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CREW

Directed by **ROBERT SIODMAK**
Produced by **MARK HELLINGER**
Screenplay by **ANTHONY VEILLER** (and **RICHARD BROOKS, JOHN HUSTON** and **DON SIEGEL**, uncredited)
From the story by **ERNEST HEMINGWAY**
Cinematography by **WOODY BREDELL**
Edited by **ARTHUR HILTON**
Art Direction by **MARTIN OBZINA, JACK OTTERSON**
Sound by **BERNARD B. BROWN**
Music by **MIKLÓS RÓZSA**
Universal-International, 1946

The KILLERS

THE KILLERS

by Sergio Angelini

In 1964 two new movies conspired to evoke memories of *The Killers* (1946), one of the foundations on which the classic film noir mythos was constructed: Don Siegel's loose, brightly coloured remake of the same title[1] and *Seven Days in May*. The latter reunited the original's central trio of stars, Burt Lancaster, Ava Gardner and Edmond O'Brien, who respectively played the victim, the temptress and the investigator. Fifty years later and the original *The Killers*, which was a sizeable hit in its day, has lost little of its ambiguous appeal and seductive power, not least because it frequently seems so at odds with received notions of what a Hollywood movie of the 1940s should be like.

One can partly ascribe its comparative modernity to the series of paradoxes it is built on: it launched the career of one of cinema's paragons of virility, Burt Lancaster, but from the start has him play a passive weakling. It is simultaneously the closest Hollywood has ever come to transposing Ernest Hemingway's work intact to the screen (the opening thirteen minutes), but also embroiders around its edges to a massive extent (the following hour and a half). Specifically set in 1946, most of its action is located in the past. It ostensibly has O'Brien's gumshoe Reardon looking to solve a murder, but confounds narrative closure by engulfing viewers in a universe in which his attempts to explicate character and motive only lead to more death and destruction. Welcome to the black and white landscape of film noir, where everything comes in shades of grey.

NOTES ON FILM NOIR

"It has always been easier to recognise a film noir than to define the term."[2]
- James Naremore

The Killers was released just as the phrase 'film noir' started to come into general usage in French critical circles, after the publication of essays by Nino Frank and Jean-Pierre Chartier. They used the term to describe several American crime dramas – including *Double*

1. Don Siegel's version of *The Killers* is also available as an Arrow Academy Blu-ray release.

2. James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p. 9

Indemnity, *Laura* and *Murder, My Sweet* – that had belatedly reached French shores with the end of the Nazi occupation. With their tarnished, morally compromised characters, fatalist mood and expressionistic, chiaroscuro cinematography, these films struck a deep chord with local audiences primed by the downbeat poetic realism of French cinema of the late 1930s and the (mainly foreign) crime books that had just started being published by Gallimard in its 'Serie Noire' imprint. But what does the term *really* mean? Just like the often impenetrable plots of the films themselves, critics and audiences alike have been scratching their heads ever since over how to categorise a type of film mainly associated with America but named by the French and indeed largely the creation of émigré Europeans. Does this large and far from homogenous body of work comprise a stylistic mode, a genre or a movement? The fascination, of course, lies in not knowing but trying, none the less, to strive for an answer. This is certainly true of *The Killers*.

In his seminal essay 'Notes on Film Noir' (first published in *Film Comment* in 1972), Paul Schrader situated noir's outer chronological boundaries as lying between the release of *The Maltese Falcon*, which in 1941 launched the directorial career of John Huston and made a leading man of Humphrey Bogart, and *Touch of Evil*, which in 1958 brought down the curtain on Orson Welles's career as a Hollywood director. Both of these films, like so many of those that came in between, were derived from pre-published sources, predominantly works by such celebrated hardboiled *auteurs* as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, Cornell Woolrich, et al, though more established mainstream writers from overseas like Somerset Maugham and Graham Greene were also folded in. Certainly, when it came to selling the feature film *The Killers*, the biggest name on the marquee was undoubtedly that of its original author, Ernest Hemingway.

BACKSTORY

"We're killing him for a friend. Just to oblige a friend"
– from *The Killers* by Ernest Hemingway

Hemingway would later claim that he wrote *The Killers* in a white heat on the morning of 16 May 1926, though it only appeared in print the following year in the March issue of *Scribner's* magazine. Reprinted umpteen times since then, it remains Hemingway's best-known story. Outwardly, it looks very simple: two assassins arrive in a small town and take over a diner, waiting for the arrival of 'Swede', so that they can carry out a contract on his life. Despite being warned of their plan, Swede opts to stay put and accept his fate. We never find out the reason for the execution or why he didn't try to get away. Despite its brevity, the text over the decades has inspired a wealth of interpretations thanks to its open ending, the spare yet

richly evocative and allusive prose and the repetitive, almost hypnotic rhythm of its clipped dialogue that is by turns sinister and humorous.

When Broadway columnist-turned-producer Mark Hellinger left Warner Bros to set up shop as an independent at Universal, he chose to make *The Killers* his first film. Having secured the rights (for approximately $37,000, though some publicity-inflated sources claim double that) he went to writer Richard Brooks to come up with a plot to follow on from where the original left off. At the time Brooks was already working on what would be the producer's next film, the prison drama *Brute Force* (1947)[3], and the two films would end up, rather unsurprisingly, having quite a lot in common, most notably a heavy reliance on flashback and a marked sympathy for the underdog. With little to draw on, other than vague hints that maybe Swede had betrayed somebody in the mob back in Chicago, Brooks tried going straight to the source for help, without much success. Some forty years later, Brooks recalled their discussion in a humorous parody of Hemingway's trademark laconic style:

> I said, "Why do the two guys come in to kill the Swede?" "How the hell do I know?" he said. "That's all you got to say?" I said. "That's all I got to say," he said.[4]

Brooks ultimately developed a scenario involving a payroll heist and an insurance investigator, using flashbacks to fill in the blanks. This first draft was then passed to Anthony Veiller, who completed the shooting script in collaboration with John Huston (who received no credit as he was under contract to Warner Bros.). Having made the decision from the outset that Hemingway's original story would be used *in toto*, the film absorbed it by maintaining an episodic pattern through a series of self-contained but interlocking vignettes.

These are largely told in flashbacks that nonetheless, with only a minimum of contrivance, present the narrative largely sequentially to propel the movie forwards. The use of multiple narrators (eight in total) and so many flashbacks (eleven) probably owes a debt to *Citizen Kane* (1941), though one suspects that it was also following in the steps of such recent hit mysteries as *Laura* (1944), *The Mask of Dimitrios* (1944), *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Mildred Pierce* (1945). In the case of the latter two, the films restructured James M. Cain's source novels to start at the end and then flash back to explain how this came about, as

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3. *Brute Force* is also available as a dual-format Arrow Academy release.

4. 'Richard Brooks: The Professional' in Pat McGilligan (ed), *Backstory 2* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 42

Thomas Schatz[5] has pointed out. *The Killers* would help establish this type of framing device as a major part of the noir lexicon, together with its man-eating femme fatale, the seedy milieu, the atmosphere of cosmic indifference and its fall guy protagonist.

THE DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH OR THE BROOCH IN THE SOUP

Hemingway was living in Spain when he composed *The Killers* and did briefly consider entitling it 'The Matadors', equating Swede's refusal to run and stoic acceptance of his destiny with the stance of the bullfighter in the ring. The Swede is undeniably the source of the mystery in the story and the film but if his end was originally meant by Hemingway to be either tragic or signify the arrival at some ennobling self-knowledge, in the film he is a mere pawn, a three-time loser. It is startling just how big a sap the filmmaker make the Swede out to be, so it really helps that Burt Lancaster plays the part without an ounce of vanity.

In fact, he did such a good job that, despite his imposing physique, for a while he was typecast as doomed weaklings under the thumb of strong-willed women (*I Walk Alone, Kiss the Blood Off My Hands* and *Sorry, Wrong Number* all follow that pattern and were all released in the same year, 1948). Making his belated debut as a Hollywood heartthrob at age 32, Lancaster delivers what Eddie Muller describes as one of cinema's "… most indelible images of vanquished masculinity."[6] Symbolically Swede was presented as what would become something of a noir fixture, the castrated male. Utterly decimated by the gunfire (as the morgue attendant tells O'Brien's investigator Reardon, "The policy is now payable. Got eight slugs in him, near tore him in half"), we learn the Swede had already lost everything that mattered to him. His career as a boxer over when his right hand was crushed in a bout, he went into the numbers racket with gangster Jim Colfax (Albert Dekker). He turned seriously to crime when taking the fall for Colfax's moll, Kitty (Ava Gardner, then an MGM starlet, finally getting her first major role), when she is caught with stolen jewellery (after unsuccessfully trying to hide it in a bowl of soup). After he spends years in jail for her, they take part in a robbery together and seemingly outwit a double-cross; but ultimately she abandons him, leading to an unsuccessful suicide attempt. Thus, by the time nemesis comes a calling in the shape of Charles McGraw and William Conrad, he is truly pathetic, a mere shell of a man.

However, is it all Kitty's fault? Gardner is certainly dressed to kill for her long-delayed entrance some forty minutes in, sporting a stunning single-strap satin gown. She is presented at a

5. Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: The American Cinema in the 1940s* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1997) p. 388

6. Eddie Muller, *Dark City: The Lost World of Film Noir* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998), p. 100

piano, warbling an insipid tune ("The more I know of love / the less I know it / the more I give to love / the more I owe it") but the Swede is utterly smitten. If he is just too dumb to survive, it is trying to figure out Kitty that really drives this film. As Foster Hirsch says, "Kitty is one of the genre's most masked spider women"[7] and remains an enigma throughout, impossible to truly pin down. In consecutive episodes from various narrators she always looks different (a homemaker in check shirt with rolled up sleeves in one, provocative 'sweater girl' in another) and the film always teases us about where Kitty had ended up and what her motives truly were. She is the last to offer her testimony to Reardon in the concluding trip down memory lane, though she gives away very little, right to her tear-stained final close-up[8].

PRONOUNCED SEE-ODD-MACK

The debut film from Mark Hellinger Productions was shot entirely at Universal Studios on a tight budget (it ultimately came in at $825,000) in a mere eight weeks, starting at the end of April 1946. When Hellinger couldn't get Don Siegel released from Warners at a reasonable price, he sensibly turned to Robert Siodmak, who was in the process of re-establishing in America after feeling persecution first in Germany then France (he even had the back of his director's chair stamped with phonetic instructions on how to pronounce his name). A superb visual stylist, he also demonstrated a special affinity for outsiders and depicting "duality, masochism and perverse relationships."[9] In the 1940s, he made more noir films than any other director and right from the opening of *The Killers* displays his mastery of the form.

As the titles scroll, the eponymous hitmen slowly walk down a small town's main thoroughfare, illuminated by just one street lamp, finally emerging into a pool of light before heading to the local diner. Siodmak and his cinematographer Woody Bredell, using very high contrast, deep focus black and white, beautifully compose and orchestrate this opening shot that lasts just under two minutes. This then shifts to soft, velvety greys once inside the sparsely populated diner, an image that apparently inspired Edward Hopper's celebrated painting, *Nighthawks* (1942)[10].

Bredell and Siodmak pull off another impressive technical coup with their presentation of the robbery, filmed as a sequence shot – that is to say, all done in a single unbroken take.

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7. Foster Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2008), p. 73

8. Those interested in one interpretation of what happens to Kitty after the film is over might want to check out film critic David Thomson's noir-obsessed meta-novel, *Suspects* (1985).

9. Andrew Spicer, *Film Noir* (Harlow: Pearson), p. 119

10. Alain Silver and James Ursini, *The Noir Style* (London: Aurum Press, 1999) p. 26

The camera snakes, cranes and tracks as it follows the men into the factory, observes as they hold up the payroll office and then pulls back to an omniscient distance to show their getaway after shooting a security guard in the groin (surely a grisly Hollywood first). This last detail, like Swede's broken hand, is one of several psychosexual touches with Freudian overtones. This has led Michael Walker to argue convincingly for a strong Oedipal subtext in the film, Swede's acquiescence to his 'execution' not just due to exhaustion and despair but an acknowledgement that in bedding Kitty he did something wrong, "sexual possession of the father figure's woman."[11]

DANGER AHEAD

Despite a post-production period of just a few weeks, Miklós Rózsa delivers a formidable and memorable musical score, opening with an orchestral explosion that musically recreates the sound of a hail of bullets. This then segues into an ominous four note 'killer' motif (sometimes titled 'Danger Ahead') that recurs throughout. This became better known when it was (to use a modern term) 'sampled' by Walter Schumann for his theme to the blockbuster radio, TV and cinema series, *Dragnet* (ultimately his publishers came to a financial arrangement with Rózsa, who belatedly was also awarded a co-composer credit). The full-blooded score also uses a startling modernist technique for the opening assassination sequence, which as part of its underscore delivers "... a sustained dissonant chord, prolonged almost to breaking point"[12] that is still enormously impressive for its daring and understated power, musically chiming with the theme that the only true and certain resolution comes in death.

Ultimately the censorship regime of the day demanded that all the criminals be punished for their wrongdoing, leaving a long line of corpses to be scooped up and sent to the morgue. Reardon does find out why the Swede was shot and what happened to Kitty and the other members of the gang. He even gets back the money for his insurance company, only to be told that the net effect will probably only be to lower the next year's premiums by a tenth of one per cent. He may have cracked the case, but he has not really solved the mystery – a fine tribute to Hemingway's cryptic classic of compact storytelling.

Sergio Angelini was the reviewer of TV home video releases for *Sight & Sound* magazine from 2005 to 2014 and blogs on crime and mystery fiction at *Tipping My Fedora* (bloodymurder.wordpress.com). Some of his print publications include contributions to the *Gilbert Adair Festschrift* (Verbivoracious Press, 2014); *Mysteries Unlocked* (McFarland, 2014); *The Cult TV Book* (IB Tauris 2010); *Investigating Alias* (IB Tauris 2007); *Directors in British and Irish Cinema* (BFI, 2006).

11. 'Robert Siodmak' in Ian Cameron (ed), *The Movie Book of Film Noir* (London: Studio Vista, 1994), p. 132

12. Christopher Palmer, *The Composer in Hollywood* (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1990), p. 203

CONTEMPORARY REVIEWS

***The Killers* was a huge commercial hit and a fairly solid critical one, with the British reviews generally echoing their American counterparts when it opened in November 1946, two and a half months after its US release. Some critics complained about the complicated flashback structure (and, in one case, the "slipshod, ill-delivered" hard-boiled dialogue), while others felt that the opening scenes (the only ones adapted directly from the original Hemingway story) were so strong that they unbalanced what came later, but in general the tone was very positive.**

This is undoubtedly exciting viewing, but the flash-back manner of the plot's unfolding, and some unintelligibility in the dialogue do not exactly make for clearness. If, however, you are content to concentrate on single episodes and admire the pace and detail of their direction, the film should not disappoint. In any case, it is out of the ordinary; there are no big stars, and in spite of this it has caused something of a sensation in America. Hollywood should now begin to pay some attention to British requirements. If the dialogue is to be slipshod, ill-delivered, or plumbs depths of underworld argot that no ordinary Briton can follow, then I foresee English captions for Hollywood films in the very near future.

(Patrick Kirwan, *Evening Standard*, 15 November 1946)

Well, it was bound to happen, despite all Hollywood's pious resolutions about never making any more gangster pictures "because they're bad publicity for America". The resolutions have been shelved in the face of the glittering box office prizes promised by a return to the *Scarface* routine. [...] *The Killers* can't claim to be star studded, but as hard hitting melodrama that throbs with tension and suspense it's distinctly my cup of arsenic.

(*News of the World*, 17 November 1946)

Of *The Killers*, publicised as Ernest Hemingway's film, about one-tenth is Hemingway's, the rest is Universal-International's. The outstanding cinematic superiority of that one reel (the first) demonstrates as clearly as could be the fundamental dependence of the director on the writer. Hemingway's tautly written short story just happens to be a first-rate film script, far better than its amplification by Hellinger, Veiller and Siodmak into ten times its proper length.

(*News Chronicle*, 16 November 1946)

The opening sets the tone. The two killers are terrifyingly convincing types - one a fat lump of flaccid evil, the other hard-eyed, craggy-featured. Towards the end, the plot becomes a bit feverish in its intricacy, but there was never a moment when the grip on me was relaxed. Burt Lancaster, who plays the ex-boxer, may well be a new star.

(Stephen Watts, *Sunday Express*, 17 November 1946)

In establishing an eerie sense of determination in the heart of casual everyday life, no film for months can equal the opening of *The Killers*. These scenes are taken direct from a Hemingway short story, and as an example of terror by suggestion it is almost impossible to fault them. (...) The rest of *The Killers* is occupied with the confused attempts of the Hollywood scenario writers to explain, by means of flashbacks, just how the Swede (Burt Lancaster, "a sensation in his first screen role") came to be in his uncomfortable position. Due to lack of invention, lack of imagination, or simply lack of talent, it proves to be a mere bumble, signifying nothing. But all the later nonsense cannot take away from us the fact that for ten minutes we have had a pocket classic of the screen.

(C.A. Lejeune, *The Observer*, 17 November 1946)

The opening sequence is almost a reproduction of the [Hemingway] story as I remember it: the quiet snack-bar, the steely insolence of the killers, the abortive hold-up; and from the story some touch of pity and horror has crept into the sharp, finely timed picture of action. But from this point the film rockets away into a superficial narrative of violence.

(Dilys Powell, *Sunday Times*, 17 November 1946)

This is one of those flinty thrillers of the type usually made by Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall - boots turning over corpses on every staircase, glib dialogue, and so much action that you give up trying to follow the plot after a time and just absorb, most excitedly, what comes next.

(*Daily Express*, 18 November 1946)

If I am not quite as enthusiastic as the producer about the "sensational discovery", Burt Lancaster, that is not unusual. At least he looks real, as do Albert Dekker, Sam Levene, and the rest under the skilful direction of Mr. Siodmak.

(Campbell Dixon, *Daily Telegraph*, 18 November 1946)

Lack of characterisation also spells death to *The Killers*. I could not believe in any of them, even within the accepted conventions of this type of story. The film is a gangster affair which has strayed from its class and is trying to appear grown-up.

(Alexander Shaw, *Spectator*, 22 November 1946)

Peopled with a sinister collection of characters and set against a background in which crime and violence are the keynote, the film is permeated by a feeling of intensity apparent in the memorable opening sequence, and which is rarely absent despite the entanglements of the plot. A stimulating if harrowing film, brilliantly directed and photographed, and acted with distinction by a newcomer, Burt Lancaster, as Swede.

(S.L., Monthly Film Bulletin, 31 December 1946)

Sadly, the cuttings file didn't attach a name or publication to this review, but it is so plainly heartfelt that we felt it had to be shared:

Either this film is mad or I am. Except for the first few minutes, when the killers take over the milk bar, I never knew who was who or what was what. Flashbacks flash back out of flashbacks. Everyone looks exactly alike. No one is remotely likeable. There are always critics who find brilliance in the incomprehensible. Praise of *The Killers* won't surprise me.

THE KILLERS: TEAMWORK ON FILM

by Herb A. Lightman

Published in the December 1946 edition of *American Cinematographer*, this article looks at the production of *The Killers* from the point of view of director Robert Siodmak, producer Mark Hellinger and cinematographer Woody Bredell. Understandably, it maintains the fiction that Anthony Veiller was the sole screenwriter – the script's real authorship (Richard Brooks, John Huston and Don Siegel, with minimal input from Veiller) wouldn't be publicly revealed until the early 1950s.

It happens all too frequently in Hollywood that during the course of shooting a motion picture, the sound stage become a kind of arena in which clashing personalities and "artistic temperaments" lock horns, often with serious detriment to the resulting film.

This friction does not always erupt into open warfare, but makes itself felt in a kind of tug-o'-war between egos, so that each player or technician becomes bent upon making his particular speciality stand out from the rest of the picture whether it remains in key with the overall production approach or not.

Since this procedure is more often the rule than the exception, it is refreshing and professionally encouraging when, once in a cinematic blue moon, a film is completed that exemplifies the very essence of creative teamwork in picture-making. Such a film is *The Killers*, a Mark Hellinger production, now in national release through Universal-International.

The Killers, beside providing tensely-paced thriller entertainment, comes to the screen as almost pure cinema. It is a story that could not have been told with such stunning force in any other medium. More important, it is a film whose smooth blending of the various production elements is so perfect that it is difficult even for the critic to tell where the effect of one technique leaves off and that of another begins.

Such a result is not accidental. Such excellence is never haphazard. In this particular case, the smooth integration of production elements is the result of a definite point-of-view originated by the film's producer and projected with contagious enthusiasm to the players and technicians. The proof of the cinematic pudding lies not only in the extravagant critical acclaim which has been heaped upon the film, but also in the warm box-office welcome the picture has received in playing dates throughout the country.

Mark Hellinger, producer of *The Killers*, is a man whose many years of background as newspaper reporter and columnist have given him a dramatic instinct that is *realistic*, and at the same time, *human*. He is a down-to-earth, cards-on-the-table, thoroughly likeable personality whose own glowing enthusiasm for motion pictures conveys itself to his co-workers with productive result.

He first became interested in Ernest Hemingway's story, 'The Killers', when it was initially published in 1927, and he felt that it would make a smashing opening sequence for a motion picture. In later years, after he had become a film producer, he tried to interest several studios in filming the property, but when he mentioned the author's price ($50,000), studio heads invariably began to talk about the weather.

INDEPENDENT SET-UP SCORES

It wasn't until Hellinger joined Universal-International as an independent producer that he was able to draw a responsive ear for *The Killers*. Then, lo and behold, the studio promptly bought the yarn without any quibbling about price, and told him to go ahead and film it. All this in the face of general opinion within the industry that this particular short story could never be successfully expanded into a feature-length film.

It is no wonder, therefore, that Mark Hellinger is highly in favour of the independent producing set-up. "Under the usual studio system," he points out, "a producer is often handed a story for which he has no personal enthusiasm. He turns it over to a director who grudgingly agrees to 'do his best with it' - and the other technicians, sensing this lukewarm attitude, are similarly uninspired about the whole thing. By way of contrast - when the independent field functions correctly, a very happy state exists. The producer does not make a picture unless he is personally enthusiastic about the story, and it is that enthusiasm, carrying over to the other technicians, that results in a well-integrated film."

In the case of *The Killers*, once the story had been purchased, there remained the job of expanding it into a suitable script. It was planned to retain the original story intact for the first sequence, and construct a complete background for the action shown. There were to be no stars in the picture, a situation that is usually a definite handicap at the box-office. In this case, however, it worked as a distinct advantage, since scenarist Anthony Veiller was able to write the story as it should be written, without having to rearrange the plot to fit the talents of specific stars.

Besides the original Hemingway story, there were certain other dramatic situations which producer Hellinger wanted to include in the screenplay - notably the deathbed confession of gangster "Dutch" Schulz, and the details of a daring payroll robbery which occurred several years ago. Blending all these elements, the scenarist evolved a tight, hard-hitting screenplay that consistently retained the atmosphere of the original Hemingway yarn.

PRODUCTION JIG-SAW PUZZLE

As the script was being polished, Hellinger began to assemble his technical staff for actual shooting of the picture. He had been very favourably impressed by the cinematic quality of *Phantom Lady*, a thriller that Universal made several years ago. Fortunately, he found that both the director of that film (Robert Siodmak), and its cinematographer (Woody Bredell, ASC) were available for his unit.

A preliminary conference followed in which the production was discussed from every possible angle. Both the director and cinematographer had suggestions to offer on treatment, and Hellinger encouraged them to "kick the story around" and let their imagination play with it. "This method worked like a charm," he recalls, "Director Siodmak deserves special credit for his contributions to the screen treatment. Usually, when you hand a director a script, you are happy if he can bring out 85% of the potential dramatic values it contains. But when you give the script to a director like Siodmak and he gives you back 125% - well, you've really got something there."

Meanwhile, cinematographer Bredell was casting about for a special photographic treatment to bring out the best in the story. Extensive casting tests had to be made to select the right girl for the lead. As he worked on these tests and experimented with different styles of lighting, a certain forceful photographic quality began to find its way onto the film. A magnificent camera mood evolved, a mood which later permeated the

entire picture. With the producer, director and cinematographer thus inspired, enthusiasm soon became contagious. The other technicians and players became eager to do their best. From the very beginning, something in the air indicated that this was going to be an outstanding film. So confident was Hellinger, that he was willing to show separate scenes and sequences to the press even before the film was completed - a risk that is rarely taken in criticism-conscious Hollywood. The simple truth of the matter is that one good technical job encouraged the other technicians to do a good job also.

"It's like being used to playing golf with a bunch of duffers," Hellinger points out. "When all of a sudden you find yourself playing with a set of pros, you try to give the game all you've got. In an all-around good picture, every phase of production looks good. But if, on the other hand, a picture is generally poor, brilliant direction, striking camerawork, or any other one outstanding phase of production usually goes unnoticed."

THE DIRECTOR AND THE CAMERA

Rarely has there existed such perfect rapport between cameraman and director as characterised the filming of *The Killers*. Siodmak is a director who really knows his camera, and use it to paint a dramatic picture in the same way that an artist would use his brush. He designs all of his own camera set-ups in closest cooperation with the Director of Photography.

"The creative use of the camera is a lost art," he maintains. "We have let ourselves over-glamourise motion picture photography to the point where it becomes unreal. Actually, there is no such thing as photography that is in itself good or bad. All that is really important is that the camera convey something expressive within the scene."

Siodmak prefers to follow a screen story through every phase of production. He likes to be in on the "heartbreak" of writing the script. He is interested in every technician's job, and he appreciates what they all contribute to the film. Similarly, he feels that everyone working on the picture should be familiar with the director's conception of the story. He works out his key scenes in precise detail before shooting begins, but relies entirely on his own impressions during filming to fill in between these key scenes. He feel that the director is the one technician who can really see the overall concept of the film. Therefore, it is this basic production pattern pattern that must be followed. However, within that pattern, the cinematographer and allied technicians should be left free to experiment and create forceful effects.

"I am happy if, out of an entire feature, I can place on film 500 feet of pure cinema," Siodmak explains. "Art is nothing more than the elimination of non-essential details. Therefore, the filmic presentation should always leave something to the audience's imagination. In modern production it is a temptation to overdo the use of unusual techniques, such as the moving camera. In *The Killers*, rather than use unmotivated camera movement, we employed a relatively static camera and let our players work toward it."

Siodmak is a director who likes to convey visual ideas in a unique way. He worked closely with Woody Bredell, ASC, striving to inject key psychological undertones into certain key sequences of the film. There is one scene, for instance, in which we see a group of gangsters plotting a hold-up. Here, the key light was placed unusually high, with no fill illumination, so that the players' eyes went dark in such a way that the shadows suggested masks.

For another sequence in which the hero is shown in a prison cell, the lighting was purposely soft and church-like, to accentuate the innocence of the character. In a series of scenes that took place in the morgue, the players were silhouetted against a glaring white wall, the striking illumination of which conveyed a kind of "butcher shop" atmosphere.

Perhaps the most unusual bit of camera handling in the whole picture is the hold-up sequence, filmed entirely in one take, utilising 18 camera stops and upwards of 60 changes of focus. The newsreel quality of the camera approach, plus the realistic confusion of the factory policemen portrayed, gave this sequence a documentary quality.

A CAMERAMAN'S PICTURE

For cinematographer Bredell, *The Killers* was, at the same time, a field day and a challenge. He wanted his treatment to be dramatic, yet so realistic that it would go unnoticed as a mechanical device. For this reason, he ruled out anything that smacked of *beautiful* photography and worked entirely for realistic effects.

Especially *apropos* was his lighting treatment, a style which he calls out-of-balance lighting, which is characterised by sharp contrast between crystal white and velvet black. Purposely discarding fill illumination, he managed to avoid wishy-washy grey halftones.

"The lighting set-ups were kept quite simple," Bredell points out. "It is a temptation for a cameraman to become spoiled because he is given too much equipment with which to work,

and he feels that he must use all of it. Similarly, if you have 18 electricians on a set, each one wants to turn his light on."

Naturally, the kind of realistic lighting used was not especially flattering to the players. There were no ethereally diffused close-ups, no softly lit glamour shots. Instead, eye shadows were allowed to go dark, and side-lighting divided faces into black and white halves. There was a hint of vain grumbling in the projection room when the first dailies were shown. "The audience can't see my eyes there," one actor was heard to remark. "One side of my face is dark," wailed an ingenue.

But the technicians continued to sacrifice the vanity of the actors in favour of the realistic, down-to-earth treatment that made the audience feel that they were watching the actions of real people. Those actors who could take that kind of lighting took it - and the rest went along for the ride. Soon, however, the players fell in with the enthusiastic mood of the technicians and forgot all about their photographic complaints.

"We had no elaborate sets with which to achieve unusual effects," Bredell observes. "Therefore, we had to get our interesting visual patterns with light and shadow. We tried to use the *story* photography rather than stereotyped motion picture or star photography. I hope that not too many people specifically noticed the photography in *The Killers*, because motion picture camerawork is only good when it goes unnoticed."

THE TEAM PULLS TOGETHER

Work on the film went along in an incredibly smooth manner. From time to time, of course, there were minor disagreements, such as occurred during the filming of the morgue sequence. The producer felt that it might be just a bit extreme to play the actors silhouetted against a glaring white background. But he was overruled by both the director and the cinematographer, so the scene stayed in.

When the picture was finished, the technicians all felt that they had a great piece of celluloid there, but the final opinion rested with the public, since a picture with no stars is usually hard to sell at the box office. Wanting to make it as difficult as possible for himself, Hellinger took the picture first to an easy audience for preview, then to the most sceptical audience he could find. He called in members of the underworld to view the picture and give their opinions as "technical advisers". When these characters waxed even more enthusiastic than

average spectators, he began to feel that the film might score.

Later, he flew a print up to author Ernest Hemingway at his mountain retreat near Sun Valley, Idaho. Hemingway invited the whole town of 60 hardy souls to see the picture, then sent a glowing telegram to Hellinger praising *The Killers* as "the best screen adaptation ever made of any of my work."

Looking back at the hectic months during which the film was in production, Mark Hellinger observes, "We had a rare association of creative personalities there - with everyone working together for the good of the picture. Working on this film, we all found that it takes unselfish cooperation to bring out the best in the individual specialist."

Asked what was his formula for cinematic success, Hellinger laughed: "Success? Well - in the movies it's about 50% luck and 50% teamwork from the kind of crew we had working on *The Killers.* What can the producer do to make the picture a success? Well - I'd say he should hire the best possible talent, and then spend six months in Florida while the picture is shooting."

ENCOUNTER WITH SIODMAK

by Russell Taylor

Originally published in the Summer/Autumn 1959 edition of *Sight & Sound*, this on-set interview was conducted during the final phase of Siodmak's career, when he would be primarily based in Germany, France and the UK. He continued making films for another decade, mostly thrillers and Westerns, before concluding his career with the two-part sword'n'sandal epic *The Last Roman* in 1969. He died on 10 March 1973 at the age of 72, seven weeks after the death of his wife.

During the 1940s Robert Siodmak was one of the most interesting, and enigmatic, of Hollywood directors. Clearly a superior technician, to say the least, he chose — if choice it was — to do his best work in the misprized genres of the horror film and psychological thriller. His evident fascination with dramatic chiaroscuro and morbid psychology appeared at first glance an obvious extension of the classic German silent cinema; but seemed more curious if one remembered that his own contribution to the silent cinema in Germany was *Menschen am Sonntag* (1929), a charming piece of realistic observation. Siodmak made several films in Germany, then worked for some years in France (directing *Mister Flow*, *Cargaison Blanche* and *Pièges*, among others) before leaving Europe for America in 1940. During the last few years he has again been working in Europe.

I was able to meet Robert Siodmak on the set of his latest film, *The Rough and the Smooth*, which was then in its second week's shooting at Elstree. A small, balding man in his fifties (the textbooks say fifty-eight), he strikes one at once as energetic, cheerful and intensely efficient. He obviously knows just what he wants from players and technicians, and just how to get it with the maximum of good humour. In the intervals of setting up and shooting a short scene between Tony Britton and Nadja Tiller over the dinner-table, he talked volubly about his films and their histories, darting off from time to time to adjust a light, check props or discuss points of interpretation with the players. Encouragingly, he turned out to like all the films one had hoped he would like — *The Spiral Staircase* is his favourite, closely followed by *Phantom Lady*, *The Suspect* and *Uncle Harry* — and to have trenchant comments to make about those he didn't and why he made them. He had little good to say of the first seven films he made in America (though he admits an affection for *Someone to*

Remember), and dismissed most of the films after *The Dark Mirror* as pot-boilers. I said that I thought *Cry of the City* was easily the best of the really-shot-on-the-streets-where-it-happened cycle. He agreed that, "I thought it was good, but it's not really my type of film: I hate locations — there's so much you can't control." In any case, his standards are high. "Even in a film you make as you want to and because you want to, you're lucky if there are five minutes which satisfy you, in which you see just what you intended on the screen."

After more than thirty years in films, Siodmak retains an extraordinary enjoyment of the whole business of film-making: one suspects he found much pleasure and amusement in his battles with producers and stars as well as annoyance and frustration. Certainly he recounts his defeats as well as his victories with a relish which seems not entirely retrospective.

MENSCHEN AM SONNTAG

You know really that was a nice little film. I saw it again recently at the National Film Theatre after many years, and I was very surprised to see how well it looked. I expected it to be much slower and heavier. It's amazing how simply you could film then: the little scene in the wood, when the girl takes the boy's hat and throws it into a tree, and then they have to climb to get it — that was quite impromptu. We just thought of a scene and filmed it straight off. Nowadays with all the technical paraphernalia of the studio, I often look at a set-up — a massively mounted camera and hordes of technicians — and think it's like an enormous zeppelin with a tiny gondola underneath: one says to oneself, there must be a more economical way of doing it.

Nowadays Billy Wilder is generally credited with the screenplay, but originally he got no screen credit, and in fact he didn't really work on the film for more than a few minutes. He and I are old friends, and at that time we were sharing a flat in Berlin; his mind was always teeming with ideas, for his friends' films as well as his own, and his only contribution to *Menschen am Sonntag* was the suggestion that we should leave the wife asleep at home, and when the husband returned in the evening she should still be sleeping. By the way, the version of *Menschen am Sonntag* shown at the NFT is considerably shorter than the original. I have since seen a copy in Germany which has the whole of the first section missing, but the rest is much fuller.

HOLLYWOOD

Working in Hollywood to get your own way you have to be cunning; you have to compromise sometimes, make films you don't want to from time to time (as [John] Ford makes one or two to please producers for every one he makes to please himself). I developed a technique to get my own way about scripts. You see, if you refuse scripts too often or argue, straight away you get the reputation of being difficult; so, instead, when I was offered a script which I thought had a basically good idea, however mishandled, I would say, "Yes, fine, of course I'll do it," and then sit back while preparations went ahead. Then about a week before shooting was due to begin I'd go to the producer and say, "Look, this is a wonderful script, but there is just one little point…" and suggest a small but vital alteration. This would always be accepted, if only to keep the peace, and then of course other things would have to be altered to fit in with it, and gradually the thing would start coming to pieces at the seams. By the time we started shooting everything would be so confused that I began with no set script at all, and could do as I liked, which was the way I wanted it…

CONTRACT WITH UNIVERSAL

In 1943 I had been in Hollywood for three years, doing what work I could get. Then Universal sent me the script of *Son of Dracula*: it was terrible — it had been knocked together in a few days. I told my wife I just couldn't do it, but she said to me: "Look, they've been making these films for twenty years, they know just what to expect from a director and just how much they're going to pay him," (I'd been offered $150 a week for the three weeks shooting) "so if you're just that little bit better than their other directors… then they'll see right away and it'll lead to better things. So I took the job, and on the third day of shooting they offered me a contract, with options, for seven years.

I took it and our association was very happy: in fact, though my salary was supposed to rise gradually until I was earning $1,100 a week in the seventh year, if I lasted that long, in fact they tore up the contract and by the third year I was earning about $3,000 a week. As for *Son of Dracula*, we did a lot of rewriting and the result wasn't bad: it wasn't good, but some scenes had a certain quality…

COBRA WOMAN

Cobra Woman was silly but fun. You know, Maria Montez couldn't act from here to there, but she was a great personality and believed completely in her roles: if she was playing a princess you had to treat her like one all through lunch, but if she was a slave-girl you could kick her around anyhow and she wouldn't object — Method acting before its time, you might say.

CHRISTMAS HOLIDAY

A good plot (though the studio always wanted to change my psychological endings into physical ones, when the Hays Office didn't intervene, as in *Uncle Harry*), and interesting casting Gene Kelly in such a way as to suggest a sinister quality behind a rather superficial charm. Deanna Durbin was difficult: she wanted to play a new part but flinched from looking like a tramp: she always wanted to look like nice, wholesome Deanna Durbin pretending to be a tramp. Still, the result was quite effective, and oddly enough did very well: I suppose everyone was so interested to see what Deanna Durbin would be like in a dramatic role. However, she never tried it again…

THE SUSPECT

Charles Laughton is one of the few lasting friends I made in Hollywood (another is James Mason), but I hardly knew him at the time of *The Suspect*. I had heard he was difficult to work with, and certainly we had the greatest difficulty in finding anyone to act with him. I had his last four or five films run through for me, and then went and talked to him. "I think I've found out why no one wants to act with you: it's because you're a perfectionist. You read and consider the whole script until you know just how the film should be made and all the parts played to fit in with your conception, and if you don't get sympathetic co-stars and director, you just give up and take refuge in playing your part all out and swamping the rest of the picture. I'll tell you what we're going to do: I'm not going to give you a script. Each evening we'll go over the next day's material and discuss anything in your part, but not talk at all about the rest." He agreed to this, and then on set to keep him occupied I'd invent dozens of special jobs for myself; beg him, as a favour, to rehearse the other players in his scene for me (he's a brilliant director of actors), and then shoot the result the way I wanted it, which kept us both happy.

I had also been warned that about half-way through a film Laughton always had a bout of uncertainty and convinced himself that the interpretation was wrong from beginning to end. Eventually he arrived one morning, hair all awry, and began, "Robert, I haven't slept a wink, I've just realised we've been completely wrong…" But this time I jumped him at the post, throwing the biggest hysterical fit of temperament I've ever thrown in my life, so that in the end he forgot his qualms trying to quieten me and keep me happy. After the film was over he told someone, "You know, Robert's a good director, but so temperamental: I had to soothe him every morning we were shooting."

THE KILLERS

I think it's not widely known that the script was in fact by [John] Huston. His name didn't appear on the credits because he was under contract to another studio at the time, but he wrote the script for us in his spare afternoons (with Tony Veiller cracking the whip occasionally). He was very pleased with the result and what we made of it. [Mark] Hellinger was quite a reasonable producer, but with his journalistic training he always insisted on each scene ending with a punchline and every character being over-established with a telling remark, which in my opinion took a lot of the reality out of the film. So I always cut out the punchlines when he wasn't looking: it drove him wild for a bit, but finally he got the idea. The robbery scene in one long crane shot was done in a single take: everything was very confused, with people not knowing where they ought to be, a car backed up wrong and left in the middle of the road, and so on, but curiously enough the result turned out to give just the right effect when we printed it.

TIME OUT OF MIND

That was a preposterous film. When Universal-International made their agreement with Rank I was due to make a film in Britain, and I was just ready to set off when they gave me the script of *Time Out of Mind*, which was to be Phyllis Calvert's first American film. I said the story was absurd (who can sympathise with a main character who doesn't believe steam will ever supplant the sailing ship?), refused to direct it and left as planned for New York. Apparently this put the studio on the spot and they sent a deputation literally on its knees begging me to come back and direct it. I said no, and after my agent had taken over they gave me a mad contract whereby they trebled my salary for two years and gave me the right to veto the finished film's release if I didn't like it. Of course Maury Gertsman and I had a great time loading the film with every crazy effect we could think of, and in the end I didn't

have to use my veto, as they played the film for just one day in a tiny Park Avenue cinema and then it disappeared for ever…

THE GREAT SINNER

For *The Great Sinner* I was loaned out to MGM. They gave me an enormous script, and after reading it I said that if it was filmed the way it stood the picture would run for six hours. No one took any notice, so I went ahead and filmed it, with any elaborations that occurred to me as we went along, and when we had cut out anything superfluous (my elaborations being the first things to go) it still ran for six hours. After that we cut and cut until it came down to three hours, but it was still too long, terribly slow (Gregory Peck, naturally a slow talker, seemed so impressed by the idea of acting in Dostoevsky that he played about a third even of his usual speed), heavy and dull, with the additional disadvantage that now the story didn't even make sense. By the first preview we had cut it down to two hours and ten minutes. Bits of it went well, especially the death scene at the beginning, with Ava Gardner in silhouette (I liked that, but it was later removed). At that point I washed my hands of the film, and heard nothing for some time until a message came that "they" — at MGM it is always "they" — had decided that what was needed was a new and stronger love story. They wanted me to reshoot, but I refused and Mervyn LeRoy was given the job. When I eventually saw the finished film, I don't believe that a single scene was left as I had made it.

AFTER HOLLYWOOD

Le Grand Jeu was just a pot-boiler, but I have made my three recent German films entirely as I wanted. Filming *Die Ratten* I made an English-speaking version with my own money, gambling that before long Curd Jurgens and Maria Schell would become international stars. It looks as if my gamble is about to pay off. Last year I co-produced a series of half-hour television films, *O.S.S.*, directing the pilot and one other myself, and this year I directed a couple of pilots for a series called *The Killers* (no connection, but it's a good title). I haven't been able to sell them yet: sponsors say they're too intelligent… I'm pleased with *The Rough and the Smooth*, I wanted to film Robin Maugham's book four years ago, but lost it to two successive producers who failed to film it. Then out of the blue came an offer to direct it for George Minter. I think it'll be good...

ABOUT THE TRANSFER

The Killers is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.37:1 with mono sound. The HD master for *The Killers* was made available from NBC Universal via Hollywood Classics. The film was transferred in HD resolution from a 35mm Interpositive at Modern VideoFilm, Burbank.

Additional picture restoration was overseen by Arrow Films and completed at Deluxe Digital-EMEA, London.

Digital Restoration Supervisor: **James White, Arrow Films**
Digital Restoration Artists: **Tom Barrett, Clayton Baker**
Deluxe Management: **Mark Bonnici, Graham Jones**
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