



JOANNA HOGG: INFLUENCES

The Killers

The Killers

Directed by: Donald Siegel

©/Production Company: Revue Productions

Produced by: Donald Siegel

Assistant Director: Milton Feldman

Screenplay by: Gene L. Coon

From the novel by: Ernest Hemingway

Director of Photography: Richard L. Rawlings

Editorial Department Head: David J. O'Connell

Film Editor: Richard Belding

Art Directors: Frank Arrigo, George Chan

Set Decorations: John McCarthy, James S. Redd

Costumes by: Helen Colvig

Make-up: Bud Westmore

Hair Stylist: Larry Germain

Music Score: Johnny Williams

Song 'Too Little Time' [Music] by: Henry Mancini

Song 'Too Little Time' [Lyrics] by: Don Raye

Song 'Too Little Time' Sung by: Nancy Wilson

Musical Supervision: Stanley Wilson

Sound: David H. Moriarty

Technical Adviser: Hall Brock

Dialogue Coach: Scott Hale

Cast:

Lee Marvin (*Charlie*)

Angie Dickinson (*Sheila Farr*)

John Cassavetes (*Johnny North*)

Clu Gulager (*Lee*)

Claude Akins (*Earl Sylvester*)

Norman Fell (*Mickey Farmer*)

Ronald Reagan (*Jack Browning*)

Virginia Christine (*Miss Watson, blind secretary*)

Don Haggerty (*mail truck driver*)

Robert Phillips (*George Fleming*)

Kathleen O'Malley (*Miss Leslie, the receptionist*)

Ted Jacques (*gym assistant*)

Irvin Mosley (*mail truck guard*)

Jimmy Joyce (*salesman*)

Davis Roberts (*maitre d'*)

Hall Brock (*border marshal*)

Burt Mustin (*elderly blind man*)

Peter Hobbs (*instructor*)

John Copage (*porter*)

Tyler McVey (*steward*)

Seymour Cassel (*postal clerk*)

Scott Hale (*hotel clerk*)

Nancy Wilson (*singer*) *

Don Siegel (*hamburger cook*) *

USA 1964©

93 mins

Digital 4K (Restoration)

Restored by Universal Pictures in collaboration with The Film Foundation. Special thanks to Martin Scorsese and Steven Spielberg for their consultation on this restoration

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

Michael Reeves, the short-lived English director, was obsessed with Don Siegel's *The Killers* – a 1964 remake of Robert Siodmak's 1946 adaptation of Ernest Hemingway's 1927 short story – and would watch it over and over while preparing his horror films. The cool, brittle, brutal ruthlessness of Siegel's picture resonates especially with Reeves's *The Sorcerers*, but seeped into the groundwater of genre, directly inspiring John Boorman and Michael Ritchie to put Lee Marvin in similar roles (and suits) in *Point Blank* and *Prime Cut* and establishing the seemingly detached, actually sentimental hit man as an acceptable crime movie protagonist, as picked up by John Woo, Quentin Tarantino and too many others to list.

Hemingway introduced the chatty, snarling hit team (whose trivial talk about diner food is picked up in *Pulp Fiction*) and Siodmak made them figures of hardboiled, quirky menace played by Charles McGraw and William Conrad. In *The Lineup*, a 1958 TV spin-off, Siegel featured Eli Wallach and Robert Keith as Dancer, a meticulous hired gun, and Julian, his oddly prissy handler (who collects their victims' dying words in a notebook). Officially, *The Lineup* is about the cops and the killers are the antagonists, but Siegel is less interested in the plods than he is intrigued by criminals, whose professionalism reads onscreen as heroic no matter how perverse or despicable they are. It's a short step to killers-as-protagonists.

In the early 1960s, Siegel was alternating film and television work. Universal hired him to make the first movies for TV, bearing in mind the likelihood of overseas theatrical release. Playing it safe, the studio looked to properties they already owned. Just after *The Killers*, Siegel shot *The Hanged Man*, a remake of Robert Montgomery's *Ride the Pink Horse* (1947). In the event, *The Killers* was judged too violent for TV and went out to cinemas. Suspicion remains that Siegel spilled scarlet gore on Lee Marvin's impeccable shoes and dwelled on Angie Dickinson's acute distress as she is dangled out of a window precisely to secure that outcome. He liked heroes who didn't follow rules set for them – inquisitive assassins and throw-away-the-badge cops – and ran his career like that too.

Hemingway's story poses but doesn't answer a question – why does the victim of a gangland execution calmly accept his fate? For Siodmak, the original story is the prologue for a *Citizen Kane*-like exploration of the dead man's reasons. An insurance investigator (Edmond O'Brien) interviews folk who reveal the background of the Swede (Burt Lancaster), an ex-boxer brought low by his twisted involvement with a femme fatale (Ava Gardner) and a heist-organising crook (Albert Dekker). Screenwriter Gene L. Coon, best-remembered as a producer and writer on *Star Trek* (he created the Klingons and Khan), follows the old script – despite Siegel's insistence 'I don't want to use any Hemingway dialogue and no scenes from the other movie' – with knockout Angie Dickinson and cold-eyed Ronald Reagan (in his final film) replacing Gardner and Dekker. But there's one major change. Here, the killers themselves – ageing, controlled Charlie Strom (Lee Marvin) and younger, crazier Lee (Clu Gulager) – wonder why their mark, ex-racing driver Johnny North (John Cassavetes), doesn't take the opportunity to run, and do the rounds of witnesses who fill in the backstory. At first, Charlie sees an opportunity to grab a missing million dollars and retire. Eventually, he admits it's more important to him to find out the truth... which transforms him from dispassionate executioner to semi-righteous avenger.

JOANNA HOGG: INFLUENCES

Criss Cross

Tue 17 Oct 20:40; Sun 26 Nov 18:40

Suspicion

Wed 18 Oct 20:45; Sat 21 Oct 18:20

The Exiles + Bunker Hill 1956

Thu 19 Oct 18:20; Tue 24 Oct 20:40

Lady in the Dark

Fri 20 Oct 18:10; Sat 11 Nov 12:20

Margaret

Sat 21 Oct 20:10; Sat 4 Nov 17:30

The Killers

Sat 28 Oct 12:30; Wed 8 Nov 20:45

Ticket of No Return Bildnis einer Trinkerin

Sun 12 Nov 18:30; Sat 25 Nov 20:30

Journey to Italy Viaggio in Italia

Fri 17 Nov 18:20; Tue 28 Nov 18:15

Italianamerican + The Neighborhood + extract from My Voyage to Italy

Tue 21 Nov 20:40; Mon 27 Nov 18:20

INTERNAL REFLECTIONS: THE FILMS OF JOANNA HOGG

Unrelated

Mon 16 Oct 20:35; Sat 25 Nov 18:10

Exhibition

Thu 19 Oct 18:10; Wed 29 Nov 20:50

Archipelago

Thu 19 Oct 20:30; Sun 26 Nov 15:00

The Souvenir

Fri 27 Oct 20:30; Thu 30 Nov 18:10

The Souvenir: Part II

Sat 28 Oct 20:30; Thu 30 Nov 20:40

Short Films

Sun 29 Oct 18:10; Tue 28 Nov 20:45

SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25*

* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info: sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk

**SIGHT
AND
SOUND**

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

Marvin's Charlie is an urban wolf who only becomes human in his last moments – making a gun-finger at a cop as he slumps gutshot on a perfect lawn. Gulager's Lee, playing with toy cars and architect's models and indulging health-nut quirks, is more obviously psychotic but tags along loyally, matching his partner's sunglasses but smiling shark-like where Charlie is inexpressive. The sparkly TV look, mixing obvious stock footage and studio shots with location work, is bright yet cold, in its own way as evocative as the *film noir* shadows of Siodmak's version. Vivid items of fetishist costume (Dickinson's tailored jumpsuit) or the primary-coloured cars are as jazzy visually as 'Johnny' Williams's Lalo Schiffrin-like score is aurally.

This is an impersonal world of freeways and public spaces, making the doomed Johnny's obsessive love for a bad dame all the more striking. An interesting, unstressed evocation of the earlier picture is the casting of Virginia Christine, the Swede's cast-off blonde girlfriend, in a cameo as the blind administrator menaced in Siegel's radically new opening scene, in which we get a Peckinpah-like glimpse of kids playing 'bang bang you're dead' before the hit men invade a School for the Blind where, absurdly, Johnny is teaching motor mechanics to sightless adults.

Kim Newman, *Sight and Sound*, April 2014

A contemporary review

As with Siodmak's earlier version of this Hemingway story, nothing quite matches up to the opening sequence. Here the setting has been transposed very effectively to an asylum for the blind: the two neatly dressed strangers in dark glasses dismiss their taxi; brush past a man with a guide dog; walk up the pleasant drive past two blind children playing an innocent game of gangsters; prowl with silent malice round the helpful, but also blind, receptionist; and push through a group of frightened students to pump bullet after bullet into the victim who has been waiting calmly for them to arrive.

At this point, Hemingway's story stops, and the temperature drops sharply as Hollywood invention takes over. It isn't just that the dialogue is weaker, or that any explanation is bound to disappoint after the ruthlessly chilling opening; the whole of the middle of the film sags badly, because John Cassavetes is far too stolid to suggest the star-crossed fatalism of the Gabin-Carné lover, while Angie Dickinson seems unlikely to inspire that sort of passion, and in any case totally fails to convey the complexities in the girl's character (the subtle balance between her different kinds of love for Browning, North and money). The film, in fact, takes such a sharp lift each time the two killers appear on the scene, that one suspects that Don Siegel wasn't very much interested in the rest of his characters, who are all conventionally conceived and acted.

The two killers, however, beautifully played by Lee Marvin and Clu Gulager, have the stuff of life (or cinema) about them. The former, an ageing, tiring professional, vaguely hurt in his pride because he feels he has been tricked into an unethical position; the latter, a handsome, brutal, playful juvenile, forever fiddling with toy cars or gadgets, hero-worshipping his colleague and snickering with pride at his cleverness. None of this is exactly new, but it is presented with arresting freshness, and both actors give their dialogue a cutting edge which is lacking in the rest of the film. They even manage to survive that Universal gloss (rich colour and all stops out on the art direction) which seems to have strayed in from a Doris Day picture.

Tom Milne, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, April 1965