



**RE-RELEASES**

# The Maltese Falcon

John Huston's directorial debut, this year celebrating its 80th anniversary, turned Bogart into a major star. Adapted from Dashiell Hammett's novel about a San Francisco detective's investigations into the murder of his business partner, Huston's snappily witty script retains the plot's labyrinthine complexity while revelling in colourful characterisations of the villains Sam Spade encounters during his quest. Inspired casting includes Lorre as volatile Joel Cairo, Greenstreet as menacingly amiable Kasper Gutman, and Cook as his gunman. But it's the fraught, febrile relationship between Bogart's Spade and Mary Astor's femme fatale – who persuaded his partner to take on her case – that shapes the deep, dark core of desire, doubt and duplicity pervading the film from beginning to memorable end.

**Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-large**

John Huston's career started erratically; the son of Walter Huston, he began as an actor himself. After several false starts it was not until 1938 that his career in films got under way. For the next four years he worked with Warners on such scripts as *Juarez*, *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet*, *High Sierra*; his first chance as writer-director came in 1941 with *The Maltese Falcon*.

The adaptation is a devoted piece of work. Huston had long wanted to film Hammett's novel and realised that it presented, almost as it stood, all the ingredients for an exciting drama of murder, rapacity and intrigue. Inevitably he had to compress – one minor figure (Rhea Guttman, the Fat Man's daughter) disappears, and the complications are foreshortened – but his adaptation is otherwise scrupulously faithful. Most of the dialogue is Hammett's; the plot development is identical; the characters are as near to the original as is humanly possible.

*The Maltese Falcon* has been flattered by a host of imitators, but never rivalled. Its success is due largely to its discipline; it is composed of many excellences in performance and technique, but such is Huston's grasp that none of these is permitted to destroy the balance of the whole as a piece of story-telling – a strange, fantastically peopled situation working uncompromisingly to its inevitable conclusion. Unlike its successors it never stoops to sensationalism or to the conventional simplifications usually dictated by the box-office.

It is interesting to note that two of its characters at least survived to figure in later films of the genre: the Fat Man (*The Falcon*, introduced by Sydney Greenstreet for the first time) and the false heroine, the beautiful, lethal schemer, here given her classic portrayal by Mary Astor. But the perfection had never been recaptured, either by Greenstreet himself in his appearances since, or (in, for instance, *The Fallen Sparrow*, *Build My Gallows High*, *The Lady from Shanghai*) by any of Miss Astor's futile imitators.

**Lindsay Anderson, National Film Theatre programme notes**

The word 'hero' never seems to fit the *noir* protagonist, for his world is devoid of the moral framework necessary to produce the traditional hero. He has been wrenched from familiar moorings, and is a hero only in the modern sense in which that word has been progressively redefined to fit the existential

bias of contemporary fiction. For the past 50 years we have groped for some term that would more aptly describe such a protagonist: the Hemingway hero; the anti-hero; the rebel hero; the non-hero.

In one respect the Sam Spade of Huston's *The Maltese Falcon*, as portrayed by Humphrey Bogart, is the least typical *noir* hero since he is the least vulnerable. Unlike Warner Brothers' first two attempts at the novel (1931 and 1936), this third is quite faithful to both the letter and the spirit of the Hammett original. The film's one unfortunate omission is the Flitcraft parable Spade tells Brigid O'Shaughnessy, for this is our only chance to peep into Spade's interior life. And what it reveals is that Spade is by nature an existentialist, with a strong conception of the randomness of existence. Robert Edenbaum sees Spade as representative of Hammett's 'daemonic' tough guy: '... He is free of sentiment, of the fear of death, of the temptations of money and sex. He is what Albert Camus calls "a man without memory", free of the burden of the past. He is capable of any action, without regard to conventional morality, and thus is apparently as amoral ... as his antagonists. His refusal to submit to the trammels which limit ordinary mortals results in a godlike immunity and independence, beyond the power of his enemies ... [but] the price he pays for his power is to be cut off behind his own self-imposed masks, in an isolation that no criminal, in a community of crime, has to face.' ('The Poetics of the Private Eyes', in *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties*, edited by David Madden; Carbondale, Illinois, 1968)

**Robert G. Porfirio, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1976**

## **Contemporary reviews**

The son of a famous father – who incidentally plays a very small part in the film, for luck, perhaps – John Huston has used with effective moderation the idea of the camera seeking and emphasising some characteristic, mental or physical or both of its subject rather than its ordinary form. This approach has undoubtedly added to the strength of the very fine performance of Sydney Greenstreet as Kasper Gutman, the arch-crook, and Mr Huston has been wise enough to confine the idea to one character only. His lighting and camera work is unusual in what would normally be unnoticed sequences. For example, a telephone on a bedside table with night-light upon it from the open window plus a side-lamp, the speaker being out of the picture, but the voice heard. In other words, the picture of a telephone conversation. The story is strong of itself with an unusual ending and fine acting, but it is the treatment which makes it the best thriller so far this year.

**Evelyn Russell, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1942**

This is a brilliantly directed, brilliantly acted and somewhat unusual film of its type. The atmosphere is well-sustained throughout and the casting is excellent. Mary Astor as the lovely but wicked Brigid is uncommonly attractive, and Lee Patrick gives a good performance as Spade's efficient and understanding secretary. Spade himself is played with aplomb by Humphrey Bogart. Finally the hitherto unknown Sydney Greenstreet gives a magnificent characterisation as the fat arch-villain.

**Monthly Film Bulletin, April 1942**

THE MALTESE FALCON

Directed by: John Huston  
©/Production Company/Presented by: Warner Bros.  
Executive Producer: Hal B. Wallis  
Associate Producer: Henry Blanke  
Dialogue Director: Robert Foulk  
Screen Play by: John Huston  
Based upon the novel by: Dashiell Hammett  
Director of Photography: Arthur Edeson  
Editor: Thomas Richards  
Art Director: Robert Haas  
Gowns by: Orry-Kelly  
Make-up Artist: Perc Westmore  
Music by: Adolph Deutsch  
Musical Director: Leo F. Forbstein  
Sound by: Oliver S. Garretson

uncredited  
Unit Manager: Al Alleborn  
Assistant Directors: Jack Sullivan, Claude Archer  
2nd Assistant Director: John Prettyman  
Script Clerk: Meta Rebner  
Script Editor: Allen Rivkin  
Additional Photography: Ernest Haller  
1st Assistant Camera: Wally Meinardus  
2nd Assistant Camera: Michael Joyce  
Grip: E.F. Dexter  
Gaffer: William Conger  
Best Boy: William Steudeman  
Stills Photography: Mack Elliott  
Montages: Don Siegel  
Scenic Artist: William McConnell  
Properties: Gilbert Kissel  
Assistant Properties: Keefe Malley  
Wardrobe Woman: Cora Lobb  
Wardrobe Man: B.W. Kring  
Make-up: Frank McCoy  
Hair: Joan Udko  
Orchestrations: Arthur Lange

Cast

Humphrey Bogart (Samuel ‘Sam’ Spade)  
Mary Astor (Brigid O’Shaughnessy)  
Gladys George (Iva Archer)  
Peter Lorre (Joel Cairo)  
Barton MacLane (Lieutenant of Detectives Dundy)  
Lee Patrick (Effie Perine)  
Sydney Greenstreet (Kasper Gutman)  
Ward Bond (Detective Tom Polhaus)  
Jerome Cowan (Miles Archer)  
Elisha Cook Jr (Wilmer Cook)  
James Burke (Luke)  
Murray Alper (Frank Richman)  
John Hamilton (District Attorney Bryan)  
  
uncredited  
Emory Parnell (mate of ‘La Paloma’)  
Robert E. Homans (policeman)  
Creighton Hale (stenographer)  
Walter Huston (Captain Jacobi)  
Charles Drake, William Hopper, Hank Mann (reporters)  
Jack Mower (postal clerk)  
Jack Perrin (policeman)  
John Skins Miller (sign painter)  
Paul Panzer, Sidney Bracey (men on street)

USA 1941©  
101 mins

A BFI release

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Souad  
Continues from Fri 27 Aug  
Annette  
From Fri 10 Sep  
The Maltese Falcon  
From Fri 17 Sep  
Rose Plays Julie  
From Fri 17 Sep

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Stranger  
Fri 17 Sep 21:00; Fri 1 Oct 14:30  
Cry of the City  
Sat 18 Sep 21:00; Tue 21 Sep 14:45  
The Big Sleep  
Sun 19 Sep 11:00; Mon 4 Oct 17:45  
Call Northside 777  
Mon 20 Sep 17:50  
Laura  
Tue 21 Sep 21:00; Fri 1 Oct 20:50

The Big Heat  
Wed 22 Sep 18:00 (+ intro by Simran Hans, writer and film critic for ‘The Observer’);  
Mon 27 Sep 17:50  
The Undercover Man  
Thu 23 Sep 14:45; Sun 26 Sep 12:00  
Detective Story  
Fri 24 Sep 18:00; Sun 3 Oct 12:10  
Rear Window  
Sat 25 Sep 11:30; Tue 28 Sep 20:45;  
Tue 5 Oct 14:30  
Double Indemnity  
Wed 29 Sep 17:45 (+ intro by Lucy Bolton, Queen Mary University of London); Sat 2 Oct 20:50  
Philosophical Screens: Temptation and Coincidence in ‘Double Indemnity’  
Wed 29 Sep 20:00 Blue Room  
The Hound of the Baskervilles  
Thu 30 Sep 18:15  
The Third Man  
Sat 2 Oct 11:30

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