

# The Night of the Hunter

Noirish or film noir?

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# Introduction

The first time I saw Charles Laughton's The Night of the Hunter was at Riverside Studios in London in 2004. It was on a double bill with Jacques Tourneur's acknowledged film noir classic Out of the Past, which I liked a lot more than Hunter. The latter seemed over acted and strange to me, and I found it much easier to enjoy a film about a private detective who was lured into violence and crime by a beautiful femme fatale. Out of the Past seemed more realistic and *cooler*, because it had people smoking cigarettes in dimly lit rooms and because it was full of banter with sexual innuendo. Lacking these noir markers, Hunter was a strange film, noirish but not a noir, and it was not until I saw it a second time that I would truly appreciate it. With more knowledge of the formal aspects of film, I could appreciate how fantastic the film *looked*: Harry Powell's looming shadow from the street light, Shelley Winter's hair flowing underwater like seaweed, the church-like setting of bedroom scene with Robert Mitchum and Winters, and the fantastic escape by the two children down the river. It also became clear to me that Hunter was unlike any other film I had seen before and I could appreciate the thematic boldness of the film in its dealings with the hypocrisy of religion: John and Pearl Harper's lives are threatened because of a psychopath who uses the Bible to legitimize his killings. Portraying children who were in such outmost peril was not a commonality in Hollywood in the 1950's and Hunter seemed to go against the grain in this respect as well.<sup>1</sup>

In my thesis I will shed some light on why The Night of the Hunter is not considered to be a film noir and what makes it noirish. Out of the Past, the other film at the double bill some five years ago is often listed as one of the most essential film noirs and one of the films which define what film noir is. There has been an extensive debate about what film noir is ever since the French film writers Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton tried to come up with a definition in 1955. Is film noir a style, a mood, a cycle of films, a phenomenon, a philosophy, or is it unclassifiable?

An extensive and massive effort to list all film noirs in An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style-Film Noir, written by film noir expert Alain Silver together with Elizabeth Ward, does not include Hunter in the film noir canon. However, the film is mentioned in the after word of the book, something I will get

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<sup>1</sup> However, a nine-year-old boy is threatened by his murderous neighbors in The Window .

back to. It is interesting to note that other acclaimed noir experts Carl Macek, Robert Porfirio and James Ursini are co-editors of the encyclopedia. The authors and editors have written some twenty books about film noir between them, but no one wants to say that *Hunter* is a noir. What is even more interesting is that another book that Silver has written (together with the aforementioned James Ursini) about film noir has used the iconographic tattoo of H-A-T-E on Harry Powell's left hand on the front cover without mentioning the film at all in the book. This does not necessarily mean that Silver and Ursini regard *Hunter* as a film noir, but is curious that use the iconography of the film on the front cover when the authors do not consider it to be a film noir.

Forster Hirsch's book *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir* is the only example I have found which classifies *Hunter* as a noir. Hirsch believes noir to be a style and writes that the film "contains a greater amount of Germanic stylization than most American thrillers" (Hirsch 58). Hirsch writes that "the disorienting close-ups (...), the prominence of objects, the extreme chiaroscuro, the angularity, the clean, sharp compositions, enclose the action in a timeless and dream like ambience (Hirsch 58)<sup>2</sup>. He also claims that *Hunter* is a film noir that adheres closely to the Expressionist's "nightmare world" (...) because the narrative pattern goes from "a detached view of madness to occasional hallucinatory renderings of the psychopath's disordered mind (168). The trouble with this interpretation is that John Harper, not Harry Powell, narrates the film to a large extent.

James Naremore's substantial book *More than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* only uses *Hunter* as an example of the untraditional reviews in the film magazine *Motion* (Naremore 29). The film has been voted as number thirteen on a top 50 list of film noirs by users of the *Internet Movie Database*, but no reason is given as to why it should be considered as a film noir. One might argue that *Hunter* is noirish stylistically speaking, but I will also argue that the theme and mood of the film is an important factor. *Hunter* is rarely considered to be on the film noir canon, but I will argue that it has many noirish qualities, and I will try to shed some light on what *Hunter* tells us about the largely debated notion of film noir, as genre, style and theme.

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<sup>2</sup> Merriam-Webster OnLine encyclopedia defines chiaroscuro as a "pictorial representation in terms of light and shade without regard to color".

The Night of the Hunter plummeted at the box office and received a number of unfavorable reviews at the time of its release, but is now considered by many to be a classic. Charles Laughton was so disillusioned by the response that he never directed another film, and scrapped his planned direction of Norman Mailer's The Naked and the Dead (Callow 56). Hunter was chosen for inclusion in the National Film Registry at the Library of Congress in 1992 and made its way into the American Film Institute's "100 Greatest Thrillers" (Jones 402). Note that it is listed as a thriller, not a film noir. Cahiers du cinema listed Hunter as one of "the hundred most beautiful films in the world", only superseded by Orson Welles' Citizen Kane (Cahiers du cinema).

Even though it was made over fifty years ago and film audiences have been exposed to an ever-increasing amount of gore and explicit violence during these years, Hunter is still frightening. However, my claim is that Hunter is more than just an entertaining film because it has a message that it wants to get across. Both the book and the film are pregnant with themes of religious hypocrisy, different readings of the Bible, children who are imperiled because of their parents' negligence, people who live under want because of failed governmental policies and the ever-present theme of the corrupting power of the city and the healing power of the frontier and the wilderness in American fiction. Hunter was an exceptional film in that it brought together many creative forces who shared the same vision and who felt the same urgency in exposing the themes of the book to an even larger audience.

# Chapter 1: The Novel and the Film

The Night of the Hunter is based on a novel by David Grubb and James Agee and an unaccredited Charles Laughton write the screenplay. The book as well as the film is based on the true story of West-Virginia's most famous mass murderer Harry Powers who killed two widows he met by placing ads in lonely hearts columns. He was dubbed "the Bluebeard of Quiet Dell", after the fairytale of the wife-slaying nobleman Bluebeard who killed seven of his wives (Couchman 45).

Hunter failed miserably at the box office, even though the film was very true to the successful book. In many cases huge chunks of dialogue was lifted directly into the film. Almost every word of the scene with Powell and Ben Harper in the prison cell found its way into the film (Callow 11). The author of the book, Davis Grubb, was even deeply involved in the writing of the screenplay, as Charles Laughton actively sought Grubb's advice on several occasions. Laughton even had Grubb send him drawings of how he had pictured the different scenes when he wrote the book and many scenes in the film are very true to these drawings (Jones 266). Laughton and his collaborators also faithfully converted scenes without dialogue into the film, like John and Pearl's escape down the river (Callow 23).

## **A Short Synopsis of the Book**

Grubb's book is set in Ohio in the midst of the 1930's Depression. Father of two, Ben Harper robs a bank and kills two clerks because he does not want to leave his "young'ns'd want" [sic] (Jones 148). Harper hides the loot of ten thousand dollars in his daughter Pearl's doll and he makes his son John swear that he will never tell anyone about the location of the money. Self-professed Preacher Harry Powell, who characteristically sports tattoos of the letters L-O-V-E and "H-A-T-E" on his knuckles, ends up in the same cell as Harper after he has been arrested for auto theft. Powell tries to lure the location of the money from Harper, but Harper does not budge and is hanged for his crimes. Powell then goes after Widow Willa Harper who eventually marries him. Willa is manipulated into believing that her late husband's crimes was her fault and that she is a sinful woman, and does not believe her son when he tells her that Powell is trying to find out where the money is. Later on, Willa walks in on Powell when he is interrogating little Pearl to learn the location of the

money. Powell kills Willa, straps her to the front seat of a Model T Ford and dumps her in a nearby river.

Powell puts up a heartbroken front and claims that Willa left him. He terrorizes the two small children and finally learns the location of the money, but John and Pearl escape in a skiff down the river. The children, with Powell in pursuit, end up in the care of Miss Cooper who runs something of a private orphanage for abandoned children. Powell tracks down John and Pearl and tries to coax Miss Cooper into turning the children over to him, but Cooper refuses and Powell besieges her house during the night. Miss Cooper manages to shoot him and the police pick him up in the morning. Powell is sentenced to death by hanging, even though John is unable to tell whether what has happened was real or not in court. A lynch mob led by Willa's friends Mr. and Mrs. Spoon unsuccessfully tries to get their hands on Powell, and John and Pearl stay safe in the care of Miss Cooper.

Grubb drew on such diverse inspirations as Hans Christian Andersen, William Faulkner, and Mark Twain (Callow 8). The influence of Andersen and the fairytale elements are quite obvious, as the children are facing an ogre or a demon in the character of the Preacher and Miss Cooper functions as a good helper who comes to their aid, another typical trait of fairytales. Laughton spoke of Hunter as a “nightmarish sort of Mother Goose tale” (Callow 26). The book features several stream of consciousness-like parts that seem to tip the hat to William Faulkner. Many have referred to the novel as a Southern Gothic and it is impossible not to think of Mark Twain when one of the main features of the book is an escape down a river from a violent father figure.

## **The Film as a Critical Text**

Author David Grubb wanted his novel to touch upon a series of themes that were important to him. The Night of the Hunter is a novel about the battle between good and evil, with the Preacher cast as the devil. The novel is ripe with references from the Bible and Grubb has compared it to a “(...) Christian mural, but without the influences of St Paul and St Augustine” (Callow 8). This would entail that Grubb view of religion was more benevolent than St Augustine's focus on original sin (St.Paul).

Miss Cooper is of course cast as “good”, as apposed to Harry Powell who is “evil”. It is Miss Cooper with her own little mix of religion who saves the children; the institutionalized religion that Powell represents is only after material wealth and hides behind the Bible to get it. This seems to be a fairly conventional story of good triumphing over evil. However, the opening of the film has Miss Cooper saying: “A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit-wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them” (Jones 130). This is sense of psychological determinism, the notion that you cannot escape your destiny, has been listed as one of the characteristics of film noir by for instance Paul Schrader (Naremore 34). A noir “hero” like the Swede in Robert Siodmak’s The Killers seems to accept that there is no point in trying to escape from the contract killers who are after him, because his fate has been determined and there is nothing he can do to change it. Miss Cooper’s speech would also entail a sense of fatalism and that Harry Powell was born “an evil fruit” and that he cannot change, in the words of Spencer Selby, “the deterministic tyranny of the past” (Sanders 98).

It is very interesting that author David Grubb and Hunter’s director Charles Laughton both had a “chip on his shoulders” about the failures and hypocrisies of institutionalized religion. In an interview with author Preston Neal Jones for the book Heaven and Hell to Play With: The Filming of The Night of the Hunter, Grubb talks extensively on what he calls “the gap between promise and gift” (...) in the Christian Church. Grubb had himself experienced “wolves in sheep’s clothing in the pulpit” in his childhood. These were priests who would preach kindness in Church and then be a tyrant at home. Grubb had a childhood friend who had to build a tree house in order to escape from his violent dad who was a minister (Jones 44). This was perhaps one of the reasons why the notion of “practice what you preach” so important to him.

Grubb also criticizes the materialism of Protestantism and Bruce Barton’s book The Man Nobody Knows from 1925 in an interview with Jones. Barton portrayed Jesus as the world’s first advertising man who and “the founder of modern business” (The Man Nobody Knows). Jesus’ parables were to Barton the greatest advertisements ever written and the best seller was an effort to sell Christianity to businessmen at the time. Grubb seems to have had problems with this marriage between business and religion which is mirrored in Preacher Powell’s quest for material wealth (Jones 46). Grubb was a Christian who saw many difficulties with the way Christianity was interpreted and he was skeptical of St. Paul’s interpretation of



the teachings of Jesus. Furthermore, Grubb even links St. Paul to Harry Powell in that both were “very ambivalent toward women” (Jones 52). St. Paul did allegedly write; “Let a woman learn in silence in all submissiveness” (St. Paul) and this would probably be something the misogynistic Harry Powell would agree with. Davis Grubb saw “the equivocation of Christianity itself” as a threat to Christianity rather than the Atheist Soviet Union (Jones 56). This is mirrored in Harry Powell who has his own version of the Gospel. Ben Harper asks Powell in the jail cell what religion he professes and the preacher explains: “The religion the Almighty and me [sic] worked out betwixt us”. Powell further explains his own take on Christianity to Ben Harper by blasphemously quoting the Redeemer: “I come not in Peace, but with a Sword” (Jones 148). The Preacher’s sword was of course the switchblade knife he had killed numerous widows with.

Davis Grubb’s view on Christianity struck a chord in Charles Laughton as he told the author: “Hollywood has been looking for forty years, Davis, to find a story about the church, what it is and what it does, and you’ve found a way of doing it that we can put over” (Jones 54). Laughton was brought up as a strict Roman Catholic and was kicked out of the Jesuit Stonyhurst College in Lancashire, England, because of indecent behavior during a religious service. Laughton was a closet homosexual who had made a new career of touring around America and reading from the Bible when his career in Hollywood was at a standstill. Charles Tatum Jr. has suggested a parallel between Laughton and Harry Powell because both men “make a living reading from the Bible while nurturing unspeakable lusts” (Callow 60). Laughton rejected the Catholic faith after Stonyhurst College and even denied absolution from a padre when he fought in the trenches in the First World War (Callow 25). Producer Paul Gregory deemed Laughton as “absolutely anti-religious in the denominational sense” and he, as well as Grubb, wanted to show that God was in Miss Cooper and not in the hell and brimstone preaching of Harry Powell (25).

Davis Grubb’s book also struck a chord with Hollywood’s hell-raiser bar none, Robert Mitchum. Laughton called Mitchum up and said that he was going to shoot a film about “a shit of a man” and according to the actor himself, he simply replied “present” (Server 322). Mitchum’s wanderings in the South during the Depression as a teenager had made him alert to people who used religion as a means to get what they wanted. His travels during the Depression had also taught him what desperate measures people can take under desperate situations: parents sending young

children into prostitution, people slitting their wrists in desperation and decent citizens who turned into killers for a nickel (Server 34). Mitchum told his sister Julie Mitchum that he wanted to do the film to make people think twice about blindly following people just because they had a Bible in their hands (Server 324).

Though highly critical of religion, Charles Laughton felt that he needed to tone down some of the critical aspects of the book. He wrote to screenwriter James Agee because he wanted to keep the part where John shuns away from the Bible when Miss Cooper starts reading from it, but also make it clear for the Breen office that “we are for religion”. This was done by having John come back to Miss Cooper to urge her to tell him more about Moses (Jones 286). Laughton also wanted Mitchum to tone down his portrayal of Powell by giving it a bit of a slapstick quality and make him less evil (Callow 40). According to Mitchum, the actor wanted to do the film in a more realistic setting, but Laughton made things lighter by adding the imagery of animals in the river sequence (Jones 271). Laughton had initially thought of Gary Cooper in the role of Harry Powell, because he admired his “naturalness and ease”, but Cooper turned it down because he was afraid that it would destroy his public image (32). Robert Mitchum was arrested for possession of marijuana in 1949 and his public persona could not be more destroyed than it already was. His criminal activities did however provide Mitchum with a mysterious allure that he benefited from when creating his rebellious star persona (Server 202).

The Night of the Hunter is a rare film in the sense that illustrious Hollywood hell-raiser Robert Mitchum actually involved himself in the making of a film. Robert Mitchum was known for his laconic way of looking at Hollywood and played in an astonishing number of forgettable and some unforgettable films. Mitchum, who was viewed by his former employees at RKO as “our horse shit salesman”, was very eager to work with something substantial (Server 275). Mitchum more often than not did not take acting seriously, but he was in awe of Laughton and claimed that he was “showing off for Charlie” during the shooting of Hunter (Callow 40). Mitchum’s incessant partying only began to show in the last three weeks of shooting, when he was unable stand up during a take, due to an enormous intake of alcohol and drugs. Producer Paul Gregory placed Mitchum in his car for a talk, but the latter concluded the disciplinary session by urinating all over the front seat of Gregory’s car (Server 331). However, Mitchum and Laughton worked very well together, and Mitchum has

claimed that Charles Laughton was the best director he had ever worked with (Callow 40).

## **The Film as Work of Art**

The Night of the Hunter is an unusual Hollywood film both when it comes to themes and the style of the film. Charles Laughton and producer Paul Gregory deliberately set out to make an extraordinary film from the start and they wanted to create a film that had a language of its own. Laughton was heavily influenced by the groundbreaking American director D. W. Griffith, who directed films like The Birth of a Nation and Intolerance. Griffith is by many considered to be “the father of film” because he perfected such cinematic devices as the flashback, the iris shot, the mask and cross cutting (Kaminsky). However, The Birth of a Nation has been criticized for showing the Ku Klux Klan in a favorable light. The most explicit allusion to Griffith is Laughton’s use of the iris in the scene where John and Pearl are hiding from Harry Powell in the basement (Still 1).



*Still 1*

Charles Laughton made use of D. W. Griffith’s tradition of establishing and closing scenes with similar shots, as we see in the establishing shot of the prison that was also used before the scene where Ben Harper is sentenced to death (Couchman 124)(Still 2 and 3).



*Still 2 and 3*

According to Charles Laughton biographer Simon Callow, Laughton saw all of Griffith's films and he set out to evolve "a narrative technique that was non-psychological and non-naturalistic, which combined visual expression with verbal rhythm" (Callow 26). Laughton felt that the contemporaneous film audience was passively watching films and that they in Griffith's time had sat up straight in their seats and paid strict attention to the silver screen. Laughton, together with cinematographer Stanley Cortez and art director Hilyard Brown wanted to create a film which was intensively cinematographic and that involved the imaginative collaboration of the audience (Callow 44). The opening of the film with Lillian Gish and the children's faces apparently suspended in mid-air also represents Laughton's love affair with the silent cinema, as film-makers during that era often used symbolic images to enhance the mood of the film (Still 4 and 5).



*Still 4 and 5*

There are other scenes in Hunter that takes on the qualities of a silent film. John and Pearl's escape down the river is also a scene which is ripe with symbolic images and it is a scene that lasts about ten minutes without any dialogue (though intercepted by the Spoons discussing the postcard from Harry Powell, a short scene

where the Preacher calls disobedient children “an abomination before God” and another short scene where the children beg for food), which was highly unusual for this period. Laughton, under the influence of his hero Griffith who dismissed talkies altogether, felt that the images were the most important element in films (Jones 116). The Night of the Hunter is an unusual film in that the themes and ideas of the film are “expressed through light and line as much as plot and action” (Couchman 104).

Hunter is also an unusual film because it was shot in black and white in 1955 when color was the norm. Hollywood tried to battle the growing competition from television by churning out films in fantastic colors that were shot in cinemascope (Naremore 21). About half of the films produced in Hollywood in 1954 were shot with Eastman color (Naremore 186). The film was even “more” black and white as its predecessors as Cortez used the new Tri-X-film that was extremely contrasted and enabled the cinematographer to shoot scenes almost without illumination (Callow 46). In fact, the scene where Powell leads the children down in the basement is the first scene in a Hollywood film that was illuminated by just a candle (Jones 117).

## **Reception**

The reception for the film was quite favorable, but many critics saw the film as, above all “strange” and found it to be “too arty”. United Artists followed their usual suit of simultaneously opening the film nationally and regionally, and even though many reviews were favorable, most of them did not know what to make of the film. Neither did United Artists know how to market the film, as the film company spent most of its money advertising for another Mitchum film, Not as a Stranger. The already doomed advertising strategy became even more lackluster by focusing on the star personas of Robert Mitchum and Shelley Winters rather than the important aspect of the children in the film. Furthermore, notices in newspapers seemed to try to sell the book instead of the film, which made the advertising even more confusing to the audience (Jones 350).

Bosley Crowther in the New York Times saw Hunter as a “weird and intriguing endeavor” that was “audacious” which he categorized as a “horror story involving children”. Crowther felt that the theme of “being a child in the midst of sordid adults is a terrible experience” was too much to handle for a film that shifted between “melodramatic and allegorical forms”. Crowther praises the film for

Mitchum's performance and writes, "the scene of the wedding-night of Miss Winters and the preacher is one of the most devastating of its sort since Von Stroheim's '*Greed*'". Crowther's main point was that the film turned into too much of a melodrama towards the end and had trouble with the mixing of what he saw as melodrama in the film and the Expressionistic, allegorical images of for instance the river scene (Crowther *Bogeyman*). In a later article in the New York Times about Hollywood actors turned directors, Crowther went further as he claimed that the film suffered from Laughton's inexperience as a director and that he "gets way out in the left field" when the film made extensive use of Expressionistic flourishes, which Bosley saw as "sheer pretense" (Crowther *Directorial*,X1).

Richard L. Coe in the Washington Post and Times Herald went a long way to slaughter the film and even called his review "Real Villain Is The [sic] Director". Coe's main issue was that the film pictures scenes from the book "far too graphically, always a danger when pictures substitute for words". According to Coe, Laughton and his cast "loused" up the book, from the "one dimensional" Mitchum, to Laughton "whose cheap taste and apparent contempt for the simple people have made this a hideous travesty of the human race", and Lillian Gish who "is a poor choice for the farm woman"(Coe). Coe, along with Crowther, deemed Laughton's use of symbolic images and his influence from Griffith to be superfluous.

The title of Will Leonard's review in the Chicago Daily Tribune says it all about the author's feelings about the film: "Horror! They Laugh at Film Full of Terror!" Leonard wrote that "seldom has so much ugliness been put into one movie, some of it dragged in for no apparent reason" and that the "audience is inclined to laugh aloud at lines that are intended to represent spine chilling thrills". According to Leonard, Hunter was "overacted, over directed and overly laden with clammy atmosphere", Mitchum is "ludicrous" and the film "moves slowly and unnaturally thru [sic] unrealistic settings to a loose, implausible conclusion" (Leonard 32).

The audience laughed at the scene where Mitchum sings a hymn outside of Miss Cooper's house, at least at the matinee David Bongard of the Los Angeles Herald & Express Examiner sat in at. According to Terry Sanders, the second unit director of Hunter, Charles Laughton was heartbroken when audiences did not laugh where he intended them to (Jones 371). Bongard dubs the film "curious", but found it "a shame" that the crucial scene with Mitchum and Gish flopped at "his" matinee, as he found the film to be close to "a really great movie". What ruined it for Bongard

was what he saw as a too clear-cut distinction between good and evil, but he still loved Mitchum's portrayal of the Preacher and paid tribute to the film's "many little touches, such as closeups [sic] of frogs and rabbits watching life go by, while Miss Winters sits at the bottom of the river, her hair streaming with the current in chorus with the reeds" (Bongard).

Gavin Lambert of Sight and Sound started his review of Hunter by stating that the film was, above all, "strange". He expected a fable after the opening with Gish reading from the Bible, but "what follows is a rather uncertain piece of exposition, in which a series of incidents, half realist, half impressionist in tone, abruptly follow each other". Lambert felt that Laughton and his crew had gone too far with the "non-realist, symbolic style in which lightning, the unexpected angle or transition, the tricks of silence and sound (...) are elaborately calculated". Lambert found that Laughton was too much under the influence of Griffith and German Expressionism, but that "the film seems extraordinarily fresh and individual" and that "the neglected resources of silent cinema are strikingly revived". The action is not so much rooted in the Depression of the 1930's, but "exists in its own deliberate vacuum". According to Lambert, Laughton and Gregory succeeded in their attempt to create an unusual film and a film with its own language. The Sight and Sound writer placed the shift from melodrama to fable at the beginning of the river scene, and described the children's flight as "magical" and that the Preacher's pursuit took on a "slow, dreamlike quality". Lambert agrees with Crowther that the film failed at the end, but that the reason for the failure was that "the melodrama is too obvious" and that Miss Cooper's speech about the endurance of children has "a strained and uncomfortable pretentious quality" (Lambert 147-8).

Edwin Schallert in the Los Angeles Times believed that Hunter would draw "huge weekend audiences" at its release in Los Angeles and even put Robert Mitchum on the list for an Academy Award nomination, but both predictions proved to be wrong. Schallert joined in the chorus, which deemed the film to be "unusual" and likened the film to Robert Wiene's Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari, but he also commented "not all the impressions are the most compelling in the world". The writer acknowledges the fact that Billy Chapin and Sally Jane Bruce were the real stars of the film in terms of minutes on the silver screen, and that "there was never during most of the picture such a hunted and haunted pair of children as these". However,

Schallert feels that much of the film “is clouded in obscurity and shadows, which makes its motivation at times dim rather than clear-cut” (Schallert).

Philip K. Scheuer, also of the Los Angeles Times, thought that the film would “carve itself an endearing niche among 1955’s best” and acknowledged the film’s “symbolic allegory” and “exceptional fidelity to the novel”. Scheuer even found the film to be so true to the book that non-readers will perhaps not make much of the film until the chase, with “its basic imagery”. Scheuer found the technique of The Night of the Hunter as “that of the silent rather than the talkie”, but ended up praising the film for its “strange”, “rare” and “symbolic” qualities (Scheuer).

William Zinsser of the New York Herald Tribune found that “sometimes Laughton gets too arty for his own good”, but forgave “these excesses” because of Mitchum’s performance that he believed would surprise the audience. “This is a tense melodrama brilliantly directed by Charles Laughton. On a deeper plane it’s a somber study of good and evil, with characters more complex than the usual Hollywood type. On any plane its fine entertainment and one of the best movies of the year”. Zinsser commented on the film’s Expressionism that made “silhouettes of houses and barns (...) look like a Thomas Hart Benton etching come to life” (Zinsser).

Dorothy Manners of the Los Angeles Examiner saw the film as a “hair raiser” and claimed, “seldom has an entire production sustained the nightmarish feeling of helpless terror as does this picturisation [sic] of Davis Grubb’s symbolic novel”. Manners also described the film as “arty”, “off-beat”, and “different”, but still predicted “‘word of mouth’ publicity of the films many ‘horrors’ will bring many ticket buyers to Ritz Theatre (...) where the film opened yesterday” (Manners).

Hunter had to battle censorship as well as confusing reviews. According to Paul Gregory, United Artists were “bombarded” with protests from church organizations. The film was even banned from Memphis, Tennessee, and Chairman of the Memphis board of censors, Lloyd T. Binford, proclaimed that Hunter was “the rawest film (he) had ever seen”. Binford later admitted that he had never actually seen the film (Jones 354). Even though many reviews of Hunter were favorable, they did not help sell the film and this could be one of the reasons, together with United Artists’ lackluster promotion, why the film flopped at the box office. Ironically, United Artists has made quite a lot of money off the film, because it ran for three decades on late night television. According to producer Paul Gregory, Hunter only



cost \$ 425000 to make, which was quite cheap at the time and practically nothing in Hollywood today.

## Chapter 2: What Is Film Noir Anyway?

It is the purpose of this chapter to illuminate some of the aspects of the largely debated notion about what film noir is and place Hunter somewhere in this debate. The film noir discussion has been about whether is a genre, a cycle of films, a period, a style or a phenomenon (Naremore 9). The French, who had not been able to see Hollywood films during the war, “came up” with the term film noir after they started to see a connection between pre- and postwar Hollywood films that the American themselves had not seen. French movie theaters started showing multiple features of Hollywood films and this enabled the public to see a link between different films. A triple feature consisting of John Huston’s The Maltese Falcon (1941), Billy Wilder’s Double Indemnity (1944), Otto Preminger’s Laura (1944) and Edward Dmytryk’s Murder, My Sweet (1944) could be seen as evidence of a darker, more pessimistic American cinema. France had a very literate film audience and a tradition of taking popular culture seriously which enabled them to look at Hollywood films in a different light (Naremore 13). One thing to agree on is that the first writings on film noir occurred in French film journals in August 1946. Interestingly, the term noir was used by the right wing press in France right before the war, to criticize the “immorality and scandal” of the left-wing culture (15). Some of the writing on film noir in the wake of WW2 viewed the films as a series of films and wrote that the Americans specialized in police stories with violent deaths, a preoccupation with “criminal psychology”, misogynistic characters, first-person narration and flashbacks. The films were seen as very bleak and full of monstrous characters beyond redemption and without the slightest chance of creating sympathy (16). Other critics argued that film noir was a genre and focused for instance on formative aspects such as retrospective narration and the stylistic influence from German Expressionism. Another group of writers classified noir in terms of mood and motif, yet others simply saw it as a phenomenon.

Film noir has been accredited with the quality of being an oppositional voice in America and the French writers Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton wrote in 1983 that “film noir had fulfilled its role, which was to create a specific malaise and drive home a social criticism of the United States” (qtd. in Silver FN Reader 11). Borde and Chaumeton and their essay “Towards a Definition of Film Noir” come the

closet to this author's understanding of what film noir is. By applying Borde and Chaumeton's theories to The Night of the Hunter I will claim that the film has noirish qualities and at the same time I think that it will shed some light on the debate about what film noir is. However, this thesis will also rely on the theories of other noir scholars in addition to Borde and Chaumeton, as it is my claim that one cannot disregard the stylistic aspect of film noir and Borde and Chaumeton did not pay too much attention to this aspect. The themes of anguish and uncertainty, alienation and the feeling of pessimism and dread in film noir were also instilled in the spectator by the use of for instance long shadows, which was a influence from German Expressionism. The very definition of Expressionism is "to destroy the external reality of a given situation and get at its 'truth' or emotional essence" (Couchman 115). The Expressionistic use of shadows in a scene could say something about how the character in that scene is feeling. German Expressionistic films from the Golden Age of the 1910's developed a particular style of "shadow-filled, artificial settings and theatrical high-contrast lighting, which dramatically divided the image into criss-crossing shafts of light and dark" (Hirsch 54). Space in these films is "fractured into an assortment of unstable, zigzagging, splintery lines, of spinning circles and twisted angles". Both the set design and the chiaroscuro mirrored the anguish the character was experiencing and many of these films "were set in claustrophobic studio-created environments where physical reality was distorted" (54).

Robert Wiene's Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari is perhaps the best example of a film in the full German Expressionistic style, as the whole film is set in a hallucinatory landscape of angles and lines that are foreign to the natural world. Foster Hirsch calls this allegorical way of making the set design and chiaroscuro mirror the protagonists' state of mind or the themes of the film "Expressionistic distortion". Later Expressionistic films did for the most part not retreat so completely from the real world like Caligari, but "are set in an approximation of reality that is then invaded by Expressionistic elements" (Hirsch 56). The nightmare sequence is another important influence from German Expressionism in film noir in addition to the chiaroscuro and set design. In this sequence "the film becomes overtly subjective, entering into the hero's consciousness to portray its disorienting fragments" (Hirsch 57).

## A Short Synopsis of the Film Noir Debate

Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton saw film noir as a cycle of films that started in 1941 and ended in 1950. They later “moved” the end of the cycle to 1955. Borde and Chaumeton’s essay “Towards a Definition of Film Noir” is of great importance because it was written in 1955, thus making it contemporaneous with “the classic period” of film noir (Silver FN Reader 11). Moreover, Borde and Chaumeton were the first who tried to define what film noir was and the essay has the special quality of being the starting point for the extensive film noir debate that was to come. Borde and Chaumeton’s idea of film noir as a cycle inspired other critics to think of noir as a classic period of films starting with John Huston’s The Maltese Falcon and ending with Orson Welles’ Touch of Evil, after extending the French writers’ original timeframe. Many authors on the subject of film noir would also place such films as Jacques Tourneur’s Out of the Past, Tay Garnett’s The Postman Always Rings Twice, Robert Aldrich’s Kiss Me Deadly and Howard Hawk’s The Big Sleep in this canon of “classic” noir. Borde and Chaumeton believed film noir to be a series of films from America which shared common traits regarding “style, atmosphere, subject matter...” and that these traits gave them “an unmistakable character” (Borde and Chaumeton 17). The two French critics wrote that series of films reach “a peak (...) of purest expression” only to fade into other genres (17). Borde and Chaumeton, who were Surrealists, were less concerned with the narrative structure or visual style of film noir, as they focused on “the emotional or affective qualities of the film”. Although they claim that the existence of a “série noir” in Hollywood was “obvious”, Borde and Chaumeton admitted that “defining its essential trait is another matter”. However, they described the series of films with five adjectives: “oneiric, weird, erotic, ambivalent, and cruel” (Borde and Chaumeton 18).

Borde and Chaumeton’s essay has been met with a lot of criticism over the years and their theories raise certain questions that need to be answered; How many of the adjectives of “nightmarish, “weird” (John Hammond used “strange” in the 2002 translation of A Panorama), “erotic”, “ambivalent” and “cruel” does one have to apply to Hunter in order to call it a film noir? Raymond Durgnat denied that noir was a genre in his essay “Paint it Black: The Family Tree of Film Noir”, but that it could be classified by “a bleak, cynical tone” and the overriding motifs of crime as social criticism, portraits and doubles, sexual pathology and psychopaths (Durgnat 37).

Durgnat was generously including films like Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) and Lolita (1962) as film noirs in other genres, but Hunter is not mentioned anywhere in the essay.

Durgnat wrote about branches like “Psychopaths” and “Guignol, Horror, Fantasy” on the noir tree. The question remains whether Harry Powell is a modern psychopath? Powell could be an example of “the psychopath as a morally responsible mad dog deserving to be put down” which Durgnat saw as belonging to the era of gangster films rather than film noir. Without a slightest hint of Powell's biography it is hard to blame “the slum environments” of Depression America for his propensity to violence, and thus the Preacher does not fit into Durgnat's category of film noir psychopaths (Durgnat 49). The psychopathic tendencies and religious zealotry of Harry Powell could be compared with Pinkie Brown in Graham Greene's novel Brighton Rock, which was adapted to film by John Boulting. Pinkie Brown is a “twisted” Catholic “who enjoys slicing people with razors”. Furthermore, Pinkie's sexuality mirrors that of Powell: “Pinkie believes in the possibility of salvation and is fascinated with priests, but he also has a disgust of sex and a need to push Rose (a female character in the novel) into eternal damnation” (Naremore 71). There are elements which link Powell to the tradition of the modern psychopath, however, but Robert Mitchum's over the top acting and stylized movements also points to the tradition of the guignol of F.W. Murnau's Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens or James Whale's Frankenstein.

Raymond Durgnat links horror, guignol and fantasy to noir. However, Hunter does not fit into the 1950's category of horror, because villains in films like Gordon Douglas' Them!, Jack Arnold's Creature from the Black Lagoon and Tarantula were not human, but giant ants and spiders or a hybrid between man and fish. Harry Powell may seem supernaturally large to John and Pearl Harper when his shadow appears in their bedroom and this could link Powell to a horror villain. There are also hints at his supernatural powers when John exclaims in the barn where he is hiding: “Don't he never sleep? (The Night of the Hunter)” But again, this has more to do with how children are sometimes unable to grasp the adult world: Powell seems to be gigantic because he is bigger than the children and it seems as if he does not need to sleep because things tend to be exaggerated in the minds of children.

Interestingly, there are similarities between Powell and Mitchum's character Max Cady in J. Lee Thompson's Cape Fear. Max Cady is also a misogynist and a

psychopath who seems to have almost supernatural and unswerving ability to stalk and torment the man who helped put him in jail. However, Mitchum portrayed Cady in his unusual downplayed (almost to the point of being sleepy) manner, which is more in the line of noir psychopaths like Phillip Raven in Frank Tuttle's This Gun for Hire. Furthermore, Cady enjoys punishing women, but unlike Harry Powell he has sex with them. The Night of the Hunter is different from science-horror films of the 1950's because it deals more with "the complex psychology of a murderous religious fanatic" (than) the instinctive drives of for instance behemoth ants" (Couchman 206). Powell belongs more in the category of a modern psychopath than in the supernatural horror creatures of the 1950's, even though Powell is sometimes as stylized in his movements as a character from a horror film.

Paul Schrader acknowledged the notion of a classic series of noir (also calling it a period) and states that the Maltese Falcon started it, Kiss Me Deadly concluded it, and that Touch of Evil served as "the epitaph" of film noir. Schrader denied that film noir can be classified in terms of motif, but focused on the moods of "cynicism, pessimism and darkness" as well as asserting that film noir had a visual style (the preference for night scenes over day scenes and Expressionistic use of lighting and camera angles are some of his examples of style). Schrader believed that the themes of film noirs were hidden in the style and that the conformist Eisenhower America smothered the social criticism of noir. In closing his "Notes on Film Noir", Schrader could be writing about The Night of the Hunter; "Film Noir attacked and interpreted its sociological conditions, and, by the close of the noir period, created a new artistic world which went beyond a simple sociological reflection, a nightmarish world of American mannerism which was by far more a creation than a reflection "(Schrader 63). Schrader lists four "catalytic elements" which helped shape film noir: "War and post-war disillusionment, Post-war realism, the German influence (of Expressionism from German and other European directors and cinematographers), and the tradition of hard-boiled American novels (Schrader 53-63). A crucial influence from hard-boiled fiction to noir is the banter, a sexually laden interplay between a female and male character. Davis Grubb's novel The Night of the Hunter is certainly not a hard-boiled novel, like for instance Edward Dmytryk's Murder, My Sweet that was based on a novel with the same name by noir luminary Raymond Chandler (Naremore 49-51).

Interestingly, David Ashley King has applied Schrader's ideas from his book Transcendental Style in Film to Hunter. King claimed that the film revealed a "spiritual presence" which took the film "beyond the realm of the thriller genre to become a religious film" and that the minimalism of the set design and Laughton's use "of the devices unique to cinema to transform the ordinary" created a sense of mystery and transcendence (King 44). A large percentage of the reviews of Hunter deemed the film to be too "arty", but were missing the point that the ideas and themes of the film were told to a large degree through the stylistics of the film and that the film was "arty" for a reason (Couchman 205). David Bordwell has written books on narration and the film style of Hollywood and claims that "style is not simply window-dressing draped over a script; it is the very flesh of the work" (qtd. in Couchman 205).

Robert Porfirio acknowledged Schrader's notion of visual style and mood as criteria (rather than looking at noir as a genre), and placed great emphasis on the "existential attitudes towards life" of "despair, loneliness, and dread" in film noir. Porfirio claimed that there quite possible would not have been any film noirs had it not been for the American tradition of hard-boiled fiction. Porfirio looked to existentialists close to home in American authors like Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain and David Goodis, rather than European Existentialists like Sartre and Camus (Porfirio 83). R. Barton also rejected film noir as a genre and argued that various noir elements could pop up in different genres like the melodrama and the thriller. Palmer called film noir a "transgeneric [sic] phenomenon" which existed "through a number of related genres whose most important common threads were a concern with criminality ...and with social breakdown" (Conard 12).

Foster Hirsch contended that film noir is "a genre" (because it) is determined by conventions of narrative structure, characterization, theme, and visual style, of just the sort that noir offers in abundance" (Hirsch 72). As beforementioned, Hirsch is the only writer on film noir (at least that I have found) who has called Hunter a full-blooded noir and Hirsch included the film (in what he saw as the genre of noir) because of its expressionistic style. He claimed that Charles Laughton's film was one the most "overtly Germanic" American films in terms of set design, the use of non-realistic space and chiaroscuro (Hirsch 58).

James Damico agreed that film noir was a genre because of its recurring narrative pattern where the protagonist is lured into violence and his own destruction by a femme fatale (Conard 10). Andrew Spicer also considered noir to be a cycle of films that “share a similar iconography, visual style, narrative strategies, subject matter and characterization” and not a genre, because there were many film noirs that did not have the plots which Damico described (11). Spicer, in accordance with Borde and Chaumeton, wanted to focus on the “way of looking at the world” of film noirs rather than formal components such as narrative technique and camera angles (11).

J.P. Telotte resisted the discussion of whether film noir is a genre or not by declaring that the films were unified by the common characteristic of rejecting traditional narrative (Conard 13). Telotte claimed that noirs were about “the problems of seeing and speaking truth” and that an untraditional narrative pattern like telling a story through flashback was the main tool to achieve this (Conard 13). According to Telotte’s theories, Hunter is not a film noir because it is not narrated in retrospect. But one could argue that the themes of Hunter deal with the problems of understanding reality, because John is not certain whether anything that has happened is real or not. Furthermore, the little boy tries to tell the truth about Harry Powell to his mother, but she has been manipulated by the preacher and does not believe her own flesh and blood. Author Davis Grubb and consequently director Charles Laughton (because the film was so faithful to the book) seem to imply that religion was used to suppress sexuality and fill people with guilt in order to make them malleable to the powers that be.

Frank Krutnik has claimed that film noir had to be called a “phenomenon” in order for it to encompass “not simply the standardized [sic] parameters of visual style, but also the normative conventions of characterization, narration, sexual representation, generic production and narrative development” (Krutnik 24). Krutnik saw the “tough” thrillers of the 1940’s as the pivotal example of the “multifaceted character of the ‘noir phenomenon’”. These were thrillers which were based on the hard boiled novels or heavily influenced by them, with male “heroes” who were either investigating or committing a crime (Krutnik 24).

James Naremore deemed film noir to be unclassifiable because it “has no essential characteristics” and because every movie is “transgeneric” [sic]. “Thus, no matter what modifier we attach to a category, we can never establish clear boundaries and uniform traits” (Naremore 6). Although Naremore does not discuss Hunter in



detail in his book More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts, he does mention the 1991 remake of Hunter together with other remakes of classic noir for television in the 1990's (163). With his notion that noir is unclassifiable, Naremore could perhaps be thinking of Hunter as noirish.

## **The Noirish Aspects of the Night of the Hunter**

How can I contend that The Night of the Hunter is noirish by using the theories of Borde and Chaumeton? Charles Laughton's film is not mentioned anywhere in A Panorama of American Film Noir 1941-1953, the book that "Towards a Definition of Film Noir" is taken from and neither is the film included in the 1979 post face of the book (Borde and Chaumeton 165-228). My claim is that all of the traits that Borde and Chaumeton applied to film noir, "nightmarish", "weird", "erotic", "ambivalent" and "cruel", can be applied to Hunter.

The film was released right at the end of the "classic period" or cycle of film noir, but it does not seem to have much in common with the other films in the cycle; it is not (to a great extent) set in an urban environment, it does not feature a private detective with a dubious morality looking for someone or something in seedy nightclubs or smoke-filled diners, there is no femme fatale trying to lure the protagonist into committing murder or other criminal activities, the film does not have banter laden with sexual innuendo, it is not based on a novel of hard-boiled fiction, it is not narrated in retrospect and there is very little uncertainty about the morality of the characters (Conard 1-2). Unlike most other classic noirs, Hunter is not set in a contemporary period; it goes about twenty years back in time to the Depression of the 1930's. Most noirs in the classic cycle of films that Borde and Chaumeton refer to are set in a contemporaneous period. Billy Wilder's Double Indemnity for instance, is set in a contemporary Fordist America and can be read as a critique of the empty materialism of the 1940's in America (Naremore 88). Even though it lacks many noir markers, Hunter shares many of the stylistic traits of classic film noir, for instance the Expressionistic chiaroscuro and set design and the use of low-key lighting (Conard 1).

Borde and Chaumeton wrote that "resounding confusion is at the core of film noir's peculiar oneirism" and that several noir titles are associated with dreams, which is evident in the very title of The Night of the Hunter (Borde and Chaumeton 24). I agree with the character Prince of Filmtides in Joseph Natoli's book This is a picture

and not the world, who claims that Hunter, along with David Lynch's Mulholland Drive, are the only films in cinema history "that lock you into a nightscape of dream" (Natoli 210). Hunter and Mulholland Drive are films that function as nightmares throughout most of the run time of the film. Several scenes in Hunter make use of the "distortion" of German Expressionism through its set design and chiaroscuro to take us into John's nightmare and to make the audience see the world through his eyes: Consider for instance the scene where the Preacher's enormous shadow invades John's room in the midst of the fairytale he is telling Pearl (Still 19). The enormity of the shadow makes it clear that we are inside John's nightmare, because this is a how big adult can seem to a ten-year-old boy. The farmhouse where John and Pearl sleep in the barn looks like it is cut out of cardboard and the crudeness of the form seem to be almost like a child's drawing (Still 6).



*Still 6*

Art director Hilyard Brown's artificial setting and twisted angles of the farm house invokes the "visual vocabulary" of German Expressionism and enables the audience to see through the children's eyes, as the bird cage would be at the locus of attention for children(Hirsch 54).

The world that is presented in *Hunter* can without doubt be described as “weird”. It is a world turned upside down where a preacher is hunting two small children in order to get his hands on the ten thousand dollars that Ben Harper has stolen. The preacher, who by normal standards should protect “little lambs”, has instead turned into a “wolf”. Christianity and religion in general should provide an alternative to a material world, but Harry Powell is completely obsessed with money. The children in the film have to take on the big, dangerous world by themselves because they are abandoned by the adults who are supposed to protect them; John and Pearl are let down by their bank robbing father who chose a desperate, but wrong measure to protect his children. Their mother was brainwashed by religion and did not trust her own children and was killed by her “savior”. And lastly, alcoholic “uncle” Birdie fails the children because of his cowardice and because he fears that he will be framed for the murder of Willa Harper.

The third adjective Borde and Chaumeton applied to film noir was “erotic”, and although there are elements of eroticism in *Hunter*, it is more “weird” than the “normal” eroticism of for instance *femme fatales* in noir. Preacher Harry Powell seems to get some sort of sexual satisfaction from murder and he sees himself as a direct link to God. Powell seems to make up for his (probable) impotence by brandishing his switch knife like a phallic symbol (Still 27). The audience gets a sense of how disturbed Harry Powell is in the scene in the burlesque house when it is evident that he cannot distinguish his sexual impulses from his violent ones (Jones 137). Harry Powell could also very well be a closet homosexual that kills women because he hates himself for not being attracted to the “right” sex and who turns his twisted anger on those he cannot covet. Dave Thompson has argued that Mitchum “offered a gay comic style” and that Laughton’s homosexuality influenced Mitchum’s acting in *Hunter*, because he on several occasions admitted to have been “showing off like crazy” for Laughton (Thompson 22). Needless to say, ten-year-old John Harper is an unlikely protagonist in a film noir because these films were filled with private investigators or people who functioned like one, be it journalists or insurance investigators. Borde and Chaumeton saw the protagonists of noir as “ambiguous” and “almost old” and one “who may throw himself into peril neither for the sake of justice nor from avarice but simply out of morbid curiosity”. Borde and Chaumeton, along with other noir writers, saw the protagonist as “a passive hero who allows himself to be dragged across the line into the gray area between legal and criminal behavior”

(Borde and Chaumeton 22). John Harper is not dragged into Harry Powell's dangerous world because of his curiosity; he is dragged in because of his father's crime and his mother's catastrophic choice of a second husband. He is neither a "passive hero" in the sense that he is victim of a scheming femme fatale, but one could argue that his world has been turned upside down because of the folly of women; his mother would not listen when he told her about Harry Powell. The events are matters beyond his control and this is more in line with Existentialism; "an outlook which begins with a disoriented individual facing a confused world that he cannot accept" (Porfirio 81).

The femme fatale was an important aspect of film noir and it has been claimed that she was a representation of both male sexual fears and sexual desire. Many men were nervous about whether "Rosie the riveter" was coming back to the kitchen after she had helped out in America's war machinery. Femme fatales were both feared and coveted because of their sexuality (Naremore 12). Robert Mitchum's character Jeff Bailey in Out of the Past knew he was getting himself into a lot of trouble by engaging in an affair with Kathie Moffat (Jane Greer), but there was no way he could escape it. Borde and Chaumeton describe the femme fatale as "half predator, half prey" and as "hard bitten as her environment", but Willa Harper is only prey and is certainly no match for Harry Powell (Borde and Chaumeton 22). James Naremore has linked modernism with film noir and has claimed that modernism's relationship with women was problematic, as many modernists criticized mass culture by personifying it as a woman (Naremore 43). Author of Hunter, Davis Grubb, wanted to show how women had held the country together in times of crisis in his book, and he has in interviews expressed a love for Rebecca West and sympathy for feminist politics.

Although there is no femme fatale in the ordinary sense in Hunter, it can be argued that Willa Harper indirectly made her husband commit the murder to pay for her "face paint and clothes". However, Willa Harper is not a scheming femme fatale like Phyllis Dietrichson in Double Indemnity who is seen smirking in a close up after her husband is killed (Higham and Greenberg 34). Willa does not use her sexuality as a means to achieve her goals, unlike Phyllis Dietrichson or Kathie Moffat in Out of the Past. Willa is a sexual person because she has been expecting sex on her wedding night with Harry Powell and groans like an animal when her needs are not fulfilled. However, she is a victim of her sexual desire and does not "win" over Harry Powell,

she succumbs to his preaching about sin and is brainwashed into believing her murdering new husband rather than her own son. She is manipulated to the extent that she still believes that Powell will save her just seconds before he ends her life. In a trance like stupor Willa accepts the fact that Powell has known about the money all along, but still believes that Harry Powell is God-sent:” But that ain’t [sic] the reason why you married me. I know that much. I couldn’t be, because the Lord just wouldn’t let it” (Jones 209). Willa Harper is a victim, and not a femme fatale. However, James Naremore has commented that the femme fatale should not be given too much importance, because “almost two-thirds of the films usually described as noir have nothing to do with fatal women” (Naremore 281). Considering these facts, Hunter can still be noirish even though it does not have a typical femme fatale.

Borde and Chaumeton claimed, “it is the presence of crime which gives film noir its most constant characteristics” (Borde and Chaumeton 19). Crime is very present in Hunter as both Ben Harper and Harry Powell have committed theft and murder, but Hunter is an unlikely noir when one considers the villain in the film. Borde and Chaumeton wrote that film noir is seen from within and from the point of view of the criminals, but this is not the case with Hunter. Borde and Chaumeton wrote that the lawbreakers were portrayed as sympathetic figures of varying degrees in film noir (Borde and Chaumeton 20). Ben Harper is the good Bad Guy and Harry Powell is the bad Bad Guy. This is to some extent the case in Hunter, as the audience can sympathize with Ben Harper’s motive for keeping his children out of poverty even though he has committed murder. Harry Powell, however, is “all bad”. Borde and Chaumeton wrote that police officers are often portrayed as unsympathetic and sometimes as murderers themselves in noirs, but there is only a hint at the ineptitude of the local police force in Hunter when Miss Cooper does not call them until she is certain that she has pacified Powell herself.

Although Hunter could be said to be a child’s nightmare, it does not have a “murky” plot, which Borde and Chaumeton considered being another trait of film noir. It is evident that Harry Powell marries Willa Harper and preys on John and Pearl because he wants the ten thousand dollars from the robbery that Ben Harper committed (Borde and Chaumeton 24). We never question Powell’s motive for his actions even though he is a deranged person. There is never any doubt about the morality of the “bad guy” or whether he is an ally or enemy of the children. This makes Hunter more clean cut as Borde and Chaumeton’s notion of an

“undistinguishable” good and evil does not apply to this film (Borde and Chaumeton 25). The distinction between good and evil is made very clear in Hunter and Harry Powell is only seen in an unfavorable light. There is not made any attempts at explaining why Powell is evil, contrary to the psychoanalytical trends of film noir and neither is Harry Powell’s background described in the novel. A typical example of a psychoanalytical biography in a film noir is Alan Ladd’s character Phillip Raven. Raven is depicted as a contract killer without remorse, but he has a soft spot for cats and confesses his wish of going to a psychotherapist. Raven is troubled by dreams about the vindictive foster mother who crippled him both physically and mentally and this makes him more sympathetic to the audience and it blurs the distinction between good and evil.

Hunter is not included in an extensive and massive effort to list all film noirs in Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward’s An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style-Film Noir because the distinction between love and hate and good and evil are made so clear in the film. This encyclopedia includes nearly three hundred films, but is explained in the appendix why Hunter is not on the list. Silver and Ward write that “the distinctions that define noir films can be extremely tenuous”, and that Hunter and films like Robert Siodmak’s The Spiral Staircase and Robert Wise’s The Body Snatcher “border between the period genre and film noir” (Silver and Ward 330). The authors claim that the distinctions between good and evil are too clear-cut in Hunter to make it a film noir and that this makes Harry Powell “evil personified and little more”, because he is made into a “too concrete force of evil”. Silver and Ward writes that the film “is a classic example of ‘American gothic’ filmmaking”, but they do admit that “some of the ambience of film noir is present”. They also claim that cinematographer Stanley Cortez’s expressionistic camerawork does not make it a film noir, because it is mixed with “stark imagery” (330). Silver and Ward conclude that Hunter is “violent, grotesque, nightmarish, decadent, and yet not hopeless” (...) and that the film “employs the elements of noir film-making without exploring the existential core of the cycle” (Silver and Ward 330).

The Night of the Hunter as both book and film can resemble for instance the novels of Charles Brockden Brown, who is considered to be the founder of American gothic. Brown placed the “religion and violence (...) tinged with a sexual edge” of English gothic and replaced the gothic castles with an American setting of back roads and “perils of the western wilderness”. This could be a description of Hunter, but

Charles Laughton's film is more skeptical of religion than what was the norm in American gothic (Couchman 36-37).

Author Davis Grubb has explained to Preston Neal Jones that he did not make up a biography for the Preacher because he was more interested in him as a symbol of the hypocrisy of the church (Jones 56). Jack Ravage claimed that the fact that Harry Powell's intentions or background is not explained made the audience of the 1950's uneasy, because they were used to the traditions of the melodrama where "resolutions are clear and uncompromising". Ravage compared *Hunter* with other Hollywood films about religious hypocrisy and religious exploitation like Richard Brook's Elmer Gantry, King Vidor's Hallelujah! and Frank Capra's The Miracle Woman, but found that for instance Elmer Gantry's motivations were clear to the audience: he was just a con man who happened to see an opportunity to trick people into giving him money through revivalist meetings. Elmer Gantry, Hallelujah and Miracle Woman are moral tales with clear-cut negative protagonists whose example should not be followed (Ravage 46). The audience does not know why Harry Powell is so desperate to get the loot from the robbery. He tells Ben Harper that he wants to build a church, but this motive is rather dubious, because he has killed twelve wealthy widows (or twenty as Walt Spoon screams out in the courthouse scene) prior to Willa Harper and would have had the sufficient funds to build a church already. Without some kind of biography for Harry Powell, the audience had to decide for themselves why he was so evil and this made them uneasy.

Comparing Elmer Gantry and The Night of the Hunter is interesting because both films deal with con men that use religion to enhance their personal wealth. However, Hunter is by far a more sinister film than Elmer Gantry. Harry Powell is a killer; Elmer Gantry is a lady killer (in the most positive connotation of the word). Powell is unadulterated evil, but Gantry is seen in an increasingly sympathetic light throughout the film, even though he is a scheming alcoholic with a low sexual moral. Gantry even protects the prostitute who sold the story of their many "meetings" to the press and as a result destroyed his public persona. Harry Powell on the other hand, wants to kill all the prostitutes in the world, but regrets that this is impossible as he explains to God: "There are too many of them. You can't kill a world" (*The Night of the Hunter*). Hunter is bolder in its social criticism than Gantry also when one considers the difference between the five years which separated them: Elmer Gantry was released after the weakening of the censorship of the Breen Office, after the death

of Joseph McCarthy and after the most fervent witch hunt for communists had ended. The Breen Office still had a strong position in Hollywood when *Hunter* was released and the Red Scare of the 1950's was still making its presence felt in every level of society. Elmer Gantry even begins with a warning that the makers of the film are not against religion and that children should not watch it, but *Hunter*, a film with a much sinister outlook on religion and religious exploitation, does not have such a warning.

Borde and Chaumeton believed that film noir had “renovated the theme of violence” because “it abandoned the adventure film convention of the fair fight” (Borde and Chaumeton 22). A good example of the unfair power balance between the children and the Preacher is the scene where Harry Powell towers over little John and with malaise tells him that he is going to marry his mother. The notion of a “fair fight” does not apply to Hunter, because Powell has singled out women and children as his victims (Borde and Chaumeton 22).

Preacher Powell seems to fit well into Borde and Chaumeton's category of “unknown breed” of killers, who kill people without a hint of remorse, but he is made into a very sinister killer even by film noir standards by the fact that he is using the Bible to justify his actions. Preacher Harry Powell fits perfectly in the French writers' category of “sanctified killers” in that he is a (supposedly) God-fearing killer of women and children (Borde and Chaumeton 21).

Although many of Borde and Chaumeton's views on film noir fit well with Hunter, the idea that the general perspective of noirs was realistic does not apply to the film in question (Borde and Chaumeton 24). Hunter is to a large degree a child's nightmare seen through the eyes of John Harper and an allegorical tale of good and evil. *Hunter*, like many film noirs, is made up by a mixture of location shots (which would entail realism) and German Expressionism. Film noir has had the ability to mix the contradictory styles of post-war realism and the “distortion” of reality of German Expressionism in “a uniform style”, according to Paul Schrader (Schrader 56). By “realistic” I mean scenes that are lifelike artistic representations. Amongst the realistic scenes in Hunter are the opening scene of the helicopter shot of the boys who discover one of Harry Powell's victims, the first scene with John and Uncle Birdie by the river, the picnic scene where Powell endears himself with the locals, and the day scenes at Miss Cooper's “orphanage”. This could be self explanatory, but most of the scenes which are shot during the day and on location, are more “realistic” or more “neutral” than the scenes which were shot at night and influenced by German Expressionism.



Borde and Chaumeton focused on the level of violence in film noir and wrote, “noir film is a film of death” (Borde and Chaumeton 19). The violence towards women and children in *Hunter* qualifies the film as a film of death. Borde and Chaumeton wrote, “often the noir aspect is linked to a character, a scene, a setting”. They concluded that Robert Wise’s *The Set Up* “is a good documentary on boxing: it becomes a film noir in the sequence when scores are settled by a savage beating in a blind alley”. Furthermore, Borde and Chaumeton linked Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope* to noir “through its intriguing sadism, and Harry Powell can most definitely be categorized as a sadist because of his hideous acts towards the children (Borde and Chaumeton 18).

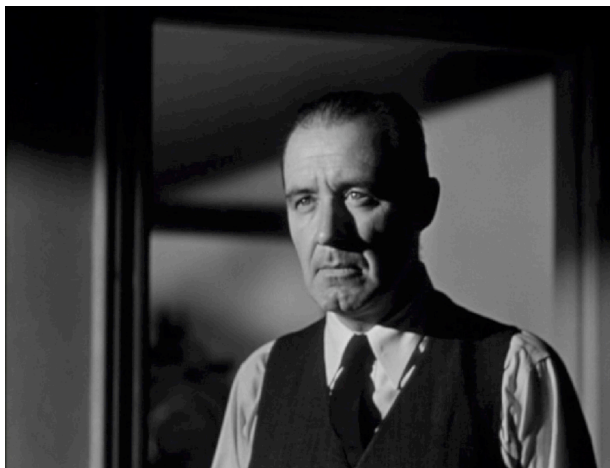
### **The Malaise and Social Criticism of *The Night of the Hunter***

Borde and Chaumeton wrote in hindsight “film noir had fulfilled its role, which was to create a specific malaise and to drive home a social criticism of the United States” (qtd. in Silver and Ursini 11). Film Noir has been given the quality of being an oppositional voice in American cinema, although this has been contended by for instance Robert B. Ray who has written extensively on Hollywood’s tendency to reconcile contradictory myths in his book *A certain tendency of the Hollywood cinema, 1930-1980*. Ray argues that one of the reasons why for instance Orson Welles had difficulties finding work in Hollywood was that he did not reconcile the conflicting “American myths of success (celebrating energy and ambition) and the simple life (warning that power and wealth corrupt) ” (Ray 58). Welles was even listed by the FBI as a “threat to the internal security” of the United States between 1945 and 1950 (Naremore 130). It is very interesting that Borde and Chaumeton mention Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane*, because both Welles and Charles Laughton had difficulties finding work in Hollywood after their groundbreaking films because they both raised questions about the origins of the American civilization (Ray 57). True, Laughton never directed another film again, but Welles had to go outside of Hollywood for the most part of his career after *Citizen Kane*, but the link is still evident as both films were box office failures (*Citizen Kane*) Ray claims that the audience was left in a state of flux because they were used to “happy endings” or the reconciliation of contradictory myths, and that these myths are reconciled to avoid the necessity for choice (Ray 57). Americans saw that their perhaps most treasured and

mythical term “individualism” was threatened after WW2, because they had to give up some of their individualism in order to help the community (63). This was typically done, by having a protagonist who was an outlaw hero: he was reluctant to help in times of crisis, but would give up some of his individualism for a short period of time.

The Night of the Hunter may seem to raise questions about capital punishment and the government’s right to execute people. Grubb never made the link between Powell and McCarthy explicit, but he did base John and Pearl on the Rosenberg orphans. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed in 1953 because of their alleged espionage for the Soviet Union, so there are links to the witch-hunt on communists in 1950’s America (Jones 54).

Furthermore, after Ben Harper has been executed we see the prison guard Bart who seems to feel remorse after he has “dropped” Harper. He washes his hands thoroughly as if to clean himself of the act he has just carried through and expresses his doubts about staying in the job as executioner to his wife. The prison guard then tucks in his two children in a parallel to the two children he has just minutes ago made fatherless. To make the (alleged) criticism against capital punishment even clearer to the audience, a shot of the guard standing immersed in shadows as if to symbolize the darkness of his mood is followed by a shot of a group of children maliciously bullying John and Pearl with a song: “Hing, hang, hung! See what the hangman done!” By making the beginning of the song supersede the image of the taunting children, the cruel lyrics are accompanying the shot of Bart staring into open space with an empty and sorrowful gaze, thus accentuating the notion that Bart is regretting his actions (Still 7).



*Still 7*

However, Bart looks forward to executing Powell and any question of the criminality of the state is answered with a big “no”. Billy Wilder famously left out a scene of the execution of the protagonist in Double Indemnity after pressure from the film

company. The scene depicted an executing by gas in detail and showed a devastated

college who had helped convict the man who was executed (Naremore 93). Both Double Indemnity and Hunter questioned the killing machinery of state executions, and both failed to carry its criticism through.

“Fredrick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, with its vision of American culture’s abiding dependence on the openness once available in the American West,” is one of the most important myths in American culture and another myth that Robert Ray discusses extensively. The idea that “as long as we have a lot of space, we’re ok” has been said to be the foundation for the colonization of the New World, the externalized frontier of Vietnam and Kennedy’s “New Frontier” (Ray 251-254). The abundance of space was closely linked with the notion that great economical wealth was possible in America. However, there was a growing sadness in the loss of the actual American Frontier as Americans began to see the end of it (256). Furthermore, the notion of escape on the frontier is a crucial myth in American culture, as this was where one could withdraw from the restrictions of society and be truly individualistic. As beforementioned, Hollywood used the reconciliatory pattern to avoid making a decision between for instance individualism and collectivism. Hunter does not support the conflicting myths of individualism vs. community because the frontier (which could nurture individualism) is not a safe place for John and Pearl, and contradictory myths are not reconciled. There is no longer an abundance of space and the frontier can only for a short while provide safety for the little children as the restrictions of society in the form of (though deranged) institutionalized religion catches up with them.

### **“A Faith Deformed”**

Hunter is ripe with social criticism and one of the main themes of the film is that of religious hypocrisy. As beforementioned, writer Davis Grubb and director Charles Laughton as well as actor Robert Mitchum were very skeptical of religious zealotry. As beforementioned, the film was met by bans and censorship by various Christian organizations and the Legion of Decency gave the film a class B designation and deemed it to be “Morally Objectionable in Part for All” because of “suggestive sequences (that) tend to degrade the dignity of marriage”. The Protestant Motion Picture Council claimed, “this study in human terror will be offensive to most religious people” (Couchman 204).

Hunter may seem to have a happy ending as John and Pearl are saved from their homicidal stalker and are safe in the care of Miss Cooper. This would entail that there is nothing wrong with American civilization, and that everything is all right when the problematic individual (Harry Powell) has been taken care of. This is in line with Robert Ray's idea of "right cycle" films, where vigilante outlaw heroes fix the ills of society, "the bad guys", so that society can go back to normal (Ray 306-307). However, author Davis Grubb and subsequently Charles Laughton held a mirror up to Americans and they were forced to take a long, hard look at the darker aspects of Christianity. Hunter deals with subjects such as the struggle between love and hate and "a religion driven by hatred and a religion rooted in love" (Couchman 203). John and Pearl are safe in the hands of Miss Cooper, but the contradictory myths of adventure/domesticity are not reconciled because both their parents have been killed (Ray 187). Furthermore, Walter Schumann's score that accompanies the final scene suggests that all is not well. A victorious theme played by a string section seems to insinuate that evil has been combated, but chords in the brass section which echo the Preacher's theme blend in and the Christmas card-quality of the last scene fades to black (Still 8). The audience is reminded that evil also abides and endures (Couchman 172). Even if one would consider the ending of Hunter a happy one, the themes of the film still seem to be saying that there is something wrong with the foundations of the American civilization: Preacher Harry Powell is trying to kill two young children in order to get his hands on the money and he is using religion to justify his actions.



*Still 8*

#### Foreign

observers, like Alexis de Tocqueville has observed the profound influence religion has had on the American civilization: "there is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over

the souls of men than in America" (qtd. in Waibel 367). The Puritans viewed the New World as "a city upon a hill", an example of the rest of the Christian world to follow.

This idea had again been adopted by the secular world in the idea of America's "Manifest destiny". As a result, religion in America is closely linked with patriotism, and President Dwight Eisenhower has summed up the importance of religion, regardless of what that religion is: "Our government makes no sense, unless it is founded in a deeply religious faith-and I don't care what it is" (Marsden Religion 214). Eisenhower's statement also sheds some light on the political climate at the time of the film's release, as the importance of religion and church attendance was significant in the conformist 1950's in America. Interestingly, the mix of the secular and the religious was analyzed by Will Herberg in his study Protestant-Catholic-Jew and he found that Americans believed in democracy, individualism, optimism, idealism, humanitarianism, nationalism and tolerance of other Americans rather than Christianity: the "American Way of Life" trumped over religion. The analysis of popular religion found that ninety percent of all Americans obeyed the law of "love thy neighbor", but that a large percent did not extend that love to communists. Clearly, the "American way of life" was a more important "religion" than for instance Christianity in the 1950's. Church membership increased dramatically from 1940 to 1960 and "church membership represented a way to overcome isolation and to embrace community norms". Furthermore, churchgoing marked the contrast to the officially atheist Soviet Union (Boyer 125). Author of Hunter, Davis Grubb, was skeptical of using Christianity to demonize the atheist Soviet Union and communists in America. Simon Callow has made a connection between Harry Powell and Senator Joseph McCarthy: the latter was a communist hunter, he used all means (which he believed was) necessary to hunt down his victims and "he too had come with a sword to bring destruction on the enemies of the Lord" (Callow 66).

Mark T. Conard has linked Nietzsche and his idea that God is dead to film noir: "For Americans, our belief in what Nietzsche is calling God, the sense, the order, and meaning of our lives and the world, is encapsulated in our idealism: our faith in God, progress, and the indomitable American spirit". Conard agrees with Barton R. Palmer's notion that film noir presents "the obverse of the American dream" because its nihilism, pessimism and alienation are proof that God is dead (Conard 19).

Although Harry Powell has created his own special kind of Christianity, one could claim that he belongs in the category of a religious fundamentalist. George M. Marsden has presented a simplified definition of the term: "A fundamentalist is an

evangelical who is angry about something”. This “something” is often changes in theology and the ever-shifting norms and values of society, and fundamentalists are militant in their opposition (Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism* 1). Marsden also writes that it is difficult to define both evangelicalism and fundamentalism because they are religious movements, not religious organizations with a membership list. However, evangelical became the common name for the revival movement which was so dominant in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and which would also increase in popularity in the 1930’s, the time period *The Night of the Hunter* is set in. Evangelicalism and fundamentalism involves a very literal reading of the Bible and claim that the Bible is based on actual historical events (Marsden, *Fundamentalism* 188). The revival movement of evangelicalism and fundamentalism would entail “simple biblical preaching in a fervent style that would elicit dramatic conversion experiences” (*Understanding Fundamentalism* 2). Harry Powell’s dramatic speech of “left hand and right hand” resembles the passionate preaching style of for instance Billy Graham, who “carried the revival movement to massive national success” (69). Graham used modern technology and dramatic story telling in his sermons, “but the message that he sent forth in his riveting voice, Bible in hand, was the age-old one of human sinfulness and God’s grace” (Boyer 126).

It has been suggested that the heritage from the Puritans who came to the New World has helped shape the American’s collective self-understanding through their focus on for instance diligence and individualistic reading of the Bible (Puritan). Interestingly, there are several links between Harry Powell and John Winthrop who led a group of Puritans to the New World. Winthrop is the father of the term “a city upon a hill”, meaning that American would be a Christian state for all to imitate. He believed that the Puritans like the Israelites, had a special covenant with God and that the nation’s success depended on the keeping of this contract (Marsden *Fun* 17). As beforementioned, Powell believes that his version of Christianity was worked out between God and him, and that he is on a special mission from God. As a parallel, many of the Puritans who came to what was to become America used religion to justify their dehumanizing and killing of Native Americans. Just one example is Commander John Mason (who was a Puritan) and his tactics during the Pequot War of 1637: Mason and his men killed around seven hundred Pequots in a village and burned them on a fire. The Puritans then stood around the fire of burning flesh and prayed to God to thank him “who had wrought so wonderfully for them” (Zinn 15).

John Mason explained the massacre of men, women and children as divinely driven, and that God had pushed the Pequots into “a fiery oven” (Takaki 42). Harry Powell seems to be the personification of what author David Grubb and director Charles Laughton despised about religion; people hiding behind Christianity to enhance their material wealth. The Puritans who came to the New World quite conveniently turned to the Bible to justify their use of force to take over “Indian” land, as Romans 13:2 tell that whoever resists this “inheritance” resists the will of God and “they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation” (Zinn 14).

Hunter breaks with the idea of American Exceptionalism, the notion that Americans were free from the corrupting powers of the Old World (Ray 56). The two main reasons why people emigrated to the New World was the prospect of acquiring land and being free from religious persecution. These are even the very foundations of the American constitution as the First Amendment professes free exercise of religion (First Amendment). The Puritans and Quakers are some examples of religious groups who fled from England to the New World in order to be able to practice their faith. Hunter presents a very dark image of “a city upon a hill” because a free exercise of religion seems impossible. Harry Powell views everyone who does not share his vision of his make shift Christianity as infidels and therefore Hunter seems to imply that “the city upon a hill” is an empty myth: the safe haven has turned into a nightmare when a person of the cloth is trying to kill innocent “little lambs”.

Richard Slotkin has argued in his book Regeneration through violence: the mythology of the American frontier 1600-1860 that the frontier experience has created an American “propensity for violence”. Slotkin claimed that “regeneration through violence is the basic myth in American culture” and that the most common incarnation of that myth is the captivity narrative, in which the Puritans’ ambivalent responses towards the New World were processed. The captivity narrative involved a violent rescue of white women from the “savage” and “libidinous” Native Americans. Slotkin argued that the newcomers saw the New World “as both an abundant garden and a terrifyingly hostile wilderness” (qtd. in Ray 358). They wanted to “subdue the wilderness without becoming like it, to participate in its freedom without yielding to its temptations” (Ray 358). Slotkin argued “the American tendency to find justification through violence and conquest explains not only the raid on American land but also the atrocity in Vietnam” (Slotkin 562-3).

With his own twisted version of Christianity Harry Powell views himself as the last stance against total moral corruption and his (probable) impotence could be causing sexual frustration and thus intensifying his propensity for violence. In his mind, the little children are what the Native American children were two the (among others) Puritan settlers in the New World: an obstruction against material wealth that had to be taken care of. At the beginning of Hunter, Harry Powell is having a conversation with God while driving through the countryside; “Well, now, what’s it to be, Lord? Another widow? (...) You always send me forth to preach your word. Sometimes I think you don’t understand me, not that you mind the killing, your book is full of ‘em” (The Night of the Hunter). Robert Mitchum was filmed passing a cemetery to accentuate the idea that his version of Christianity involves the killing of infidels (Still 9).



*Still 9*

Harry Powell professed to have a special kind of Christianity, “the religion the Almighty and me worked out betwixt us” (Jones 148). Powell, like the Puritans, believed that he had a divine right to take over the belongings of the heathens. The



Puritans turned to Psalms 2:8: “Ask of me, and I shall give thee, the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession” (Zinn 14).

Harry Powell is a fictional example of someone who is rewriting the Bible, but there are factual examples of this as well: Joseph Smith Jr., the founder of the Latter Day Saint movement or Mormonism, claimed to have found a book with a record of “God’s dealings with ancient Israelite inhabitants of the Americas” nearby his home. Smith interpreted this book into what was to become the Book of Mormon and it is the general consensus among Mormons that this is an equal to the Bible (Joseph Smith Jr.). Furthermore, Joseph Smith Jr. also dictated his personal version of the Bible, “the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible (Joseph Smith’s translation of the Bible). Although Harry Powell is a deranged killer and Joseph Smith was not, the link to between the two is still relevant because they both presented their own version of the Bible. Powell is an evangelical “TV-preacher” in the extreme sense set in the Depression; he goes further than any other Evangelical minister in his relentless collection of funds for his “congregation”.

The gullible Spoons represent another example of “a faith deformed” in The Night of the Hunter. Icky Spoon functions as a matchmaker and sets up the first “date” between Willa Harper and Harry Powell, but she forgets all about turning the other cheek when Powell’s horrible actions are revealed. Icky screams, “lynch him!” in the courthouse, and she leads the lynch mob together with her husband Walt at the end of the film. Icky dismisses sex and the natural world of instincts in the film, but seems completely overtaken by her feelings and almost drunk with rage, when she crudely exposes the little children to the lynch mob to whip them into frenzy yet again. The Christian townsfolk seem more concerned with the fact that they have been tricked than the well being of the little orphans as the lynch mob marches through town (Still 10).



*Still 10*

The colonists who came to the New World saw themselves as ruled by the mind rather than the body and that the Native Americans were savages ruled by their passions. European

civilization required people to repress the instinctual forces of nature, but the Spoons are completely overtaken by passionate hate when they want to lynch Harry Powell (Takaki 32). The Spoons are using the religion of love to carry out an action of hate.

With all this focus on religion and the darker side of faith, one could wonder if The Night of the Hunter is a religious movie in the line of contemporaneous epics from the Bible, like William Dieterle's Salome or Mervyn LeRoy's Quo Vadis. Hollywood had turned to the Bible to battle the ever-growing competition from television in need of larger-than-life narratives and they were filmed in Cinemascope and in color to differentiate the product from the limitations of television. These films were simply "living pictures of memorable biblical incidents" and the film audience could revel "in a pious hedonism" (Couchman 203). No questions were asked about the darker side of the faith and the films were just complying to the notion that there was nothing wrong with Christianity or the American civilization. Hunter, however, raised questions about Christianity and the American society, thus distinguishing it from contemporaneous religious films.

James Naremore disagrees with Borde and Chaumeton's notion that Surrealism had left a significant on film noir and saw modernism as a more important influence. Modernism's aim was "to create scandal and thereby challenge dominant values at the levels of both the signifier and the signified" and it also represented an assault on the bourgeois' ideals of religion (Naremore 43). High modernism was skeptical of mass culture, which was often personified by a woman (44). According to Naremore, both film noir and modernism were "somewhat 'anti-American', or at least ambivalent about modernity and progress". Some modernist artists saw the American metropolis as a threat to the values of Europe because it was spreading mass culture, "mechanization" and "kitsch" (45). The city is seen as a corruptor in Hunter, because the city is a place of low sexual moral where icons of popular culture are worshipped in the form of magazines. Everything seems to be for sale in the city and Miss Cooper and her little flock of children has retreated safely on the outskirts of town. The corrupting powers of the metropolis and the healing powers of the frontier was a frequent theme in Hollywood films, as well as in film noir: Robert Mitchum's character Jeff Bailey in Out of the Past is safe for a while in the little town where he lives and in the wilderness where he goes fishing, but the past catches up with him and he is dragged back to San Francisco where hideous crimes are pinned on him. Likewise, Sterling Hayden's character Dix Handley in John Huston's The Asphalt

Jungle is corrupted by the metropolis and sacrifices his life to get back to the farm where he grew up in order to reclaim some of his old self. In Hunter, John and Pearl have to escape down the river and into the wilderness to get away from the religious zealot.

Hunter is also modernistic in its view on woman because all women in the film (save Miss Cooper) are shown in an unfavorable light: Willa Harper is brainwashed and does not believe what her son tells her and Ruby has a low sexual moral. Icky Spoon joins the rank of characters in the film that neglect the needs of the children. She is constantly shushing Pearl and John and crudely exposes the children to the lynch mob after Harry Powell's trial in order to whip the crowd into frenzy. Ruby is another example of a "foolish" woman who falls under Harry Powell's spell.

Although there are numerous examples of the malaise and social criticism that Borde and Chaumeton mention in The Night of the Hunter, Ray claims that noirs were a critical voice in that they showed the discrepancy of intent and effect only visually, not thematically. He argues that "noir films represented an eruption into the American cinema's main tradition of values, emotions and anxieties, and behavior (...)", but mostly on the visual level as the films thematically continued the tradition of happy endings. Ray believes that the visual style of noirs (brought in by European immigrants in Hollywood inspired by German Expressionism) developed anxieties that the stories themselves did not (Ray 159). In most cases we are talking about "termite art" where conflicting myths are reconciled (Ray 155). Conflicting myths are also reconciled in Hunter, because the children are safe with Rachel Cooper and they get presents from her on Christmas Eve (the last image of the film even presents her home like a Christmas card). Nevertheless, the film has oppositional qualities because it depicts a faith deformed and it is able to do so through the themes of the film. Many film noirs have happy endings and a reconciliation of conflicting myths, but they were and still are presenting a grim and disillusioned image of America. When one considers the fact that The Night of the Hunter conforms to some of the most important and radical aspects of Borde and Chaumeton, it is possible to say that the film is a film noir. Hunter's clear oppositional qualities because it raises questions of the origins of the whole of the American civilization.

## Chapter 3: Further Analysis

In the last chapter of my thesis I will delve deeper into essential scenes of the film, analyze how the stylistics of the film are connected with “the malaise and social criticism” of The Night of the Hunter. I will also focus further on important factors of the film which need to be addressed; that of the fairytale qualities of the film, the relationship between realism and German Expression/allegory, the importance of the pastoral setting and the city and discuss whether Harry Powell belongs in the category of an urban psychopath, demon or frontiersman.

### The Stylistics of The Night of the Hunter

Even though Borde and Chaumeton did not focus on the stylistics of film noir, I feel that this is important because the stylistics of the film is applied to elaborate on the themes of the film. The influence from German Expressionism is often emphasized as one of the key qualities of film noir. Siegfried Kracauer has read the Expressionistic film Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari as an allegory of the German society’s need for a controlling dictator; Cesare, the somnambulist, committed crimes in his sleep as a result of Dr. Caligari’s manipulation and Kracauer has linked this with Adolf Hitler’s manipulation of the German people and their sleep-like acceptance of Nazi politics (Hirsch 56). Hunter, like Caligari, makes use of Expressionistic “distortion” through set design and chiaroscuro to elaborate on the themes of the film.

Hunter is linked with the stylistic paradigms of film noir through low-key lighting and “its landscape of shadows”, which is particularly clear in the scene from the burlesque house (Couchman 120). Harry Powell, with his lips curled in contempt (or hateful desire) watches a dancer and (the audience is seeing the world through his point of view<sup>3</sup>) Still 11). Powell is in focus, but most of the other people in the crowd are immersed in shadows and are only represented as silhouettes against a brightly lit

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<sup>3</sup> I will comment on the scenes that divert from the norm of the third point of view, rather than commenting on every scene. The third point of view would entail an objective, detached, and sometimes omniscient point of view, as opposed to the subjective first point of view. The latter involves a subjective point of view and the audience can “see through the eyes of the main character”. An example of the second point of view in film is typically a scene where two characters are having a conversation across a table at a restaurant and where the camera switches between filming from the two characters’ point of view (Falstein).

wall in the background. Shadows frame the dancer in what appears to be a keyhole to suggest the action of peeping (Still 12). The urban setting of the burlesque house is one of the most noirish settings in *Hunter*, which is otherwise filled with pastoral scenes. Seedy nightclubs were a popular setting in film noir, which to a large degree took place in urban settings (Naremore 197).



*Still 11 and 12*

The scene in the burlesque house is not a lifelike artistic representation of that setting; it becomes more of a mimetic account of a real social scene because of its highly stylized lighting. Simon Callow sees the scene as “simply a crystallised [sic] image, a painting, almost, of a certain situation, with Preacher (...) abstractly lit in the foreground” (Callow 64). Interestingly, Robert Mitchum wanted the scene to be shot on location, which would perhaps have made it more in the realm of film noir and less of “a painting”(64). Like many other scenes in the film, Charles Laughton’s influence from the theatre is evident: the scene is sparsely and allegorically set, but we are provided with all the information we need: the preacher hates and wants to kill sensuous woman and he is a criminal, a fact that we learn when he is arrested for stealing a car in the burlesque house. Powell’s knife, a phallic symbol, rips through his jacket and the film cuts to a close-up of the Preacher’s face (Still 13 and 14).



*Still 13 and 14*

Powell's face reflects what original screenwriter James Agee called "the moment equivalent to that post-climax; sick, guilty, let down in sex but tightened up in religiosity" (Couchman 96). Author Davis Grubb wanted to question Christianity's focus on original sin and this scene in particular is ripe with the idea that sex is sinful: Ridled with guilt, not one member of the crowd seems to be enjoying the show. Harry Powell, however, seems filled with hatred rather than guilt and the audience is enabled to witness his view on sinful "perfume-smelling things" as most of the scene is seen from his point of view (Callow 8). He seems to be at once relived and disillusioned when he explains to God that the task of killing all sinful women like the burlesque dancer is too big: "There's too many of them. You can't kill a world (The Night of the Hunter)!" This line makes it evident that Powell views himself as a true believer and that the rest of the world and "sinful" women in particular, are infidels.

The scene from the revival meeting is a similar scene in all its expressionistic simplicity; it is shot with a torch in the foreground and a few others placed around the tent with only a few extras to respond to Preacher Harry Powell's calls (Still 15). As with the scene from the burlesque house, the revival meeting sacrifices a lifelike representation in favor of the highly stylized chiaroscuro. This scene is more related to the theatre than Hollywood, but the audience learns that Willa is now completely under Powell's thumb and is channeling her sexual frustrations into the revivalist meeting. One of the torches seems to be licking Harry Powell's body and suggests through the hell and brimstone language of his religion that he is not the Redeemer, but rather the devil (Still 16).



*Still 15 and 16*

The Preacher's right hand of L-O-V-E is introduced for the first time in the prison cell when he praises God for putting him in the same cell as Harper who had "a widder [sic] in the making" (The Night of the Hunter). The camera zooms out from

Powell's hands to reveal a thankful Preacher literally framed in the cell window and this could suggest that he is a captive of his faith (Still 17). The bars in the window are oblique lines that were preferred in noir to make the scenes "restless and unstable" (Schrader 57).



*Still 17 and 18*

The audience is introduced to the slick, manipulative Powell in the scene in the prison cell. Preacher Harry Powell is working his congregation of one enthusiastically to get a contribution from Harper, but to no avail. However, the coaxing and "TV-preacher" like qualities are gone for a second when he is explaining his special covenant from God. A close up of Powell's face enables the audience to take a closer look at the madness that lies beneath the alleged God-fearing surface (Still 18).

Laughton and his crew's inspired use of shadows in the scene from John and Pearl's bedroom is another example of how style can heighten and elaborate on the themes and idea of a film; Powell's shadow and the dark side of Christianity is looming in the children's bedroom and poses as a threat to their safety. The scene is seen from John's point of view and the shadow symbolizes how big adults can seem to children. The way the shadow is reflected is of course an impossibility in the real world (Powell's shadow would not be cast on the wall in that angle), but the expressionistic chiaroscuro elaborates on the ideas of the film; religion can be dangerous and it can threaten "the little lambs" that it is supposed to protect. A child's bedroom would normally be the place where children kneel down by the bed to pray to God, but it is the menace of Preacher Harry Powell's version of Christianity that is reflected on John and Pearl's bedroom wall (Still 19).



*Still 19*

It is not the religion of “love thy neighbor” or “turn the other cheek”; it is a hell and brimstone kind of Christianity and Powell’s singing of the hymn “The Everlasting Arms” sheds some ironic light on the discrepancy between the intent and the practice of religion in the movie. In the line of Expressionistic “distortion”, sound is also manipulated to elaborate on the themes of the film: the hymn which Harry Powell is singing is “quite artificially loud, as if in the room, or in John’s head” (Callow 66). The scene is also ripe with the “oblique” lines that Schrader mentioned (Schrader 57). Furthermore, the size of Harry Powell’s shadow next to John Harper’s silhouette exemplifies Borde and Chaumeton’s point that the notion of a fair fight or equal opponents does not apply to film noir (Borde and Chaumeton 22).

It is interesting to note that this scene resembles a scene in Fritz Lang’s M: A little girl is bouncing a ball against a poster announcing a reward for a child murderer on it (Still 20). The murderer’s enormous shadow (like Powell, this murderer was also wearing a hat) appears on the poster and looks down on the girl (Couchman 118). Fritz Lang was one of many German directors and cameramen who fled from Nazi Germany and started working in Hollywood and “brought” German Expressionism with them. Lang has directed several films that are considered to be film noir: The



Big Heat, Scarlet Street and the Woman in the Window (Naremore 45). However, Lang himself has refuted the idea that his work had anything to do with German Expressionism. Furthermore, Thomas Elsaesser had denied the connection between German émigrés and film noir because most of these film workers had not worked with thrillers and “street films” in Germany and this could make the case for the claim that the alleged influence from German Expressionism is overrated (280).



*Still 20*

The scene where Willa Harper is murdered another example of how Expressionistic set design and chiaroscuro can elaborate on the themes of the film. Simon Callow found the murder scene to be “quite startlingly unrealistic, a highly self-conscious composition set in a room of no graspable geography, and self-consciously acted” (Callow 70). The location of the murder scene was

carefully structured to look like a church. Thusly, Charles Laughton and his crew made use of expressionistic distortion on the set design to convey the notion of a faith deformed: Jeffrey Couchman writes that the scene is shed in an ironic light, because the holy location is associated with the unholy act of killing another human being. The walls of Willa’s bedroom were in fact built on an elevated structure ten feet in front of the actors, in order to make Mitchum’s figure loom over Shelley Winters in the bed. When Charles Laughton pulled back for a longer perspective, the room seemed to be suspended in black space and the chiaroscuro emphasizes the look of a church: the whole A-frame of the church which is created through the interplay of light and shadow becomes visible (Still 21) (Couchman 117). The chiaroscuro and the set design express what Schrader calls the “odd shapes” of film noir (Schrader 57). Furthermore, the low-key lighting creates “the constant opposition of areas of light and dark that characterizes film noir cinematography” (Place and Peterson 65).

Laughton cleverly made use of the A-frame of a church formed by the chiaroscuro again in the scene where Ruby awakes from Powell’s singing outside Rachel’s house. Powell’s sexual appeal to women and the idea that “women are

fools” are once again invoked in the audience. Furthermore, we are reminded of what happened in the last “church” in the film and Laughton is thus suggesting that Ruby may be Powell’s next victim (Couchman 167). Ruby is now under Powell’s sexual spell like Willa was (Still 22).



*Still 21 and 22*

Willa’s acceptance of death and denial of the realities of life also implies that religion can be dangerous in the sense that can be pacifying and used to brain wash people. The interplay between light and shadows makes the audience associate her with an angel with a halo around her head (Still 23).



*Still 23 and 24*

Even on her death bed Willa still believes in the healing powers of Harry Powell and her final words before her savior slits her throat is evidence of her almost hypnotized state of mind: “God me you marry me so that you could show me the way and the life and the salvation for my soul. (...) The rest of it don’t [sic] matter” (The Night of the Hunter). Powell seems to be having a telepathic conversation with God and reaches his hand towards heaven in psychopathic ecstasy; in his mind, God has given him permission to kill the treacherous woman who is obstructing his goal of honoring God (whether Powell saves the money from the murdered widows to build a

gigantic tent for revivalist meetings or not is uncertain). The chiaroscuro creates lines that are mirroring Harry Powell's psyche: the audience is in his "church".

Powell raises his arm in an unnatural angle "to align it with the slant of the roof and become one with the 'church'"(Still 21)(Couchman 117). Mitchum's stylized movements resemble the movements of the somnambulist in Caligari (1920) and again, Frankenstein and Nosferatu. Powell believes that he *is* the church and the only church that is true to God. In his mind he is performing a religious act (117).

Laughton moved in for a close up of Mitchum and it is as if Powell's skull has become a death's head that can receive demonic messages from his god (Still 24). Powell is not Willa Harper's savior; he is a psychopathic killer in the line of Borde and Chaumeton's "sanctified killers" (Borde and Chaumeton 21).

Film noir has encompassed an "antitraditional [sic] lightning and camera" style, according to Janey Place and Lowell Peterson, and there are examples of this tendency in Hunter: in a low angle shot, Powell is seen through the eyes of John as a gigantic, menacing figure (Still 25)(Place and Peterson 72). With the excuse of straightening John's tie, Powell establishes his power over John by looming over him. It is a paternal action as Powell allegedly takes on the quality of being John's new father and helping him with a manly action, but it is also a frightening action because it resembles the strangulation of John's biological father. The scene is cleverly shot in deep focus, which enables the audience to see Willa's joyful reaction after her first "date" with Powell. The Preacher's black cloth represents darkness and cuts the image in half, as if to symbolize the oppositions between good and evil and the harsh discrepancy between Willa's image of Powell and the truth.



*Still 25 and 26*

There are also examples of the untraditional camera angles of film noir in Hunter: Willa explains her role as a peace keeper between Harry and John to the

Spoons before the night she dies and she walks out in the night and is gradually obscured by fog (Still 26). It is “an unsettling shot” because Willa is shot from her waist and up and she disappears out of sight in a scene that should by “normal” Hollywood standards start with a full body shot (Place and Peterson 68).

Borde and Chaumeton’s notion that film noir had the quality of depicting “malaise and social criticism” has been discussed in chapter 2 and both the American metropolis as a corruptor and the Frontier’s failure to nurture individualism are important elements of the social critique of *Hunter* (Silver and Ursini 11). James Naremore has suggested that film noir is related to modernism through its criticism of the American metropolis and its alleged corrupting powers (Naremore 45).

To be fair, there are urban settings in addition to the burlesque house in the film; the prison where both Harry Powell and Ben Harper are incarcerated is in the town of Moundville and then there is the little town where Ruby exchanges sexual favors for ice cream and movie magazines. Rachel is admiring the glittering neon lights of the town and a sensual saxophone is playing the same wedding waltz as when Willa was seen drowned in the river (Still 27). This could again suggest that Rachel is going to be punished by Powell because of her sexuality.



*Still 27 and 28*

The signs are advertising commodities of the modern world; drugs, cosmetics and magazines. To Powell, these are probably all commodities that are sinful because of their hedonistic qualities. However hateful of sex Powell may be, he still uses his handsome looks to learn the location of John and Pearl. When Davis Grubb suggested that an older actor should play Preacher, Charles Laughton explained why Mitchum with his sturdy good looks should play the part: “People who sell God, Davis, must be sexy“(Couchman 140). Powell clearly knows how to play the part of a “normal” person, but he is unable to maintain his slick flirtatious act when Ruby whispers sweet

nothings in his ear: Preacher grabs his knife in his pocket and Ruby is very close to be “saved” like Willa. However, the respectable facade of Powell’s religion is maintained and he walks through town greeting his fellow man, which he secretly despises (Still 28).

## **The Mixture of Expressionism and Realism in Hunter**

Film noir was influenced by the contrasting elements of German Expressionism and Italian Neo-Realism. The latter was striving to (as much as possible) document reality objectively while the former was a nightmarish and subjective vision of the world (Hirsch 53). The Night of the Hunter is also a mix of these two contrasting influences: the beforementioned opening scene where Miss Cooper and the children seem to be floating in mid-air is a very allegorical scene juxtaposed to the scene where Harry Powell is driving along the road in a stolen car, which is filmed in a very somber manner without any of the “distortions” of German Expressionism. Of course, the fact that Powell believes that he is having a conversation with a belligerent God does not make it “real”, but there is a stark contrast between the two first scenes of the film in the way that they are shot. Jeffrey Couchman has described the scene where Willa Harper’s body is strapped to a car underwater and where her hair is streaming like seaweed in the river current as “at once realistic and surreal, grim and poetic” (Still 29)(Couchman 111). This description can be applied to The Night of the Hunter in general, as the film is a mixture of both realism and allegory.



*Still 29*

There are several more scenes in Hunter that were filmed on location, which gives them an air of Italian Neo-Realism. Most of the second half of the film where the children are under Miss Cooper’s care is shot on location and for the most part in

a realistic way without the any sense of expressionistic distortion. There are also several overview shots of Harry Powell stalking the children along the riverside, the overview helicopter shot of the children discovering one of Powell's victims, John Harper's arrest, Powell's right hand/left hand sermon, John fishing with Uncle Birdie, and most of the picnic scene could be said to have been filmed in a realistic manner.

I will argue that Hunter to a larger degree than most film noirs stay in the nightmarish world of German Expressionism and that it goes "further" in its expressionistic distortion than most films on the film noir canon. Foster Hirsch has claimed that noirs did not distort the world to the extent that Caligari did, but typically "accommodated Expressionistic distortion" through dream sequences. An example of this is Philip Marlowe's hallucinatory dream in Edward Dmytryk's Murder, My Sweet, where objects and people he has come across earlier in the film float crazily around (Hirsch 57).

The river sequence is an Expressionistic distorted representation of the world because it is filled with gigantic animals and stylized settings. Robert Hirsch writes: "Retreating from the real world in which most of the action is set, these scenes seem to be taking place on a vast sound stage, where real time and place have been suspended" (Hirsch 59). I believe that François Truffaut's description of Hunter as "a horrifying news item retold by small children", is particularly true of the river sequence (Truffaut 120). It is in this sequence of the film that we are to a large extent seeing the world through the eyes of the children. Its expressionistic set design is there to further symbolize the oppositions of good and evil in the film and it is remarkable in the sense that the film seems to "breathe" and that it makes an even further step away from reality. What is quite remarkable is that there is almost no dialogue for a good ten minutes and thus the film takes on the quality of a silent film. It is evident in this sequence that Hunter has more in common with the silent films of D. W. Griffith and German Expressionism than film noir.

The beginning of the river scene is also another example of Laughton's expressionistic use of sound as well as chiaroscuro, as Powell's scream is distorted and reverberates into the next scene with the children in the boat. The sweet singing of the little girl then overtakes the scream of the evil Harry Powell and the audience is given the opportunity to lower their shoulders and reflect on what they have seen so far. The children are for now safe in the hands of the benevolent Mother Nature. Powell's ineptitude in the wilderness seems to suggest that he is an anachronism; he is

outside of his natural element in nature. Powell and his religion, which denounces the body and nature, are unwelcome in the natural world, but the children are welcome because they are free from religious constraints and they are in touch with the natural world. One could claim that Charles Laughton is trying to communicate to the audience that religion is unnatural.

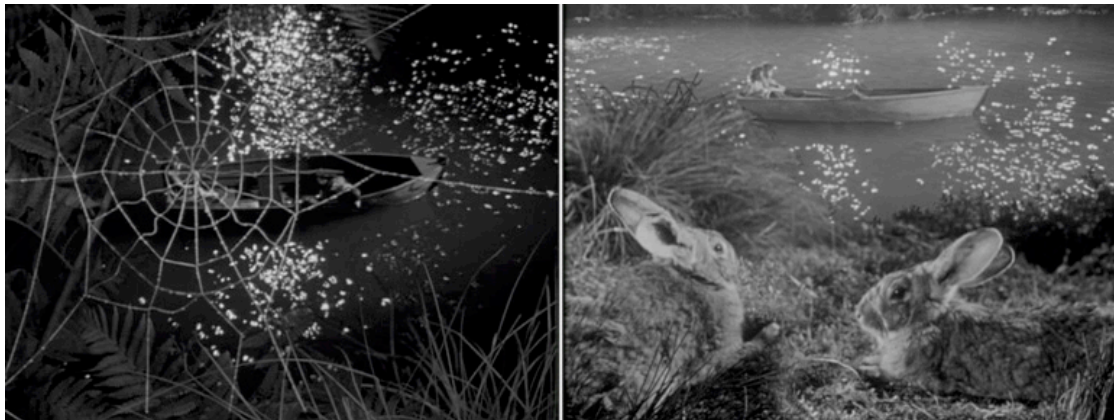
Furthermore, the notion that animals and the natural forces seem to be helping the children in their escape amplifies the feeling of watching a fairytale, as this is an important feature of said literature. Powell's rigidity when John and Pearl narrowly escape him also intensifies the suspension of time and the fairytale-like qualities of Hunter: It is as if he is a troll turned into stone (Still 30).



*Still 30*

According to Robert Mitchum, the river sequence was filled with images of animals to sweeten up the film (Jones 270). The animals in the scene where Powell stalks Miss Cooper's house are beasts of prey, but the animals in the river sequence seem to be guarding the little children and are in fact guardians of humans in Native American mythology. The frogs, rabbits, spider and turtle of the river sequence are oversized to convey John and Pearl's view of the world and the imagery of the river sequence resemble that of a children's picture book and accentuates the fairytale-like

qualities of the film (Still 31 and 32). Cinematographer Stanley Cortez used deep focus lenses to film the skiff with the children passing the spider web, a symbol of Powell's web that could not threaten them.



*Still 31 and 32*

Ordinary animals take on mysterious qualities through Cortez's cinematography and the river journey is the central part of the film according to Jeffrey Couchman;(it is) "a poetic idyll at the center of the film, bridging the first half, dominated by Preacher, and the second, dominated by Rachel Cooper"(Couchman 115). The stylized scenery resembles the mise-en scene of a dream where only some objects are in focus. The children doze off in the boat and a haunting clarinet blends in with Pearl's song about a pretty fly who flew away and whose children flew into the sky, clearly symbolizing Willa and her children. A dark and menacing cello blends in to remind the audience that evil is still lurking in the bushes and that everything is not well.

There are obvious similarities between Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Davis Grubb's novel The Night of the Hunter: both John Harper and Huckleberry Finn live in a close relationship with the Ohio River and the Mississippi Rivers respectively. Both Huck and John have to escape violent fathers (Harry Powell is of course John's step-father) who chase after them to get hold of their fortunes. Huck's father tries to get hold of the treasure that Huck and Tom Sawyer found in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and John is trying to keep his stepfather away from the ten thousand dollars that are hidden in Pearl's doll. Both Hunter and Huckleberry Finn are critical of American society: Huckleberry Finn satirizes, among other things, the issue of slavery in pre-Civil War years and The Night of the Hunter deals with the themes of religious hypocrisy and exploitation (Aas 29)



## Harry Powell – Urban psychopath, Frontiersman or Demon?



*Still 33*

There are aspects of Harry Powell that deviates from the typical film noir. It is interesting to note that Mitchum, who was by many considered one of the quintessential noir actors, normally had a very realistic way of acting, but that his acting in *Hunter* is very stylized. The psychopaths of noir were in some cases like the beforementioned Phillip Raven in Frank Tuttle's *This Gun for Hire*, portrayed in a laconic manner with a very monotone voice. The “bad guys” of film noir, like Whit Sterling in *Out of the Past* seem to be hissing their violent threats through their teeth. This is in stark contrast to Mitchum's portrayal of Harry Powell, who has many mannerisms and can go from exaggerated sweet-talking to animalistic screaming in an instant. The idea that the general perspective of film noir was realistic also applied to its villains; they were people who you could come across in a post-WW2 world, however psychotic they were (Borde and Chaumeton 24).

The pastoral setting of *The Night of the Hunter* and the fact that Harry Powell is (some sort of) priest also seems to suggest that he is more of a symbol of a frontiersman than an urban psychopath. The beginning of the river sequence in

particular evokes the image of the first European settlers in America: Powell is cutting through the bushes with his knife like a machete and seems to be hunting for infidels and savages (Still 33). Richard Slotkin has written about how the Americans reinvented themselves and became in D. H. Lawrence's words "hard, isolate, stoic and a killer" (qtd. in Slotkin 2). Slotkin argues that this new American really is a "regression" to a being controlled by impulse and desire, and thus becoming exactly what was, in their view, a typical "Indian" (Slotkin 2).

The fairytale qualities of the film speaks for labeling Powell as a demon and director Charles Laughton did set out to make a "nightmarish sort of Mother Goose tale" (Callow 26). Harry Powell is by far more "over the top" in his mannerisms than most film noir villains and his buffoon/demon-like qualities points to the world outside of film noir (Thomson 21). Laughton and his crew built a very narrow basement to make the setting more claustrophobic. In terms with Laughton's fairytale qualities and the notion of the gigantic ogre, the small set exaggerates Mitchum's size over the children and makes it clear that we are seeing through the children's point of view (Still 34).



*Still 34*

Furthermore, the scene where John wakes up in the barn and sees Harry Powell silhouetted on the horizon suggests Preacher's (possible) supernatural abilities: John frightfully exclaims "Don't he never sleep?" suggesting that Powell is more of a demon without the need to sleep (Still 35). John wakes up to the howling of a dog before Powell appears and it is as if one beast has sensed another. The notion that animals could detect the villains in horror films was a typical feature of said category. The protagonist Irena Dubrovna in Jacques Tourneur's Cat People has the ability to communicate with panthers, but other animals fear her presence. Unlike Powell, Dubrovna morphs into an animal at the end of the film. Interestingly, Cat People is listed by James Naremore as a horror film that could be labeled as a film noir (Naremore 9).



*Still 35*

Harry Powell's animalistic qualities are apparent as he screams wildly when John and Pearl escape him with the smallest margin; he has regressed into an animal. Ironically, the Christianity that Powell professes (though altered) sought to separate the mind and the body and to control the animal in man (Takaki 32). The current in the river takes hold of the skiff and Mother Nature seems to be helping the small ones. Mitchum is seen in a high-angle shot which amplifies the instability of the situation. The high-angle takes on the quality of a close up and the audience is again able to

take a closer look at Powell's madness. The image of Powell's "death's head" is once again invoked and the Preacher's look of both extreme hate and as well as utter desperation implies that he is an ardent believer in his God and that he is completely shattered because he has let his master down (Still 36).



*Still 36*

Even though there are many elements of the urban psychopath typical of film noir in Harry Powell, he is also seems to be a mixture of a demon and a deranged frontiersman. Powell is extremely violent, but his over the top mannerisms and the pastoral setting and fairytale-like qualities of certain scenes makes him a mixture of an urban psychopath, a demon and a deranged frontiersman. This is one of the factors that take the film away from Borde and Chaumeton's psychotic killers (Borde and Chaumeton 24).

## Conclusion

One of the first things which come to mind when one thinks about film noir is the darkness or the notion that the films set out to depict a darker side of America after WW2. The “legend” of film noir has it that these films were nihilistic and pessimistic and that Hollywood for a short while could honestly project the underside of the American society to the public. This was one of the first things that got me interested in film noir, because I have always been interested in darkness, both in terms of style and themes. However, Robert Ray has claimed that film noirs to a large degree perpetuated the tradition of reconciling conflicting myths and that film noir’s reputation of being an oppositional voice in Hollywood is exaggerated because most of the noirs ended on a happy note (Ray 159). However dark these films seem, it is mostly embedded in the style, for instance the tradition of long shadows and confusing camera angles that was “borrowed” from German Expressionism. One could argue that The Night of the Hunter also ends on a happy note, but the level of darkness and the dark aspects of religion and American society which is depicted during the run time of the film goes beyond the notion of what was the alleged critical voice of film noir. The Night of the Hunter goes further in its social criticism than any other film in the film noir canon and it is true to Borde and Chaumeton’s ideal of creating “a specific malaise and drive home a social criticism of the United States” (qtd. in Silver and Ursini 11).

Some of the forefathers of America were Puritans who settled down in what was viewed as a Garden of Eden and the wilderness has thus always had a significant part in the makings of American myths. Hunter raises serious questions about the origins of the American civilization because it has a preacher (although not an ordained priest, Harry Powell is an ardent believer in his twisted version of Christianity) who chases after innocent children with a knife in one hand and the Bible in the other to get his hands on some money. Even the Frontier, which was supposed to nurture individualism, is not safe in Hunter, and John and Pearl are driven from one hiding place to another.

The film raises questions about the Puritanical focus on success and the acquisition of money and property. The Puritans used the Bible to justify their slaying of Native American children, just like Harry Powell wants to get his hands on the money to build a new tabernacle. The film has clear oppositional qualities by portraying a self-professed man of God who is killing in the name of the Lord. My claim is that depicting something like that in 1955, in the midst of one of the most conformist periods in America, is not “termite art”, but a bold statement about the myths and origins of the American civilization. An imperiled child in Hollywood films is still controversial to this day, and it is still quite out of the ordinary to show such small children in the face of such peril and evil. Furthermore, the oppositional qualities of the film are intensified by the fact that the state killed John and Pearl’s father who had to resolve to dramatic measures to provide for his children. Extreme capitalism ignited the Big Crash of ‘29, which again resulted in the Depression. Ben Harper had to steal and kill of the failings of official politics and then the government killed him. John and Pearl are safe in the care of Miss Cooper, but the general feel of the whole film is still very bleak as the state killed their father and religion killed their mother. Hunter is a film noir in the sense of Borde and Chaumeton’s theories because it presents a bleak vision of the American society and it is somewhat of a post modernistic work of art that questions the institutions of religion and the American focus on material wealth. This certainly agrees with Borde and Chaumeton’s conclusion of “Towards a definition of Film Noir”: “All the films of this cycle create a similar emotional effect: that state of tension instilled in the spectator when the psychological reference points are removed”. The aim of film noir was “to create a specific alienation” (Borde and Chaumeton 25).

We can then conclude that Hunter conforms to some of the most essential aspects of Borde and Chaumeton’s definition of noir, thusly comes closer to a “true” film noir than any of the films they mentioned in their essay “Towards a definition of Film Noir” or films which are normally classified as film noir. When we differentiate film noir from genre and think of it in terms of theme and style, The Night of the Hunter is a film noir. In the sense of Borde and Chaumeton’s theories, The Night of the Hunter is more than noirish - it is a film noir.

The Night of the Hunter is a separate work of art, which through (among other things) expressionistic distortion of chiaroscuro and set design seeks to focus on the themes of religious hypocrisy. This brings us back to the contemporaneous critics’

notion that Hunter was “too arty”. However, style is not simply “window dressing”; it can say something about the theme of the film (Couchman 205). Allegory is closely linked to German Expressionism and the perhaps most essential films of German Expressionism, Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari is a distorted view of the world where the unnatural angles and lines of the sets is saying something about the protagonist’s state of mind. Robert Ray has also claimed that there were a discrepancy between intent and effect in film noir, because even though the films more often than not ended on a happy note, “film noir’s visuals often seemed to operate at an entirely different level of intensity, conveying anxieties not suggested by the stories themselves”(Ray 160). Hunter has a happy ending as well, but as beforementioned, the dark visuals of the last scene of the film suggest that the darker side of faith is going to be victorious. The audience has just witnessed an idyllic scene from Miss Cooper’s house and we know that John and Pearl are safe. However, the Christmas-like qualities of the last scene of the film is filled with dark shadows and Powell’s theme song which blends in with the victorious strings seems to suggest that even though Preacher is gone, religious hypocrisy is not.

I have shown that by tying into American narratives and myths such as the American frontier, Hunter further conforms to Borde and Chaumeton’s theories. To the two French critics, “the essence of film noir was in a feeling of discontinuity, an intermingling of social realism and oneirism, an anarcho-leftist critique of bourgeois ideology, and an erotized treatment of violence” (Naremore 22). Thus, The Night of the Hunter has by taking on the task of forcing Americans to look at a faith deformed and by questioning one of the most fundamental elements of American culture and civilization, created “a specific malaise and (driven) home a social criticism of the United States”, in the words of Borde and Chaumeton (qtd. in Silver and Ursini 11). According to these aspects of Borde and Chaumeton’s theories, The Night of the Hunter is a film noir and one of the most unsettling films of its generation.

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