

EVENT REPORT

Remembering John Huston, transnational filmmaker Universidad de Guadalajara, Centro Universitario de la Costa, Puerto Vallarta Mexico, 25–29 November 2013

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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 sought to engage the broader local community and industry. They took place at the Centro Universitario de la Costa in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, during the last week of November 2013. They included concerts featuring the films' music played by the local orchestra at the University Campus; 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;¹ a roundtable on the various literary incarnations of one of the films, *Night of the Iguana* (1963), and their interpretations; and a series of outdoor screenings of Huston's films at the Los Arcos Wharf. The inclusion of film-music, photography and literature as central to the events prompted synesthetic and contextual readings of the films, going beyond the more common focus on plot and character.

The roundtable centred 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. Born in Nevada, in the US, he then lived and worked in various countries including Mexico and Ireland, 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, there was 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). Figueroa was photography director of both *Night of the Iguana* and *Under the Volcano* (1984). His work has also been noted for his sublime

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Figure 1. Exhibition curated by award-winning photographer Sergio Toledano.

renderings of landscape, accounting in fact for much of the ‘Mexicanness’ attributed to director Emilio Fernández, with whom he frequently filmed (Keating 2010). The documentary on Figueroa entitled *Multiple Visions: The Crazy Machine* (2012), by roundtable participant Emilio Maillé, was shown during the event, vividly illustrating all these points. The documentary draws from interviews with 40 cameramen of different generations and countries, all of whom are shown fragments of Figueroa’s filmmaking and comment on the image and depth of frame. Among the cinematographers interviewed there was Raoul Coutard (*Jules et Jim*, 1962), Christopher Doyle (*In the Mood for Love*, 2000), Affonso Beato (*All About My Mother*, 1999), Vittorio Storaro (*Apocalypse Now*, 1979), Janusz Kaminski (*Lincoln*, 2012, *Schindler’s List*, 1993), Haskell Wexler (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, 1975) and Anthony Dod Mantle (*Slumdog Millionaire*, 2008). The variety of views from these cinematographers from all over the world called to mind conceptualizations of the transnational as the visual language of a kind of cosmopolitan filmmaking, perhaps the counterpart to the cosmopolitan citizenship of viewers that Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden (2006, 4) have ascribed to film festival audiences.

The roundtable also highlighted transnationalism with the presentation of writer David del Campo’s novel, *No desearás*, in which John Huston, Elizabeth Taylor and the cast of *Night of the Iguana* – Richard Burton, Ava Gardner, Deborah Kerr and Sue Lyon – are all characters, living passionately in Puerto Vallarta during the shooting of the film while a murder is committed.² This provided interesting insights into the glocalization strategies that del Campo followed, in an instance of transfictionality/transmediality (Ryan 2008; Jenkins 2006) that engages the film as raw material for contemporary literature in a way that suits its target market. Guillermo Vaidovits, writer and film critic, added to this by explaining how Tennessee Williams – on whose play the film is based – upon feeling disappointed with the film’s ending rewrote it into a short story that was, in Williams’ view, suitably tragic.³ The participation of Pavel Cortés, director of the Maguey prize at the Guadalajara International Film Festival, introduced a reading of the film that highlighted another transnational theme, namely its



Figure 2. Ignacio López Tarso and Nelly Wulff.

Queer dimensions. It is implied that the character of Judith Fellows, played by Grayson Hall, whose vigilant, controlling gaze over her niece is key for the plot to unfold, is a lesbian. Cortés's most interesting reading convincingly established a connection between this character and Williams' own experience as a homosexual writer, by comparing his various depictions of the female characters on the film.⁴

A series of outdoor screenings of Huston's films followed the roundtable, with pride of place being given to those he made in Mexico. These films are based on plays, novels and short stories where transcultural exchange, displacement or transnational/universal themes such as religion or engagement with nature are crucial and remain central to the plot. Of these, it is perhaps *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948) that is best known. Based on a story by B. Traven, a German citizen living in Tamaulipas, Mexico, it tells the story of three Americans in search of work during the gold rush of the 1900s. They end up finding gold 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 in one of them (Dobbs, played by Humphrey Bogart). However, the other two find deliverance, one of them returning to the US and the other 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 with positive and negative results. It is the character who chooses to remain – Howard, the elder and most 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 novel by Malcolm Lowry, tells of 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 impending second 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 set during the day of the dead.

But of all three, it is without doubt *Night of the Iguana*, mentioned above, 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 Cabello, 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 of the Iguana* 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 in the group, Shannon leads the ladies to 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 close, 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 that 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.

To conclude, it must be emphasized that if the Vallarta community finds in cinema ‘a foundational event’, with its past clearly rooted in the many benefits that 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 databases 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.

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Notes

1. A selection of photographs is available at <http://www.pinterest.com/puertovallarta/elizabeth-taylor-richard-burton-and-puerto-vallarta/>.
2. The paparazzi had made much of Taylor’s presence on the set, which they attributed to her jealousy of Gardner as she had no role in the film but was already engaged to Burton.
3. Although not discussed at the roundtable, the song ‘Night of the Iguana’ (2007) by Joni Mitchell is a further music-literary adaptation of the film, as the lyrics succinctly but pithily narrate the plot.
4. Today Puerto Vallarta proudly foregrounds its credentials as the first and most successful lesbian, gay, bisexual and transexual (LGBT) resort in Mexico.

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