Watching the River: Mise en Scène and Safe Space in The Night of the Hunter

By Bryan Wuest

In Davis Grubb’s 1953 novel The Night of the Hunter, the source material for the 1955 film directed by Charles Laughton, the lonely journey of recently-orphaned John and Pearl Harper down the river is given no particular prominence. Encompassing 20 of the novel’s 273 pages (just over 7% of the book), their journey, while important to the progression of the plot, does not stand out as unique within the book; the children make their way downriver and steal or beg for food in the Ohio countryside, which is described in the novel’s relatively simple prose. The novel explains the sorry state of the children, detailing John’s hunger, his misplaced resentment towards Pearl, his consideration of the grisly fate of his mother, his fear of the reappearance of Harry Powell, how the children smell after days in the boat, etc. The book also ties John and Pearl’s troubles into the more general plight of children during the Depression:

It was no strange sight in the land in that lean and fallow time: children running the woodlands and the fields without parents, without food, without love. Families were shattered and broken asunder in that black decade and the children were driven to fend for themselves... sleeping in barn lofts... stealing food where they could...¹

This is in stark contrast to the film, which not only privileges this section of the narrative in length by allowing it 13 of the film’s 93 minutes (about 14% of the film), but also employs an extremely stylized, expressionist aesthetic that makes the river sequence one of the most memorable features of the film.
The full river sequence

The realistic gravity of the novel is gone, replaced with entrancing photography of fantastic sets so visibly artificial that it is actually slightly distancing from the world of the film. This is not the only instance of odd or expressionist photography in the film – the nightmarish geometry of Willa Harper’s murder scene, the gently floating corpse in the river accompanied by the oddly-serene score, and the watchful, beatific silhouette of Rachel Cooper as she stands guard over house and matches Powell in hymn-singing are all memoriable, stylized features of the film that appear before and after the river sequence. But nowhere else in the film is this style so prolonged, structured, and meaningful, as will be illustrated throughout this analysis.

With this stylistic shift, the river sequence becomes reminiscent of a fairy tale to the point that some events become so marginally connected to reality that they are actually confusing upon first consideration. For example, both the Powell and John act in ways that strictly speaking do not seem to make sense within the diegesis. During the chase to the river, Powell reaches the water just as John pushes off from the shore. Powell takes a few steps in, flounders in the suddenly deep water, then immediately retreats and stops his pursuit. While the boat does get caught by the current, the river’s flow is not exceedingly fast or rough, and the boat is drifting away slowly, so it is surprising that after demonstrating his determination to get the money by his willingness to murder and his furious strength (recall that he broke down a door to escape a cellar moments before), Powell would not simply swim the couple of yards necessary to catch and stop the children’s boat.

John’s behavior is equally illogical – after his frantic race to get himself and Pearl away from Powell, the moment he pushes off from the shore and drifts out of Powell’s reach, he slumps down in the boat and falls asleep. The shot of the boat drifting away from Powell and the shot in which John sits down to sleep occur one immediately after the other. This timing, then, implies that the children and Powell are realistically still within eyeshot of each other, which makes bizarre John’s sudden carelessness in observing the enemy, of whom he has been wary since Powell’s first appearance in the film. The book, quite logically, does not turn its attention away from Powell so immediately; even after getting the boat on the river, the children could still hear Preacher: every sound drifting clean and sharp across the flat water: he was back on shore now where he could follow better, clawing his way down the brush filth through sumac and pokeberry, cursing and shouting...but now they were moving beyond him, they were free.²

In the film, why does John become complacent so quickly, not watching whether Powell comes swimming out after them, or gets his own boat, or follows them on foot along the shoreline?

This logistical nitpicking is intended only to make clear that a strictly narrative analysis is inadequate for an understanding of this sequence and the children’s relationship to the river. Instead, I would suggest that the river is deliberately delineated as a
temporarily separated, unreal space where the children are (mostly) safe from Powell. I am not the first to remark upon the abrupt stylistic shift in this sequence that portrays the children’s journey as so otherworldly and dreamlike; histories of the film usually remark on the uniqueness of this section of the film, detailing both Laughton’s general stylistic intentions and influences in the sequence as well as the technical methods by which the images were created and captured. For example, in his monograph of the film Simon Callow describes the sequence as “idyllic transition,” and “poetic transformation” that moves the children from the terror of Powell’s pursuit to a place of “extraordinary natural benevolence.” Jeffrey Couchman “biography” of the film describes the imagery of the river sequence as “a storybook painting come to life,” going on to compare the Ohio River of Hunter with the enchanted forest of the 1935 Warner Bros. version of A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Preston Neal Jones’ history of the film’s production relays an interview with the film’s cinematographer, Stanley Cortez, who reported that Laughton explicitly used the term “fairy tale” to communicate his vision for the river sequence to Cortez.

Many have commented on this sequence, and I also think most viewers simply intuit the shift in the film’s mood or atmosphere when the children reach the river, if only based on changes in music and the pacing of the film. However, through close textual analysis of the mise en scène of this sequence, my goal here is to consider the actual formal and structural elements used to deliberately engineer the memorable “feel” of the river sequence. If we acknowledge that Laughton and company intended for the creation of this atmosphere, and that we as viewers do experience the sequence in this way, how exactly are the images constructed and organized onscreen to this end? The main components of mise en scène relevant to this analysis are lighting, framing, blocking, and music, which I first examine to determine how they evoke a certain mood and are used to create an intermediate and insular safe space within the diegesis; second, I explore how repetition and symmetry within the river sequence, and its immediately prior and following shots, create meaningful structural relationships between different elements of the film.

My exploration of this sequence is indebted to Raymond Bellour’s systematic method of shot organization and examination in The Analysis of Film, so I will borrow his technique to establish how I am approaching this sequence. I define the river sequence as consisting of three categories of shots: 1.) fifty-one “river” (R) shots specifically of the children and their journey downriver; 2.) twenty-five “surrounding” (S) shots on either side of the river sequence, showing the children boarding the boat from Uncle Birdie’s house and disembarking at Rachel Cooper’s house; 3.) and seven “Powell” (P) shots that interrupt the river shots to show Powell’s progress and schemes. While the Powell shots are completely bokended by the river shots, it is important to this analysis (and, as I’ll demonstrate, quite logical) to consider them as separate. These eighty-three shots occur approximately between minute 55 and minute 68 of the film, spanning 13 minutes. Continuing to apply Bellour’s method, I illustrate below how these shots can be grouped into seven sets:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Shot</th>
<th>Set</th>
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<tr>
<td>Shots 1-17</td>
<td>S1</td>
<td>Children are chased by Powell to the shore; board the boat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shots 18-26</td>
<td>R1</td>
<td>Children cast off, float downriver as Pearl sings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shots 27-29</td>
<td>P1</td>
<td>Powell deceives the Spoons with postcard; rides a horse down the shore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shots 30-31</td>
<td>R2</td>
<td>Children briefly come ashore to beg for food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shots 32-35</td>
<td>P2</td>
<td>Powell preaches about children’s misbehavior to men in the woods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shots 36-75</td>
<td>R3</td>
<td>Children dock, sleep in barn; flee Powell; float further, wash up on shore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shots 76-83</td>
<td>S2</td>
<td>Children disembark; are chased by Rachel towards her house</td>
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To begin: shot 18 is the first shot of the river sequence and must demarcate the separate, unreal space the children are entering. 18, a very wide, high static shot, features an unmoving Powell in the bottom left corner and the children moving from the center to the upper right corner. Besides the expansive frame’s emphasis of the distance now between Powell and his prey, a streak of reflected moonlight also runs from top to bottom of the near center of the frame, dividing (and visually blocking) Powell from the children. The next shot (19) excludes Powell, instead consisting only of the children in medium framing, but Powell does not even linger in the offscreen space; rather, as soon as he is gone from the shot, the children (and the camera) stop acknowledging him. He is gone from the diegesis, at least as experienced by the children; he does not reappear in the film until shot 28, and will not actually share the frame with the children again until shot 59.
Shot 18 - Powell watching the children drift away
Concurrently with these spatial and structural demarcations of Powell’s world from the children’s, the soundtrack draws an equally clear border. Shot 17, the end of the S1 set, is a close-up of Powell as he produces an animalistic scream at his loss of the children. Upon the cut to 18, the scream becomes electronically-distorted, then quickly fades into strings and a celeste, according to Couchman, who describes this audio transition as “otherworldly evil [fading] away before otherworldly goodness,” and does not overstate a thing; it is a distinct and sudden contrast between Powell’s unsettling yell and the following eerie serenity of the “Pretty Fly” motif (sung diegetically by Pearl with non-diegetic instrumental accompaniment). In fact, the sudden drop of Powell’s scream and the rise of the strings occur simultaneously with the boat’s crossing of the moonlight streak on the water, and the aural transition is as abrupt as if the children had entered another room and shut the door behind them.

Audio: Powell’s scream

These various elements of mise en scène signal the children’s movement from the ordinary to the extraordinary by way of a border-crossing into a world less connected to the dangerous reality they have just escaped. This unreality is quickly established in shot 20, a very wide shot of the boat slowly drifting under a sky of impossibly bright stars, as seen above:
This shot, created by inserting a background of hung electric lights in postproduction, creates an ultra-stylized, storybook look\(^9\); while the photography in other memorable shots throughout the film is also sometimes very stylized or expressionistic, this is one of the few instances in the film of a shot looking explicitly *fake* (especially on a 35mm print). This patent stagedness makes the film form visible, forgoing reality for the purpose of stylization. Instead of negatively affecting viewer engagement with the film, however, I would argue this exposure of the world as unreal actually functions to adjust viewer perception to John and Pearl’s new environment that is separated from reality, and in doing so create different expectations – for example, with this premise we can accept Powell’s inability to catch the children once they are on the water (and thus out of the bounds of his world of reality).

The children’s temporary safety is further indicated by the fact that besides not sharing a frame with Powell again until halfway through the sequence, shots of the children are not even situated adjacent to those of Powell through editing. Through the two P sets of shots, Powell’s own journey down the shoreline *does* interrupt the children’s journey; twice the camera leaves John and Pearl and instead follows Powell while he travels on horseback and interacts with other men in the woods. However, in these instances when Powell has precedence in the frame, the children are never put into close compositional association with him. While the camera does cut directly between a shot of the Spoons reading Powell’s postcard (27) and a shot of the preacher, Powell does not achieve such direct access to the children. In his first scene during the river sequence, the shot of him on horseback dissolves to an extreme wide aerial shot of the children reaching the first house (30); besides the dissolve, which in itself creates a less solid connection between the two parties (by way of softening their association and making their spatiotemporal relationship more ambiguous), the shot of the children directly adjacent to Powell’s medium shot (29) is so wide that it puts the children out of his reach, so to speak – a dissolve and a distanced aerial shot separates them. Likewise, Powell’s scene in the woods with the men is not only followed by a dissolve, but also has two insert shots of animals (an owl and a turtle, respectively) acting as a buffer between his and the children’s separate narrative spaces.
Shots 27-31 - Powell separated from the children by shots of the Spoons and wide aerial shots

Powell finally succeeds in reaching the children (at least in terms of shot composition) while they are resting in the barn. In shot 53, John wakes up to dogs barking and looks into the distance. Suddenly Powell's hymn is heard while the camera is still in medium close-up of John's face – a first invasion of the children's space, albeit only on the soundtrack. The shot cuts to a wide framing of the horizon, upon which Powell's faraway silhouette appears. The film cuts back to John, whose face registers surprise and fear upon recognizing Powell, and a second invasion occurs: without the buffer of dissolves or insert shots, this cutting establishes the shots of Powell as John's point-of-view, connecting the children and Powell with a spatiotemporal closeness that has not occurred during the river sequence. After cutting between John's face and his POV of the preacher several times, the film allows Powell to fully invade the children's compositional space: the camera is behind John, staging him and Powell in different planes of the same shot (59). The preacher has breached John and Pearl's world, if only by entering a shared frame, and they must rush back to the safety of the boat and the river.
Shots 53-60 - Powell invading the soundtrack and the frame as the children rest in the barn
Shot 57 - Powell on the horizon
Shot 58 - John watching from the hayloft
In our effort to understand the children’s unreal world, it is worth noting that the children only seem to be in danger when they come ashore. Only twice during the river sequence do the children venture onto land, both times seeking help or refuge at homesteads they find on the shore; in both cases the composition of the frames containing these houses foretells what the children will find there. The first house scene consists of only one shot, with the camera located in the house shooting through the doorway (shot 31). Both sides of the shot are dark, creating only a narrow area for the children to inhabit in the middle third of the frame (not to mention the fact that this space is already crowded with other children when John and Pearl disembark from the boat). John and Pearl begin the shot small, well in the background, but as they approach the foreground they quickly fill the narrow frame, reifying the fact that there simply is no room for them here and that they will be quickly sent away by the harried woman of the house. In fact, this cramped frame is even visually similar to the front hallway of the home they left behind, where John was trapped and interrogated by Powell.
Shot 31 - The children coming ashore to beg for food
An earlier rhyming shot of Powell and John in the hallway: the adult-run, civilized world as claustrophobic

When the children reach the second house further down the river, the composition of this environment invites the children as much as the previous one had repelled them. This composition is the complete opposite of the claustrophobic framing of the first house's doorway: besides being a very wide shot, wide enough for two buildings and plenty of sky above and between, the calm water filling the bottom half of the frame is extremely reflective of the top half, expanding the open space in the same way a mirror wall creates the illusion of a larger room in a house.
Besides simply countering the tightness of the previous house scene’s composition, however, the lines of this image guide the children onto the shore. Both the house and the barn are staged diagonally to the camera, which causes their roofs to slope inward towards the center, visually drawing the viewer’s eye and compositionally drawing the children. Of course this visual structure is also doubled in the water’s reflection, strengthening its pull in the frame. We can take this idea one step further: while the barn’s roof does not reach the top of the frame (leaving sky space), the shot is composed in such a way that its reflection in the water does meet with the bottom of the frame. In this way, their way forward by boat is blocked off; the composition demands they stop their rightward progress and follow the shot’s lines into the center of the frame where they will dock their boat and rest in the barn.

Like the wide shot of the starry sky over the river, this shot looks overtly fake. During the R1 set, the film has associated unreality with safety for the children, so the appearance of this new environment immediately suggests that John and Pearl will be protected from danger here. Also noteworthy is that the house and barn are always shown in static shots. The four shots previous to this homestead’s first appearance (40-43) are moving shots following the boat’s smooth drifting down the river, but for the homestead the film cuts to a wide static shot that John and Pearl drift into. This was most likely motivated at least partly by the logistics of shooting on a sound stage with a large backdrop, but in terms of mise en scène this arrangement functions to establish this environment as a discrete, bordered space – cutting to the static shot deemphasizes the space’s geographical connection to its surroundings, much like the river is marked as a separate space disconnected from the real world.

However, once Powell has invaded the children’s frame as described above, the homestead environment changes. The difference between shots 44 and 64 is striking: the backlight is much dimmer (consistent with the progression of time within the diegesis, but expressive nonetheless), the window with the birdcage is now unlit, and perhaps most noticeably, the river has changed. Now darker and flowing more turbulently, the water no longer reflects the top half of the screen, decreasing the shot’s stylization and concurrently increasing how realistic it looks. Recalling the implicit safety of unrealistic environments that the mise en scène of the R1 set established, it follows that the increasing realisticness of the shot means a loss of security for the children, and they board their boat to leave behind their safehouse that is now corrupted by its return to reality.
Shot 44 - The safehouse...
This brings us to the final R shots before the children dock and arrive in the “real” world in front of Rachel Cooper’s house. After the children’s flight from the barn on the choppy waters, there is a dissolve to the last five R shots (71-75), for which the water has once again become placid and slow. The children are asleep on the boat, giving the currents complete control over their direction. Shot 72, a static close shot of the riverbank, is soon entered by the front of the boat as it very slowly drifts into land and stops. Shot 73 is a wide high-angle shot of the children sleeping in the now docked boat, then shot 74 again shows the front of the boat on shore. The repetition of this seemingly inconsequential shot encourages closer consideration, so let us compare it to its mirror at the beginning of the children’s journey. Shot 16 shows the front of the boat as it pushes away from the shore, just out of Powell’s grasp. This shot, about five seconds long in its entirety, is “empty” for about two seconds; the boat is already halfway out of the frame at the beginning of the shot, and quickly exits out the top-right corner, leaving the camera to film only the rushing river for almost half of the shot. Shot 72 lasts for about eleven seconds, and the front of the boat takes about seven seconds to reach the center of the frame.
Shots 18 / 72 - The boat casting off / the boat drifting ashore

Besides their inverse symmetry (a boat quickly leaving a space [full space -> empty space] in 16, a boat slowly filling a space [empty space -> full space] in 72; both shots feature an empty frame for part of their duration), these shots are especially noteworthy because of their close framing of the boat. Nowhere else in the sequence is the boat framed so closely and to the exclusion of other things; the camera generally prefers wide shots of the boat moving down the river, or medium/medium close-ups of John and Pearl in the boat. The two other times the children board or disembark during the sequence either take place offscreen (shot 31) or in very wide shots (44, 64). Thus shot 16 and shot 72 (and 72's repetition, 74) mirror each other in their compositional similarity, and function to begin and end the children's journey down the river. Viewers can note the similarities between the two shots and realize that the 72 is meant to bring to a close what 16 began.

In addition to the visual echoes within the frame compositions, repetition also occurs on the audio track. Various musical motifs weave and blend together throughout both the river sequence and the film as a whole, but one specific arrangement, which I'll call the "Land" motif, occurs only twice: once during shots 50-54, as the children sleep in the hayloft, and once during 72-75, as the sleeping children's boat drifts shore. "Land" consists of soft, low brass, a playful clarinet line, a trilling flute, and light triangle and bell notes (listen to it below). In both cases the arrangement brings melodic resolution to the music on the soundtrack – the first time to the semi-diegetic "Lullaby" motif (semi-diegetic because the woman in the house sings, but the sound is not bound by rules of space and distance), and the second time to the nondiegetic intermingled "Lullaby" and "Pretty Fly" motifs, both recurring themes during the children's journey downriver. Both motifs, while not threatening like the heavy scoring associated with Powell, are in a minor key, so the melodic resolution offered by "Land" brings a tense, otherworldly score to a satisfying and calming conclusion.

The resolution offered by "Land" during shots 50-54, however, is not allowed full realization; before it reaches completion, dogs begin to bark, interrupting the serenity and preceding Powell's hymn, which enters the soundtrack moments later.

Audio: Land theme, interrupted

These sounds invade, breaking into the resolution on the soundtrack and the safety of the house and barn, forcing the children to keep traveling. Then in shots 72-75, it is almost as though the river wants a second chance; it softly pulls the children into the shore as the "Land" motif is heard again (with the transition from the minor key "Lullaby"/"Pretty Fly" motif to the major key "Land" motif occurring almost exactly when the front of the boat comes to rest on the riverbank), and the children remain asleep as the motif plays out fully.
Audio: Land theme, to completion

The camera slowly tilts upward (75) to the same artificial stars seen over the river in shot 20, giving us our last glimpse of the unreal river world before a rooster’s crow, a dissolve to a sunny sky (76), then a cut to John slowly waking (77). I do not think the river sequence is meant to be taken as a literal dream of John’s, but shot 77’s close-up of him coming awake on the shore of Rachel Cooper’s house certainly symbolizes his exit from unreality and reentry into the reality that Cooper (and Powell) inhabits.

The children awake and are immediately gathered up by Cooper. The introduction of Cooper “rhymes” with the children’s interactions with both Birdie and Powell. For example, back at the beginning of this sequence, the children have just come from the houseboat where a very drunk Birdie was unable to help the children. Thus they must fend for themselves and are shown running rightward during shots 1 and 2 before reaching the boat in shot 3. This rhymes (inversely) with shots 80-83: the children are with the boat in shot 80, then are shown running leftward for shots 81-83. Both the direction and the number of shots are important.

Shots 1-3 / 80-83 - Powell chasing the children toward the river / Cooper chasing the children away from the river

This is the first time in the sequence that the children are moving leftward; even in the R3 set as they retreat from the loft in the barn, where it is conceivable the tracking shot past the cows (shot 49) would have been reversed, right to left, as the children fled, the film cuts directly from them climbing down the ladder (63) to them exiting the barn, boarding the boat and continuing rightward on the river (64). This sudden change in direction in the S2 set deserves examination, and I would argue that this shift further positions the river as a temporary, separate space. Continuing rightward after the third and final docking of their boat would suggest a straightforward, constantly progressive journey of three steps: start at home, travel down the river, and arrive at Cooper's house. Instead, the children's final movement to the left implies that they had moved (rightward) into a space and are now withdrawing (leftward) from it. They had fled from the real world into the unreal world, and now are ready to return to reality.

Also, as mentioned above, the children run rightward on the shore for two shots (1-2), but leftward for three shots (81-83). This asymmetry foretells Cooper’s ability to help the children: instead of exiting the separated world of the river and simply regressing back into the same hopelessness of useless adults, John and Pearl break out of the cycle and progress past it. After shots 81-83, they once again come upon a house on the river (as with Birdie’s houseboat), but this time the house contains an adult who will protect them from Powell.
While Cooper’s connection to Birdie is mostly structural, her rhyme with Powell is much more visual. Shots 13 and 78 block Powell and Cooper, respectively, in a very similar visual relationship with John; in both John stands in the boat, back to the camera, holding the oar up either to push away from shore or as a weapon. Both Powell and Cooper are armed as well: one with a knife and one with a switch.

Shot 13 - John brandishing the oar at Powell just before shoving off
The symmetry here is clear: after performing this blocking with Powell, John has returned to repeat it with Cooper, the exact opposite of Powell and the character who will counter him in a good vs. evil conflict by the end of the film. Cooper is, in fact, the first adult John can rely on after his father’s death: Powell wants to kill him, of course; Willa was essentially manipulated into martyrdom; the Spoons were deceived about Powell’s true intentions; and Birdie, who specifically presented himself to John as a helper in time of need, drank himself into a stupor just when John needed him most. Cooper halts this repetition of ineffectual adults and sets into motion the events that will eventually bring the film to a conclusion.

A formal analysis of the carefully-constructed unreality of this sequence does lead to the question of why: why is this bleak, realistic description of Depression-era desperation transformed to a fantastic journey through a storybook forest? Why did Laughton want this sequence to resemble a children’s fairy tale? It is difficult to say for sure, but let us consider the state of the children at the beginning of this sequence. At this point, the children have lost their connections to the adult, or real, world. As mentioned above, before they find Cooper, the children are let down by every potentially helpful adult, and where Powell once had to maintain a façade of respectability in order to not arouse the suspicion of other adults, he can now become an unchecked monster, overtly threatening the children and screaming like an animal. As a result, the children have fled the real world and taken flight through their own adult-free world.

If the film followed the novel more closely and wove in commentary on the effects of the Depression on the region, the resulting sequence, while perhaps more realistic, might in a way actually be more distancing to viewers than the obviously-artificial world portrayed in the film. While viewers are likely distanced from their understanding of reality by the unreal river sequence, this actually aligns them more closely with the children, who are themselves experiencing a new and bizarre world; a certain distance from reality is actually necessary to become more closely connected to the children. The children do not understand the socioeconomic results of the Depression era; they are concerned with the star-filled sky they are under alone for the first time, with the animals they float by, and with the reappearance of their predator on the horizon. And so, in order to better align the viewers with the endangered children, Cortez’s camera is also concerned with these things. It is a trade – the film sacrifices the chance to comment more fully on that specific moment in American history to encourage deeper viewer identification with the children, the key players in this tale of good versus evil. And once the children find Cooper, a grown-up they can rely on, they reenter the real adult world, this time finding it ultimately safe.

It is a testament to the effectiveness of a film’s mise en scène when so much about the film world can be expressed so quickly in visual (or aural) form. Through the mise en scène of the river sequence, the film explains in purely cinematic terms the new rules of the unreal space the children are inhabiting, and by the use and violation of compositional and structural symmetry, the film
prepares viewers for a showdown between Cooper and Powell, good and evil. These techniques work in ways that do not even need to operate on a conscious level; a viewer need not actually perform an analysis of the sequence in order to understand that the children have entered a dreamy otherworld. But close examination of these elements of mise en scène and their arrangement can lay bare the underlying mechanics at work in a film’s system of style and make sense of the motives and methods behind a film as entrancing as The Night of the Hunter.

NOTES

2. Grubb, 188.
7. This is perhaps even reminiscent of vampire folklore, in which the monster is unable to cross running water.
8. Couchman, 156.

Author bio:
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