

# Richard Linklater's *Hit Man*: A light touch, a dark problem

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Veteran US filmmaker's Richard Linklater's *Hit Man* on Netflix is a comedy-drama about a college philosophy instructor who also works undercover for the New Orleans police. In that capacity, he poses as a hired killer, using various disguises and personae, and helps prosecute dozens of people who seek out his services over the course of a number of years.

The story is inspired by the experiences of an actual figure in Houston, Gary Johnson, recounted in an article by Skip Hollandsworth in *Texas Monthly* in October 2001. Johnson died in 2022. Hollandsworth, credited as a co-writer on *Hit Man*, previously worked with Linklater on the screenplay for the latter's 2011 film, *Bernie*.

The *Texas Monthly* article explained that for "the past decade, more than sixty Houston-area residents have hired him [Johnson] to shoot, stab, chop, poison, or suffocate their enemies, their romantic rivals, or their former loved ones."

Whenever the police learn through an informant that a person wants to hire someone to knock off someone else, they cannot just go out and arrest that person. To get the proper evidence to win a conviction, they need to catch that person ordering the hit and then paying for it. That's where Johnson comes in.

In Linklater's fictional film version, Johnson (Glen Powell) encounters and helps bring to justice a variety of would-be accomplices in murder. The numerous sting operations, featuring a microphone-wearing Gary and a nearby police van, are treated in a relatively breezy manner. Gary's clients are portrayed as an assortment of quirky lowlifes, including a woman who wants to pay Johnson with a speedboat and a privileged teenage boy ("Do you really wanna kill your mom, Monte? You're young. You'll be making yourself an orphan." "That's the point. Did I ask your opinion? Kill the bitch.")

Gary explains in his narration: "My would-be employers ran the gamut. Evenly divided between men and women, young and old, rich and poor."

Eventually, posing as tough guy "Ron," he manages to *dissuade* one of his would-be clients, the young and attractive Madison Figueroa Masters (Adria Arjona), from pursuing the elimination of her abusive, controlling husband. Gary suggests instead she do her "future self, the one that deserves a happy, fulfilling life, that can still have that, a big favor." She should take the money she planned on paying Gary for the

murder, he urges, "and get a new life. Right now. Don't go home." She follows his advice.

Needless to say, and this is purely the scriptwriters' invention, Gary and Madison become romantically involved. She remains under the impression he is a paid assassin, and, in fact, "Ron" proves to be a forceful, appealing, sexually and emotionally compelling figure, unlike the ordinarily milquetoast Gary.

Complications arise when Jasper (Austin Amelio), the cop whose position as a fake contract killer Gary has essentially usurped, becomes aware of the relationship between Gary and Madison. When Madison's husband Ray (Evan Holtzman) turns up dead, Jasper, a nasty, backward type, puts two and two together and suspects the widow who once tried to organize Ray's death. This leads to further complications, and death.

As noted above, *Hit Man* handles the events with a relatively light touch. Powell and Arjona make the most of the sensual, "screwball" possibilities, often amusingly.

The film concentrates on the malleability, flexibility, changeability of identity. Linklater told the *New York Times* in an interview that he had become "interested in this notion lately that, oh, you *can* change, the personality isn't fixed. That seems current: this notion of self and identity, gender. I sort of like that it's all on the table, that everybody's thinking you kind of are who you say you are. To me, that's interesting." The interviewer later suggested that one "idea of the film ... is that we all have the power to create our own identity."

The director told *Slant*, "I think if you put enough of your brain power into it and are methodical enough, you can create the world you want to live in." Or as he commented to the *Radio Times*, it seems "very modern the idea [that] you can be whoever you want to be. It's very empowering."

Presumably, the defense of people's right to identify with the gender or race of their choice is hovering over *Hit Man*, obliquely as that might be.

In his classroom lectures and presentations, Gary is explicit about his conceptions. In one such scene, he tells his students,

Your entire being is invested with this notion of self. It has to be for its own survival, but what we'll be doing this semester is challenging this notion. What if your "self" is a construction? An illusion, an act, a role you've been playing every day since you can remember?

The "human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single

individual,” but neither is it simply a “construct,” created in any manner that one likes. People live and make decisions about their lives, but they do so under already existing, quite definite conditions, inherited from the past. The characters in *Hit Man* are no different in that regard from anyone else.

Gary’s flippant postmodern relativism is no help to anyone, nor is the Nietzscheanism he advocates:

So, what does Nietzsche mean when he says, “The secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness, the greatest enjoyment is to live dangerously! Build your cities on the slopes of Vesuvius! Send your ships into uncharted seas! Live at war with your peers and yourselves!”

Presumably, Linklater is bored with certain aspects of American life and appalled by others. His attitudes are no doubt sincere, but they are not thought through.

It is not a good thing to take the ending of someone’s life, even a villain’s, so light-mindedly as is done in this film. Moreover, in another of his classroom perorations, Gary seems to argue for preemptively doing away with an “existential threat in the form of your unhinged leader who’s invading other tribes? He’s killing. He’s raping. He’s pillaging.” He asks his students what should be done with someone like that. One group’s spokesperson answers, “The majority of us ...want to eliminate him.” The solution to the problem is “execution.” Gary goes on:

That’s ruthless, but historically, potentially the right choice. There’s been a lot of scholarship on this very subject recently. And the new thinking is that these kind of targeted killings actually play a larger part in our social evolution than previously thought. This impulse to weed out these destabilizing forces is likely a dark thread in our historical DNA.

It’s not clear precisely what Linklater and Hollandsworth are driving at here, but the implications are disturbing.

No doubt the issue of identity was on the filmmakers’ minds, but *Hit Man* plays itself out to a certain extent as a new version of the Jekyll and Hyde story, with “Ron” and Gary representing two poles of one personality. This is one aspect of Johnson’s drama, but not necessarily the richest or most artistically and socially rewarding.

What *Hit Man* entirely fails to examine is the more obvious, glaring matter: the intense *brutality* of American life. The film tends to take for granted that dozens of people in a major metropolitan area were prepared to confide in a total stranger the fact they wanted someone done to death and were prepared to hand over thousands of dollars in cash to have it done.

All sorts of dramas and even comedies can be made from such a situation, but doesn’t it deserve serious consideration, first of all, as an ominous social fact? What is the ultimate source of these murderous inclinations?

In his 2001 article, Hollandsworth points to Johnson’s undercover activities as having taken place over “the past decade.” What characterized that particular ten-year period?

One can refer in general terms to American capitalism’s bloody history and a residual, pragmatic propensity in the population to search for a “quick fix,” occasionally including homicide, to a range of difficulties, but US establishment policy and practice in the 1990s took on a new, intensely malignant and threatening character.

The dissolution of the USSR in December 1991, as the WSWS pointed out earlier this year, far from ushering in a golden age of peace and prosperity, “led to the eruption of an orgy of imperialist violence, from the Gulf War to the bombing of the former Yugoslavia, to the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan within the framework of the “war on terror.”

“In this period, the political forces arguing for the most aggressive actions with regard to the Soviet Union during the Cold War came to dominate US foreign policy. The doctrine of American imperialism was summed up in a 1991 editorial statement in the *Wall Street Journal*: ‘force works.’”

In other words, “solving problems” through the massive, lethal and devastating exercise of violence became *quasi-official state doctrine*, blessed or sanctioned by the White House and the government apparatus. In their pronouncements on foreign enemies, presidents and other US officials became indistinguishable from crime bosses.

Bound up with these processes, in the wave of post-Soviet triumphalism, the glorification of unfettered “free enterprise,” greed and individual ruthlessness took hold of the ruling elite and its media and entertainment outlets with corrosive, damaging consequences. How could such conceptions and moods, which prized removing obstacles at any and all cost and were blasted daily from televisions and movies and radios, communicated repeatedly by politicians and businessmen and the rest, not have had an impact on the most vulnerable portions of the population?

The 60 citizens of Houston who sought Johnson out to eradicate a troublesome person in their lives were simply imitating, on a small scale, the vast global operations of the US military-intelligence machinery, as well as the “morality” prevailing on Wall Street.

This was the decade during which school and workplace shootings began occurring with terrible frequency, which began with the Persian Gulf war and ended with the Columbine High School massacre.

Couldn’t the filmmakers have done more with all that?



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