



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# The Night of the Hunter

In my film-watching experience, *The Night of the Hunter* is the closest a director has come to capturing the hypnotic, compelling potency of the kind of nightmares we have when we are children. Initially, I was knocked out by Stanley Cortez's stunning black and white photography, but after repeated viewing I have also developed immense respect for [Charles] Laughton's direction and for the actors' performances (in particular, Lillian Gish and Robert Mitchum, but Shelley Winters as Mitchum's new wife is also quite unforgettable). Not only is the film very frightening – every single adult, with the exception of Lillian Gish, betrays the two helpless children – but it's filled with great beauty and compassion for the innocence of childhood. There is a recurring image of wandering, homeless kids begging for food. At one point Gish comments on children surviving horrendous experiences – 'they abide and they endure,' she says.

Like a Grimm's fairy tale it mixes magical beauty with primal fears. While elements of the movie now seem awkward and/or dated, for the most part it still holds tremendous power. My favourite moments: Lillian Gish in her rocking chair on the screened-in porch, holding a gun and singing a hymn with Robert Mitchum who sits just outside the house waiting for an opportunity to get inside to kill her and the children; the love/hate speech Mitchum makes in the ice-cream store while passing himself off as a preacher; the ghostly river journey made by the children with all the night creatures watching them sail by in the moonlight; and, at the end, when the mob of self-righteous do-gooders have turned into screaming maniacs calling for the murderer's blood, the moment when the camera pans off the mob to Gish with her arms around the homeless children she has taken under her wing, leading them off to safety. As Rachel, a benefactor of lost children, Lillian Gish scoops up any kid who needs her – 'I'm an old tree with branches for many birds', she says, 'I'm good for something in this world and I know it.'

**Jocelyn Moorhouse, *Sight and Sound*, April 1995**

Charles Laughton's film proved too perverse in tone and style for its time (a nation still feeling its way out of the nightmare of McCarthyism and the Korean War towards what was to be a post-war boom with its attendant liberalisation).

Given this context of social disorientation and paranoia brought on by an excess of demented authoritarianism, we can see that *Hunter* is a quintessential fairy story for its time. Today it is the film's critique of sexual domination, its deceptive Manicheism and its visual boldness that invites a more positive response. *Night of the Hunter* stands proud of mainstream cinema of the 50s, yet it is close enough to its time for us not to have to make a meal of the way the bits are put together. That is to say in terms of montage it breaks little or no new ground. Dissolves usually bracket and link chronological syntagma which are themselves made up of more or less brisk 'classical' cutting. It is the *mise en scène* that is radical. The emotional shocks suffered by a nine-year-old boy as he confusedly flees from a sadistic father

figure through a blighted material and moral landscape are paralleled by the way aesthetics are quoted, collide and co-exist.

Like all Hollywood film, *Hunter* relies on our empathy. The camera sets us up alongside John and Pearl. Occasionally our identification with John is emphasised by a shot from his point of view, as when at the picnic where Powell courts Willa, John has his tie roughly straightened by his stepfather-to-be. His fingers busy out of frame, Mitchum's smirking face appears in close-up, bottom right, while on the hill behind him, already in his power so to speak, we see Pearl and her doll and Willa running towards Icey, who waits, arms outstretched, to congratulate the young woman on her choice of suitor. While an off-screen John is excluded, Mitchum is integrated into this gullible harem by Cortez's deep-focus photography. Yet he is simultaneously alienated from it: light reflected from the river at his feet plays over his face and lends it a livid appearance that contradicts the Arcadian feeling of sunshine bathing the landscape at his back.

If *Hunter* depends on empathy, it also relies on distancing. We are struck by the contrasting aesthetics at work; we aren't sure which basket to put our eggs in. There are basically three aesthetics in use: 'Griffithian Pastoral' and 'German Expressionism', supplemented by contemporary Hollywood film practice. Like Brecht, Laughton was an eclectic artist who thought the conflict of styles within a work lent it textural richness and dialectical integrity. At the same time the spectator was made aware of the conventional nature of what he saw, he was encouraged to be critical about its ideological bias. In this sense *Night of the Hunter* is a very open work.

Political and economic crises encourage an uncomplicated (and pointless) nostalgia for lost innocence, for the good old days. *Hunter*, made during one crisis (McCarthyism), about another (the Depression), gives an airing to old-fashioned virtues and values. Alongside this ethical consensus we must set an implicit nostalgia for the dear dead days of silent cinema. Before embarking on his first film Laughton studied all D. W. Griffith's. This provided him with a refresher course in filmmaking technique. But Laughton and his team also wanted to create the Arcadian qualities Griffith's use of landscape had, with its emphasis on natural light and deep space. The sequence when the paddle steamer passes Cresap's Landing has just this impressionistic feeling. The presence of Lillian Gish refers us back to Griffith. And Cortez rehabilitates archaic devices like the iris. There is a shot of Mitchum leaning against a tree in the Harper garden. He is intensifying his terror campaign and calls out seductively for the children. As he moves towards the house, the camera irises down to a detail until then unnoticed: John and Pearl's grimy faces pressed fearfully against the cellar window.

**Paul Hammond, *Sight & Sound*, Spring 1979**

THE NIGHT OF THE HUNTER

Directed by: Charles Laughton  
©: Paul Gregory Productions  
Presented by: Paul Gregory Productions  
Released thru: United Artists  
Produced by: Paul Gregory  
Production Manager: Ruby Rosenberg  
Assistant Director: Milton Carter  
Screen Play by: James Agee  
From the novel by: Davis Grubb  
Photography by: Stanley Cortez  
Special Photographic Effects: Jack Rabin, Louis De Witt  
Editor: Robert Golden  
Art Direction by: Hilyard Brown  
Set Decoration: Al Spencer  
Property Man: Joe La Bella  
Wardrobe: Jerry Bos  
Assisted by: Evelyn Carruth  
Makeup: Don Cash  
Hair Stylist: Kay Shea  
Music by: Walter Schumann  
Sound: Stanford Naughton  
Sound System: Western Electric

uncredited  
2nd Unit Directors: Terry Sanders, Frank Parmenter  
Dialogue Director: Denis Sanders  
2nd Unit Director of Photography: Harold E. Wellman  
Camera Operator: Bud Mautino  
Camera Assistants: Seymour Hoffberg, Robert B. Hauser  
Gaffer: James Potevin

Cast

Robert Mitchum (Preacher Harry Powell)  
Shelley Winters (Willa Harper)  
Lillian Gish (Miss Rachel Cooper)  
James Gleason (Uncle Birdie)  
Evelyn Varden (Icely Spoon)  
Peter Graves (Ben Harper)  
Don Beddoe (Walter ‘Walt’ Spoon)  
Billy Chapin (John Harper)  
Sally Jane Bruce (Pearl Harper)  
Gloria Castillo (Ruby)

uncredited  
Mary Ellen Clemons (Clary)  
Cheryl Callaway (Mary)  
Paul Bryar (Bart, the hangman)  
Corey Allen (young boy in town)

USA 1955©  
92 mins

The screening on Wed 10 Aug will be introduced by Jason Wood, BFI Director of Public Programme and Audiences

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Manchurian Candidate

Mon 1 Aug 14:40; Fri 5 Aug 18:00; Sun 14 Aug 14:40  
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Tue 2 Aug 18:15; Wed 10 Aug 20:45; Tue 23 Aug 20:50;  
Mon 29 Aug 12:00

Sweet Smell of Success

Tue 2 Aug 20:50; Sat 13 Aug 18:10; Mon 29 Aug 18:30

Dance, Girl, Dance

Wed 3 Aug 18:00 (+ intro by Pamela Hutchinson, Film Critic and Historian); Thu 18 Aug 20:45

Gaslight

Thu 4 Aug 18:15; Mon 8 Aug 20:45

Persona

Fri 5 Aug 20:50; Thu 11 Aug 21:00; Wed 31 Aug 18:20 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer at Large)

Raging Bull

Sat 6 Aug 20:30; Thu 11 Aug 20:30; Fri 26 Aug 20:30

La Haine

Sat 6 Aug 21:00; Fri 19 Aug 20:50; Wed 24 Aug 18:10 (+ intro by Ginette Vincendeau, Professor of film studies at King’s College London)

Citizen Kane

Sun 7 Aug 14:30; Tue 16 Aug 18:15; Wed 24 Aug 20:40

The White Ribbon (Das weisse Band)

Tue 9 Aug 17:50; Sat 27 Aug 17:50

Kes

Tue 9 Aug 20:45; Mon 15 Aug 18:15; Tue 30 Aug 20:40

The Night of the Hunter

Wed 10 Aug 18:10 (+ intro by Jason Wood, BFI Director of Public Programme and Audiences); Mon 22 Aug 20:45; Sun 28 Aug 12:20

Notorious

Thu 11 Aug 18:10; Wed 17 Aug 20:45; Sun 21 Aug 12:20; Thu 25 Aug 18:15

Bigger Than Life

Fri 12 Aug 20:40; Wed 17 Aug 18:20 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer at Large)

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