# The Night of the Hunter (1955)

*Christian Krug*

*dir. Charles Laughton; prod. Paul Gregory; screenplay James Agee [and Charles Laughton]; photography Stanley Cortez; music Walter Schumann. 35mm, black/white, 92 mins. Paul Gregory Productions, distrib. United Artists.*

Charles Laughton's only directorial work is a stark black-and-white melodramatic fairy tale set in the Great Depression of the 1930s. The plot involves a self-proclaimed preacher and serial killer, Harry Powell (played by Robert Mitchum), who learns of a large sum of money hidden by a fellow prisoner. After his cellmate's execution, the Preacher insinuates himself into the widow's family. He marries and kills Willa (Shelley Winters), then pursues the orphaned siblings Pearl and John on their flight through poverty-stricken West Virginia. The film frequently adopts the perspective of the children as they journey (with the money hidden in a doll) through a dreamlike, and overtly Freudian, landscape. Eventually, they are taken in at an orphanage run by devout Rachel Cooper (Lillian Gish). After a final standoff with her, the Preacher is defeated and sentenced to death.



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

*The Night of the Hunter* is a close adaptation of Davis Grubb's eponymous novel (1953), whose »swift pace, scenes of terror and suspense, and broadly delineated characters« in turn evoke prose melodramas by Charles Dickens, specifically *Oliver Twist* (Couchman 48). The film also references two other major subgenres of 19th century British stage melodrama, the Gothic and the domestic. While it borrows several of their generic features, the film's crucial debt to melodrama lies elsewhere: Laughton's film partakes of a melodramatic modality (Christine Gledhill) that traverses genres and media and works at sensitive cultural and aesthetic boundaries. This may also explain

why audiences originally found it difficult to label and categorize *The Night of the Hunter* when it opened to lackluster reviews, but why its cultural prestige has steadily grown since, as it continues to fascinate and engross audiences.

Reviewers and critics have often puzzled over Laughton's eclectic mix of genres and styles. These include »the kind of bucolic romance associated with the silent cinema, America as the Arcadian paradise of D. W. Griffith, combined with all the shadows that can be thrown by German expressionist lighting« (Combs qtd. in Callow 61). The film accommodates them in a loose serial structure of set pieces: A tight-knit community in the beginning is represented in terms of the Southern Gothic. When the Preacher stabs Willa to death, the film uses expressionist high-contrast images to transform their attic bedroom into a cathedral of light and long shadows. Her corpse on the bottom of the river is rendered as an uncanny pastoral painting; the dream-like journey of her children on the river is shot as a 1940s deep-focus fantasy film, replete with emblematic animals in the foreground; and the Preacher pursuing them as a cut-out cardboard figure is taken from shadow theater. In formal terms, this arrangement is reminiscent of Victorian melodrama's structure of »situation and incident« (Tetzeli). As a mode of articulation, however, melodrama allows the film to explore the interplay of the media, genres, and styles it incorporates.

The film opens with the head of one of the most beloved stars of D. W. Griffith's silent films, Lillian Gish, superimposed onto a starry night sky. A corona of children's heads listens intently as she recounts, directly into the camera, the biblical tale of false prophets in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15). This highly stylized montage addresses the audience as ›children‹ as well; it follows the film's title song, a lullaby (»Dream, Little One, Dream«), and, in several scenes, the film employs low camera angles and props built to scale to approximate a child's perspective of innocence and wonder—tinged with glimpses of knowledge. In François Truffaut's memorable phrase, the film resembles »a horrifying news item retold by small children« (120). As with other set pieces, this opening montage is submitted to Brechtian strategies of *Verfremdung* (Laughton worked closely with Brecht just before the latter testified to the House Committee on Un-American Activities and fled the U.S.). In fact, the film consistently undercuts its affective strategies by means of defamiliarization and alienation. Immersion is off-set by modernist self-reflexivity, and sunscreens, windows, and barn doors double as quasi-cinematic screens. And while Robert Mitchum's over-the-top portrayal of the Preacher approximates a child's nightmare, it also epitomizes an ironic and even camp »acting in quotation marks« (Couchman 177), a presentational feature that draws attention to its own artifice. The film thus highlights melodrama's ability, as a modality, to work at the juncture of the representational and presentational, of affect and distanciation.

*The Night of the Hunter* consistently pushes against the boundaries of 1950s narrative film. For example, storytelling continually interrupts the cinematic flow, and the film is punctuated by suggestive tales whose epistemological statuses are very much in question. Who recounts the biblical tale in the beginning—Lillian Gish's star persona or Rachel Cooper? Is the audience invited to share Gish's sentiments—or does her character utilize them to bring impressionable children (literally) ›in line‹ (they will later follow her like a gaggle of geese)? The film explores such ambivalences, and, by not alleviating the tensions that arise in the process, as Jonathan Goldberg has argued (2016), a melodramatic modality can gain its productive force. Similarly, when the Preacher first

appears to the children, the modes of storytelling, theater, and meta-cinema intersect with unsettling effect. In the scene, John tells a Freudian family romance to his sister. He performs in front of their bedroom wall, which is brightly lit from a streetlamp outside. When his tale involves the arrival of some »bad men,« the Preacher's shadow is suddenly thrown onto the wall, eclipsing John. To a burst of melodramatic music, the children's bedroom stage is revealed to be part of a larger apparatus—the house as camera obscura—and the mode shifts from presentational theater to proto-cinema. The film anticipates this crucial moment with an ›impossible‹ shot from within the bedroom wall that effectively collapses the gaze of the camera and the screen as the latter anticipates the projection (Krug 78-81).

The film enlists such moments of formal transgression to explore the ontological status of its characters. Critics usually point out that in this scene the Preacher's shadow symbolizes the »law of the (new) father« for John, while the rest of the film has been read in conventional Freudian terms as an Oedipal struggle over the mother's body (symbolically represented by the doll with the hidden money [Hammond]). However, its melodramatic modality furnishes the film with a generative force that results in more unsettling epistemologies: Now that his powers of storytelling have been amplified by the dispositif of cinema, John's psyche may have ›projected,‹ or generated, the Preacher—and with it, the rest of the film (a similar point is made even more explicitly in Grubb's bestselling novel).

*The Night of the Hunter* also questions easy character classifications by subtly undermining the values associated with them. The Preacher has »LOVE« and »HATE« tattooed on his fingers, and when he uses them to perform yet another tale—the ostensible conquest of Good over Evil—he visually demonstrates that both are in fact intricately intertwined. His final confrontation with Rachel Cooper, during a long night where she is protecting her ›flock‹ of children with a shotgun while the Preacher sits menacingly on the fence of her property, is set up as a Manichean struggle of Good and Evil but culminates in the two sharing verses in a joint hymn. The affective pull of music undoes any easy distinctions between characters—this is ›melo‹-drama in the etymological sense, and as modality, but not primarily in terms of genre expectations. Even religion no longer serves as a simple yardstick—both characters profess Christian beliefs that are improvised to suit their respective needs.

*The Night of the Hunter* thus continuously dramatizes categorical slippages: between moral categories conventionally used to classify characters; between the actors' star personae and their respective roles (itself a feature of early 19th century stage performances); and, most conspicuously, between type and specificity. While the film invites audiences to locate the action in 1930s West Virginia, where Grubb's novel is set, neither time nor place are clearly identified in the film and the setting remains curiously generic. Gilles Deleuze briefly discusses the dream-like sequences of *The Night of the Hunter*, as the children glide in a state of suspended animation in their boat on the river, as examples of a »›societizing‹ [mondianization]« (59), when agency is depersonalized and transferred from the characters to the world surrounding them. A similar tension exists between ›realistically‹ delineated ›characters‹ and generic types, and it is here that the generative force of the melodramatic mode becomes most apparent. The film threatens to collapse individuated characters into predictable types (arguably John's final fate), while it also spawns a succession of characters based on melodramatic templates. »Character,« remarks Callow, »becomes a kind of conjuring trick« (65-66). For

example, by reproducing the same formal arrangements (an arrest, a trial) in which John encounters two successive father figures, they become simultaneously different and the same to him. The result is a traumatic inability to distinguish between them at the end of the film.

Set during the Great Depression, but shot during another crisis, the Cold War and McCarthyism (Hammond), *The Night of the Hunter* stages paranoid or schizophrenic moments between typecasting and assertions of individuality—a theme famously elaborated on in another black-and-white noir film, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), just one year later. What is arguably at stake in *The Night of the Hunter*, and where the film's social and political significance may lie, is the larger question of whether individual identity positions (a child-like sense of imaginary selfhood) can be maintained in harsh and unforgiving social conditions, or whether they will have to be assimilated into generic social types. Melodrama's potential lies in dramatizing such moments.

## References

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