THE MALTESE FALCON: MELODRAMA OR FILM NOIR?

Though Huston had been a writer in Hollywood for ten years, The Maltese Falcon was the first film that he directed. Still considered by many to be his best film (in an 18 September 1950 Life article, James Agee called this third cinematic adaptation of Dashiell Hammen's novel "the best private-eye melodrama ever made"), it contains some of the thematic approaches and cinematic techniques that characterize Huston's work throughout his extended and extraordinary directing career, including his final film, The Dead.

Scripted by Huston, the picture opens with the credits over a long take of the black falcon statue. It is a straight-on shot, a close-up, and the camera is stationary. Although not an establishing shot in the traditional sense of the term, this take prepares the audience for the importance of the figurine in the development of the plot. It also is a vital element to be taken into account in an assessment of the film, for it is one of the determining factors in whether The Maltese Falcon is deciding a melodrama or an example of film noir, a subject of critical debate when the film was released.

Melodrama as a genre has existed since the classical Greek theater, though in the early nineteenth century the definition began to focus on the sensational actions and violent appeals to the emotions. According to various literary dictionaries, the characteristics that define a melodrama are that it intensifies sentiment, exaggerates emotion, and relates sensational and thrilling incidents in which all other elements are subordinated to extravagant sensational action and clearly virtuous characters are pitted against clearly vicious characters in sensational situations filled with suspense, with virtue triumphing over unlikely circumstances.1 Traditionally, the social fabric has been incidental and not the fundamental focus of works in this genre.

Film noir, on the other hand, is a label that French film critics applied to certain American gangster films beginning in the 1940s. These movies are characterized by heavily low-key lighting and a bleak and literally black atmosphere in both the visual images and the themes conveyed. Typically, these motion pictures emphasize a fatalistic, despairing view of life in which dread and paranoia mold the characters' actions. There is a social component involved in film noir as the dark sides of the psyches of the characters are examined, especially as they relate to social conventions.2

The falcon statue is what the major characters in Huston's The Maltese Falcon are seeking, and their search initiates the events that involve everyone else in the film. Still, the statue itself has no intrinsic value--its only worth is the symbolic value attached to gold and jewels. Part of the definition of a melodrama is that it is a conflict over an object that has no intrinsic value so, on a superficial
level, The Maltese Falcon is a melodrama. This aspect of the film is underscored by the legend that is scrolled on the screen, purportedly to explain the origin and mystical history of the figure and, incidentally; to initiate a quest motif.

There follows an establishing shot of San Francisco, with the title "San Francisco" superimposed over the shot. If the next shot had been the start of the action in the Spade and Archer Detective Agency offices, the movie might well have unfolded as a mystery-action-adventure story. Instead, there is a pan of the bay panorama intercut with views of the Golden Gate Bridge and of Fisherman's Wharf. Although it is not clear at this point, the fact that there is a series of establishing shots transfers the emphasis of the film from the statue and involves humanity and contemporary 1941 American society.

The next shot is of a window in the detective agency office, seen from the inside. The painted words Spade and Archer appear on the window in reverse. The camera then pans down to reveal Spade sitting at his desk. By this time the film's underlying thematic events have been exposed.

Hammett's 1930 novel contains the elements that director Huston develops to deliver a film noir, and these opening moments from the movie exemplify how well Huston exploits his cinematic medium in translating the novel to celluloid. In moving from the stationary shot of the statue to pans of the city, Huston directs his audience away from the melodramatic to a focus on the societal. By showing the lettering on the detective agency window, he clearly links the characters of Spade and Archer in their partnership. Because the names are seen in reverse, though, Huston is letting his audience know that everything is not exactly as it seems and that either the partnership or the characters are not pure and upstanding (the lettering reappears as shadows on the floor or walls in a number of subsequent scenes, reinforcing these motifs).

When Sam Spade is revealed, he is seen in a close-up, and the word Archer is seen on the window behind his head. Since he is the protagonist, it is fitting that Spade is the first character shown, that the shot is a close-up (the other characters are introduced in full shots), and that his face is brightly lit. The juxtaposition of his head and Archer's name, after the Spade/Archer partnership has been established by the window legend, prepares the audience for the final thematic strand. Spade may be presented as a somewhat dubious character involved in a somewhat dubious business, but ultimately he is found to be admirable because he adheres to an accepted societal code: partners are expected to look out for each other. If, as transpires in this tale, something happens to one partner, it is incumbent upon the other partner to set things right. Thus, when Spade rejects O'Shaughnessey at the end of The Maltese Falcon, he is exhibiting the highest order of integrity by
refusing to let his personal desires overcome his societal responsibilities. All of this has been foreshadowed by the opening ninety seconds of the movie.

Interestingly, Huston's original script contains only the barest outline of what appears in-the final cut of the movie. The working titles for the 1941 Warner Brothers release reflect how the film took on added significance during its transformation from scenario to celluloid. Neither The Gent from Frisco nor The Knight of Malta holds the symbolic values contained in The Maltese Falcon, and the first two shots in Huston's screenplay (a type-script version of which is in the John Huston Collection at the Margaret Herrick Library at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Beverly Hills) are more in line with those tentative titles:

FADE IN.

1. CLOSE SHOT ON A WINDOW upon which the words--SPADE AND ARCHER--appear in reverse, in big black letters. Through the window we see in the left tall buildings that front San Francisco's Market Street, to the right, a section of the Bay Bridge. CAMERA PULLS BACK TO:

2. INT OFFICE CLOSE SHOT SAM SPADE behind his cheap office desk, back to the window. His jaw is long and bony, his chin a jutting V under the more flexible V of his mouth. The V motif is picked up again by thickish brows rising upward from twin creases above a hooked nose. His dark hair grows down to a point on his forehead. he looks rather pleasantly like Satan. Spade is rolling a cigarette. OVER SCENE the SOUND of the office door opening. He does not look up. SPADE: Yes, sweetheart?

Clearly, with the inclusion of the V motif and the allusion to Satan, Huston was consciously incorporating symbolic values in the film. Even the opening establishing shot through the agency window with the lettering seen in reverse must have been a conscious effort to begin the development of those thematic components discussed above. Still, the shots as described in the script do not allow for the manifestation of the full symbolic significance of the shadowy representation of Spade's world and ethics embodied in the filmed version of the scene--and it is the exploration of these aspects of the tale that transform it from a melodrama to film noir. Huston has successfully exploited his establishing shots, the use of shadow, and the concept of reversal to open what has become a major example of the genre and in doing so he has also demonstrated the effective kind of montage that will become characteristic of the genre:

Initially, the characters in The Maltese Falcon are clear representations of good and evil. As the movie proceeds, these impressions become blurred, only to be resolved at the picture's conclusion.
The opening shots of the film, then, demonstrate how important the first moments of The Maltese Falcon are in establishing the tone, theme, and characterization that shape the rest of the movie. Even today, over fifty years later, the influence of this film is clearly evident in current movies. The definition of the film noir genre, with its dark emphasis on imperfect human characters confronted with the corrupting nature of greed, lust, and evil, yet salvaged by individual moral strength, can be traced to the very first images seen in The Maltese Falcon. Furthermore, these opening shots, compared to the written script, provide a nice example of how a cinematic artist such as John Huston truly develops his creative art only when he is working with the celluloid medium itself.

Notes


PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): The Maltese Falcon: Melodrama or Film Noir

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