. Rpt.in Cooper's *Perspectives on John Huston*, 99-115.
2. As early as 1950, one of the director's champions, James Agee, suggested that each of Huston's films had a visual style and tone of its own, usually dictated by the source material on which the director was drawing (see James Agee, "Undirectable Director," in *Agee On Film, Volume 1*. New York: Universal Library, 1969, 320-31). This view is reinforced by Martin Rubin, who notes that Huston has resisted identification with a particular genre, formal device or stylistic tendency, and that the director's point of view is intertwined with those of the authors he has adapted to the screen (Martin Rubin, "Heroic, Antiheroic, Aheroic: John Huston and the Problematic Protagonist" in *Reflections in a Male Eye: John Huston and the American Experience*. Eds. Gaylyn Studlar and David Dresser. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993. 137-156.) The introduction to Lesley Brill's *John Huston's Filmmaking* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1997) also provides a summary of the major critical arguments raised by the director's work.
3. See, for example, the analysis of *The Maltese Falcon* in David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's *Film Art: An Introduction*.
4. One might also consider a third Goldsmith-Huston collaboration here, since the composer scored Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), in which Huston had a prominent role.
5. And perhaps were intended as a bit of intentional musical self-parody of the composer's hugely successful score for David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962).
6. These comments are reproduced in the liner notes to the Marco Polo re-recording of the *Moby Dick* score.
7. In addition to Rozsa's autobiography, Lillian Ross's *Picture* (1984), on the making of *The Red Badge of Courage* (1951), and James Goode's *The Making of the Misfits* (1986) demonstrate the director taking an active interest in the music and expressing specific ideas about its function.
8. Kathryn Kalinak begins her analysis of the score for *The Informer* (1935) by quoting composer Max Steiner, who is often credited with establishing the foundations for the classic Hollywood film scores, as stating, "Every character should have a theme" (Kalinak 113).
9. A term applied to the tendency of composers to musically punctuate character movements or actions in the manner of scores for animated cartoons.
10. John Williams used the single theme concept for more direct parody the same year in Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1973), with the theme song given everything from a mariachi band treatment to a muzak rendition in a supermarket scene.
11. For a discussion of musical conventions in the western, see the "Introduction" in Kathryn Kalinak's *Music in the Western: Notes from the Frontier* (1-17). The anthology also includes Ben Winters' "Silencing the Truth: Music and Identity in *The Unforgiven*," a detailed analysis of Tiomkin's score to Huston's film and particularly the application of the theme for Rachel (76-93).
12. *The Maltese Falcon* contains about 44 minutes of music in the 100-minute long film, leaving nearly an hour unscored. By contrast, Fred Karlin, in his breakdowns of scores for various films in *Listening to Movies*, indicates that about 72 percent of the Warner Brothers production *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) is scored.
13. For a detailed analysis of this section of the film see George Burt, *The Art of Film Music* (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1994), 130-142.
14. Kristofferson's song also appears diegetically in the film during the opening and end credits.
15. The film also includes one inside joke when Huston incorporates a rendition of "The Look of Love," a song written for the film *Casino Royale* (1967) on which Huston was one of five directors.
16. Tiomkin's music for these scenes foreshadows the main theme written by the composer for *The Guns of Navarone* (J. Lee Thompson, 1961).

ABSTRACTS

While David Bordwell and others have used the films of John Huston as textbook examples of what is considered the classical visual style of Hollywood cinema, few have noted that, by contrast, Huston's approach to music often defies conventions of film scoring. This becomes evident when examining several aspects of Huston's use of music and sound, including his choices of composers, the application of the leitmotif technique, the use of music to establish conflicts of cultures, the interaction of sound and silence, treatment and placement of diegetic and non-diegetic aural elements, the incorporation of songs, and his use of music to emphasize the psychological dimensions of his characters. Citing examples from more than two dozen of the director's films, a consideration of these concepts in this essay demonstrates Huston's deliberate deviations from conventional scoring methods and contradicts the charge of some critics that the director often was indifferent to the technical aspects of his films, such as music.

Alors que David Bordwell et d'autres chercheurs ont utilisé les films de John Huston comme des cas d'école du classicisme hollywoodien au niveau visuel, peu ont remarqué, qu'en revanche, la manière dont Huston abordait la musique de film défiait les conventions. Cela apparaît comme une évidence quand on examine les différents aspects de l'utilisation que Huston fait de la musique et du son, notamment les choix de compositeurs, la mise en œuvre de la technique du *leitmotif*, l'interaction entre le son et le silence, le traitement et le positionnement d'éléments sonores, l'inclusion de chansons, l'emploi de la musique pour montrer le conflit des cultures ou encore pour souligner les traits psychologiques de ses personnages. En étudiant ces différents aspects et en s'appuyant sur des exemples dans plus d'une vingtaine de films, cet article montre que Huston dévie délibérément des méthodes conventionnelles de composition de musique de film et par là contredit les accusations selon lesquelles il ne se préoccupait pas des aspects techniques de ses films tels que la musique.

INDEX

Keywords: Film Music, John Huston, Classical Hollywood, Leitmotif

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