



## BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

# The Night of the Hunter

### 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©  
92 mins

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**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

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.

## BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

### Miller's Crossing

Tue 1 Aug 20:40; Sat 12 Aug 15:20; Mon 14 Aug 18:10

### Sawdust and Tinsel (Gycklanas afton)

Wed 2 Aug 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Tue 22 Aug 20:45

### The Night of the Hunter

Thu 3 Aug 20:50; Sat 26 Aug 18:10; Tue 29 Aug 20:50

### The Bigamist

Fri 4 Aug 20:45; Wed 9 Aug 18:00 (+ intro by Aga Baranowska, Events Programmer)

### 3 Women

Sat 5 Aug 20:30; Sun 20 Aug 18:25

### La Peau douce (Silken Skin)

Sun 6 Aug 18:30; Thu 24 Aug 20:45

### In the Mood for Love (Huayang Nianhua)

Mon 7 Aug 18:10; Fri 18 Aug 20:45; Fri 25 Aug 18:20

### Charulata (The Lonely Wife)

Tue 8 Aug 20:35; Wed 16 Aug 18:00 (+ intro by Professor Chandak Sengoopta, Birkbeck College, University of London)

### Brief Encounter

Thu 10 Aug 18:30; Sun 20 Aug 13:20

### Merrily We Go to Hell

Fri 11 Aug 18:20; Wed 23 Aug 18:15 (+ intro by author and film journalist Helen O'Hara)

### Love Is the Devil: Study for a Portrait of Francis Bacon

Sat 12 Aug 20:40; Wed 30 Aug 18:10 (+ intro)

### Mildred Pierce

Sun 13 Aug 15:40; Mon 21 Aug 20:45; Mon 28 Aug 15:10

### Beau travail

Tue 15 Aug 20:45; Mon 28 Aug 18:30

### Red River

Thu 17 Aug 20:20; Sun 27 Aug 15:20

### Blue Velvet

Sat 19 Aug 17:45; Thu 24 Aug 18:10; Thu 31 Aug 20:35

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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 and Sound*, Spring 1979