

RECOVERED TREASURES: GREAT FILMS FROM WORLD ARCHIVES

January 15–February 20, 2011

THE HUSTLER

Saturday, January 15, 2:00 p.m.

Sunday, January 16, 2:00 p.m.

1961, 133 mins.

World premiere of newly restored 35mm print from 20th Century Fox

Directed and produced by Robert Rossen. Written by Rossen and Sidney Carroll. Photographed by Eugen Schüfftan. Edited by Dede Allen. Production design by Harry Horner. Costume design by Ruth Morley. Music by Kenyon Hopkins.

Principal cast: Paul Newman (as Eddie Felson), Jackie Gleason (Minnesota Fats), Piper Laurie (Sarah Packard), George C. Scott (Bert Gordon), Myron McCormick (Charlie Burns), Murray Hamilton (Findlay), Michael Constantine (Big John), Stefan Gierasch (Preacher).

Review in *The New York Times*, by Bosley Crowther, September 27, 1961:

Dad always said stay out of poolrooms, and obviously he was right, to judge by what one sees in *The Hustler*, which came to the Paramount and the Seventy-second Street Playhouse yesterday. For the characters one meets in the succession of sunless and smoky billiard halls (to use a more genteel term for them) that are tenanted in the course of this tough film are the sort to make your flesh creep and whatever blood you may have run cold. Indeed, one character says in the beginning that a pool-room looks like a morgue and “those tables are the slabs they lay the stiff on.”

We're glad we took the good advice of Dad.

But this doesn't say the weird assembly of pool players, gamblers, hangers-on and hustlers—especially the hustlers—which they used to call “pool sharks” in our youth, are not fascinating and exciting to watch at a safe distance from the screen. They're high-strung, voracious and evil. They talk dirty, smoke, guzzle booze and befoul the dignity of human beings. At least, the hustlers' wicked betting managers do. They have a consuming greed for money that cancels out charity and love. They're full of energy and action.

That's the virtuous quality of this film.

Under Robert Rossen's strong direction, its ruthless and odorous account of one young hustler's eventual emancipation is positive and alive. It crackles with credible passions. It comes briskly and brusquely to sharp points. It doesn't

dawdle with romantic nonsense, except in one brief unfortunate stretch.

Along about midway, after its hero has been washed out in a herculean game and has sneaked away into a cheap New York apartment with a fortuitously picked-up girl, it does mush about a bit with chitchat anent the deep yearnings of the heart and the needful direction a man takes to get onto solid ground.

But even in this mushy area, Mr. Rossen and Sidney Carroll have provided their characters with dialogue that keeps them buoyant and alive. And soon they are potently projected into the world of the realists again—into a brutally cynical connivance and a gorge-raising sweep to an ironic end.

There may not be much depth to the hero, whom Paul Newman violently plays with a master's control of tart expressions and bitterly passionate attitudes. Nor may there be quite enough clarity in the complicated nature of the girl, whom Piper Laurie wrings into a pathetic and eventually exhausted little rag. But they're both appealing people, he in a truculent, helpless way and she in the manner of a courageous, confused and uncompromising child.

The real power is packed into the character of an evil gambler, whom George C. Scott plays as though the devil himself had donned dark glasses and taken up residence in a rancid billiard hall. Mr. Scott is magnificently malefic. When he lifts those glasses and squints, it is as though somebody had suddenly put a knife between your ribs.

Jackie Gleason is also excellent—more so than you first realize—as a cool, self-collected pool expert who has gone into bondage to the gambling man. His deceptively casual behavior in that titanic initial game conceals a pathetic robot that you only later perceive.

Myron McCormick is touchingly futile as a tin-horn manager and Murray Hamilton, too, is effective in the brief role of a wealthy billiards buff. Michael Constantine, Carl York, and Jale LaMotta are colorful as poolroom types.

The Hustler is not a picture to take the children to see, but it is one a father might wisely recommend to a restless teen-age son.

An appropriately nervous jazz score keeps the eardrums sharp.

From "The Films of Robert Rossen," by Alan Casty, *Film Quarterly*, Winter 1966-1967:

Eddie, the hustler, is a more complete version of Rossen's young seeker. His desire for money and status within his "art" is even recognized by him as destructive of other impulses toward identity he feels within himself. The feelings of love surprise his defenses, but in the hemmed-in, trapped tightness of the girl's small apartment, the possibilities of love are overrun by the distortions of aggression (the counterpart of his need to be the top man of the world of the pool hall). Only in one scene in the open air, in which Rossen uses the wide screen to set up the strikingly contrasting sense of the openness of possibilities of tenderness and creativity, can Eddie verbalize his sense of his skill as more than a tool of conquest—as, rather, a creative and fulfilling artistry—and his sense of love as more than a battle for victory of the self. But Eddie is not strong enough to carry out these possibilities. The girl—physically crippled, emotionally warped—is not yet destroyed, not yet without love. She is insightful enough to know what is happening—"We are all crippled," she says—but too weak, too wounded herself, to forestall it. The film, then, is not merely the realistic depiction of the milieu and tricks of the trade of the pool hall and pool shark.

It does not merely depict a battle between the old pool player and the young—within the reflex

convention of old doctor and young, old gangster and young, old lawyer and young, old cowboy and young. It depicts, rather, the struggle between the gambler and the girl for the unformed soul and the

unshaped energies of the pool-playing young American, the wanderer, skilled but isolated without purpose, mission or connection.

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