

Cold War Religion

Night of the Hunter, 1955

“Not that you mind the killings, your Book is full of killings.”

Production Information

Based on a novel by Davis Grubb and screenplay by James Agee, author of *Let us Now Praise Famous Men* and screenplay for *African Queen*. Supposedly director Charles Laughton didn't like script and he and Robert Mitchem rewrote it. Laughton was a well-known actor of the 30s and 40s but this was only film he directed. Lillian Gish, who plays Rachel Cooper, was also important actress starting in films beginning in 1912 (she was in *Birth of a Nation*). Shot in 36 days in black and white when color was *en vogue*. 93 mins.

Cast: Harry Powell (Robert Mitchem); Willa Harper (Shelly Winters); Rachel Cooper (Lillian Gish); John Harper (Billy Chapin); Pearl Harper (Sally Jane Bruce).

Film History

Censorship and the subliminal. Eliminating words from script but conveying meaning in visuals. Phallic symbols—knife, train going through tunnels.

Loosening of Censorship. Supreme Court decision in 1952 that movies are not protected by the First Amendment (movies are business, not an expression and therefore can be regulated). Production Code approval only granted for US films. Typically art houses showed foreign but nobody cared. All changes when Robert Rossellini's *Il Miracolo* (*The Miracle*) opens in 1950 in Manhattan. The film is about a dim-witted peasant woman who is plied with drink and then seduced by a vagabond whom she mistakes in her stupor for St. Joseph. (St. Joseph is played by the young Federico Fellini who also wrote the screenplay.) It's not clear whether Nanni is even awake for the actual sex, but she soon discovers she is pregnant and decides it is an immaculate conception. Her fellow villagers are not so naive; they mock and torment her, even singing religious hymns as they parade her through the streets with a basin instead of a halo on her head. Nanni escapes to a hilltop church, and experiences a beatific moment of religious ecstasy after giving birth alone on the church floor. Sense of film is of mean, petty villagers.

New York City License Commissioner, a Catholic, declares it "officially and personally blasphemous," and ordered the manager of the Paris to stop showing it. Film distributor files suit. Francis Cardinal Spellman writes statement attacking *The Miracle* (which he did not see) that he ordered read at every mass in all 400 parishes of New York Archdiocese. Catholics picket the film up to 1000 at a time. Not all Catholics condemned film, indicating a growing liberal strain within the Church.

Back and forth in courts. Eventually Supreme Court in a unanimous decision in the case of *Burstyn v. Wilson* (May 1952) declares "sacrilege" far too vague a censorship standard

to be permitted under the First Amendment. Justice Tom Clark wrote for the Court that trying to decide what qualifies as sacrilege sets the censor "adrift upon a boundless sea amid a myriad of conflicting currents of religious views, with no charts but those provided by the most vocal and powerful orthodoxies." He added that "it is not the business of government ... to suppress real or imagined attacks upon a particular religious doctrine."

Hollywood silent as censorship is functional. Not wanting to upset viewers, especially Legion of Decency. Fearful of gov't accusations of "communists" in movie industry.

Rise of popularity of horror and science fiction films. Not general market but small, niche market especially of young men. *Night of the Hunter* with feel of horror.

Film noir: 'black film or cinema'-- coined by French film after WWII who noticed the trend of how 'dark' and black the looks and themes were of many American crime and detective films released in France. Hard-boiled detective most typical but broader genre. Contrast with light comedies and musicals by stressing anxiety, pessimism, and suspicion. Films based around fear, mistrust, bleakness, and paranoia. Inhuman side of human nature. Helplessness, as if living a bad nightmare. Life is brutal, unhealthy, seamy, shadowy, dark and sadistic. Characters are cynical, tarnished, obsessive (sexual or otherwise), brooding, menacing, sinister, sardonic, disillusioned, frightened and insecure loners (usually men). Men heroes and anti-heroes are criminal, violent and misogynistic, hard-boiled, or greedy. Women are either *femme fatales*-- mysterious, duplicitous, double-crossing, gorgeous, unloving, predatory, but also unreliable, irresponsible, manipulative and desperate. Or, women are dutiful, reliable, trustworthy and loving women.

Filming emphasizes *nourish* character: shadows, disorienting visuals, jarring editing and juxtaposition of elements. Skewed camera angles, often in interiors with low lighting, light filtered through Venetian blinds or windows. Rooms are dark and claustrophobic, gloomy. Examples, John Huston's *Maltese Falcon* (1941), *The Big Sleep* (1946), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), *All the Kings Men* (1949), *The Big Heat* (1953).

"Homage" of other films of love/hate tattoo: Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) referenced the love/hate, left and right hand theme; *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), LOVE and HATE were tattooed on Eddie's (Meat Loaf) knuckles, and in *The Blues Brothers* (1980), the two brothers (John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd) have their names tattooed on their knuckles. In *The Simpsons* episode "Cape Feare", the menacing Sideshow Bob had similar tattoos on each set of knuckles as well - but since the characters in the cartoon show had only three fingers and a thumb, the tattoos were humorously "LUV" and "HAT" - (with a bar over the A).

Social History

Cold and hot wars. Build up of nuclear weapons and delivery systems by USSR and USA. Detonation of bombs in South Pacific. Korean War (1950-1953). In 1955 Nationwide civil defense exercises began in USA to prepare against nuclear attack.

Cold War and Hollywood: Importance of unions and of intellectuals who came as writers to Hollywood in 30s. Progressives who wanted change—racial equality, reduction of class barriers, acceptance of many different life styles. Making of socially critical films (before PCA). Establishment after the war of House Committee on UnAmerican Activities. Series of “investigations” (1947 and 1951) including Hollywood. Conservatives wished to discourage any Hollywood impulse to make films advocating social change at home or that were critical of US foreign policy. The task of intimidation was focused on the role Communists played as screenwriters (60 percent) and actors (20 percent). Individuals forced to testify and to “name names.” Hollywood Ten spent year in federal prison for refusing to cooperate. Only very few were ever CP members, most just progressives. Studios fired most obvious but about 300 were merely blacklisted—informally not giving work. Rise of TV making studios very nervous. Taken on cheaper using fake names, not acknowledged as real writers until 1959. Hollywood makes a series of anti-communist films: *The Red Menace* (1949), *I Married a Communist* (1950), *My Son John* (1952), *Big Jim McClain* (1952), and *Trial* (1955).

Women: “You’ve got common sense and she ain’t.” Post World War II efforts to return women to home from work place. Popular books showing that aggressive women, especially mothers “de-masculinized” boys making them weak (cf. *Marty* 1955) and possibly homosexual. Decline in women going to college from 1920s rise in men after GI-Bill. Movies defining appropriate female behavior and character. Often supporting conservative view of what “happens” to women when men are not around. Women’s overly emotional (read: religious?) tendencies make them reliant on men.

Promotion of suburban ideal. Men returning after the war and families “boom” (peak year, 1957). Baby boom encouraging domestic, home “mystique” promoted in mass media. Suburban “ideal” as alternative to Great Depression poverty and World War II violence. Dr. Spock on childcare, first published 1946. Encouraged parents to enjoy their children and to be flexible Media images of the “perfect” family—*Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963).

Concerns about things relating to children—education, safety, health. Fear of children growing up in dumb-down culture (in 1950, 9% of American homes had a TV; in 1956, 72%). Frederic Wertham's, *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), an attack on the comic-book industry. The original *Black Board Jungle* (1955). Sputnik (Russians in space, 1957) secures fear so gov’t spends on education: The National Defense Education Act of 1958 paid for loans to students; for equipment needed to teach science, math, and foreign languages; for “national defense” fellowships for graduate students; and for testing and guidance services.

And the creation of rebels: *Mad Magazine* (1952); *Rebel without a Cause* (1955). Beat generation of post-war (too young to fight, born in 30s): bebop, narcotics, sexual promiscuity, French philosophy.

Religious History

Importance of religion in politics and in rise of suburban America. US as “god-fearing” in contrast with godless Communism. Introduction of “under God” in Pledge of Allegiance (1954). General, Judeo-Christian “civil religion,” not marked by clear theological differences. Baby boom places stress on children in religion—Sunday school, building of parochial Catholics schools. Simplification of theology and church history. More Americans than ever belonging to church community or synagogue.

Divisions within Catholicism, slow development of progressive Catholics who were more open to movies portraying complicated and realistic problems.

Evangelicals more prominent and acceptable, Billy Graham’s crusades. Stories from missionaries of Communist atrocities fuels anti-communism in conservative churches. "Communism is not only an economic interpretation of life - Communism is a religion that is inspired, directed and motivated by the Devil himself who has declared war against Almighty God," BG (1950)

Bible movies: *The Robe* (1953), *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *Ben Hur* (1959)*The Big Fisherman* (1959), *Spartacus* (1960).

References:

On *Night of the Hunter*

<http://www.filmsite.org/nightof.html>

on impact of *The Miracle*

<http://www.fepproject.org/commentaries/themiracle.html>

on popular culture and Cold War

http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/popcoldwarprint.html#_edn46

Things to Think About:

What is the film saying about the relationship between religion and sexuality? How does it communicate those ideas?

In both *Miracle Woman* and *Night of the Hunter* the notion of religious “fakery” is explored. How are “false prophets” gendered? Are men different from women?

The film is set in a fictional set of towns, along a river during the Depression. Why do you think filmmakers wanted that setting? What does it do for the plot?

How does the director use the visual elements of the film to convey ideas about the relationship between evil and religion?

