

The Night of the Hunter

By Peter Rainer

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As a teenager in the late sixties, I first saw "The Night of the Hunter" not inside the hushed precincts of a New York revival house but, instead, on commercial-interrupted television. Wedged between the hawking of wares, the film was still flabbergasting. Not only had I never seen another film like it; I had never *imagined* anything like it. Subsequently, in art houses and film societies, I gave myself an education in the great movies of the past; the film's visual influences — especially, and quite consciously, D.W. Griffith, silent German Expressionism, and "The Magnificent Ambersons" — became increasingly obvious. But one of the great paradoxes of "The Night of the Hunter," which is about a deranged preacher's pursuit of two young runaways in the Depression-era Ohio River back country, is that it recalls so many other movies and yet is one-of-a-kind. Charles Laughton, whose only directorial effort this was, tapped into the feeling tone of Griffith's pastoralism; he slipped inside the sinister, chiaroscuroed lubricity of the early Lang and Murnau movies. He gave the aestheticism of those movies a new lease on life and a new appalling comic tone, too: Perhaps the most disturbing and original aspect of "The Night of the Hunter" is how deeply funny, in all senses of the word, this frightening story truly is. The movie can be seen not only as a kind of summation of what came before but also as a forerunner of what would come later, in the yin-yang tonal shifts and slapstick humor of such films as "The Manchurian Candidate" and "Lolita" and "Bonnie and Clyde" (which is also set in the Depression) and "Blue Velvet." And so we have another paradox: The movie is both recipient of a tradition and precursor of a new one.

A big reason "The Night of the Hunter" seems so fresh — even though it was shunned by the public upon its release in 1955 — is because it lacks the well-oiled sameness of mood that even the most notable Hollywood movies of its time had. Its crazy-quilt emotionalism is much closer to how we experience the world now. Still, the extreme mood swings in "The Night of the Hunter" have always disrupted audiences, even its most fervid appreciators. The movie is amazingly soulful and yet, unless you get the hang of it, it can be baffling. When I saw



Robert Mitchum's preacher as the personification of evil. Courtesy Library of Congress

the film at an evening tribute for its star, Robert Mitchum, not long before he died, some in the audience howled at all the "wrong" places, convinced that the preacher's high dudgeon and Laughton's storybook symbolism were flubs, or even worse, put-ons. But the howls, if I'm not reading too much into them, also carried an undercurrent of discomfort and perplexity. In the air that evening was at least the grudging realization that "The Night of the Hunter" was no ordinary movie, bad or otherwise. Those members of the audience who think they're smarter than this film always end up outsmarting themselves.

If you were to show "The Night of the Hunter" to an audience of children, I suspect it might be more easily grasped by them than by adults. It mixes the horrid and the peculiar in a way that kids intuitively understand. The Davis Grubb novel on which it's based is highflown, hillbilly Gothic, but Laughton recognized at its core the glowing radium of a resonant tale. (The script is credited to James Agee, and certainly the film is an emanation of his lifelong obsessions with myth and poverty and Christianity and childhood abandonment, as well as his love for artists such as Griffith; nevertheless, Laughton reportedly pared down or discarded much of what Agee gave him and went back to the book, where most of the film's dialogue, and even some of its imagery, comes from, though virtually none of the gallows humor). No other American movie has so intimately resembled an elaborate children's fable as imagined by a child. The look of the film — shot by "Ambersons"'s Stanley Cortez — leaves the impression of something newly imprinted, as if everything were being seen through the eyes of a rapt cherub for the first time. There's an exaggerated purity to the imagery. The film's terrors are epically black, the enchantments are transcendent, starlit.

Mitchum's roving preacher Harry Powell is a false prophet whose falseness is instinctively sensed by children. (Most adults are taken in by him.) With L-O-V-E tattooed across his right fingers, and H-A-T-E tattooed across the left, Powell is a flagrant demon; his pocket switchblade slices through his trousers when he's aroused. (If there is such a thing as Old Testament Freudian, Harry Powell personifies it.) His nemesis is Miss Rachel, played by Lillian Gish, a mother hen who gathers up foundlings and runaways and brings them into her home. Rachel is as immaculate as Harry is depraved; she lives by the Scriptures and knows them well enough to recognize when they are being fouled.

And yet nothing is as simple as it seems in "The Night of the Hunter." The visuals are conceived in tones of jet black and pearl, but the film is far from schematic: The darkness and the light are always bleeding into each other. Rachel abhors Harry, but hearing him in the night intoning "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," she joins in the singing even though she sits inside her house with a rifle in her lap to defend her brood against him. Harry is a trickster who seems to have entered into the story in order to the test the spiritual mettle of the pure-in-heart, and those not so pure-in-heart, too. If the film has any literary antecedent, it would not be Davis Grubb's book, but rather Melville's "The Confidence Man" or Twain's "The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg," comic-horror texts with a sly, enraged comprehension of man's weakness and duplicity.

Serving time in a penitentiary at the start of the film, Harry finds himself sharing a cell with Ben Harper (Peter Graves), condemned to be executed for a robbery in which someone was killed. The stolen cash, as Ben tells it, was meant to feed his wife Willa (Shelley Winters) and their two children, Pearl (Sally Bruce), who is perhaps four or five, and John (Billy Chapin), who is around ten. Try as he might, Harry can't extract the hiding place of the money from Ben before he dies; but he makes it his business, when he's released from prison, to woo and marry Ben's widow. He loathes her wedding night advances and she loathes herself for having made them. The shy, dutiful Willa vows to become the chaste woman Harry wants her to be, but her face at the torch-lit revival meeting where she proclaims her sins has a hideous carnal ferocity to it. (Perhaps *this* is the woman Harry wants.) Harry mesmerizes Willa into a brief life of terrible piety before finally dispatching her. "The Night of the Hunter" expresses the sheer terror that men can hold for women, and women for men. Willa and Harry are riven by more than the secret of where the money is hidden; they're separated from each other by something insuper-

ably elemental between the sexes, a difference, in the movie's terms, almost of species. Harry's murder of Willa occurs off camera, but we see its aftermath: her submerged body resting in a rusted open convertible at the bottom of the lake, her long hair streaming out in an undercurrent thick with delicate water grass. It's an image to place beside Shakespeare's description of the drowned Ophelia.

Harry loves the orotundity he gives his syllables; there's fire and brimstone in the breath. When John and Pearl, stolen cash in tow, break away from him and race for the river, the low, strangled yowl he lets out is both shockingly funny and hair-raising — a bogeyman's aria. The children's flight from Harry, which ends with their rescue by Rachel, is one of the most supernally eerie sequences ever filmed. (Walter Schumann's buoyant, infernal score sets the movie's mood throughout.) The toylike boat that carries them along the moonlit Ohio is framed in the foreground by a succession of immense, looming close-ups of frogs and caged birds and spider webs and a pair of shivering rabbits. This is the extended sequence that makes some audiences groan, perhaps because it is so grandiloquently *obvious*, but I think its greatness lies precisely in its obviousness. Who, except curdled cynics, would reject the grandeur that comes from such an enhanced symbolism, which is no different in kind or in depth of lyric feeling from a fearful Bible story or a Grimm's fairy tale?

Mitchum had his greatest role in "The Night of the Hunter," and it's his finest performance. His cunning and his torpor, which always carried a sadistic, sensual edge, achieve here a kind of apotheosis. He's more malevolently erotic in this film, with its storybook homilies and bejeweled night skies, than in any of his hothouse melodramas. Sex — the awareness of the temptations it can bring — etches through the imagery; it's what is held back and denied and still corrodes the screen. But it is the hatred of sex — Harry's hatred — that is the true corrosive in this film. He's twisted by his own abhorrence, and yet his writhings are a form of self-stimulation. Harry's consmanship works so well (for a time) with Willa and her townspeople because, in their own way, they are just as aghast as Harry is at the pleasures of the flesh — and just as drawn to them, too. The reason Harry has made such a success of himself is because he shows up in a community ready-made for his handiwork.

Thus, the pastoralism of the Griffith films, which this town evokes, is undercut by Laughton even as it is being commemorated. He draws out the hysteria that was always present just below the surface of these sanctified

rural tableaux. (The hysteria comes from fearing the loss of innocence.) It makes poetic sense that Laughton would cast Lillian Gish in "The Night of the Hunter," not only because she was Griffith's greatest actress but also because, in such films as "Way Down East" and "Broken Blossoms" and "Orphans of the Storm," she expressed both the luminescence of her virginal heroines and also their affrighted souls. In "The Night of the Hunter," Rachel may be the savior of these orphans of the storm, but there is also the suggestion of a life once lived apart from the goodness she engenders. (She speaks cryptically of her estrangement from her son.) Rachel is a worthy adversary for Harry because, one feels, her purity has already been tested. She has seen enough of life to account for the Harry Powells of the world, while Harry has no real conception of purity except as something he must annihilate. And so, in a sense, the preacher is the true innocent in "The Night of the Hunter," the L-O-V-E and H-A-T-E spelled out across his fingers represent the breadth of his existence. He's untainted by complexity.

Rachel, for all her motherly chippiness, sees things whole. The waifs she raises are her bulwark against wickedness; she herself is a kind of idealized waif, gifted with worldly wisdom. (Has any actress ever looked more youthfully beautiful in old age than Lillian Gish?) Rachel proclaims that children are man at his strongest, that they will abide and endure. It's an affirmation that is also a plea. She's soliciting the fates for a reprieve from horror. "The Night of the Hunter" is a fable that passes from darkness to light, but we are left in no doubt that the wolf is forever at the door.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Peter Rainer, film critic for The Christian Science Monitor, is chairman of the National Society of Film Critics and the editor of the anthology Love and Hisses (Mercury House). He was a finalist for the 1998 Pulitzer Prize in Criticism. He wrote and co-produced the A & E Biographies of Sidney Poitier and The Hustons.