

# 70 years since the release of John Huston's *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*

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26 January 2018

John Huston's *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* was recently screened at movie theaters in the US to mark 70 years since the film's release in early January 1948. The showings were sponsored by Turner Classic Movies, Fathom Events and Warner Bros. Entertainment.

The classic film, based on the 1927 novel by German author B. Traven (published in English in 1935 to considerable success), is the tale of two down-and-out Americans in Mexico who join with an older prospector to dig for gold.

It is a drama about the transformation and degeneration of human beings as they become possessors, or believe they have become possessors, of considerable wealth. The movie comes out of Hollywood's most radical and realistic period, between the end of World War II and the full onset of the "Red Scare." Indeed, by the time of the release of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, the liberal opposition to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and the anticommunist blacklist, led by Huston, Humphrey Bogart and others, had already collapsed in large measure.

From the film's first images, Huston is attentive to the acute social and economic realities that are also today's dominant facts of life. In 1925, Fred C. Dobbs (Bogart), destitute in hot, dusty Tampico, Mexico on the Gulf of Mexico, has been reduced to bumming change from strangers, especially fellow Americans. In fact, Dobbs is so focused on the hands that either fumble for coins—or don't—that he doesn't notice he's solicited cash three times from the same man (played by director Huston). Dobbs subsequently hooks up with another vagabond expatriate Bob Curtin (Tim Holt).

Dobbs and Curtin are recruited by a big-talking contractor, Pat McCormick (Barton MacLane), to work on setting up an oil rig for the princely sum of eight dollars a day. Under the blazing sun, they slave away for McCormick, only to be cheated out of their wages. Drinking in a cantina, the duo are informed about the contractor, who regularly fleeces "foreigners and half-baked Americans." After a no-holds-barred confrontation with McCormick, they claim their hard-earned pay.

Soon afterward, the pair encounter an experienced, but penniless and more or less toothless, grizzled old gold prospector, Howard (Walter Huston, the director's father). In their wretched flophouse, the subject of gold comes up. In a remarkable speech, brilliantly delivered in rapid-fire fashion, Howard gives them the lowdown, loosely basing himself on Marx's theory of value: "A thousand men, say, go searchin' for gold. After six months, one of 'em's lucky—one out of the thousand. His find represents not only his own labor but that of 999 others to boot. That's uh, 6,000 months, uh, 500 years scrambling over mountains, goin' hungry and thirsty. An ounce of gold, mister, is worth what it is because of the human labor that went into the findin' and the gettin' of it."

Later, Howard adds prophetically: "Aw, gold's a devilish sort of a thing anyway. You start out to tell yourself you'll be satisfied with 25,000 handsome smackers worth of it, so help me Lord and cross my heart. Fine resolution. After months of sweatin' yourself dizzy and growin' short on

provisions and findin' nothin', you finally come down to 15,000 and then 10. Finally you say, 'Lord, let me just find 5,000 dollars worth and I'll never ask for anything more the rest of my life' ... Yeah, here in this joint, it seems like a lot. But I tell you, if you was to make a real strike, you couldn't be dragged away. Not even the threat of miserable death wouldn't keep you from tryin' to add \$10,000 more. \$10,000, you'd want to get 25. \$25,000, you'd want to get 50. \$50,000, a 100. Like roulette. One more turn, you know, always one more."

But soon, Howard, Dobbs and Curtin are pooling their resources, beginning a perilous journey in search of the elusive shiny metal that is eternally cursed because it "changes the soul of man in a second." A four-day trip takes them to the Sierra Madre, north of Durango.

As they climb the mountainside, clearing the thick brush along the way, Howard—more energetic and agile than either of the younger men—shows his expertise at distinguishing genuine from fool's gold. Having come upon the real thing, Huston does a memorable, devilish jig to mark the spot. The trio set up a mining encampment and begin the arduous and grueling labor that will take them months.

Traven writes in his novel: "Sand and dirt, dirt and sand, coupled with inhumane privations; crushing rocks from the bitter cold morning hours, through the broiling of midday, and far into the darkness of night made them feel worse than convicts. When it turned out that a huge heap of crushed rocks held, as frequently happened, hardly the day's pay of a union bricklayer in Chicago, the disappointment of the gang became so great that they could have killed each other just for the pleasure of doing something different from the daily routine."

The gold dust eventually piles up, but so does their fear and distrust of one another. Dobbs is the worst, showing signs of genuine paranoia and even madness.

When a stranger, Cody (Bruce Bennett), also in search of treasure, encroaches on their unregistered claim, the three "vote" to kill him, an act that is only interrupted by an attack of bandits—not looking for gold but ammunition.

Cody, originally from Texas, dies in the exchange of gunfire. His wallet contains a poignant letter from his wife, who reminds him that his family is "life's real treasure," and that she "never thought any material treasure, no matter how great, is worth the pain of these long separations."

But the lure of riches is irresistible, regardless of the consequences. In the novel, during an argument with Dobbs, who has denounced him for his "Bolshevik ideas" delivered from "a soap-box," Curtin responds that perhaps it was the Bolsheviks' aim "to see that a worker gets the full value of what he produces, and that no one tries to cheat a worker out of what is honestly coming to him." Curtin is no saint, Traven makes clear in the novel, his morals are those of a society in which "the big oil-magnates, the big financiers, the presidents of great corporations, and in particular the politicians, stole and robbed wherever there was an opportunity. Why should he, the little feller, the ordinary citizen, be honest if the big ones knew no scruples and no honesty, either in their

business or in the affairs of the nation.”

In one of the book’s most important passages, whose spirit is largely captured in Huston’s movie, Traven writes: “With every ounce more of gold possessed by them they left the proletarian class and neared that of the property-holders, the well-to-do middle class. So far they had never had anything of value to protect against thieves. Since they now owned certain riches, their worries about how to protect them had started. The world no longer looked to them as it had a few weeks ago. They had become members of the minority of mankind.

“Those who up to this time had been considered by them as their proletarian brethren were now enemies against whom they had to protect themselves. As long as they had owned nothing of value, they had been slaves of their hungry bellies, slaves to those who had the means to fill their bellies. All this was changed now.

“They had reached the first step by which man becomes the slave of his property.”

And for Dobbs in particular, being a slave to his gold adds to the insanity produced by the sacrifices he made for it. The expedition to the mountains, as it must, ends in tragedy and failure.

Huston’s *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, conscientious and artistically crafted, is a condemnation of capitalism: gold assumes enormously appealing and powerful qualities, while human beings turn to dirt—literally. In the movie, the three leads are reduced to a heap of sandy filth. Both Huston and Traven echo Shakespeare, who has his Timon declaim “Gold? Yellow, glittering, precious gold? ... Thus much of this [gold] will make black white, foul fair, Wrong right, base noble, old young, coward valiant.”

Author and filmmaker are influenced by socialist notions about the enslavement of people to money and gold, infecting, corrupting and destroying relationships. The acrimony and murderous altercations among the principals, who were all poor, diverts them from looking to the roots of the general misery affecting poor Americans, Indians and Mexicans alike.

Walter Huston gives an extraordinary performance in particular. His characterization speaks to a period when artists still paid attention to the working class and plebeian elements in society. The earthy, slang-filled speech in Huston’s movie has not become dated, unlike the words of characters in many naturalistic novels of the time, because universal truths about class society and humanity find expression through its particularity.

The Hustons (John and Walter) received the film’s three Academy Awards, out of four nominations: Best Supporting Actor (Walter Huston), Best Director and Best Screenplay (John Huston).

The context in which this generally left-wing film was shot and released is significant and has tragic overtones. *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* was filmed from March to July 1947. As we have previously noted, the “political situation in the US ... transformed itself within a matter of months in 1947-48. ... The American political and media establishment’s anticommunist campaign had shifted into full gear.

“The House Un-American Activities Committee hearings into ‘Communist influence’ in Hollywood grabbed headlines day after day in the autumn of 1947; ultimately, the ‘Hollywood Ten’ were convicted and sentenced in April 1948; throughout that year the Communist Party leadership in New York City faced prosecution under the Smith Act, which outlawed conspiring to advocate forcible overthrow of the government; in August 1948 congressional hearings (presided over by Richard Nixon) began into accusations that former State Department official Alger Hiss had spied for the Soviet Union.”

In response to the film industry’s blacklist attempts, Hollywood liberals and radicals like Huston, Bogart, Lauren Bacall, Lucille Ball, Henry Fonda, Katharine Hepburn, Gene Kelly and numerous others established the Committee for the First Amendment in September 1947. However, the group’s visit to Washington in October 1947 was pilloried by the media

as a “Communist front” operation and its members soon caved in to the pressure.

In March 1948, only 12 months after filming on *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* began, an article appeared in *Photoplay* magazine under Bogart’s byline. “I’m No Communist.” The disgraceful piece claimed that the actor and other members of the Committee for the First Amendment had been duped by Communist Party members and supporters.

At the time of filming *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, Huston had a number of important credits as a screenwriter (above all, *High Sierra*, 1941, directed by Raoul Walsh) and director (*The Maltese Falcon*, 1941) under his belt. He had wanted to film Traven’s novel next, but World War II intervened. He took up the project again in 1946 once he had returned from active duty in the war.

The McCarthyite purges resulted in the complete exclusion of some, but it also knocked the stuffing out of others. Huston directed two more significant works in Hollywood, *Key Largo* (1948) and *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), but the demoralizing, “scoundrel time” atmosphere had a seriously damaging effect on his artistic life. There are interesting and even insightful works to come, but nothing close to the intensity and social boldness of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* or *The Asphalt Jungle*.

Like Charlie Chaplin and Orson Welles, Huston was essentially driven out of the country. Increasingly disgusted by the political situation in the US, he took up residence in Ireland in 1952 and took out Irish citizenship a dozen years later.

“I left the country,” he explained decades later, “because I could not abide with what McCarthy was doing to America ... [and] I did not want to come back into an atmosphere that was permeated with the stench of that dreadful man. In some ways, I trace the Nixon years with its disgrace to the McCarthy period.”

Like many disillusioned liberals and radicals, he drew fairly despairing conclusions. “The idea of America, the America of our founding fathers, was lost,” he later recalled. “It stopped being that America and became something else. And then one wondered whether it ever had been America except for the founding fathers and a few rare souls. Was it all an illusion?”

Huston’s contributions to American filmmaking remain with us.

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