Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 18
Issue 1 *April 2014*

Article 46

March 2014

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Recommended Citation

Laamanen, Carl (2014) "Preaching in the Darkness: The Night of the Hunter's Subversion of Patriarchal Christianity and Classical Cinema," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 18: Iss. 1, Article 46.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.18.01.46
Available at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol18/iss1/46

Preaching in the Darkness: The Night of the Hunter's Subversion of Patriarchal Christianity and Classical Cinema

Abstract

Upon its release in 1955, *The Night of the Hunter* did not find favor among audiences or critics, who failed to appreciate Charles Laughton's vision for the Davis Grubb's bestselling novel of the same title. While poor marketing certainly played into the film's colossal collapse at the box office, I believe there is a deeper reason behind the rejection of the film in the 1950s—its portrayal of women and the female voice. In *The Night of the Hunter*, Miz Cooper (Lillian Gish) ultimately defeats Harry Powell (Robert Mitchum), the corrupt Preacher, through the use of her voice, and by doing so subverts the dominant patriarchal paradigms of American Christianity and classical cinematic form prevalent in the 1950s. The film gives Miz Cooper the power necessary to overcome the corrupt patriarchy embodied by the Preacher by imbuing her with acousmatic abilities (per Michel Chion) and allowing her control over the cinematic apparatus, sonically and visually. By giving Miz Cooper control over the cinematic apparatus, the film radically breaks with the cinematic, societal, and religious status-quo of the 1950s, accounting for the outrage surrounding the film upon its original release. The reaction to *The Night of the Hunter* illustrates a larger trend among American Christianity during the 1950s, further illuminating our understanding of how the conservative Evangelical Church of the time thought of women in Church leadership and how it responded to critical representation of its tenets in the culture. While the film brilliantly uses film form and sound to subvert the mores of its time, the adverse reception of *The Night of the Hunter* reveals that American Christianity and classical cinema were active participants in the oppression of women at the time.

Keywords

The Night of the Hunter, Christian Fundamentalism, Feminist Theology, Patriarchy

Author Notes

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The author would like to thank Dr. Allison Whitney for her many helpful comments during the revision process. He would also like to thank Dr. Marta Kvande and his colleagues in ENGL 5390 for their feedback and encouragement.

The Night of the Hunter (1955) confused and alienated audiences and critics alike upon its release, its dark vision of rural America and religion unsettling moviegoers. Based on the best-selling novel of the same name by Davis Grubb (1953), the film failed at the box office despite its acclaimed source material; this commercial collapse can largely be attributed to questionable marketing and a genre-bending narrative which did not sell well alongside other films of the 1950s.[1] Yet, these two factors alone cannot account for the entirety of the vitriol that critics and moral guardians aimed at *The Night of the Hunter*. For example, a lack of conformity to the cinematic status-quo would hardly seem damning enough to prompt a response like this from Richard Coe: "But worst villain of the lot is Director Laughton, whose cheap taste and apparent contempt for simple people have made this [film] a hideous travesty of the human race."[2] For the film to rise to the level of "a hideous travesty" affecting the entire "human race," something deeper and darker must have alienated the critics and audiences. Indeed, *The Night of the Hunter* is unconventional for the cinema of the time, but it also undermines the patriarchal status-quo of 1950s' fundamentalist Christianity, explicitly depicting the religious corruption and violence of the masculine hierarchy of fundamentalism. Through a masterful use of film form and sound, the film subverts patriarchal paradigms of both classical cinema and fundamentalist Christianity, giving women a voice to stand up against male oppression through its portrayal of Miz Rachel Cooper (Lillian Gish).

Set in rural West Virginia, *The Night of the Hunter* tells the story of John (Billy Chapin) and Pearl Harper (Sally Jane Bruce) and their flight from the evil Preacher, Harry Powell (Robert Mitchum). As we learn in the inciting incident of the film, John and Pearl's father, Ben (Peter Graves), steals ten thousand dollars from a bank, hides the money somewhere on his property, and only tells his children about the money's location. The police apprehend Ben and he is hanged, but not before he meets the Preacher in prison and tells him about the robbery. With this information in hand, the Preacher arrives in town and seduces Ben's widow, Willa (Shelley Winters), marrying her in an attempt to discover where the money is hidden. Eventually, Harry finds out that the children know the whereabouts of the money, and he sets in motion a chain of events that leads to his murder of Willa, forcing the children to flee from him in terror. John and Pearl take to the river and find refuge with Miz Cooper, a kind woman who takes in orphaned children and supports them. The Preacher tracks them down and the film ends with a showdown between Miz Cooper and Harry, in which Miz Cooper triumphs and ensures the safety of the children.

My analysis of *The Night of the Hunter* is built upon three levels, each forming a different perspective that will allow a more nuanced and accurate depiction of the film's break from the historical, theological, and cinematic status-quo. First, I will discuss the historical movements of American Christianity during the 1930s to situate the film's portrayal of Christian fundamentalism and

its attitudes toward women in context. Second, situated in its proper place in history, *The Night of the Hunter* demonstrates the pitfalls of patriarchal Christianity—as pointed out by feminist theologians during the 1970s and 80s—in its portrayal of Willa and suggests a solution by giving Miz Cooper the power to speak and defeat the Preacher, an embodiment of corrupt, male-dominated Christianity.[3] Finally, I will argue that the film is able to effectively subvert classical cinematic form and the fundamentalist Christian patriarchy due to its decision to give Miz Cooper control over the sonic and visual diegetic space of the film, usually the property of men.

CHRISTIAN FUNDAMENTALISM AND *THE NIGHT OF THE HUNTER*

Knowledge of fundamentalism and its reaction against modernism and liberalism is essential to understanding *The Night of the Hunter*'s portrayal of women in the 1930s and American fundamentalism's attitudes toward women in the 1950s. While Christian institutions have historically barred women from positions of authority, the American tradition offers a notable exception to this practice during the late 1800s and early 1900s. At this time, Christian women in America held a large measure of power in the church, often exercising this power by forming organizations, entering seminary, and participating in church leadership.[4] During this period, Lisa Bernal notes that "women in evangelical

traditions found significant access to the pulpit ministry," although this trend would not continue in the decades to follow.[5] With the rise of fundamentalism in the 1920s, women's access to pulpit ministry and power was derailed by a renewed effort to place men in positions of parochial leadership, a facet of the fundamentalist reaction against mainline liberalism.[6] Despite their devoted service at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, women in the fundamentalism tradition quickly found themselves under the control of the patriarchy.

Fundamentalism, like any religious movement, is subject to a number of differing, occasionally contradictory definitions. For purposes of this article, I will define Christian fundamentalism "as a distinct movement with a particular mixture of beliefs and concerns" which came into being as a reaction to theological liberalism, and eventually gave rise to certain forms of Evangelicalism in the 1950s.[7] While historians and theologians often debate the minutiae of these beliefs, most agree that the beliefs below usually mark Christian fundamentalism:

> An intense focus on evangelism as the church's overwhelming priority, the need for a fresh infilling of the Holy Spirit after conversion in order to live a holy and effective Christian life, the imminent, premillenial second coming of Christ, and the divine inspiration and absolute authority of the Bible.[8]

In addition to these core beliefs, fundamentalists were "bent on combatting Darwinism in the public schools and liberalism in the churches."[9] Fundamentalism thrived throughout the early 1920s, but eventually disappeared from the public eye after the debacle of the 1925 Scopes Trial, where the American Civil Liberty Union's lawyer, Clarence Darrow, ridiculed William Jennings Bryan and fundamentalism's position on evolution, tarnishing fundamentalism's credibility in the process.[10] Although distant from the public eye during the 1930s and 40s, fundamentalists were actively forming their own subculture apart from mainline Christianity, complete with very specific opinions on politics and the place of women in the family.

The Night of the Hunter offers a remarkably accurate picture of fundamentalism's attitude toward America and women in the 1930s through its portrayal of Willa and her older female friend, Icey (Evelyn Varden). Icey constantly badgers Willa, telling her that she needs a husband to help her bring up her children: "No woman is able to raise growing youngsters alone; the Lord meant that job for two." Being a woman—especially a Christian woman—Willa is not considered fit to raise her children on her own, as the 1930s fundamentalist home was marked by "daily family prayer and Bible reading, patriarchal rule, firm but tender-hearted rearing of children…and a thoroughgoing enforcement of fundamentalist mores."[11] Among the fundamentalist mores that began to surface in the 20s and 30s were a number of restrictions designed to prevent women from

serving in Church leadership and keep them in the home.[12] For fundamentalism, motherhood and domesticity are the pinnacle of womanhood, yet this veneration carries a darker side, which Karen McCarthy Brown notes: "Women can be idolized only when their sphere of activity is carefully contained and their power scrupulously monitored."[13] Indeed, *The Night of the Hunter* will demonstrate through Willa's increasingly distant behavior to her children, that her submission to the patriarchy and its veneration does not make her a better mother, but ironically blinds her to her own children's struggles against their father, hardly the ideal home promised by the patriarchy.

Part of this fundamentalist idealization of the domestic space can be traced to the fundamentalist desire to remain unspotted from the world and the responsibility it placed upon the family to rear children in order to lead them to salvation. In the 1930s, fundamentalists were stuck between two paradigms: strict separation from the world and radical devotion to trying to save the world.[14] In *The Night of the Hunter*, we see the separatist side in the Preacher's actions and in his speeches about the evil of the world and worldly desires, while the desire to evangelize is evident in the prayer-tent revival meeting that Harry and Willa conduct shortly after their marriage. Dispensationalism, a newly advanced eschatological paradigm, strongly pointed toward separation as it "taught the apostasy of the major churches of 'Christendom' as part of a steady cultural degeneration during the present 'church age'," [15] and ultimately "promoted a kind

of supernaturalism that, for all of its virtues in defending the faith, failed to give the proper attention to the world."[16] Arising from this theological base was a certain Gnosticism, accounting for a "sharp break between the pure heavenly realm and carnal earthly realm."[17] The next link in this chain implicitly condemns women and "the fearsome, mute power of the flesh," as "fundamentalism will always involve the control of women, for women generally carry the greater burden of human fleshliness."[18] Thus, in the 1930s, fundamentalist theology and thought began to establish a bias against women as sexual, complete beings, which carried on into the Christian climate of the 1950s, when *The Night of the Hunter* was released.

The Night of the Hunter's frank depiction of the darker side of patriarchal Christianity elicited outright condemnation from some of America's moral guardians, before and after the film's release. Joseph Breen sent the film's script to the Broadcasting and Film Commission of the National Council of the Churches of Christ,[19] and producer Paul Gregory later received "a four-page letter detailing the script's many offenses against the Christian religion" from "the commission's West Coast director, George A. Heimrich."[20] Among his suggestions for making the film more appropriate, Heimrich requested that Mitchum's Preacher be changed so that he could not be strongly identified as a minister.[21] Laughton and Gregory ignored these suggestions, which helps explain why the film faced some of the same objections after it was released, with both

the Legion of Decency and the Protestant Motion Picture Council encouraging people of faith to bypass the film's dark vision of Christianity.[22] A few film critics exhibit a similar moral outrage against the film, condemning its abundance of violence. Coe channels the Production Code's fear of images: "The film blunders in picturing [violent scenes] far too graphically, always a danger when pictures substitute for words."[23] Similarly, Will Leonard's review disdains the film's treatment of violence: "Seldom has so much ugliness been put into one movie, some of it dragged in for no apparent reason."[24] By pointing to the violence, almost always perpetrated by the Preacher, Coe and Leonard join their voices to the chorus of those decrying the picture of Christianity painted by *The Night of the Hunter*—a picture that includes, quite graphically, the oppression of women by the dominant power structures of Christian fundamentalism.

For a concrete example of how the film represents women during this time, consider the relationship between Willa and Icey. Early in the film, after Ben Harper has been hanged, Icey converses with Willa, informing her of the proper definition of a family: "No woman is able to raise growing youngsters alone; the Lord meant that job for two." Willa replies, "Icey, I just don't want a husband." Immediately after this exchange, the film cuts to a long shot of a train, black against the setting sun and billowing smoke, as it races across the screen left to right—here comes the Preacher, foreboding music announcing his nefarious intentions. Following a brief snippet of dialogue from Icey—"It's a man you need

in the house, Willa Harper"—is another shot of the train, supported by the same music, but this time charging straight at the camera. Cutting to the train during this conversation suggests three important ideas regarding the role of the patriarch in the film. First, the train and its phallic symbolism are associated with Harry, but given the ominous music and the way the train appears black—even in the night—this power is seen as dark and corrupt. Second, by positioning the first shot of the train after Willa declares her independence, the film shows that she will inevitably be forced by traditional, fundamentalist concepts of the family to accept this evil phallic power into her home. Finally, by combining Icey's statements with the shots of the train, the film creates a conflation of her stance on proper, patriarchal homemaking with the corrupt religious establishment embodied by Harry Powell. In the character of the Preacher, the film combines numerous fundamentalist traditions, forming a composite caricature that stands in for the totality of oppressive fundamentalism. From its beginning, *The Night of the Hunter* makes it clear that the values of patriarchal Christianity are complicit in the oppression of women by denying them their independence and creating a society where even other women tell them to submit to the masculine hegemony.

OPPRESSION AND SUBVERSION: WILLA AND MIZ COOPER SEEN THROUGH FEMINIST THEOLOGY

As feminist theologians would begin to point out in the 1970s and 80s, fundamentalism, whether Catholic or Protestant, is as complicit in the oppression of women as the surrounding society. *The Night of the Hunter* shows us the damage the patriarchal system does to women through the character of Willa, who is ultimately murdered by the Preacher, himself an embodiment of the masculine Church's abuse of power. The film offers a striking commentary on two of the main issues feminist theologians would identify as emblematic of patriarchal oppression in the Church: its control over the woman's voice and her body. In the film, if women are allowed to speak to men in a church setting, they serve a male agenda and are carefully controlled by the patriarchal church hierarchy. Furthermore, Harry, in an impassioned speech on his wedding night, recites a position representative of fundamentalist Christianity's view on the female body and how its seductive power must be contained. These scenes, imbued with terror, condemn the patriarchal project of fundamentalist Christianity and illustrate how the Church and the Preacher oppress and repress Willa.

In the first of these scenes, Willa and Harry's wedding night, Willa prepares in the bathroom for the eventual consummation of the marriage; however, when she exits the bathroom, Harry initially refuses to acknowledge her,

pretending to be praying. With this act, Harry further cements himself as a holy man who has risen above the temptations of the flesh, enabling him to use his religious rhetoric even more effectively. Eventually, he finishes praying and launches into a sermon on the nature of sex and its role in his version of Christianity. Harry's statements resound with notions of a masculinized, disembodied Christianity, projecting sin and death upon the woman's body, in service of his patriarchal agenda of control. For the Preacher, "Marriage…represents a blending of two spirits in the sight of heaven," while the woman's body is "the temple of creation and motherhood," "the flesh of Eve that man since Adam has profaned," and "meant for begetting children." In this manner, Harry's comments are representative of patriarchal, fundamentalist Christianity's attitudes toward women. In keeping with fundamentalism's devaluing of the physical, Harry sees marriage as solely spiritual, a bastion against the sins of the flesh which have pervaded the world since the Fall. Mary Daly, a prominent feminist theologian, takes issue with this view of the world: "This static, sin-haunted view of human life reflects and perpetuates a negative attitude toward sexuality, matter, and 'the world.' In such an atmosphere antifeminism has thrived."[25] Through the Preacher, *The Night of the Hunter* demonstrates the dangers of this negative view of sex and shows how the patriarchy controls women by subsuming their sexuality within motherhood.

For the Preacher, sex is only to be used for the purposes of reproduction; otherwise it denigrates the female body. While this could be conceivably seen as an elevation of the female and her body, Daly asserts that this mentality is the opposite and that the act of "stressing that the union is primarily for the production and education of offspring" has led to "the tacit assumption that women are not fully human."[26] As Daly argues, fundamentalism sees the institution of marriage as a biological, pragmatic union, rather than one built "upon personalist values and goals."[27] While the Preacher's rhetoric suggests a rejection of the lust of the flesh, freeing Willa from his sexual desire, this rejection further locks her into his patriarchal system, due to his ability to control her body through his denial of her sexuality. In this scene, the Preacher's authoritative tone and terse commands force Willa to do as he says, and in an extended medium-close up of Willa, he appears, still in focus, in the background, exerting his control on the shot. Furthermore, he turns off the solitary light in the room, leaving Willa in the dark, dictating the very circumstances of the room and solidifying his power in their relationship. The guise of honor given to Willa imprisons rather than frees, as Brown explains: "In fundamentalism, women are highly honored as mothers, but they are also forbidden the freedom to refuse this elevated role."[28] Given the ability to control a woman's body—through keeping her pregnant or asserting that her natural physicality is evil—the Christian

patriarchy then exercises its power over the woman's voice, using her words to reinforce the patriarchal hegemony in the Church.

In what might be the film's most chilling scene, Willa delivers a sermon at a revival meeting that binds her voice to ideas that animate the Christian patriarchy's view of women as destructive. Throughout the sermon, Harry stands behind her, and his domineering presence indicates the masculine control needed to allow Willa to speak to a congregation that includes men. Additionally, the ubiquity of burning torches, in the foreground and background of the shot, give Willa's already intense message an air of fire-and-brimstone, creating a hellish backdrop for her condemnation of femininity. According to Willa, she "drove a good man to murder" because she "kept a'hounding him for perfume and clothes and face paint." The implication is clear: due to Willa's feminine desires to be beautiful, she, like Eve, led her former husband to sin—it was her fault, her responsibility. Of course, with what the film has shown us about Willa up to this point, we know this is not her true voice, the one that earlier intoned, "I just don't want a husband." Here, Willa takes on one of classical Christianity's favorite images of the woman as seductive Eve betraying Adam, an image used to control women and their sexuality: "[Woman's creation from Adam's rib], together with her role as temptress in the story of the Fall, supposedly established beyond all doubt woman's immutable inferiority."[29] Willa's voice in this scene is

manipulated by Harry to serve his patriarchal agenda and his elevation of a masculine Christianity, bereft of feminine symbolism and the temptations of sex.

The Night of the Hunter must demonstrate the logical end of Willa's complicity in the patriarchal oppression, concluding with her death at the hands of the Preacher. By constructing Willa as the embodiment of the traditional fundamentalist woman, the film encourages us to read her death as the natural end of her complicity; for women to reverse the oppression of the patriarchal Church, the old, traditional image of the woman must die and be replaced with a new image of femininity. Daly echoes this call to action: "Women who have a consciousness of the problem…have the responsibility of changing the image of woman by raising up their own image, giving an example to others, especially to the young."[30] At this moment in the film, Willa has finally discovered the Preacher's true nature and tries to talk him out of his maniacal mission—she uses her voice to speak the truth, but this effort is too late. In her moment of resistance, Willa still upholds traditional stereotypes of the Christian woman as docile and subservient to her husband, even as Harry attacks her with a knife. At this moment, Willa takes the traditional role to its extreme, acquiescing to her husband's judgment by not attempting to fight back, ultimately sacrificing herself to his wishes. Although Willa maintains this traditional stereotype, the film also uses her as a subversive device: her sacrifice is both an indictment of the patriarchal system as well as a necessary step in the narrative of subversion

offered by the film. With her death, the film announces its intention to cast aside the traditional image of the fundamentalist female in favor of something different.

In Miz Cooper, *The Night of the Hunter* fashions a new image of woman for Christianity. She controls her voice and her body, recognizes the physicality and sexuality of women as essential to their being, and removes her voice from the control of the patriarchal hegemony. Leo Braudy does not see the film in this progressive of a light, suggesting "the process of the film is basically from Mitchum to Gish, from morbid antisexuality to reasonable and moral antisexuality."[31] Yet, Miz Cooper does not share the Preacher's abhorrence for sex or affection; when Ruby (Gloria Castillo) tells her that she has been sneaking off to be with boys, Miz Cooper responds with compassion, validating Ruby's desire for love expressed through sexuality. Additionally, Miz Cooper seems quite aware of the physicality inherent in being a human in the world and glorifies that state as proper and good, not evil and non-spiritual. For example, she is in touch with the earth, growing vegetables and raising chickens, which she sells in town and uses to feed the children she takes care of at her house. To be certain, the cinema of the time had its share of similarly minded characters, both men and women, but *The Night of the Hunter* renders its power relationships in explicitly gendered terms. Therefore, Miz Cooper exhibits a more nuanced understanding of the world than the Preacher by disregarding the dichotomous categories of

good/bad, spiritual/physical, and men/women, and as such she transcends the traditional conception of a Christian woman provided by fundamentalism.

The film situates Miz Cooper as an authority through her words and her control of the cinematic form, visually and sonically, to give her maximum impact.[32] She is particularly critical of the Preacher and her ability to speak in this fashion equates with Bernal's description of the potential of the female voice in Christianity: "As the speech of the 'Other' or the 'outsider,' feminist theological speech critiques the idolatrous pretensions of those who manipulate the live-giving force of language."[33] The Preacher often manipulates the people and spaces around him through his smooth language and command of religious rhetoric, which "points to a central idea implicit in *The Night of the Hunter*: power belongs to the one who controls the story."[34] This idea is not just implicit in *The Night of the Hunter*, but in many classical Hollywood films with one major difference—in *The Night of the Hunter*, the woman controls the story. In this sense, the film gives the pulpit to Miz Cooper, framing its story with her and giving her voice the power to transcend the diegetic space of the film, creating a scenario which forms a new vision of the woman's role in Christianity and Hollywood. By viewing the opening and closing of the film, as well as the climactic showdown between Miz Cooper and the Preacher, through feminist film theory and film sound theory, I will argue that Miz Cooper exerts control over the

diegesis and subverts classical Hollywood film form and patriarchal fundamentalism.

STEALING THE SPOTLIGHT: MIZ COOPER'S SUBVERSION OF CLASSICAL CINEMA

Feminist film theory in the realm of the visual has long been shaped by Laura Mulvey's discussion of the male gaze, in which "the male protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action."[35] *The Night of the Hunter* occasionally plays with the male gaze, but it also positions Miz Cooper's diegetic and formal power at the sonic level, perhaps a less noticeable, yet equally powerful subversion of masculine control. For theorists such as Kaja Silverman and Amy Lawrence, the patriarchal system is expressed just as forcefully through the sound editing of classical cinema as it is through the male gaze of the camera. Silverman sees continuity sound editing as "working to identify even the *embodied* male voice with the attributes of the cinematic apparatus, but always situating the female voice within a hyperbolically diegetic context."[36] Within this diegetic prison, then, Lawrence postulates that "the text forces [women] to speak," leading to a situation where "attempts to stop her from speaking rupture classical conventions of representation...and expose the way patriarchy uses language, image, sound,

and narrative to construct and contain 'woman'."[37] The terror that Lawrence describes when women start speaking in classical Hollywood film mirrors the Christian patriarchy's fear of allowing a woman to speak from the pulpit as an ordained minister. Along with its treatment of the woman's voice, the film differentiated itself visually from other films of that era, standing out even more.

Upon *The Night of the Hunter*'s release, many critics pointed at Laughton's direction and the film's style as the primary problems with the film. The film's artistic creativity was often seen as confusing and unnecessary, prompting John Beaufort to call it "a grim but self-consciously artificial moving picture" in contrast to "Davis Grubb's grimly brilliant suspense novel."[38] Bosley Crowther, in the *New York Times*, first compliments the film on its acting and sense of place before criticizing Laughton's decisions at the end of the film, suggesting that the film veers into "abstraction" which "is handled with obvious pretense."[39] In a piece a few days later, Crowther further comments on Laughton's direction, praising him for some scenes, but he again questions Laughton's direction in the second part of the film: "Mr. Laughton gets way out in left field when he tries to make his film grotesque and weird…[he] drifts away into realms that are 'arty.' The last part is sheer pretense."[40] In a similar fashion to Crowther, William Zinsser enjoyed the film, yet also asserted that "sometimes Laughton gets too arty for his own good but *The Night of the Hunter* has so much imagination that we can forgive its excesses."[41] Most critics were not so quick to

forgive Laughton's excesses and instead found the film superficial. For Couchman, the film's "spiritual battle…finds its deepest expression within the visual scheme of the film," and he is not surprised that "so many reviewers" could not "penetrate the deeper meanings conveyed by [Laughton's] techniques."[42] The visual and aural work together to deliver religious significance, as *The Night of the Hunter* gives Miz Cooper control of the diegetic world sonically and visually from the onset of the film, a radical inversion of common Hollywood practice at the time.[43]

The film opens with a scene that can only be called bizarre: Miz Cooper's head appears in the starry sky, addressing a group of children, whose heads later appear in the sky, as she sets the stage for the ensuing narrative. More importantly, her voice quickly becomes a voice-over, accompanying an aerial shot of the Ohio countryside. Here, Miz Cooper becomes, by virtue of her voice being heard without being connected to her body, what Michel Chion terms an acousmétre—"a special being, a kind of talking and acting shadow."[44] In the hierarchy of Chion's acousmétres, Miz Cooper falls into the category of the "already visualized acousmétre," her voice identified with her body; thus, she does not have the "ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence" of the complete acousmétre, who has not been visually identified.[45] However, "in the dark regions of the acousmatic field" Miz Cooper "can acquire by contagion some of the powers of the complete acousmétre."[46] The film gives Miz Cooper access,

in some form, to the complete acousmétre's powers, despite having already visualized her within the opening seconds of the film, through its construction of the opening and concluding sequences and her showdown with the Preacher.

The Night of the Hunter explicitly gives Miz Cooper sonic and visual authority from the opening scene. She begins the narrative by reflecting on the Sermon on the Mount—preaching, as it were—to the audience as she stares out from space. She is centered in the frame with a medium shot that fills the center of the frame, the dominant presence in these opening shots. Then, while Miz Cooper is telling us to "beware of false prophets," the film cuts away from her to a succession of three aerial shots, each one getting closer to the ground. By conflating her voice with the aerial perspective, the film positions her as all-seeing and all-knowing, as if she is directing the camera to view the scene, where some young boys find the Preacher's most recent victim. Miz Cooper's voice-over resumes and the camera returns to the aerial perspective, although this time, with each successive cut, it moves closer to Harry Powell driving down the road. The voice-over ends with her declaring, "And by their fruits, ye shall know them"—a second later, the film cuts to a medium shot of the Preacher in the car. Due to Miz Cooper's acousmatic voice guiding our perception and the diegesis, we know that Harry is a bearer of bad fruit, because Miz Cooper, through the voice-over, has been situated as the arbiter of the story space.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.18.01.46

Just as her presence and voice open the film, Miz Cooper closes the film, confirming her authority through her relationship to the camera. It is of particular import in *The Night of the Hunter* that Miz Cooper exerts her authority over both the visual and sonic elements of cinematic form because, as Mary Ann Doane notes, both the voice and body can been seen as sites of patriarchal oppression of women; therefore, only subverting one or the other would not actually be a subversion of the patriarchal order.[47] The film concludes at Christmas, and after all the gifts have been exchanged, the children exit the scene and we are left with Miz Cooper, who delivers these lines about children: "They abide and they endure." What is significant about this moment is not what she says, but how she says it—looking straight into the camera. Miz Cooper knows she is the storyteller, and she announces the conclusion of her story by blatantly disregarding the patriarchal conventions of classical cinematic form by directly addressing her audience. Earlier in the film, she also exhibits the power to directly address the audience, when she takes the children into town and stops at the general store. Here, as the store owner talks to her about Jon and Pearl, the camera suddenly cuts to a close-up of her face as she proclaims, "I'm a strong tree with branches for many birds." While she is not looking directly at the camera, at least not in the same manner as the closing scene, this statement seems oddly out of context in the conversation, and the forcefulness of Miz Cooper's tone suggests an address

to the audience or even to the fundamentalist order doubting her ability to raise five children on her own.

Miz Cooper's visual power is further evident in the scene just prior to the final showdown between her and the Preacher. Here, the Preacher arrives at her home to claim Jon and Pearl, spouting religious rhetoric as he tries to convince Miz Cooper to let him take the children. As they converse—Miz Cooper at the top of the porch stairs and the Preacher at the bottom—the camera frames them both in such a way as to suggest the ineffectuality of the male gaze. Of this series of conventional shot/countershots, Couchman correctly notes that the film gives power to Miz Cooper by framing the Preacher from a high angle matching Miz Cooper's perspective; however, the countershots of Miz Cooper are straight angle shots rather than, as Couchman suggests, low angle shots and they do not correlate with Harry's gaze.[48] The Preacher is in her gaze, but she is not in his; her control over the visual economy prevents the camera from conforming to the conventional mirroring of perspectives this sequence would normally entail, ultimately confirming the film's "transfer of power from Preacher to Miz Cooper."[49]

Immediately following this exchange is the climactic battle of Miz Cooper and the Preacher, staged at night—a battle of competing voices for who will get the final word in the film's story. The Preacher sits in the dark and shadows and begins to sing "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," his trademark song throughout

the film, which Miz Cooper eventually matches by singing the counter-melody of the chorus. Two important things transpire during this rather chillingly beautiful duet between the two which require deeper analysis: one on a theological level, the other on the cinematic level. In what Braudy calls the film's move "from a violent Old Testament religion to a calming New Testament religion,"[50] Miz Cooper responds to the Preacher's chorus "by adding the word—that is, to say, the Word—that Harry Powell has left out: 'Leaning on *Jesus*'."[51] As Daly mentions, "In the New Testament it is significant that the statements which reflect the antifeminism of the times are never those of Christ," as Jesus is often considered radically subversive in his views on women in the intensely patriarchal system of the ancient Middle East.[52] Thus, by invoking the name of Jesus, Miz Cooper appeals to a subversive figure for the power to speak against the current oppression engendered by patriarchal Christianity in the form of the Preacher.

Confirming Miz Cooper's theology, the visual and sonic elements of the scene grant her superiority over the Preacher as they both begin to sing. Speaking of this moment, Couchman eloquently describes the shift in power: "When Rachel's voice enters, Preacher's dwindles to accompaniment. Miz Cooper has appropriated his song and thereby reduced his power."[53] Indeed, her voice takes precedence in the audio mix, even when the camera moves back outside to focus on the Preacher, highlighting Miz Cooper's control over the sonic elements of this scene. Likewise, the shift in the acousmatic elements of the duet situates Miz

Cooper in a position of power and ubiquity. The scene begins with Harry's acousmatic voice, then as Miz Cooper starts singing, the camera cuts back outside to Harry and her voice becomes acousmatic, hauntingly filling the off-screen space. The next shot is a two-shot of Miz Cooper and Harry: she is in the shadows in the left foreground, completely black, only the movements of her lips visible; he is in the background, centered, yet illuminated by the outside lamp. As they both end singing on screen, it would appear that their battle has ended in a stalemate with neither Miz Cooper nor the Preacher in control of the acousmatic voice and the power it affords. However, the final shot of the duet reveals an inversion of power, as Miz Cooper comfortably sits in the darkness, refusing to let Harry take control of the night—she has not only assumed authority over his song, but also his time of day.

The Night of the Hunter's subversive project persists in the conclusion of this scene, where Miz Cooper defeats the Preacher physically after she has beaten him vocally. As she watches the children in the kitchen, waiting for Harry to enter the house, Miz Cooper once again tells a story about Jesus, comparing the Preacher to King Herod and his maniacal quest to find and kill the baby Jesus. Here, Miz Cooper is investing the current events with religious significance, intimating that, no matter how terrible the world can be, love and goodness, as embodied by her, have a chance to win. Glimpsing the Preacher's shadow on the wall, Miz Cooper commands the children to run and hide as she raises the

shotgun, prepared to fire at any instant—and fire she does, reducing the Preacher to a screeching animal of a man who flees from the house to take shelter in the barn, the animals' abode. While Miz Cooper dispatches the Preacher through use of a gun, a typically masculine symbol; her voice laid the groundwork for the victory. The film reflects this reading of the power of the female voice, as Miz Cooper defeats the Preacher so soundly that he does not utter another word for the remainder of the film, rendered silent by the voice of a woman.

The Night of the Hunter openly flouts a number of cinematic conventions connected to the male control of the diegetic space, giving the film a subversive quality unusual for its time. Furthermore, *The Night of the Hunter* subverts fundamentalist Christianity, an institution rarely criticized by mainstream film of the time. The film illuminates the darker side of the fundamentalist patriarchy through the Preacher, a composite of the various masculine abuses of power that mar the history of fundamentalism and demonstrates the destructive effect of fundamentalist conceptions of gender and womanhood through its depiction of Willa. By not allowing women the authority to preach or control their own bodies, the male fundamentalist hierarchy forces women like Willa to submit to the control of men. *The Night of the Hunter* highlights the power of the woman in the sphere of religion and her importance in resisting evil through Miz Cooper. She proclaims the Word without a man standing over her shoulder; in fact, the film posits that this might be just what the men fear. Yet, *The Night of the Hunter* does

not only undermine the patriarchal institution of fundamentalist Christianity, it also launches an assault on the classical Hollywood convention of masculine control over the cinematic apparatus. Miz Cooper, through framing the story and addressing the audience directly with her gaze and her voice, controls both the apparatus and the diegesis, leaving no doubt as to her eventual triumph over the Preacher. Utilizing sound in a fascinating manner, *The Night of the Hunter* provides a compelling picture of the power of the female voice to resist and subvert the patriarchy, a film well ahead of its time.

Notes

[1] Jeffrey Couchman, *The Night of the Hunter: A Biography of a Film* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 195-209.

[2] Richard Coe, "Real Villain is the Director," *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, October 14, 1955, 32.

[3] These theologians are, of course, far from the first to levy these critiques against masculine Christianity, but I chose this particular time period because it lines up with a larger discourse about feminism in the surrounding society. For a discussion of early Christian feminists in America, see Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, *Fundamentalism & Gender, 1875 to the Present*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 33-41.

[4] In the late 1800s, as Bendroth points out, "feminine piety was something revivalists could almost take for granted" and Christian women at that time "gained social power for themselves by pointing out the moral irresponsibility of middle-class men." For more information, see Bendroth, *Fundamentalism and Gender*, 13-30; and George M. Marsden, *Religion and American Culture* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1990), 112-15.

[5] Lisa V. Bernal, "Deviant Speech: Women Preachers and Christian Anathema," *ARC* 31 (2003): 134.

[6] Bendroth, *Fundamentalism and Gender*, 19-24; Marsden, *Religion and American Culture*, 182-84.

[7] Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 6. Additionally, I am choosing to view fundamentalism as a somewhat cohesive movement for the purposes of this article, leaving aside some of the denominational squabbles that splintered fundamentalism since its beginning.

[8] Ibid. See also Jon R. Stone and George M. Marsden for further definition of fundamentalism (52; *Religion* 182-84).

[9] Jon R. Stone, *On the Boundaries of American Evangelicalism: The Postwar Evangelical Coalition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 54. For more information on fundamentalism's fight against evolution, see George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 168-170.

[10] The Scopes Trial pitted the State of Tennessee against John T. Scopes, a public school teacher, who had taught evolution to his class. William Jennings Bryan represented Tennessee, who ultimately won the case, but not before Darrow and the ACLU thoroughly devastated the fundamentalist position. For a longer treatment, see Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 184-89; and Stone, *On the Boundaries*, 64-66.

[11] Carpenter, *Revive Us Again*, 61.

[12] Randall Balmer, *Blessed Assurance: A History of Evangelicalism in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 79, and Carpenter, *Revive Us Again*, 68.

[13] Karen McCarthy Brown, "Fundamentalism and the Control of Women," in *Fundamentalism and Gender*, ed. John Stratton Hawley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 181.

[14] George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 66-68.

[15] Ibid, 67.

[16] Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 132.

[17] Stone, *On the Boundaries*, 55.

[18] Brown, "Fundamentalism and the Control of Women," 176.

[19] The National Council of the Churches of Christ (NCC) was an ecumenical movement, associated with liberalism by more conservative evangelical Christians in the 1950s. See Stone, *On the Boundaries*, 124-25. Surprisingly, even the mainline denominations with their embrace of newer ideas and equality had problems with *The Night of the Hunter* and its treatment of Christianity.

[20] Couchman, *The Night of the Hunter*, 169.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid, 204.

[23] Coe, "Real Villain," 32.

[24] Will Leonard, "Horrors! They Laugh at Film Full of Terror," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Oct. 21, 1955, B10.

[25] Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1975), 186.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid, 187.

[28] Brown, "Fundamentalism and the Control of Women," 181.

[29] Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex*, 76.

[30] Ibid, 177.

[31] Leo Braudy, *The World in a Frame: What We See in Films* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1976), 234.

[32] The fact that Lillian Gish plays Miz Cooper only adds to the subversive qualities of her voice. Gish, well-known for starring in numerous silent films, had only appeared in six films since her first "talkie," *One Romantic Night* (1930), and she had been absent from film for almost a decade (minus a brief appearance in *Portrait of Jennie* (1948)) before *The Night of the Hunter*. See Charles Affron, *Lillian Gish: Her Legend, Her Life* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 317-318. In *The Night of the* Hunter, the prevalence of Gish's voice and her toughness directly contrasts many of her earlier and more well-known silent film roles, adding an extra dimension to Miz Cooper's subversive abilities.

[33] Bernal, "Deviant Speech," 140.

[34] Couchman, *The Night of the Hunter*, 142.

[35] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory & Criticism* (7th ed.), eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 717.

[36] Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 45.

[37] Amy Lawrence, *Echo and Narcissus: Women's Voices in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 10 and 32.

[38] John Beaufort, "'The Night of the Hunter' Presented at the Astor," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 20, 1955, 11.

[39] Bosley Crowther, "Screen: Bogeyman Plus," *New York Times*, September 30, 1955, 23.

[40] Bosley Crowther, "Directorial Ambition," *New York Times*, October 2, 1955, X1.

[41] William Zinsser, "The Night of the Hunter," *New York Herald Tribune*, September 30, 1955, quoted in Simon Callow, *The Night of the Hunter* (London: BFI, 2000), 53.

[42] Couchman, *The Night of the Hunter*, 204.

[43] In the case of *The Night of the Hunter*, I believe that contemporary film theory not only helps explain a small portion of the initial consternation caused by the film but, more importantly, gives us unique insight into how the film constructs and illuminates the power relationship between Miz Cooper and the Preacher.

[44] Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 21.

[45] Ibid, 21 and 24.

[46] Ibid, 21.

[47] Mary Ann Doane, "The Voice in Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space," in *Film Theory & Criticism* (7th ed.), eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 329-30.

[48] Couchman, *The Night of the Hunter*, 143.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Braudy, *The World in a Frame*, 234.

[51] Couchman, *The Night of the Hunter*, 167.

[52] Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex*, 79. Also, see Elizabeth Fiorenza *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 105-59.

[53] Couchman, *The Night of the Hunter*, 168.

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