



**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 Ikey, 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**

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## 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 (*Icey 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©

93 mins

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## BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

### Persona

Mon 17 May 14:30; Fri 28 May 21:00; Wed 2 Jun 18:10

(+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large)

Mon 28 Jun 21:00

### Touch of Evil

Tue 18 May 14:30; Mon 31 May 12:45; Sat 5 Jun 17:50;

Sun 20 Jun 18:15

### The Tango Lesson

Tue 18 May 20:45; Wed 9 Jun 17:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by

So Mayer, author of 'The Cinema of Sally Potter')

### Citizen Kane

Wed 19 May 18:00; Sun 30 May 12:40; Mon 21 Jun 20:45

### L'eclisse (The Eclipse)

Thu 20 May 14:15; Sat 5 Jun 12:10; Tue 15 Jun 17:50

### La Haine

Thu 20 May 17:50; Sat 29 May 21:00; Wed 16 Jun 21:00;

Fri 18 Jun 20:40

### The Last Picture Show (Director's Cut)

Fri 21 May 20:30; Mon 31 May 12:50; Mon 7 Jun 17:45

### Steamboat Bill, Jr.

Sat 22 May 12:00; Thu 3 Jun 14:30; Tue 22 Jun 18:30

### Cleo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7)

Sat 22 May 21:00; Thu 10 Jun 21:00; Mon 21 Jun 14:30

### The Big City (Mahanagar)

Sun 23 May 12:10; Wed 23 Jun 17:40

### The Gospel According to Matthew (Il vangelo secondo Matteo)

Sun 23 May 15:20; Thu 24 Jun 17:40

### The Night of the Hunter

Mon 24 May 14:30; Tue 8 Jun 20:50; Wed 16 Jun 18:15

(+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large)

### The Killers + pre-recorded intro by Imogen Sara Smith,

author of 'In Lonely Places: Film Noir beyond the City'

Tue 25 May 20:30; Tue 8 Jun 14:30; Wed 23 Jun 17:50

### Alice in the Cities (Alice in den Städten)

Wed 26 May 17:50; Tue 1 Jun 14:30; Fri 25 Jun 20:45

### Eraserhead

Thu 27 May 18:20; Mon 14 Jun 21:00; Thu 24 Jun 21:10

### Man Hunt

Fri 28 May 18:10; Sat 12 Jun 16:00; Tue 29 Jun 14:15

### Sweet Smell of Success

Fri 4 Jun 15:00; Sun 13 Jun 15:45; Sat 26 Jun 11:40

### The Man Who Wasn't There

Fri 4 Jun 17:50; Sun 27 Jun 18:20

### The White Ribbon (Das weisse Band)

Sun 6 Jun 18:10; Sat 26 Jun 16:30

### Le Doulos + pre-recorded intro by Professor Ginette Vincendeau,

King's College London

Mon 7 Jun 14:15; Thu 17 Jun 20:45; Wed 30 Jun 17:45

### Bitter Victory

Sun 20 Jun 13:00; Mon 28 Jun 17:55

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