Killing 'The Killers': Hemingway, Hollywood, and Death

Oliver Harris

'All stories, if continued far enough, end in death, and he is no true story teller who would keep that from you'

Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon*

'Ah, it's the job'

Reardon (Edmund O'Brien) in *The Killers*

The Bell Rang

An hour into the classic *film noir* thriller, *The Killers* (1946), the detective-figure, Reardon, walks into the office of his insurance company boss and announces, 'Well, the bell rang.' Reardon means that he has finally solved the mystery of the film's enigmatic object, a green silk handkerchief found among the effects of 'the Swede,' the former boxer whose murder he has been investigating.[1] Reardon then hands his boss a newspaper report of a payroll heist from some six years earlier in which the Swede is identifiable by this 'unusual green handkerchief,' worn over his face as a disguise. For a few seconds there's a close-up of the clipping while Reardon's boss reads the headline aloud, and then, as he carries on reading in voice-over, the image dissolves to the scene of the crime. What follows is a stunning, two-minute long unbroken sequence-shot, filmed in semi-documentary style without a diegetic sound-track, that has been the subject of detailed analysis by critics arguing the scene's internal complexity and film-historical importance. But curiously, both Robert Porfirio, who hails it as 'the

[1] For more on this handkerchief, and other aspects of *The Killers* as a *film noir*, see my article 'Film Noir Fascination.'

effective "germ" of a subsequent type of caper film' (179), and Tom Conley, who sees it 'providing self-reflexivity for the New Wave to take from the general conventions of noir' (1991, 165), misleadingly describe the scene as a *flashback*.[2] The film's narrative does feature ten conventional flashbacks (a structure adapted, like the 'Rosebud' enigma, from *Citizen Kane*), in which the spectator is given privileged access to the audio-visual representation of a remembered past initially narrated by a character. But, here, speech and image are separated from one another, are detached from the narrator (it is the other character, Reardon, whose memory is involved), and, most crucially, both speech and image are mediated by their origins in a *text*. In other words, we might begin to read this scene as a type of page-to-screen adaptation, one that foregrounds the problematics of representation by making a self-reflexive statement about the nature of textual and filmic media and the relationship between them. It offers, then, a point of departure for recognising how, as Conley has argued (albeit on finally different grounds), *The Killers* 'occupies a central niche in the history of film theory, in *film noir*, and in the relations of cinema and literature' (1997, 524).

What enables us to read this particular scene as a kind of allegory or *mise en abîme* of adaptation? Most obviously, the inevitable mismatch it demonstrates between the verbal and the visual. As the written text gives rise to a set of images, we witness an *excess*, a host of visual details not described in the verbal report that is the source of those images. In the transfer from text to screen, the spectator must always 'see too much'. However, as Porfirio has observed, the mismatch here also entails something more - a failure in synchronisation itself: as

[2] Indeed, *all* critics have called it a flashback, including Maureen Turim in her full-length study, *Flashbacks and Film* (181), even though it fails to match her own definition of the technique as 'a cinematic discourse on the mind's relationship to the past and on the subject's relationship to telling his or her past' (2).

he notes, the camera 'begins to anticipate the action' while the narrator 'occasionally falls behind the visual revelations of those events' (180). In fact, the failure goes further, and in turn points towards a double critique of representation.

Firstly, this failure to achieve synchronisation of sound and image exposes the claim to veracity made by the documentary style, as in Bordwell's assumption that the narrator 'gives the rendition of the robbery the stamp of objective verisimilitude' (197). Indeed, although it has been overlooked by critics, the final moments of this scene stage a blatant contradiction between what the recited text states and what we are shown; even as we are informed that a security guard 'fell to the ground with a bullet in his groin,' we observe him quite clearly clutching not his groin but his shoulder. And secondly, this discrepancy also begs questions about the fidelity of image to text in the process of adaptation and about the hierarchy of representations: which version of the past should we believe is the original - the real thing - and which the false copy? Finally, we may grasp the importance of this problematising of representation by observing that, while it's true that the visual exceeds the verbal source, in this instance the opposite is also the case, since here we witness a significant *loss*. For the key detail in both this sequence and the film's larger plot - the 'green handkerchief' (a gift from the femme fatale who causes Swede's death) - is not revealed at all but effectively concealed by virtue of being filmed in black-and-white. A reminder that the essential is always lost in translation, this negation matters because the entire basis to Reardon's investigation is his recollection of this detail in the report (the 'bell' that rang signals the return of his repressed memory). We might even say that this text is the source of the film from the point, some ten minutes in, when Reardon discovers Swede's handkerchief and begins trying to decipher its mystery. In which case, the elusive - or illusive - nature of this enigmatic key to the secrets of the past is subversively inscribed by these contradictions within the very representation that is supposed to resolve it.

If this analysis suggests a subtle meditation on the generation of cinematic images and film narrative out of a written source text, it stands in for the rather more obvious process of adaptation announced by the film's full title: *Ernest Hemingway's The Killers*. As we will see, the critical response to this film has usually included some sort of comparative analysis with the Hemingway short story on which it is based. In light of the recent trend towards intertextual theories of adaptation, the more detailed of these comparative studies now appear tainted by the various fallacies of traditional 'fidelity' criticism (an essentialist assumption of authorial intention, an implicit hierarchy that favours the literary 'original' and judges the film for being true or false to its 'letter' or 'spirit,' and so on). On the other hand, adaptation theorists have also worried about the limits to an expanded field, concerned that 'use of the intertextuality model might in some cases tend to obscure the relationship between the two works' (Mayer, 6). In the case of *The Killers* and 'The Killers,' I would argue that what's needed is a limited dialogic approach, because the relationship and its significance has been so *obscured* by the existing criticism.

In what follows there are, therefore, a number of significant omissions: the larger matrix of international modernism formed by the intersection of Hemingway, existentialism, and aesthetic exchanges between European and American culture; a fully two-way analysis that re-reads 'The Killers' in light of *The Killers*; the contextualising Nick Adams short-story cycle; a comparative analysis of the 1946 film and its remake in 1964, and so on. First focused extratextually and then intertextually, my main interests lie in a sociological and medium-specific reassessment of the film's relationship with Hemingway's story and, finally, in their representations of death.

Ernest Hemingway's The Killers

Criticism has overwhelmingly situated *The Killers* within one of three determining contexts: the emerging tradition of what critics (but not the studios that made the films) would call *film noir*; the oeuvre of its director, Robert Siodmak; and the field of Hollywood adaptations of Hemingway's work. These three contexts can be triangulated to form an initial framework.

Of *The Killers*' relation to *film noir* a great deal has been written - it is widely recognised as 'one of the most "complete" *films noirs*' (Walker, 135) - but, significantly, the film is almost never mentioned in context of *noir*'s relation to literary adaptation.[3] While adaptation has been a constant in Hollywood's history, *noir* is something of a special case, and not only because so many films derive from a specific range of writers, chiefly the 'hardboiled' tradition of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, and Cornell Woolrich. For this literary base has also been one of the key factors in critical efforts to define the field's very identity, its claims to coherence, ever since, in August 1946, the French cineaste Nino Frank coined the term *noir* to describe recent American crime films. In fact, only Porfirio has claimed that the film's debt to Hemingway, as the Papa of the tough guy school, makes *The Killers* a fitting illustration of

[3] An exception is R. Barton Palmer's recent essay, itself exceptional for its well-theorised engagement with Patrick Cattryse's *Pour une théorie de l'adaptation filmique: le film noir américain* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1992). Acknowledging that *The Killers*' 'narrative complexity' may have cinematic sources - he cites *Citizen Kane* - Palmer claims (without supporting evidence) that it 'can also be traced to adaptation - not of the literary text actually being reworked in this instance [i.e. 'The Killers'], but of a literary norm adopted by this emerging model [i.e. *film noir*] . . . from an earlier and ground-breaking adaptation' [i.e. *Murder, My Sweet*, the 1944 adaptation of Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Loveley*] (275).

some 'definitive aspects' of *film noir* (177), and even this lineage has been called 'more apparent than real' (Schickel, 17). If there are no more than passing references to Hemingway in the numerous comparative studies of *noir* film and fiction (see in particular Marling and Abbott), it is not just because of the lack of other Hemingway *noir* adaptations,[4] but, I would argue, because *The Killers* does not seem to fit established comparative paradigms.

While Abbott can discuss 'the choices these films make in regard to the novels' of Raymond Chandler, and analyse both 'the defatalization of the femme fatale' and the 'Hollywood makeover' of their detective heroes in the passage from page to screen (132, 138, 133), in the case of *The Killers* the mismatch between film and short story seems to leave nothing to compare: what sense does it make to speak of culturally and politically significant 'choices' in the process of adaptation when the literary source text is less than a dozen pages long, provides the basis to only ten minutes of the film, and features neither detective-hero nor femme fatale? At its most elementary, this is a material problem of *length*. Since both the theory and practice of literature-to-film adaptation criticism has always taken the novel as its standard, this issue is typically phrased in precisely the reverse terms of *cuts*, not expansions (how to redact a text of several hundred pages into a ninety minute movie). And in the *noir* context, cutting has been especially important to critics because of the determining institutional and cultural conditions of film production in 1940s America. Criticism has often focused on how *noir* films adapted their source novels because of the need to negotiate the ideological injunctions and moral prohibitions of the Production Code, observing how the repressed (usually, but not exclusively, sexual material) returns in displaced form through the *mise-en-scène*. However, the *locus classicus* of this approach - the treatment of sexuality

[4] Critics sometimes include *Breaking Point* (1950), based on *To Have and Have Not*.

in Howard Hawks' 1946 adaptation of Chandler's novel, *The Big Sleep* - does not provide the only model for the workings of censorship and its subversion.

Although Kuhn's case is that, in the film text, 'censorship is a *productive* operation rather than, as it is commonly conceived, a process of excision, of cutting things out' (79), her comparative analysis of *The Big Sleep* film and novel is based precisely on noting the presence of material too dangerous to be left in. Another model altogether is needed, however, to take into account the distinctive stylistics as well as length of Hemingway's short story - to reckon, that is, with the 'iceberg' aesthetic of the *already* cut text. Paradoxically, *The Killers'* very expansions of its minimalist source can be seen to achieve a similar state of culturally significant self-contradiction by the opposed route. The processes of Hollywoodisation and its resistance that have been analysed in *noir* adaptations may be just as meaningful when narrative techniques and generic types are not reworked from a literary source but added entirely from scratch. As I will argue below, the key additions that made *The Killers* - a complex flashback structure and a plot driven by the detective's pursuit of a femme fatale - should be seen as a culturally determined response to the danger of what in Hemingway's 'The Killers' is *absent*.

This emphasis on the conditions of film production brings us to our second determining context. Whereas Hemingway has an oblique relation to the *noir* field, Robert Siodmak is widely recognised as the *noir* director *par excellence* (only his fellow German emigré, Fritz Lang, is credited with more titles). On the other hand, when critics have comparatively analysed Siodmak's film and Hemingway's text they have become snared in the problematic definition of authorship. Thus Kaminsky describes both Hemingway and Siodmak as 'an author of merit,' as if writer and director exercised comparable autonomous control over their materials - and then, recognising the special importance of the film's producer, Mark Hellinger, Kaminsky undoes his comparative model by creating the hyphenated identity in 'Hellinger-Siodmak's *The Killers*' (125, 129). In fact,

this issue of whether to credit the director with a film's paternity was already raised in the case of Siodmak by the French critics Borde and Chaumeton (in the first - and for twenty years, the only - study of *film noir*),[5] and the material evidence supports their suspicion about Hellinger's role in *The Killers*: it was Hellinger who had long wanted to adapt the Hemingway story and who got Universal to acquire the property for his production company, Hellinger who commissioned the screenwriters (John Huston, Richard Brooks, and Anthony Veiller), arranged the lead casting, and hired the director - and Siodmak wasn't even his first choice (this was Don Siegel, who directed the remake of *The Killers* in 1964). Despite Siodmak's creative input into all aspects of the production - including 'a tremendous hand in the final screenplay' (Alpi, 154) - there are, then, strong empirical grounds for resisting the (in any case theoretically contested) notion of *The Killers* as the response of one author to another.

Indeed, it might be just as fruitful to discuss the film in the context of Hellinger's independent production company, which played an important role in the reorganisation of the postwar film industry generally and, in particular, reworked the gangster genre by 'sponsoring candid hard-boiled social realist treatments of modern American life' (Munby, 162). Since Siodmak's main interests lay elsewhere - chiefly, psychological trauma in domestic settings and obsessive relationships - it's revealing that one critic should claim he 'did get the chance to re-do *The Killers* his way' when, 'without Hellinger at the helm' (Greco, 18), he directed *Criss-Cross* (1948); ironically, greater autonomy for the director may account for why the later film lacks the kind of internal contradictions and covert textual operations that make *The Killers* especially interesting.

[5] 'What is the producer's contribution, the scriptwriter's, the editor's? Is it pure chance that the late Mark Hellinger produced three such unmistakable films as *The Killers, Brute Force,* and *The Naked City?*' (3).

The Killers brought Siodmak name recognition in Hollywood and his only Oscar nominations, brought Mark Hellinger International and Universal significant financial success, and made instant stars of its two leads (Burt Lancaster, on his debut, and Ava Gardner). But publicity for the film traded emphatically on the biggest star name of all, that of Ernest Hemingway. Not only did all posters and lobby cards feature Hemingway's name in the film title, but over a dozen different poster designs used the key promotional tag line to seal the association: 'Told the Untamed Hemingway way.' The original pressbook begins with an astonishingly clear, if clearly misleading, hierarchy of authorship - 'Story by Ernest Hemingway / Produced by Mark Hellinger / Directed by Robert Siodmak' - while several poster designs redoubled the emphasis by featuring references to the three Hemingway novels previously adapted by Hollywood, *To Have and Have Not* (1944), *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1943) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1932).[6] Perhaps unsurprisingly, only the small print in such publicity clarified the actual extent of Hemingway's involvement in *The Killers*; when promotional material boasted, 'Hemingway Does It Again! Author Makes Screen History with Sensational New Hit!' the impression given is of a new, original work by Hemingway - not an adaptation, "90%" of which was an "addendum" (Greco, 86) by other writers to a twenty-year old, very short story.

If Hemingway was, as Hellinger put it at the time, 'the biggest selling element in our advertising' (qtd. in Greco, 86), this was because, in the 1940s, 'he alone of his generation was both a critically successful writer of fiction and also a celebrity' (Lewis, xi). On the other hand, when Hollywood used his name to pre-sell its product, it constructed a Hemingway to suit each occasion: Hemingway the romantic novelist of sentimental love stories for *A Farewell to Arms*, or the tough guy writer of 'Tense! Taut! Terrific!' action for *The Killers*, or

[6] Information about the pressbook, from the Criterion DVD edition of *The Killers* and from Laurence, 'Hollywood's Publicity'.

even, in a promotion for *The Macomber Affair* (1947) that brazenly reconstructs the earlier construction in order to trade off it, the writer of 'the love story of *The Killers*' (qtd. in Laurence, 'Hollywood's Publicity,' 24). Given the publicity departments' promiscuous makeovers of Hemingway's image, what are we to make of his name's presence in the film title? Was it meant to be taken as an act of homage - a claim to fidelity, deferring to the great author - or, quite the opposite, as an unabashed Hollywood take-over, appropriating the property as its own? Begging the question of originality, Hemingway's name in the title also begs the question of the spectator's knowledge of the original. In 1946, how many of the film's audience would have read 'The Killers,' or have known it was not a novel but a short story, or have otherwise known it was by Hemingway at all? But whatever the audience's cultural competence, the title wreaks a curious epistemological confusion in thoroughly mystifying the distinction between film and story: being called *Ernest Hemingway's The Killers*, the film makes it impossible to refer to Ernest Hemingway's 'The Killers' without once again naming the film.[7] It's as if the title fantasises the erasure and replacement of both author's name and original text, insisting that this, the film, is not a substitute for the story, not some pale imitation, but the thing itself, the real thing.

He investigated Hemingway

'As is well known, Hemingway's story supplies only the first two scenes of the film,' states Michael Walker (128), effectively dividing up *The Killers* into what might be termed the opening 'adaptation' and the 'expansion' that follows and, inadvertently, begging two questions. Firstly, 'well known' to whom? To modern

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[7] The same case could be made for *To Have and Have Not* and *The Snows of Killimanjaro* (1952), which also had 'Ernest Hemingway's' before the commonly abbreviated title, although neither film promoted the name as did *The Killers*.

critics, or the film's contemporary audience? And secondly, since what's 'well known' sometimes turns out to be wrong, is the commonplace Walker notes actually the case? Both questions turn on the reception, critical as well as popular, of Hemingway's story in the context established by the film.

First published in 1927, 'The Killers' quickly became one of the most widely anthologised and critically analysed of all Hemingway's stories. Written almost entirely in terse dialogue, it is short and striking enough for spectators already familiar with it to have recognised the largely verbatim adaptation of the first two of its three scenes: the arrival of the two hit men, Max and Al, in Henry's diner, where they verbally terrorise George, the counterman, and Nick Adams, a customer, reveal their plan to ambush the Swede, and, when he doesn't appear, leave; then Nick's visit to Swede's room to tell him about the men, and Swede's quiet insistence, lying passively on his bed, that 'There ain't anything to do' (Hemingway, 1955, 67). In the third scene, not adapted for the film, Nick returns to the diner where he and George briefly speculate what Swede must have done wrong, and George, responding to Nick's horrified reaction, tells him he'd 'better not think about it' (69). For critics, this gangster hit scenario becomes an absurdist moral and philosophical drama through the story's extraordinary density of repetitive, contradictory, and enigmatic details, so that the common denominator in Hemingway criticism is to read it as a text of 'false impressions' (Fleming, 41) where 'very little in the story is what it appears to be' (Carter, 13).

Knowing that 'textual perplexity' (Brenner, 159) wouldn't sell half so well as the hardboiled violence promised in the story's title, promotion for the film naturally passed over self-reflexive artifice and played up the angle that linked Hemingway and Hellinger: their backgrounds in journalism of urban crime. Hemingway's firsthand experience as a crime reporter in Kansas City and Chicago was echoed in Hellinger's own underworld connections and fame as a former *New York Daily News* syndicated columnist, so that it's noticeable not only how much space but what kind of credit 1946 reviewers gave the producer. James Agee, for

example, described in *The Nation* the film's 'good strident journalistic feeling … all well manipulated by Robert Siodmak, which is probably chiefly to the credit of the producer, Mark Hellinger' (217). Ignoring Siodmak's name entirely, the *Time* magazine review gave half its space to Hellinger and an evocation of 'the '20s, when Manhattan teemed with murdering bootleggers': *'The Killers* … is packed with scenes, characters and dialogue straight out of Hellinger's Broadway.'[8] Most revealing of all, there's a large picture of Hellinger, taken at the Stork Club, teasingly captioned: '*He investigated Hemingway*.'

Exploiting an appearance of authenticity supported by Hemingway's biography and Hellinger's reputation, the film in effect investigated the extra-textual reality hinted at in the story, when Nick Adams and George speculate about why a pair of hit men should be looking for the former boxer: '"He must have got mixed up in something in Chicago,"' George concludes; '"Double-crossed somebody. That's what they kill them for"' (1955, 69). In later years, Hemingway himself would speak of 'the real thing in back of "The Killers"' (Hotchner, 160), supporting the idea of a true but absent history - one that offered Hellinger (who was also drawing on his underworld reporting days) a version of the iceberg aesthetic to which the film could respond by filling out the 'missing' back-story.

The critical verdict on the relationship between the 'adaptation' and the 'expansion' of Hemingway's 'The Killers' can be divided into two broad camps, each more or less preoccupied with issues of fidelity and judgements of quality. There are those who see the film's response as inadequate or reductive: in Hollywood, more means less. Thus Borde and Chaumeton observed that 'from the first sequences onward one expects something extraordinary,' but that with 'the appearance of the investigator the rhythm gets weaker, and the atmosphere more commonplace. We steal in the direction of the well-made, but classical, crime film' (78). For Shadoian, the film used 'Hemingway's museum piece' with 'a

[8] *Time* (September 6 1946), 40.

kind of insolent nonchalance, as a symbolic introductory gesture' (80), a verdict echoed by Tusca, who refers to the 'short story by Ernest Hemingway on which [the film] was ostensibly based but to which it bears only the slightest relationship' (184). In sum, as Burt Lancaster recalled on seeing the script: 'Well, the first sixteen pages are Hemingway verbatim, and after that you have a rather interesting whodunnit film, but nothing comparable to Hemingway' (qtd. in Clinch, 14). In the other camp are those who claim not just the film's fidelity to the original but a kind of parity. The 1946 *New Yorker* review singled it out as an adaptation, noting that 'Hollywood has so frequently botched a good story by extending it that this one instance of preserving the quality of the original is most cheering'.[9] Greco describes the film's 'addendum' as 'a perfect compliment' (86, 89), while others have gone further. 'In its extension from Hemingway's short story beginning, the '46 *Killers* looked something like what Hemingway might have written,' asserts Laurence (1981, 180), and Selby goes one better still in claiming that 'the film transforms Hemingway's short story into the detective novel he never wrote but should have' (44).[10] The issue of quality, then, is answered in terms of *The Killers*' success in *completing* 'The Killers,' an analysis that is crudely reductive towards the story and that curiously elides the distinction between cinema and literature.

This idea that 'The Killers' needed completing is generally argued in plot rather than aesthetic terms, responding not to 'textual perplexity' but rather to the 'perplexing mysteries within the story' (Fleming, 40). Thus, Hirsch: 'Although

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[9] John McNulty, review in *New Yorker* (September 7 1946), 52.

[10] Laurence and Selby evoke the prospect of the film's novelisation, a book that could only be titled '*Ernest Hemingway's "The Killers," '*but that would have to begin with a disclaimer acknowledging that the text was *not* Ernest Hemingway's 'The Killers' (as would happen, fifty years later, for the novelisation of Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula*).

Hemingway offers no explanation for the character's almost indifferent embrace of death, the film attempts to unravel the intriguing mystery of his submission' (72). We might properly invert this to say that it's not *although* but *because* of the lack of an explanation that the film unravels Hemingway's mystery, and that this is the reason for introducing its detective figure. As Selby puts it: 'The film then produces Riordan [sic] to answer the questions that the viewer must have about this story' (43). In this analysis, the spectator of *The Killers* is presumed not just to know 'The Killers' but to have been left puzzled and unsatisfied by it, so that, externalising our role as readers and acting as our surrogate, Reardon fulfills our desire to know by, in effect, producing more text. The problem with this approach is not only the reductive assumption it makes about the story's readers, that they can only read for the plot, as if this is the rest of Hemingway's iceberg. The other problem, which needs addressing here, is that in conflating reader with spectator it also fails to distinguish between the historicity of Hemingway's writing and Hollywood's filming.

As an interpretation of Hemingway's story, Reardon's investigation rehistoricizes what is most problematic in it according to those cultural and historical determinations registered by *film noir* in mid-1940s America. Structurally, for example, Reardon's pursuit of the Swede's back-story proceeds through flashbacks, whose remarkable proliferation in *noir* films of this period has been understood both as the 'transcription of a literary device' (Turim, 171), reflecting the number of hardboiled source novels, and as a symptomatic response to a general 'postwar concern about historical recollection' (Munby, 216). If the flashback affirms that the 'secrets of the past need to be told or found out' (Turim, 143), then its use ten times to drive *The Killers*' narrative suggests an excessive, medium-specific reaction to 'The Killers,' as if over-compensating for the absence of narrative development in Hemingway. Likewise, as the insurance investigator takes on the rationalizing task of the solitary

detective - Edmund O'Brien plays him as a cheapened version of Bogart in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) - it's as if Reardon's increasingly obsessive quest to solve the Swede's mystery effectively metonymises the film's need to finish off the story. Thematically, as Krutnik has demonstrated, Reardon's active role in *The Killers* is to restore the loss of agency embodied by the former boxer in his paralysed surrender to death: the film offers a defining image of its culture's 'persistent fascination with the spectacle of the passive or emasculated man' (127). Introducing the femme fatale - by the mid-1940s an established generic type, albeit one individualised intriguingly here - the film takes up the clue in Hemingway about Swede's feminisation - his landlady says, 'He's just as gentle' (1955, 68); meaning, *as a woman* - so that his loss of potency comes to represent male fears about social and economic realignments in the postwar order. In a zero-sum game of power, Reardon avenges Swede's losses by finding and triumphing over the double-crossing woman and the double-act killers, and at the film's end he exits his boss's office with a smile that expresses job satisfaction: from unfinished business to case closed.

In effect, then, the film has read back from 'effects' in Hemingway's story to produce the 'causes,' even as these causes are constructed according to historical conditions and cultural types two decades later. On a range of levels, the 1946 production responded to the horror of Swede's negativity in 1927 - 'There ain't anything to do' - by doing something: narrating his crime and allocating punishment, redeeming his defeat and achieving closure.

Finally, before returning to address the second question posed by Walker's comments (whether Hemingway 'supplies only the first two scenes of the film'), we may consider the brief but usefully theorised analysis advanced by Slavoj Zizek. Deriving his terms from Lacan, Zizek takes *The Killers* to exemplify those reconstructions of artworks that 'fill the void around which some canonical work is structured' (19). Since this central hole denotes a 'constitutive gap between the explicit symbolic texture and its phantasmatic background' (18), when some

other work fills it in, 'the effect is inevitably that of obscene vulgarity' (19). Zizek observes: 'in its first ten minutes, the film faithfully follows the original story; what then ensues, however, is a prequel to it - an attempt to reconstruct the mysterious past traumatic experience that caused the "Swede" to vegetate as a living dead, and calmly await his death' (19). Despite offering a valuable model to theorise Hemingway's iceberg aesthetic (of which, more below), Zizek's analysis more or less sums up what I would call a 'first approach' to *The Killers*, one that sees fidelity to the letter in the adaptation of Hemingway and betrayal of it in spirit in the expansion. In each respect, I would argue that this account is fundamentally mistaken. In a 'second approach,' we must recognise that Hemingway supplies both less than the first two scenes, and more.

Nothing Happens

To begin with, the problem in Walker's observation has nothing to do with the usual questions of fidelity. Laurence's objection that a detailed comparative analysis shows how the script and direction 'changed *many* important details and disregarded its meaning' (1981, 181) is both true and (given its essentialist assumptions) beside the point. In the first instance, the problem is that critics have overlooked how these first scenes are determined by how they are *framed*.

After the Universal International logo, before the titles begin to roll and before the appearance of Henry's diner, the first shot fades in from a black screen to the dark interior of a car speeding through the night. In a tight close-up, the spectator is positioned in the backseat, looking ahead over the shoulders of two men. After ten seconds, the shot cuts to the road illuminated in the car's headlamps as seen from the driver's point of view. Only now does the camera cut to the scene of the diner, as the titles appear and Miklos Rozsa's dramatic 'Killers' theme music swells to a sudden crescendo. Paradoxically, the importance of this opening frame is suggested by its very lack of necessity: not only does it have no

equivalent in Hemingway's story (first line: 'The door of Henry's lunch-room opened and two men came in' (57)), but, as an introduction to the action that follows, the film simply does not require it. However, if we work backwards from effects to functions, and consider two other framing devices that follow, a critical purpose becomes apparent.

Firstly, these opening frames cannot be mistaken for location shots: the road beyond the windshield is obviously a back-projection, as visibly *screened* as the town, lit by a key light in the far distance that casts enormous shadows towards us, is a Universal sound stage. The film begins by literally setting its own artifice into the foreground. In this, it follows Hemingway's story, which playfully alludes to vaudeville, photography, and the movies, and whose stagy, unreal qualities critics have often noted as a counterpoint to its claims to realism.[11] However, the self-reflexive dimension in *The Killers* is emphatically and historically medium-specific: the dark interior of the car must remind spectators of their location in a cinema theatre (the silhouetted figures of the killers reproduce the shapes of those seated in the row in front), while, as Conley notes, 'the headlamps are an icon of the cinema being projected over the head of the viewer' (1991, 156). If we now cut forward to the closing seconds of the film's first movement - the moment of Swede's death - we find a second, equally self-reflexive framing device in the form of the killers' gunfire. As the gunmen 'blast away at the camera' (Phillips, 71), the lighting creates an extraordinary cinematic flicker that darkens and illuminates the killers in rapid alternation, as if presenting us with positive and negative images. Put together, these instances of meta-cinematic framing that open and close the Hemingway adaptation (to be, temporarily, inexact) form a revealing contrast to the kind of frames used for the

[11] Greco likewise notes that Siodmak and his cinematographer, Woody Bredell, achieved a 'remarkable authenticity' and yet, in scenes like the diner, 'there is something eerie in the way they enhance the reality of it' (96)

adaptation of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* three years earlier. That production began and ended with elaborate illuminated lettering, clearly intended to invoke for the spectator an association with the literary status of the film's source text (rather like the close-up shots of a leather-bound edition of *Jane Eyre* at either end of the 1944 film of Charlotte Bronte's novel). In *The Killers*, therefore, we can see how the cinematic framing of Hemingway's text - key elements of what Turim calls the film's 'covert enunciation' of its 'symbolic project, its projection of symbolization' (181) - functions to inscribe a vital, medium-specific, critical distance, achieved through visual devices that have no equivalent in the original story.

There is, finally, a second set of frames that are scripted and that relate directly to Hemingway's dialogue. This frame opens with the very first line spoken in the film, which is Nick Adams' single-word request to the counterman: 'Ketchup.' Again, it is the entirely gratuitous nature of this addition, as well as its placement, that implies its subtle but significant function. The frame closes with the key line in the whole film - the pivot point in the narrative between adaptation and expansion - or rather with its extraordinary double repetition. In the first frame, whether the film adaptation's marking of difference is recognised or overlooked depends on whether or not the viewer knows the original text (where Nick doesn't speak until addressed by the killers). The duplication of dialogue in the second frame, however, has the effect of re-staging this very structure of differentiation between original and adaptation within the film itself. Explaining his fate to Nick Adams, Swede says, in a quiet monotone and with a long, enigmatic pause: 'I did something wrong - once.' It is significant that numerous critics should have mistaken these words as Hemingway's (actually, 'I got in wrong' 1955, 67), because they generate a crucial confusion within the film. This occurs in the very next scene, when the 'adaptation' stops and the 'expansion' begins, as Reardon quotes these words over Swede's body in the morgue. What Reardon says is: 'Once I did something wrong.' Lest we miss the errors - inverting 'once' and cutting out the long pause - Reardon repeats the

line, and compounds his mistake by describing them as Swede's 'last words to Nick' (actually, 'Thanks for coming'). Wrongly repeating twice last words that aren't last words about doing something wrong once - the confusion is the equal of anything in Hemingway. And, since critics have sometimes confused this key line with that in the original text and almost always overlooked its falsifying repetition within the film, it would appear as if *The Killers* correctly anticipated its own confusion *with* Hemingway. Corresponding to its failures in synchronisation elsewhere - including the sustained use of voice-off to disrupt Hemingway's dialogue in the diner scene (see Conley, 1991, 159-60) - this emphatic contradiction in speech, this internal failure of fidelity between adaptation and expansion, stands in therefore for the external relationship between text and film. In short, each of these frames insist on the difference of *Ernest Hemingway's The Killers* with respect to Ernest Hemingway's 'The Killers'.

The second problem posed by the question of what is supposedly 'well known' about the adaptation concerns the most striking failure of all to differentiate *The Killers* from 'The Killers.' In the film criticism, one mistake occurs over and over again - namely, the impression that Hemingway's story ends with Swede's death. To be more precise, this error takes two forms, claiming either that the film 'begins by faithfully recording the whole of Hemingway's story of a killing' (Crowther, 50), or that, for the film, we 'see Swede killed. The horror is not left to the imagination, it is explicit' (Kaminsky, 50). The first error effectively rewrites the story in terms of the film, projecting backwards onto the source precisely what is absent from it: Swede's death. The second assumes that the film acts out what is implied in the story but not shown. Either way, the film has left its indelible print, as the 'false ending' in *Ernest Hemingway's The Killers* circulates a false cultural memory of Ernest Hemingway's 'The Killers.' One of the essential enigmas of Hemingway's text is therefore lost, since the killers themselves announce as they leave that they aren't now going to kill anyone ('We're through with it,' says Max (1955, 64)). As Paul Smith observes: 'For all

the impending violence and seemingly inevitable bloodshed, nothing happens. The killers don't kill' (10).

'Nothing happens': this is not the same as saying that something *fails* to happen. For once we confront the force of what this non-event actually is - death - we might recognise that this is the non-event, the nothing, that happens, and that happens, paradoxically, precisely because the killers don't kill. The horror of the ending, in other words, is not a murder scene left to our imagination, but the interminable non-ending with which the Swede - and we - are left.

Death in 'The Killers' therefore constitutes a particular form of Hemingway's theory of omission, which he had already practiced in short stories several times before. In 1923, for 'Out of Season,' and in 1924, for 'Indian Camp,' Hemingway left out a beginning and an ending that in each case related to death, and he implied as much when referring to 'The Killers,' a text that lacks both a beginning (Swede's crime) and an ending (his punishment): 'That story probably had more left out of it than anything I ever wrote. More even than when I left the war out of Big Two-Hearted River' (qtd. in Johnston, 247).[12] The idea, he famously claimed, was that 'you could omit anything if … the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood' (Hemingway, 1986, 54). But this 'anything' is, in 'The Killers' at least, the more specific, and yet still more ambiguous, thing that is 'nothing'. One name for this kind of nonevent is *trauma*, which Miriam Clark calls the 'vital other' to Hemingway's prose: 'Hemingway's omissions gain raw force not from the unsaid … but from the unsayable, the bodily experience outside and in excess of language and story' (169).

[12] Hemingway 'clarified' this to mean he left out 'all Chicago,' but I read this reference to a specific history, like his allusions to the real-life boxer behind the Swede, as a misleading literalism.

At this point we might conclude that *The Killers* completely negates Hemingway's aesthetic by crudely representing what can only be represented by its omission. It would then support Linda Dittmar's verdict (referring to *The Old Man and the Sea*) on the resistance of Hemingway's minimalist aesthetic to filming, since his style 'lures his adapters into excess' and because 'explication can deplete a text' (54). However, the paradoxical achievement of *The Killers* is to turn its very excess of explication against itself; its expansion subverts any possible fullness of representation through the Baroque excesses of its surface style and structure, as its multiple flashbacks fragment the narrative, disorder its chronology, and disorient its spectators. These disturbances not only create punctual gaps in knowledge of the past, they point towards the central absent cause that gives rise to them - the gaping hole that runs from 1940 (when the payroll heist takes place and the Swede falls victim to the femme fatale's double-cross) until 1946 (the time of Swede's death and Reardon's investigation). As 'Big Two-hearted River' omitted the First World War, so *The Killers*, like many other *noir* films, omits the Second. And this culturally determined repression of global historical trauma can indeed be felt, if not understood, in relation to the film's representation of Swede's death as an individual instance of existential trauma. For rather than showing us too much, this scene forces the spectator to confront the very emptiness that marks death's impossible alterity. This is the constitutionally 'unsayable' that informs the institutionally 'unsaid'.

In the scene of Swede's death the film stages both visually and verbally and with remarkable power the *nothing* that happens in 'The Killers.' To recall Zizek's terms, it is here that the film, in the very process of filling out the void in Hemingway's story, *creates its own void*. This is like answering a riddle with a riddle, since the scene of death in *The Killers* fills the hole in 'The Killers' with another hole, one that the rest of the film's narrative will ostensibly fill out. In Lacan's terms, what we encounter here is 'the Thing,' the Real that is not repressed but foreclosed, that which cannot be represented and so 'will always be

represented by emptiness': 'All art is characterized by a certain mode of organization around this emptiness' (129, 130). And yet this void is materialised as a visceral proximity according to the force of the cinematic medium that 'brings me,' as Steven Shaviro says, 'compulsively, convulsively, face to face with an Otherness that I can neither incorporate nor expel' (259). For the hole in vision that confronts the spectator in *The Killers* takes the form of an extraordinary sequence in which Siodmak alternates between shots of Swede's paralysed stare towards the camera and shots of the dark door behind which the killers are readying their guns. Exploiting the mirroring effect of the shot/reverse-shot structure, Siodmak forces the spectator to identify with both looks. That is to say: looking at the Swede's immobilised look, we do not see, but, as in a mirror, see only ourselves seeing; looking at what Swede sees, we see a door beyond which death waits, a sort of empty mirror. For what feels like an eternity, as we wait - wish - for it to be over, nothing happens.

This profoundly disturbing moment is the visual correlative to the verbal hole in Swede's speech, the gap that Reardon closes in his falsification of the line, 'I did something wrong - once.' Swede is not really hesitating, nor does he exactly give emphasis (to 'once') by his pause. The blank here is a paradoxical absence, because it gives voice to the unsayable, forcing us to hear, precisely, nothing. No word is missing between 'wrong' and 'once,' and yet Reardon's closure of the gap in his repetition of the line falsifies it by leaving nothing out.

Swede's key line and its 'adaptation' by Reardon effectively index the structural relation between the film's opening movement and all that follows. For the words that declare Swede's identification with fate and embrace of death come to express, in Reardon's mouth, a primal truth that is repressed: consciously, despite his relentless drive to investigate, Reardon does not identify with the Swede at all. On the contrary, when the screen fades back in from Swede's death to reveal Reardon in the police station the morning after, it is as though we have awoken from a nightmare, one that Reardon does not remember.

In narrative terms, we might understand this structural relation via the psychoanalytical model suggested by Thierry Kuntzel. In Altman's summary, Kuntzel proposed a two-stage division of film that produces two roles for the film spectator: 'at first analogous to the dreamer (the introductory sequence representing his dream), the spectator subsequently becomes analogous to the analyst (the remainder of the film representing an explanation of the introductory "dream" material)' (527). The value of this model here is to clarify the shift in the spectator's position that corresponds to the introduction of Reardon and our identification with him. If we put this model together with Hemingway's, the binary dream/analysis finds its exact match in feeling/understanding. Forced by Siodmak's direction to feel Swede's encounter with death, but unable to understand it, the spectator is invited to side with Reardon as the one who 'untangles the dream material, explaining it' (527) - that is, explaining it away. In terms of the cinematic medium, the film spectator is caught between the affective dimension of the image and the analytical satisfactions of narrative. This structure, in which a symptom is unraveled by analysis and causal knowledge substitutes for ethically-based feeling, marks Reardon's appearance in the very next scene.

Shortly after Reardon's entry he interviews Nick Adams, evidently disturbed after witnessing Swede's refusal to save himself. In the police station morgue, Nick narrates the film's first flashback, which ends with Swede's realisation that the past has caught up with him. Not grasping the situation, Nick asks: 'What's the matter, Swede, are you sick?' Swede replies, 'Yeah, I feel kinda sick.' When the flashback ends, Reardon asks questions until Nick stops him with the line: 'Look, mister, I'm feeling kinda sick myself.'[13] At this point, Nick exits

[13] Nick echoes how the Nick Adams of 'In Another Country' responds to news of death: '"Oh -' I said, feeling sick for him' (1955, 50). In a film whose script pays extraordinary attention to detail, the echo may well be a debt.

the film, effectively knowing and understanding nothing about the Swede's fate. For this, we must look to Reardon. And yet, already, the spectator's identification with the detective is divided. Just before Nick's flashback, when Reardon finishes reciting Swede's 'last words' - making the telltale errors - he lifts the sheet covering his cadaver. In close-up we see him turn over one of the boxer's enormous hands, fingering its scars. It's a casual gesture and that's what makes it such a chilling moment, for the way he holds hands with the dead proves that Reardon cannot grasp death. The detail warns us that, whereas Nick feels an embodied empathy - identifying with the Swede's feeling of sickness - Reardon feels nothing. It is an early warning, easily ignored for now, that our investment of desire in the detective will produce the wrong kind of knowledge. Thus the spectator probably follows Reardon in failing to react when, in the form of raw statistics - 'Born Philadelphia, June 23, 1908. Mother died 1909' - the film offers a tantalising glimpse of Swede's traumatic upbringing, a back-story Reardon overlooks entirely.[14] The longer the film goes on, the more it will subvert its own overt project - and the basis to its own narrative development - by distancing us from Reardon. It thereby indicts the spectator for sharing his drive to know - a drive that is steadily revealed to us as a disavowal, of his own sickness, of his own death-drive, of that which cannot be grasped. Reardon's project to kill the killers, to disavow death, has also been a project to kill 'The Killers,' to put an end to Hemingway's incessant and interminable limbo. Rather than giving us too much, then, Reardon's mission leaves us with the sense of all that is missing, even though what is left out is not something that could ever have been put in.

In his efforts to placate death with analysis, Reardon demonstrates the reductive, rationalising response to the inconclusive, unfathomable quality of 'The Killers' so well expressed by Paul Smith, for whom the story 'leaves us with the

[14] Far from coincidentally, the mother plays a crucial role in numerous Siodmak films, including *Criss-Cross*, the effective sequel to *The Killers*.

sense that something profoundly important, something elemental and enigmatic, has occurred and one life at least has been changed' (12). The life that has been changed in 'The Killers' is, as we see by his traumatised reaction, that of Nick Adams; in *The Killers*, we recognise by the end that Reardon's life has not been changed in the least. Rather than being represented within the film text, the life to be changed by this *Killers* is the object of its address - that is to say, the spectator. From here, it is a short step to projecting onto Reardon the identity of the analytical reader, to say that he holds up a harsh mirror to the critic carrying out 'the routine, rationalized business of interpretation' (Bordwell, 255). And this is why it is so crucial to see that the film's overt project of investigation - 'there are some last words and a mysterious handkerchief, puzzles solved in due course' (Greco, 88) - is completely undermined from within by its covert operations. Reardon's empty victory at the end, with a self-satisfied smile and flippant wave of the hand, and the ironic reward from his boss of a weekend off work, signals a critique of all his activity. Arriving at Hemingway's conclusion by the opposite route, the truth of *The Killers* turns, in effect, on exposing Reardon as no true story teller. It's as if the film's parting shot is to say, 'This is how Hollywood does it!' - where 'it' denotes both the act of adaptation and the treatment of death. As Reardon says with almost his last words, 'Ah, it's the job.'

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