CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Remembering John Huston, transnational filmmaker
Authors	de la Garza, Armida;Gil Curiel, Germán
Publication date	2014-02-20
Original Citation	de La Garza, A. and Gil Curiel, G. (2014) 'Remembering John Huston, Transnational Filmmaker', Transnational Cinemas, 5(1), pp. 72-77. doi: 10.1080/20403526.2014.883127
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.1080/20403526.2014.883127
Rights	This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Transnational Cinemas on 20 February, 2014, available online: http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/20403526.2014.883127
Download date	2026-11-07 23:11:01
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/2967

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Event Report

Remembering John Huston, Transnational Filmmaker
UDG, Centro Universitario de la Costa, Puerto Vallarta Mexico. 25-29 November 2013

By Armida de la Garza and Germán Gil Curiel, University College Cork

John Huston is frequently celebrated as a multi-talented director, an accomplished adaptor of novels and plays who wrote his own scripts and drew from his training as a fine artist to construct extremely powerful visual images, emphasizing angles, colour and lighting, and shooting so economically that the films required only the most cursory editing (Brill 1997). For all these reasons, auteur theories or intermedial approaches to cinema are normally used as theoretical frameworks with which to engage his work.

There is, however, a truly transnational dimension to his oeuvre. It was this that was emphasized by the Universidad de Guadalajara and University College Cork, Ireland, with a series of events to celebrate the signing of a cooperation agreement for the study of cinema between the two institutions, and to pay homage to Huston as a director whose work in both Mexico and Ireland became so central to the film culture of these countries. The events took place at the Centro Universitario de la Costa in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, during the last week of November 2013. They included outdoor film screenings at *Los Arcos* wharf, concerts featuring the films' music played by the local orchestra at the University Campus, and an exhibition of more than 130 photographs depicting not only the on-location filming process, but also the life and times of Puerto Vallarta in the 1960s, shown at the Exhibition Centre.

The events also included round tables on the films by Huston that were made in Mexico, and their transnational features were variously highlighted. There was, first of all, Huston's own background, living and working in various countries including Mexico and Ireland, and ultimately choosing exile in Ireland, where he became a citizen in 1964 (Huston 1994). There was also the collaboration between staff and crew of different nationalities that his films promoted. Notably, cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa, widely credited as the

author of a 'national' shooting style that Charles Ramírez Berg has attributed to its featuring two vanishing points in each shot (Ramírez-Berg 2001, 123-125), was photography director in both *Night of the Iguana* (1963) and *Under the Volcano* (1984). The work of Figueroa has also been noted for his almost sublime renderings of landscape, accounting in fact for much of the 'Mexicannes' attributed to director Emilio Fernández, with whom he frequently worked (Keating 2010). But well beyond cross-national collaboration, these Huston's films are based on plays, novels, and short stories where transcultural exchange, displacement or transnational themes such as religion or engagement with nature are crucial and remain central to the films' plots.

It is perhaps *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948) that is better known. Based on a story by B. Traven, a German citizen living in Tamaulipas, Mexico, it tells the story of three Americans in search for work during the gold rush of the 1900s. They end up finding it at the Sierra Madre, only to see it blown away by the wind at the end of the film. The plot revolves around change in the characters, as their sudden wealth brings out the worst of one of them, Dobbs, played by Humphrey Bogart. However, the other two find deliverance, one of them returning to the US, and the other one staying to live among the 'Indians', here not confined to either noble or backward savages, but presented instead as a heterogeneous population, with whom the protagonists interact for both better and worse. It is the character who chooses to remain, Howard, the elder and more experienced of the three, that also insists on 'curing' the mountain once the gold has been extracted, by closing the mine, and who also 'celebrates' at the end that 'the gold has returned right to where we found it', underscoring nature as more than a passive scenery that can be changed by human agency, and this relation as one not circumscribed to national culture.

Under the Volcano (1984), based on the eponymous novel by Malcolm Lowry, tells the last day in the life of an alcoholic British Consul in Cuernavaca, Mexico in 1938, as his estranged wife returns after a year of separation. Reference is made to the Spanish civil war, where a half brother of the Consul fought for the Republicans, and there are hints to the world war as the Consul finally dies at the hands of Fascist thugs. The volcano of the title is thus both literal, the Popocatepetl so beautifully shot by Figueroa, and metaphorical, as the

protagonist finds himself in a convulsing, nearly erupting world. Spanish and English are spoken throughout the film, and the religious and mystical aspects of Huston's work are also present, with the film taking place during the day of the dead.

But of all three, it is without doubt *Night of the Iguana* (1963), starring Richard Burton, Ava Gardner, Deborah Kerr and Sue Lyon, that most productively lends itself to a transnational reading. Juanita Cabello describes the play by Tennessee Williams on which it is based as 'a travel narrative', inspired by the writer's first journey to Mexico. According to her, just prior to the Broadway opening of the play

> Williams describes a series of events two decades earlier that inspired it—events that prompted his "discovery" of the modern condition of displacement and its possible resolution through travel. In fact, [his] experience contributed key details to the […] play […]: the recurring seaside setting at the […] Hotel, the literal and figurative function of the hammock on its veranda, and the dislocation and angst with which the myriad travellers find themselves grappling (Cabello 2011).

Huston's *Night* carefully brings all this to the screen, with Burton playing Shannon, a defrocked priest turned into a tourist guide for a group of American ladies in Puerto Vallarta. Resisting the advances of the youngest one in the group, they end up at a hotel deep in the jungle, run by Shannon's friend Maxine, played by Ava Gardner, and her two Mexican lovers. An iguana that is kept tied to a tree is made into a metaphor for the various characters, whose fears and sense of guilt keep them equally trapped. But rationalizing their fears during a conversation in which Shannon has been tied to the hammock on the veranda to prevent him from committing suicide finally helps them decide to set the iguana free. The iguana also stands for nature and for human instincts. In a symbolic act that brought events to a closure, audiences were also invited to set baby iguanas free on campus.

The relevance that Huston's *Night of the Iguana* had for Puerto Vallarta became clear when Marco A. Cortés Guardado, president of the Centro Universitario de la Costa, singled it out as 'the film that put Vallarta on the map and set it on the track to become the thriving international destination it is today'. In his own memoirs, Huston himself had put it thus: 'Before *Night of the Iguana,* the population [of Puerto Vallarta] was some 2,500. Afterward, it grew prodigiously and it is now (in 1979) 80,000' (Huston 1994, 3). He added this was his third home, and that he expected it would be his last. Ignacio López Tarso, one of the very few actors from the 'Golden Age' of Mexican cinema (1935-1954) alive today, and who had a role in *Under the Volcano*, also took part in the celebrations, with other Vallartans who came along to the gardens of Los Mangos Library, to share their memories and photographs with the younger generations.

But if the Vallarta community finds in cinema 'a foundational event', with its past clearly rooted in the many benefits that that as well as other filmmaking has brought over the years, it is now also looking at cinema as a means of making sense of its identity and future. It is expected that the cooperation agreement signed between the Universidad de Guadalajara and University College Cork will promote the exchange and training of film students and staff; the development of digital applications such as film maps and data bases that will allow users to benefit from the film archives; and the promotion of Irish and Mexican cinema, or indeed, in a further instance of transnationalism, the creation of student-led Irish-Mexican film projects.

Works Cited

Brill, Lesley. *John Huston's Filmmaking.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Cabello, Juanita. *A Summer of Discovery: The Exilic and Touristic Poetics of The Night of the Iguana.* 2011. http://www.tennesseewilliamsstudies.org/journal/work.php?ID=110 (accessed 12 27, 2013).

Keating, Patrick. "The Volcano and the Barren Hill: Gabriel Figueroa and the Space of Arts Cinema." In *Global Art Cinema*, edited by Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, 201-217. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Ramírez-Berg, Charles. "La Invención de México: El Estilo Estético Emilio Fernández y Gabriel Figueroa." In *El Cine Mexicano A Través de la Crítica*, edited by Gustavo García and David R Maciel, 107-125. México D.F.: UNAM, 2001.