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# THE KILLING

HARRIS-KUBRICK PRODUCTIONS, 1956

## CAST

**Sterling Hayden** as Johnny Clay

**Coleen Gray** as Fay **Vince Edwards** as Val Cannon

**Jay C. Flippen** as Marvin Unger **Ted DeCorsia** as Policeman Randy Kennan

**Marie Windsor** as Sherry Peatty **Elisha Cook** as George Peatty

**Joe Sawyer** as Mike O'Reilly **James Edwards** as Track Parking Attendant

**Timothy Carey** as Nikki Arcane **Kola Kwariani** as Maurice Oboukhoff

**Jay Adler** as Leo the Loanshark **Tito Vuolo** as Joe Piano

**Dorothy Adams** as Mrs. Ruthie O'Reilly

## CREW

Directed by **STANLEY KUBRICK**

Screenplay by **STANLEY KUBRICK**

Dialogue by **JIM THOMPSON**

Based on the Novel *Clean Break* by **LIONEL WHITE**

Original Music by **GERALD FRIED**

Director of Photography **LUCIEN BALLARD**

Edited by **BETTY STEINBERG**

Produced by **JAMES B. HARRIS**



## A NEW BOY WONDER: 'KILLER'S KISS', 'THE KILLING' AND STANLEY KUBRICK'S EARLY CAREER

by Peter Krämer

On 4 June 1956, *Time* magazine's review of United Artists' new crime caper *The Killing* declared that the film's release "announces the arrival of a new boy wonder in a business that soon separates the men from the boys". On the one hand, this statement confirmed that, at the young age of 27, the film's director Stanley Kubrick had already demonstrated his artistic talent and his ability to make movies "likely to make a killing at the cash booths". The review went as far as comparing him to Orson Welles, who, in 1941, had attracted a lot of attention at the age of 26 with his debut feature *Citizen Kane*. On the other hand, *Time's* declaration contained a warning: through a ruthless selection process (based mainly on box office receipts), Hollywood quickly separated the filmmakers who could grow up, and grow old, in the business from those who could not. Indeed, after early box office disappointments, Welles's career as a Hollywood filmmaker had soon floundered, and when *Time* compared Kubrick to him, it appeared to have stalled altogether.

There was no certainty about which way Kubrick's career would go at this point – especially since, as *Time* reported, Kubrick's first feature, the war movie *Fear and Desire* (1953), had been "drowned in a downpour of public inattention", while his second, the crime drama *Killer's Kiss* (1955), had "thudded even louder than its predecessor". This track record did not inspire great confidence in the commercial prospects of *The Killing* and Kubrick's future in the film business.

Of course, today we know how it all turned out. Kubrick continued to make films for the major Hollywood studios for the next 43 years, until his death in 1999. The majority of the ten films he made after *The Killing* were commercial and critical successes, and many of them are now widely regarded as classics of world cinema. Most notably, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) has been ranked, since 1992, in the top ten of *Sight & Sound's* international survey of critical opinion about the best films of all time (which takes place every ten years); in the 2012 poll, it was at number six. (It is worth noting that this poll was topped by *Citizen Kane* from 1962 to 2002, Welles's film finally being displaced from the top spot by Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* [1958] in 2012.)

But no-one could have predicted this in 1956. When trying to understand Kubrick's early career it is therefore perhaps best to try to forget, temporarily, what we know about later developments, and instead to concentrate on how things looked at the time. How, then, did Kubrick get to the point where *Time* could declare him to be American cinema's "new boy wonder" in 1956? How did he try to differentiate *The Killing* from his previous box office flop *Killer's Kiss*? And how well did *The Killing* perform in the end?



Born in New York on 26 July 1928, Stanley Kubrick had been a precocious artist and high achiever long before he made *The Killing*. As a teenager, he did not only learn about the arts (among other things watching countless movies, ranging from recent Hollywood releases to European art movies and avant-garde films), but he also spent a lot of time playing music and taking photographs. In June 1945, a year before he graduated from high school (with middling grades), he managed to sell one of his pictures to *Look*, a photo-magazine with a readership in the millions. Soon after graduation, he was employed as a staff photographer by *Look*, receiving an informal apprenticeship and taking countless pictures. The magazine's editors acknowledged that it was highly unusual for a teenager to become such an important contributor in an article entitled 'A veteran photographer at 19, Stanley Kubrick makes up for youth with zeal' (published in the issue of 11 May 1948). This article also revealed that "[i]n his spare time, Stanley experiments with cinematography and dreams of the day when he can make documentary films".

That day came sooner than the editors may have expected. After having talked about various possible film projects with his school friend Alexander Singer (who would work on several of his early movies), in spring 1950 Kubrick used some of his own, as well as some of his physician father's, savings to shoot a short documentary about the New York boxer Walter Cartier, who he had previously photographed for an article in *Look* (published on 18 January 1949). He sold the film, which culminated in a very vivid depiction of the titular fight, to RKO, one of the major Hollywood studios, which released it in cinemas (as part of the support programmes preceding feature presentations) under the title *Day of the Fight* in spring 1951. (The original release version was sixteen minutes long but Kubrick would later shorten the film to twelve minutes and redo its credits.)

RKO also provided Kubrick with funding for a second documentary about a Catholic priest who piloted an airplane to serve his far-flung congregation in New Mexico; this nine-minute film, entitled *Flying Padre*, was released soon after *Day of the Fight*. By this time, Kubrick had quit his job at *Look* so as to be able to focus all his energies on filmmaking.

While Kubrick continued to make documentaries for the next two years (a short film on the World Assembly of Youth made for the US State Department in 1952, and a half-hour promotional film for the Seafarers International Union entitled *The Seafarers* [1953]), he was mainly working on his first full-length feature. This was a movie he had been developing since the late 1940s about four soldiers who find themselves behind enemy lines in an unidentified war; shot on location in California in 1951, it was eventually released, after several title changes, as *Fear and Desire* in April 1953.

As with *Day of the Fight*, Kubrick was able to raise funding for the film's production privately, mainly from his uncle Martin Perveler, a wealthy drugstore owner. And as with all of his documentaries, he managed to keep costs down by taking over multiple roles in the production (on *Fear and Desire*, he received credits for cinematography, directing, editing and producing, while also being the uncredited co-author of the script), and by working with people he knew from high school. On *Fear and Desire*, these included the poet Howard O. Sackler, who received the screenplay credit, the composer Gerald Fried, and Toba Metz, whom Kubrick had married in 1948 and who did various jobs during the production.

From the outset of his career as a filmmaker, Kubrick used his extensive press contacts to promote himself and the films he was working on to the American public, and also to those in the film industry who might further his career. Starting in December 1950 with articles in film industry trade papers and an Associated Press story entitled 'A 22-Year Old Producer: Makes Real Films for Fun and Profit', there was a steady stream of reports about this astonishingly young and hugely ambitious filmmaker.

Nevertheless, Kubrick was unable to get a distribution deal for *Fear and Desire* with one of the major studios, perhaps because his film turned out to be a bit too avant-garde (it featured a very poetic narrator, additional voiceovers expressing the thoughts of characters, long conversations about existential issues, a disorienting montage sequence and characters on both sides of the conflict being played by the same actors). He had to settle instead for the arthouse distributor Joseph Burstyn, who specialised in European imports. Indeed, after the release of *Fear and Desire*, one reviewer wrote that Kubrick's "very arty" film "tries to capture the photographic qualities and flavor of a European product".

Despite a rather sensationalistic marketing campaign which, making extensive use of material provided by Kubrick, emphasised a key scene in which a young, mentally disturbed soldier gropes and then kills a female captive, the film was, as already mentioned, a box office flop and Kubrick lost money on it. The reviews tended to emphasise the film's "shoestring" budget and the fact that the people behind it were very young movie "enthusiasts" rather than seasoned professionals. Yet reviewers concluded that, despite its many faults, *Fear and Desire* was a promising debut feature. The *New York Post*, for example, judged the film to be a "serious attempt to say something about what war does to men", with flashes of the kind of "brilliance ... one associates with young genius": "With a better script and more money ... [Kubrick] might turn out something wholly admirable."

In July 1953, less than four months after the release of *Fear and Desire*, Stanley Kubrick announced to the press that he had privately raised \$80,000 (over \$25,000 more than the final budget of his debut feature) for his second full-length movie, which would be “a tragic, contemporary love story” set in New York City. He admitted that *Fear and Desire* had been too wordy and promised to take a different approach in his new film: “The story should be told more through actions and reactions of the players than through their words.” Kubrick declared that he would not want to work for one of the major Hollywood studios if it meant giving up control over his projects, but also announced that he intended to make low-budget films that were “just as good” as those produced by the majors (which, on average, cost over \$1 million).

As with *Fear and Desire*, Kubrick intended his independently produced second feature to be picked up by one of the major studios, so as to ensure wide distribution and to recoup the production costs as well as, hopefully, making a profit. He had failed to achieve this with his debut feature, and he now gave more thought to the question what kind of film he might be able to sell to the majors. Reading the film industry trade press, notably *Variety*, he must have noticed the proliferation of gritty low-budget urban crime movies (of the kind that French critics at the time subsumed under the heading *film noir*, a term picked up only much later by American critics).

Given his strong desire to keep control of his projects in future, Kubrick would also have been aware of the special status that United Artists (UA) had as a major studio willing to grant filmmakers unusually high levels of control. He may even have known that Edward Small, UA's largest supplier of low-budget movies in the \$100,000 to \$300,000 range, was able to sell a steady stream of crime films (as well as Westerns) to the studio. It is no surprise, then, that Kubrick's “contemporary love story” turned out to be a crime drama, featuring a boxer, a taxi-dancer (a woman who dances with men for money), her boss and his goons, and involving long chases, plenty of fights (including a boxing match) and a murder as well as unwanted sexual advances.

The script, which was referred to as both *Along Came the Spider* and *Along Came a Spider*, was once again written by Kubrick and Sackler (this time only Kubrick's name would appear in the film's credits). In April 1953 (at the time of the release of *Fear and Desire*) it was submitted to the Production Code Administration (PCA). The PCA, which had been set up by the major Hollywood studios, censored all scripts and also all finished films intended for release in mainstream cinemas in the United States so as to make them as unobjectionable as possible and also, in principle, suitable for all age groups. Its report from May 1953 declared that “in its present form” Kubrick and Sackler's script was “unacceptable” due to “scenes of nudity, [...] excessive brutality, attempted rape and an illicit sex affair between the two leads.” (“Illicit” here simply meant that the two people involved were not married, nor had they even known each other for long.) The

report noted that “a revised version of this script” could be considered at a later stage. Kubrick and Sackler did indeed do further work on the script, and its title evolved: both *The Nymph and the Maniac* and *Kiss Me, Kill Me* (sometimes without the comma) were considered in September 1953.

At this point, the script and the underlying ‘original story’ by Kubrick and Sackler were purchased by Minotaur Productions Inc., the company Kubrick had set up to finance the making of his second movie. While the film's projected \$80,000 budget was tiny by Hollywood standards, it was still very substantial, given the fact that the average annual income of full-time employees in the United States in 1953 was only around \$3,500. As on *Day of the Fight* and *Fear and Desire*, Kubrick was able to raise money through personal connections. His partner in Minotaur Productions was the Bronx pharmacist Morris (Moe) Bousel, an acquaintance of the Kubrick family, who carried the title ‘treasurer’ (while Kubrick was Minotaur's ‘president’), owned half of the company and was the main investor in the new movie.

So as to be able to stay within the budget, Kubrick once again worked mainly with friends (including Gerald Fried, and also his girlfriend Ruth Sobotka, who would become his second wife in January 1955) and inexperienced, and therefore cheap, newcomers, while also taking multiple roles himself: he received credits for story and cinematography as well as producing, directing and editing. The only established actor he hired was Frank Silvera, with whom he had already worked on *Fear and Desire*.

*Killer's Kiss* was shot during three months (an unusually long shoot for a low-budget production) early in 1954 on location in New York, a place Kubrick was intimately familiar with not only because he had grown up there but also because he had gone on numerous assignments for *Look* in the city. In addition, by making the main protagonist a boxer, Kubrick was able to draw on his experiences with *Day of the Fight* (indeed he re-staged several scenes from his documentary). One might say that, after the disappointment of *Fear and Desire* (a film Kubrick later disowned), the filmmaker was trying to play it safe with his second feature – although the finished film would still include plenty of unusual elements (among them flashbacks within a flashback, a long ballet sequence featuring Sobotka, and a highly stylised dream sequence) and also some quite transgressive material.

After completing principal photography, Kubrick spent many months in post-production which involved editing the film, composing and recording the musical score as well as post-syncing all dialogue and sound effects (Kubrick had shot the film without sound). As on *Fear and Desire*, the majority of the final budget, which in the end was almost \$90,000 (thus exceeding the original budget by more than 10%), was spent at this stage.

In June 1954, Kubrick contacted the PCA again so as to get his project approved, but it was only

in March 1955 that a print of the finished film, entitled *Kiss Me, Kill Me*, was sent in; by this time Kubrick had made a distribution deal with United Artists which therefore was now largely dealing with the PCA. The PCA continued to find certain aspects of the project “unacceptable”, among them “the unmistakable indication of a sex affair between the prize-fighter and the girl” in the scene in which he first comes to her room: “In order to prove acceptable, this scene should be re-cut so that it ends before the boy pushes the girl down on the bed.” The PCA also demanded the removal of a character who was “obviously a ‘pansy’”, and “considerable eliminations” in “the concluding sequence among the mass of nude mannequins”. On 18 May 1955, Kubrick wrote to the PCA to announce another title change (*The Killer’s Kiss*) and to confirm that he would make the required changes to the film. A few days later, the PCA issued a ‘Certificate of Approval’ for Kubrick’s movie.

UA made some effort to promote the film, among other things organising a preview screening for invited guests in August 1955, as well as a screening for the press and cinema booking managers in September. At this point the distributor had finally settled on the title *Killer’s Kiss*, describing the film in the invitation letter as “an exciting drama” with “a most unique production background”, and highlighting Kubrick’s role as director and producer.

UA also produced, probably with a lot of input from Kubrick, a press book featuring several articles and a review that newspapers could use if they did not have film specialists on staff who wrote their own material. The press book foregrounded the “Authenticity” and “Realism” of the film’s locations and action (with a particular emphasis on the “Fight Scenes”) and Kubrick’s status as “the young man who many consider the brightest creative star to appear in motion pictures in recent years”. The tag line to be used in advertisements adopted the same sensationalistic approach as the marketing for *Fear and Desire* had done: “The most savage story that ever seared the screen.” This line was to be accompanied by drawings showing a passionate kiss and the fight in the mannequin factory. Once again the emphasis was on the connection between sex and violence.

*Killer’s Kiss* was reviewed in *Variety* on 21 September 1955. The paper categorised the film as a “[l]ow budget meller [melodrama] for lower half of the duals”, that is it was only suitable to be shown as a supporting act for a more accomplished feature film in cinemas which presented double bills (two features for the price of one). The reviewer emphasised the “shoestring” budget, the “negligible” “production values”, the absence of actors with “marquee” value and the “familiar” story (“reminiscent of old fashioned mellers which had the hero dashing up in the nick to save his beloved from the villain”).

While “Kubrick’s low key lensing occasionally catches the flavor of the seamy side of Gotham life”, on the whole the reviewer found the visuals rather boring: “Much of the footage consists

of city streets and rooftop exteriors.” The generally low quality of the film (as judged – rather unfairly we would say in retrospect – by the reviewer) was attributed to the fact that Kubrick had tried “taking on most of the major chores” himself: “this picture attests anew the hazards of such an attempt.” The review highlighted “a few lurid scenes that could rate special attention in exploitation houses”, that is cinemas specialising in what were advertised as particularly daring and shocking films, including films not approved by the PCA (*Fear and Desire* had also been shown in such cinemas after its initial arthouse release). Yet, the review concluded, *Killer’s Kiss* was unlikely to be widely shown.

It seems that *Variety*’s prediction was correct, because the film’s release has left few traces (for example, in sharp contrast to the many reviews of *Fear and Desire*, it is difficult to find any for *Killer’s Kiss*, apart from those in trade papers). There is some disagreement in the sources about the film’s finances, but it would appear that while UA may have eventually made some money from it, Minotaur made a substantial loss. The company had sold *Killer’s Kiss* to UA for \$75,000 plus an additional \$37,000 which would be “payable out of profits, if any, derived from the exploitation of the film” by UA. However, by November 1964, when accountants produced a financial report on *Killer’s Kiss* for Minotaur, no such profits had yet materialised, which meant that due to its production costs of almost \$90,000 and later expenses of over \$5,000, the company’s net loss on the film was close to \$20,000. This meant that Kubrick’s investors never got all of their money back; Kubrick himself, though, did make some money because he had been paid a fee of several thousand dollars for his various roles on the film (for example, the budget included almost \$2,500 for cinematography).

Kubrick also could perhaps take some consolation from the review of *Killer’s Kiss* in *Motion Picture Daily*, which recognised, and appreciated, what he had set out to achieve with his second feature: “Kubrick lets the camera tell the story, using a minimum of dialogue to good effect.” It is worth noting that, despite the intervention of the PCA, *Killer’s Kiss* retained many elements through which Kubrick explored, as he had done in *Fear and Desire*, the relationship between male violence and male sexuality. The most spectacular, and disturbing, of these elements is the scene in which hero and villain (who are attracted to the same woman) brutally fight each other in a mannequin factory, using nude plastic bodies and various body parts as weapons, thus inflicting damage on the female mannequins as well as on each other. The PCA had demanded “considerable eliminations” in this scene, but whatever cuts Kubrick may have made to it, the remaining footage takes up a lot of time, and makes a strong impact, towards the end of the film.

This, in conjunction with other aspects of *Killer’s Kiss*, was enough for *Variety* to find the film quite “lurid”, for *Motion Picture Daily* to recommend it only for adults, and for the Catholic Church’s Legion of Decency to issue a warning about the film’s “low moral tone; suggestive sequences; excessive brutality”; its ‘B’ rating implied that the film was unsuitable for young people and also





perhaps many adults. By the standards of the time, then, Kubrick's film was testing the boundaries of acceptability and exploring forbidden territory.

It is also important to note, however, that, in line with the PCA's concerns at various stages of the project's development, the relationship between the taxi-dancer and her boss remains ill-defined in the film (does he molest, even rape her after kissing her while the boxer's fight is shown on television?), and there is no indication that the boxer and the taxi-dancer have sex. Furthermore, the rather abrupt happy end, in which she somewhat unexpectedly arrives at the station to go away with him, serves in retrospect to legitimate the romance that was developing between them. The plot summary contained in the press book makes explicit what this ending is meant to imply: they are going to get married - which will finally remove any suggestion of illicitness from their relationship. To a considerable degree, then, Kubrick was playing by the rules.

### 3

When, at some point late in 1954 or early in 1955, United Artists made its deal with Minotaur Productions for *Killer's Kiss*, the studio also agreed to invest \$100,000 in Kubrick's next film, should he come up with a suitable project. Around the same time, Kubrick found a new business partner in James B. Harris. He was the same age as Kubrick and a friend of his high school buddy Alexander Singer, came from a wealthy family and had worked in film and television distribution, but now wanted to move into film production. In a later interview, Harris explained the rationale for his partnership with Kubrick: "I told him he needed someone to raise financing, find a good story, professional actors and writers [...] deal with practical problems, everything from financing to distribution so that Kubrick could be left in peace to create."

Once the Harris-Kubrick Pictures Corporation had been formed, Harris quickly found a recently published novel that both he and Kubrick thought was a promising candidate for becoming the follow-up to *Killer's Kiss* which United Artists had provisionally agreed to finance. Lionel White's *Clean Break* (1955) told the story of a racetrack heist in a non-chronological fashion, moving forward and backward in time so as to approach the same events from the perspectives of different characters (the novel being in this respect reminiscent of *Citizen Kane*). There was plenty of violent action and also a considerable amount of sex, much of which was closely linked to violence. Needless to say, the Production Code made it impossible for the film to depict any of this sexual activity explicitly; in fact, much - but not all - of it was not even implied, but instead removed from the story altogether.

In addition to allowing Kubrick to continue his exploration of male violence and sexuality, and to tell a familiar story in a formally innovative way, the adaptation of *Clean Break* would also enable him to concentrate once again on the professional roles, relationships, skills and

procedures underpinning a particular male endeavour. He had done so with regards to the world of professional boxing in *Day of the Fight* (and also, to a lesser extent, in *Killer's Kiss*), with regards to the working life of a Catholic priest in *Flying Padre*, with regards to the operations of the Seafarers International Union in *The Seafarers*, and with regards to military organisations and combat in *Fear and Desire*. Indeed, we could characterise all of these films as 'procedurals' (a term derived from the genre designation 'police procedural', which has been used to identify a dominant strand in crime fiction since the 1940s). *Clean Break* must have been an attractive proposition for Kubrick because it is one of the definitive crime procedurals.

When Harris tried to buy the film rights for the novel, it turned out that White's agent was already in talks with Frank Sinatra. In the end, though, it was Harris who acquired the rights for \$10,000 on behalf of Harris-Kubrick Pictures. That Harris was able to spend this considerable sum of money demonstrates that Kubrick now had much greater financial resources to draw on than before. Among other things, this allowed Harris-Kubrick Pictures to hire a professional writer to work with Kubrick on the script, which was seen to be a necessity in the light of critics' negative comments on the scripts of his first two features. Interestingly, though, Kubrick chose crime novelist Jim Thompson, rather than an established Hollywood scriptwriter, for this task. He liked Thompson's novels, and the fact that the novelist's finances were very precarious at the time so that he was willing to work quite cheaply, probably contributed to the hiring decision as well.

In close collaboration with Kubrick, Thompson wrote a first draft screenplay entitled *Day of Violence* in the spring of 1955. According to Harris, "Stanley was responsible for outlining what the scenes in the picture were going to be, and Jim was then going to write the dialogue. I guess Stanley structured the thing - but we followed the structure of the book." Later on, Thompson would be very upset when the film's screenplay credit went to Kubrick with "Dialogue by Jim Thompson based on the novel *Clean Break* by Lionel White".

UA liked the script but there was considerable debate about the casting of the lead role of Johnny Clay, the heist's mastermind. Sterling Hayden was interested - which was perfect for the film, because Hayden had starred in *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), a heist movie which, although not a commercial success, had received a lot of acclaim (among other things it had been nominated for four Academy Awards including Best Director and Best Screenplay) and was already considered a classic. Indeed, the *New York Times* review of *The Killing* would compare it, unfavourably, to this "classic" precursor.

UA, however, preferred a bigger star. So when Harris-Kubrick signed Hayden anyway (for a fee of \$40,000), the studio capped its investment in the project at \$200,000, twice the amount provisionally agreed when the deal for *Killer's Kiss* was made, but far short of the final budget of just over \$320,000. In fact, UA did not directly invest its own money but merely guaranteed a

\$200,000 bank loan for Harris-Kubrick Pictures. The rest of the money would come from Harris's father (\$50,000) and from Harris himself (about \$70,000). To put these figures in perspective: the input from the Harris family was almost as large as the combined budgets of Kubrick's previous two feature films. As had been the case on these two films, Kubrick continued to be dependent on his personal relationships with wealthy backers.

Parallel to arranging the financing of their film, Kubrick and Harris started negotiations with the PCA. From June to August 1955 Harris corresponded with Geoffrey Shurlock about what kind of 'automatic weapons' could, according to the Production Code, be used in the film (answer: anything "that is not classified as an *illegal* weapon").

At the end of August, Kubrick sent Shurlock a script, and on 9 September Shurlock told Harris that it was basically acceptable, but not without some revisions. He noted that during the preceding year there had been a "public outcry" about "five pictures featuring crooked cops", and Harris should therefore consult with a contact at the Los Angeles Police Department about the portrayal of the policeman who participates in the heist in the story. He also asked for a general reduction of swearing and casual violence, and expressed a particularly strong concern about violence against women in the script (including the climactic shooting of Sherry Peatty, the unfaithful wife who cheats on her husband and relates the plans for the heist he is involved in to her lover, as well as earlier scenes, notably one in which she is slapped by Johnny): "There has been a great deal of complaint about such scenes of women being brutalized." Before the end of the month (around the same time that *Killer's Kiss* was finally released) Kubrick replied that he had made the required script changes.

Kubrick, Harris and their cast and crew then gathered in Los Angeles where they filmed interior scenes at Charles Chaplin's old studio, while exterior scenes were shot on various locations around Los Angeles and San Francisco. Principal photography was originally scheduled to last from 2 to 29 November 1955, but in fact it went on until 13 December. This extension, together with other unforeseen costs arising in post-production, meant that the original budget, which a letter from Harris to Shurlock in November 1955 (giving *Bed of Fear* as the film's current title) listed as \$275,000, was eventually exceeded by over 15%.

On his third feature, as on most of his previous films, Kubrick worked with several people he knew very well, including Alexander Singer (who was credited as associate producer), Ruth Sobotka (art director) and Gerald Fried (who once again composed and conducted the music). However, unlike Kubrick's earlier films this was a union production, which meant that Harris-Kubrick Pictures had to hire union (or 'guild') members and abide by union rules.

Among other things, these rules made it impossible for Kubrick to take complete charge of, and

receive credit for, other important functions on the production. Most notably he handed over cinematography to Hollywood veteran Lucien Ballard, with whom he promptly had many clashes during the shoot. But, since *Variety* had argued that one of the biggest problems with *Killer's Kiss* had been the filmmaker's attempt to "tak[e] on most of the major chores", and Harris had seen it as one of his main tasks to surround Kubrick with professionals rather than amateurs, the rules forcing the filmmaker to delegate more of his work to experienced collaborators should probably be regarded a good thing.

After the completion of principal photography, Kubrick and his post-production team worked with remarkable speed, because already at the beginning of January 1956 Harris wrote to Shurlock to tell him that "it was a pleasure screening the picture for you a few weeks ago" (this must have been a – very – rough cut). The PCA's 'Certificate of Approval' was issued on 16 February 1956; at this time the title was still listed as *Bed of Fear*. The film was, however, released under the title *The Killing* in May that year.

Despite Kubrick's compliance with PCA demands (for example, Johnny's slapping of Sherry can only be heard but not seen), his work was once again judged to be pushing the envelope. The Legion of Decency warned about the film's "low moral tone" and put it, like *Killer's Kiss*, into the 'B' category. The Protestant Motion Picture Council similarly declared it to be a film for 'Adults': "Ethical and moral values are ignored, a member of the police force is corruptly co-operating with the criminals. The plotting of this crime could help to blueprint others." A few months into the release of the film, the Film Estimate Board of National Organizations declared *The Killing* to be only for adults, mainly due to its "horrifyingly graphic violence".

In addition to these potentially quite off-putting evaluations by influential organisations, Harris and Kubrick had another problem with the film's release, insofar as they had been unable to agree with UA on an appropriate marketing strategy. The two filmmakers had taken out advertisements in trade papers introducing themselves as the "new UA team" and *The Killing* as the "suspense film of the year". They had planned to slowly build up interest in the movie, first among exhibitors reading the trades and then among critics and art house audiences, before giving the film a wide release, but UA rushed *The Killing* into movie theatres as the second feature on a double bill. The results were disastrous, especially for Harris-Kubrick Pictures; as late as 1958, the company's balance sheet for *The Killing* was around \$100,000 in the red (which meant that, at that point, Harris and his father had earned back only a fraction of their investments).

This grim situation was only rectified when Harris-Kubrick Pictures sold all rights to *The Killing* in perpetuity to UA that year, thus finally breaking even. However, it should also be noted that the final budget had included various sums to be paid to Kubrick and Harris for their work on the film

(some, but not all, of these payments had been deferred, meaning that they would only be issued once the production went into profit).

As disappointing as the initial box office performance of *The Killing* turned out to be, the film's critical reception was very encouraging. *Variety* noted that the "documentary style" (here referring to the extensive use of voiceover to guide the viewer through the many temporal jumps in the film) "at first tends to be somewhat confusing", but then praised the "tense and suspenseful" development of the story and its "unexpected and ironic windup", Kubrick's "tight and fast-paced" direction, Ballard's "top photography" and the fine work of several of the actors.

By comparison, the review in the *New York Times*, despite commenting on the many positive aspects of the film, was somewhat condescending in concluding that *The Killing* was "an engrossing little adventure". The *New York Herald Tribune*, though, was full of praise: "*The Killing* is an excellent portrait of a crime, unusually taut, keenly directed and acted, and with a sharp, leanly written script." The review highlighted the film's "documentary-like eye for detail", its "quite exceptional" finale and the absence of the "usual sorties into romance" (with Johnny's love for a good woman being dealt with only very briefly). While *The Killing* "is not a picture for the kiddies", nor for dating couples ("the lovers in the loges"), its single-minded pursuit of thrills worked to its advantage: "All is subordinated to the telling of a confessedly vicious yet credible story." The review concluded: "Stanley Kubrick, who wrote the screenplay and directed the movie, is to be congratulated."

Soon afterwards, *Time* magazine not only praised Kubrick's "audacity with dialogue and camera" in *The Killing* as well as the film's "gut-clenching suspense and plenty of surprises", but, as discussed at the beginning of this article, also celebrated him as "a new boy wonder". Not much later, *The Killing*, described as "an estimable entry into that small field of well-made crime films that expose the modus operandi of the colossal caper", became the subject of a largely appreciative, in-depth analysis in the specialist film journal *Film Culture*. And across November and December 1956, ads appeared in *Variety* declaring that "*The Killing* is tailor made for an Oscar". Finally, in January 1957 the *Saturday Review* listed *The Killing* as one of the ten best films of the previous year. This listing confirmed that Kubrick really had arrived as a major new filmmaker – although, it has to be noted, his films were still far from making, in the words of *Time* magazine, "a killing at the cash booths".

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# LIONEL WHITE: HARDBOILED MASTER

by Barry Forshaw

## Dark World of the Black Maskers

The name Lionel White can be very useful if you want to impress people who think they know all about the American hardboiled crime tradition. White was a master of the form, and utilised it with great assurance throughout his career. But mention his name – even to aficionados of the crime genre – and you will most likely be met with a blank look. For although White's books have enjoyed acclaim over the years, their hold in publishers' lists has been tenuous – and most of the time, they have languished out of print. The irony of this, of course, is the fact that one of the very best regarded of heist movies, Stanley Kubrick's *The Killing*, is an adaptation of one of White's most impressive novels, and that alone should have rescued him from the obscurity into which he has fallen.

Of the various crime genres, the Golden Age of British crime writing is held in high esteem, but the real heavyweight – in terms of literary standing – is the American pulp tradition, forged in the bloodstained pages of post-war magazines such as *Black Mask*, and boasting the two patron saints of American crime writing, Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. The iconographic elements of the hardboiled world remain as sure-fire today as when they were freshly minted, despite a million parodies. And the image of the tough protagonist cutting through the polished surface of society to reveal the decay beneath has an existential force that makes most crime fiction seem trivial. This is a world in which female sexuality is often a snare and a delusion, plunging the anti-hero into a violent world of carnality and danger; and while the structure of society (manipulative politicians, brutal police) may seem callously efficient, the classic pulp novels present a world in which order is an illusion – and fate can randomly destroy the dreams of the central character, particularly if he is a criminal, as in *The Killing*. White was both an integral part of this tradition and an ambitious writer who customised the tradition in personal ways.

## A Prolific Pulp Maestro

White was born in New York in July 1905 and, like several of the crime writers of his era, he earned his crust as a journalist, reporting on a wide range of topics. His particular speciality – unsurprisingly, in light of his later career – was crime reporting (in this endeavour he also wrote under the name L.W. Blanco). However, inspired by other journalists who had parlayed that career into novelistic ambitions, he decided to utilise his extensive knowledge of true crime by writing fiction, starting with *Seven Hungry Men!* in 1952. His 35-odd books accrued respectable sales, without ever matching those of his contemporaries Chandler and Hammett (similarly, he was not to enjoy the critical reputation of

those two writers). As a novelist he enjoyed a healthy following – even though he wryly noted that each new book had to achieve success on its own terms rather than from his name on the jacket, being fully aware that the latter alone was not a guarantee of strong sales. Nevertheless, the books were successful enough to result in a variety of foreign translations and, like so many pulp novelists, he wrote for a clutch of different publishers: initially the gritty crime specialists Gold Medal, but latterly for Dutton. His books, which included *The Snatchers* (1953, filmed 15 years later as *The Night of the Following Day*), *The Big Caper* (1955, filmed two years later under that title) and *A Grave Undertaking* (1961), were written in a terse, stripped-down style that was the *lingua franca* of the hardboiled novel. But White brought something to his work unlike that of most of his contemporaries: several of his books had a specifically literary identity peculiar to themselves, such as *Obsession* (1962, filmed by Jean-Luc Godard as *Pierrot le fou* in 1965, with no credit given to the novelist), *The House on K Street* (1965) was very different in style, shot through with a pronounced social commitment, notably in its emphasis on endemic governmental corruption. The later *Death of a City* (1970) paid more specific attention to the machine-tooled mechanics of building suspense than earlier more discursive books such as *The Money Trap* (1963). The latter was also filmed in 1965; for a writer who was often under-regarded, White had no shortage of film adaptations, and Quentin Tarantino cited him as an influence. The protean nature of his writing, with its subtle stylistic differences from book to book, echoed another neglected cult writer, the British-born novelist Gerald Kersh.

## Short Chapters and Sharp Dialogue

*The Killing* (as we now know it) may well be Lionel White's magnum opus, and not just because it enjoyed such a successful film adaptation. The novel was originally published under the title *Clean Break* in 1955 and was a perfect example of the sinewy and astringent crime narrative. White delineates all his multiple characters with concision and vividness as the book moves swiftly and inexorably to its tense climax; the entire narrative is delivered in eleven concise chapters. Like his fellow American masters George V. Higgins and Elmore Leonard, White had the full measure of street argot, and the language of the book – and the dialogue between its characters – always rings true. And (again as with Higgins and Leonard) the unsentimental world of the professional criminal is evoked with assurance. *The Killing/Clean Break's* fracturing of linear structure – setting out its various plot elements in a series of apparently disconnected fragments – now looks distinctly post-modern (it was a tactic that was employed in the film of another of White's books, Hubert Cornfield's unconventionally structured *The Night of the Following Day*). But *The Killing's* most cogent achievement is the juggling of the various subplots – a facet that Kubrick and his screenwriter Jim Thompson (another excellent hardboiled novelist) were well aware of, finding the perfect equivalent for it in their film.

**Barry Forshaw's books include *British Crime Film*, *British Gothic Cinema* and *The Rough Guide to Crime Fiction***



# KILLER'S KISS

MINOTAUR PRODUCTIONS, 1955

## CAST

**Frank Silvera** as Vincent Rapallo

**Jamie Smith** as Davey Gordon

**Irene Kane** as Gloria Price

**Jerry Jarrett** as Albert

## CREW

Directed by **Stanley Kubrick**

Screenplay by **Stanley Kubrick**

Original Music by **Gerald Fried**

Cinematography by **Stanley Kubrick**

Edited by **Stanley Kubrick**

Produced by **Morris Bousel** and **Stanley Kubrick**



# SNAKES AND LADDERS

by Ron Peck

*Killer's Kiss* was Stanley Kubrick's fifth film, made after completing three documentaries and a first feature. It was a pivotal film, which is generally seen – including by Kubrick himself – as a forward move but also as the last of his apprentice works, before he announced his arrival more emphatically with *The Killing* (1956) and then travelled down a road that led to *Paths of Glory* (1957), *Lolita* (1962), *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) and, in 1968, to the climactic *2001: A Space Odyssey*. *2001* was another turning point – a huge one, a real game changer – so much so that, from then on, every new Kubrick film was seen as an event, as something big and important in the world, with no-one knowing what on earth to expect, but eagerly anticipating each one in the hope that he would continue to simply astonish us. The pressure on him to deliver greatness every time was immense and we never expected anything less of him.

Somehow, and almost uniquely, he remained what he started out as: an independent filmmaker. In the early years he had got used to doing things his own way and having the most thorough hands-on involvement over every creative element of a film production, and even though he later commanded big studio budgets, it seemed that he was still doing things absolutely his own way.

But back in 1955 his *new* film was *Killer's Kiss* and it was one that really had to work for him if he was to build a professional career as a filmmaker. His first feature, *Fear and Desire* (1954), had lost money and found only a limited art house audience. Later he withdrew it from distribution, embarrassed by it and describing it as pretentious juvenilia. But it did get some good reviews and, while it was still playing in theatres, Kubrick tried to use this situation of being briefly in the public eye to get another script into production. This was to be *Killer's Kiss*.

Kubrick was a genuine independent from the very beginning, working completely outside the industry initially, raising money from friends and family to pay for the productions, pulling in school friends to make up the crew and taking on the key technical and directing roles himself, confident he could do good work on very low budgets. Nonetheless, it clearly was not an easy period for him. In a very illuminating (and rare) audio interview with Jeremy Bernstein, recorded in 1966, he several times repeated that he never got any offers of work at this time<sup>1</sup>. After his first film, one of the very best boxing documentaries ever made, *Day of the Fight* (1951), he thought he'd

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1 - Interview with Jeremy Bernstein, November 27th 1966



get millions of offers afterwards, “but got none to do anything”. After *Fear and Desire* “again, not one single offer to do anything, from anybody” and he describes how he was no longer sure how he would even be able to earn a living other than by playing chess in the park for two to three dollars a day. If the next film didn’t work, perhaps that might have been the end of the film career of Stanley Kubrick, a very strange thought indeed, but one that must have seemed very real to him at the time of its production.

In the same interview, he described how he reacted to the allegorical pretensions of *Fear and Desire* – and its commercial failure – by “lashing together” some action sequences for an “action gangster” film, but again, as he moved into his later work, he became very disparaging of his efforts in *Killer’s Kiss* too, though, so far as I know, never withdrew it from distribution.

*Killer’s Kiss* can certainly be seen as disparate parts strung together, but maybe this was already illustrative of a certain method and approach useful to Kubrick in constructing a film – and it is this bringing together of very different blocks that makes *Killer’s Kiss* interesting. Science fiction writer Brian Aldiss, with whom he collaborated for several months on what was ultimately to become *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), completed not by Kubrick but by Steven Spielberg, made a revealing observation in the 2001 documentary, *Stanley Kubrick: A Life In Pictures*: “His way of making a film was to concentrate on seven or eight, as he called them, ‘non-submersible units’ and what this meant was, you had a very good chunk, you had another good chunk and when you’d got six good chunks you were almost home with a movie. It would be easy to connect them and you can see this principle operating in particular in *2001* where I believe the bits don’t quite fit... and this is why there’s a mystery about *2001*.”<sup>2</sup>

Kubrick himself, as he made more films, spoke several times about his struggle with narrative, and about its importance or not in engaging an audience’s interest in a medium that was primarily visual and had simply to be experienced<sup>3</sup>. After *Killer’s Kiss*, which was an original story, every one of his films had its origin in pre-existing books and stories, even if he dramatically transformed them in the actual process of bringing them to the screen.

There *is* a story in *Killer’s Kiss*, a very simple one in essence, a fairy tale, but it’s one that deviates, folds in on itself, goes off on a line sometimes, opens out to some unexpected places. None of

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2 - *Stanley Kubrick: A Life In Pictures*, produced and directed by Jan Harlan, 2001

3 - In an interview on *The Shining*, Kubrick told Michel Ciment: “I’ve never been able to decide whether the plot is just a way of keeping people’s attention while you do everything else, or whether the plot is really more important than anything else, perhaps communicating with us on an unconscious level which affects us in the way that myths once did.” Published in Michael Ciment’s *Kubrick*, 1983

this happens in quite the same way in the later films, which become tighter and more controlled in every sense, studios becoming more useful for this than locations, reconstruction of the world more important and deeper in effect than filming in the actual world, performances becoming increasingly very strongly stamped rather than loose and improvised. Unlike the later films, it often takes its time on the seemingly unimportant, ambles with the actors, highlights the fragile, the awkward and the vulnerable.

If the subject, and the way Kubrick was to handle it, was a reaction against the whole approach of *Fear and Desire*, it *did* reconnect him with elements of *Day of the Fight*, which itself had grown out of one of two photo spreads he did earlier on the boxers Rocky Marciano and Walter Cartier for *Look* magazine. His central character in *Killer’s Kiss* is again a boxer, Davey Gordon (played by Jamie Smith), this time not a champion but a veteran on the downslide, whose time is up. Kubrick would have known very well what failure meant both in boxing and, no doubt, in filmmaking too, and perhaps it’s this that gives the film and this character some of their very real paths.

Davey inhabits a one-room rental apartment that is like all those desultory rooms seen in earlier boxing and *film noir* movies of the forties and early fifties, most notably in Robert Wise’s *The Set-Up* (1949), where Robert Ryan, another boxer past his prime, waits for his next fight. Art directed by Kubrick’s wife at that time, Ruth Sobotka, Davey’s cell-like room is a small bare space, with little in it other than a mattress bed, a sink, a hot plate and a dresser, which puts a huge premium on its large window and the view it affords him of another world, in this case a mirror-reflection of his own world, the cell of another solitary character, Gloria Price, played by Irene Kane (later known as Chris Chase), who lives opposite. Much play is made of how these two characters live in parallel and look into each other’s lives through their respective windows. Interestingly, *Killer’s Kiss* was released shortly after Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* and Richard Quine’s *Pushover* (both 1954), two films which also centre on looking across into the lives of other apartments from your own window. The other notable feature of the rooms are the mirrors, just as it is in the office of the third character, Victor Rapallo (played by Frank Silvera), who runs the sleazy dance hall, Pleasureland, where Gloria works. In all these mirrors the characters can confront only themselves whereas the windows at least open out into the world beyond the self, to a world of other people.

One of Kubrick’s enormous strengths as a filmmaker was his ability to shape environments that have almost a subconscious pull both on the audiences watching the films and on the characters inhabiting them. A recent exhibition in London of material from the Kubrick Archive demonstrated this with an exploration of how he and his team created the *Discovery* spacecraft in *2001*, the Overlook Hotel in *The Shining* (1980) and Hué city in *Full Metal Jacket* (1987)<sup>4</sup>. This ability is

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4 - Exhibition *Stanley Kubrick: New Perspectives*, Work Gallery, 8th August – 27th September 2014

already there, in embryo, in *Killer's Kiss*. The film is built out of spaces even before it is built out of action sequences, spaces that take on arguably larger significance than the scenes that play in them: the boxing arena, the Pleasureland dance hall, the mirror apartments of Gloria and Davey, the office of Rapallo, a dark alley, and the long empty streets, boltholes and rooftops of the downtown part of the city – all familiar *noir* settings, but more foregrounded in this film because the drama is overall less intense, the settings lit and framed strongly (by Kubrick himself) and the scenes in them scored hauntingly by his school friend Gerald Fried, who also worked on *Day of the Fight*, *Fear and Desire*, *The Killing* and *Paths of Glory*.

Kubrick cast two unknowns as Davey and Gloria and they essentially remained unknown after this picture. Their unfamiliarity is in marked contrast to the hard-focus casting of *The Killing*, with its dominant Sterling Hayden and a number of familiar Hollywood character actors. By contrast, there is a low key fragility in the playing of Smith and Kane which gains from the fact that they appear on the screen to us as strangers, not seen before or after on the screen by most of the audience, fleeting figures, representative of the millions who populated New York City then.

Davey and Gloria are each seen in a very singular way. Both are shown as down on their luck, existing near the bottom of the food chain, with very little future and only a meagre and subsistence present. The set, built by Kubrick to put their two upper storey apartments into relationship with each other, centres on their views of one another. Without TV sets in their rooms, the windows function like screens, each life glimpsed functioning as a kind of movie for the other. The windows light up scenes in a general darkness. The set-up is simple but brilliantly conceived and, like the corridors of the Overlook Hotel in *The Shining*, stay in the mind long after the film is over.

Neither actor looks like a film star. Kane, in particular, has a kind of awkwardness to all her movements, expressing a lack of confidence, which is wholly in keeping with her character. The fact that she is also re-voiced by another actress (an uncredited Peggy Lobbin) has the further effect of dislocating her strangely. Smith, out of the ring, has more of an everyman anonymity to him; he doesn't have the dark good looks of Vince Edwards in *The Killing*, for instance, or the harsh imposing presence of Hayden. All this, for me, has always made these scenes between the two quite special, quite outside the more hardboiled representations generally more familiar and expected in *film noir*. We have to make up our own minds about them as characters as the film goes on. They don't come pre-stamped as to a considerable extent Elisha Cook and Marie Windsor are in *The Killing*, from their familiarity in other similar roles.

The two rooms are also connected by identical staircases down to the streets and these too are shown strongly, whether they be very populated, as in the Times Square scenes, or utterly deserted, as in the later downtown scenes. Off these streets are other very singular spaces: the boxing gym, as well as the boxing arena itself, the Pleasureland dance hall, the warehouse room

full of manikins where the vicious climactic fight takes place at the end of the film, a sinister side-alley that leads nowhere except to darkness and death. It is already a vision of the world that Kubrick conjures up, a *noir* vision for sure in this instance, but somehow more indelible than most because dwelled on often in single takes sometimes at the expense of the drama itself.

The story of *Killer's Kiss* is structured as Davey's flashback, while he waits at Pennsylvania Station to see if Gloria will show up, as arranged, and join him in a flight from the city and its violence to his uncle's horse farm. But midway in the film, Gloria, within *his* flashback, has a flashback structure of her own, one recalling Rapallo's attack on her, the other, far stranger, featuring the ghost of her dead sister dancing a classical ballet alone on an empty stage while Gloria gives an account of how she herself ended up as a dancer in New York, albeit in a very different kind of space. In a way, it doesn't make sense, one character having a flashback or two in the framework of someone else's flashback, but it works. It disrupts and grips. Perhaps a stricter future Kubrick would never have let this anomaly pass, but one goes with it in this film because it helps fill out Gloria's background and makes her increasingly as important a character as Davey. Giving the characters *presence* in a city whose architectural and structural elements are shown to be so overwhelming, also, I feel, gives them a basic dignity.

Kubrick was brought up in New York and one can assume that many of his *Look* assignments would have been undertaken there. Before joining the magazine, at just 17, he had already been taking photographs from the age of 12 or 13, which means he would have known the city both from everyday experience and through the more focused lens of his camera, selecting, framing, seeking things out. *Killer's Kiss* has as strong a sense of its locations as any other film he made, I think, and New York certainly has a more powerful, looming, even chilling presence in *Killer's Kiss* than the more horizontal Los Angeles does in *The Killing*.

There is a bracing sense to some of his outdoor work in New York, a sense of crowds and chance encounters; at one point, in Times Square, two strangely behaving men, both wearing a fez, and perhaps drunk, dance along the street and playfully take Davey's scarf away from him, running off with it, in a bizarre sequence which then plays a crucial plot role in delaying Davey from getting to a prearranged meeting with Gloria, preventing him from being killed. Just off these same streets, stairs lead up to the dance hall and to Rapallo's office. The flat lighting of the dance floor, where men glide robotically with their rented partners, emphasises its dull repetitiveness, but the boss's office is a dark lair where he works on seducing Gloria. This office is also a place where we feel Rapallo's intense sexual frustration and awkwardness and where at one moment he throws in self-disgust a glass at his own image in the mirror. There's also a disturbingly violent poster for *Blue Jeans* on a wall there showing someone being held down over a table next to a rotating buzz saw. Later Rapallo's frustrated sexual drive breaks out of the office and quite literally *drives* him to Gloria's apartment, where he comes close to raping her after failing to move her by pathetically



offering to be her slave, another extraordinary moment given the weight and powerful physical presence of Rapallo set against the glass animal-like fragility of Gloria.

The end of this scene is witnessed from his window by Davey after hearing Gloria screaming loudly. To get there fast in order to rescue her - as any good hero should - he has to go up the stairs of his own block, over the rooftop and down the stairs to her block. There are stairs everywhere in the film, they're a kind of snakes and ladder element in the plotting, visually emphasised. You can never be sure who will come down or come up. 'Watch your step', says a sign on a particularly steep flight of stairs connecting the dancehall to the street, and it's a warning that holds good for all the characters throughout all of the film.

The last sequences, like many crime films of the time, like *The Naked City* (1948), involve races through the streets, chases up and down fire escapes, across roofs, through bolt holes. Davey, the running man, is dwarfed by the downtown canyon blocks. Perhaps there's nothing very unique about this sequence but its locations are superbly chosen, the action expressively framed and helped by Fried's strange punctuating score. One senses nonetheless that, for Kubrick, perhaps the real interest was to get Davey on to the setting for the next 'chunk' of the storytelling: the warehouse of dismembered manikins where there is a very violent confrontation between the two men. Hero and villain stuff. Whoever wins gets the girl. But, again, it's well staged and it works.

So far as I recall, Kubrick never again filmed in New York (or in any other big city location). Rather he built parts of it on the lot at Pinewood Studios for *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), but the New York in that film is like a dreamscape or a nightmare. The city has a weird, highly charged and vibrantly coloured hyper-reality and a gang roaming the streets there attacks Tom Cruise a little like the 'droogs' in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) rather than just teases him by running away with his scarf. This is not so much the indifferent universe of *Killer's Kiss* but a darker and far more sexualised city, spread with traps.

After *Killer's Kiss*, *The Killing* marked a new assertiveness, a stronger adherence to the rules of genre, in this case the heist film, but Kubrick daringly exploded the time structure to highlight the meticulousness of the planning and to keep the audience on its toes. The spatial and temporal environments of this and the next film, *Paths of Glory*, become increasingly patrolled. There are few if any deviations. The relentless forward track becomes an increasing hallmark of Kubrick's style, forcing us to go where he wants to push us. By the time of *Dr Strangelove*, Kubrick's environments seem increasingly locked tight - the War Room, the base where General Ripper goes nuts and launches the nuclear bombers. People communicate increasingly through technology rather than by physically moving from one place to another. Even in the immensity of space, in *2001*, the characters are physically confined and under the permanent surveillance of a supercomputer. Through *A Clockwork Orange* and *Barry Lyndon* (1975), the very external

environment itself seems to be increasingly constructed or 'pictured', and time itself becomes another claustrophobic element. This seems to be where Kubrick's vision took him, increasingly to airless and constricted places, man a prisoner of time, space, formidable power structures and his own evolutionary condition. By the time of *Full Metal Jacket* and, twelve years later, *Eyes Wide Shut*, the world has become a kind of inescapable hell, a place of unrelenting violence and destruction or a labyrinth of repressed and unconsummated desires.

The now faraway back in time *Killer's Kiss* hints everywhere at this same claustrophobia that increasingly dominates the later work, but the film itself, its actors, its structure, the waywardness of many of its dialogues, do not seem yet to be fully under control. It's for that reason that I personally prefer it to *The Killing*, enjoy the ride of it more. In *The Killing* Marie Windsor wisecracks with every line, playing a wholly cynical character, and her opposite, Sterling Hayden's girl, played by Coleen Gray (a pretty thankless role, to be honest), is just too dull an emblem of stability, goodness and light. By contrast, Irene Kane drags herself across the dancefloor of Pleasureland to collect the money due her without a shred of style but with a sense of burden, and shows a character who never quite knows how to play her scenes, by which I mean she never quite knows how best to manoeuvre, how to get out of a tight spot, how best in short to survive. Hackneyed it may be, but her run from the taxi to Davey at the end of the film, one of those clichéd nick-of-time jobs, works fine for me. I like the way she runs. I like the awkward way they embrace. I believe it and I find I actually care about what could happen to them beyond the film.

I'm not sure I felt quite that way about any other Kubrick characters. Kubrick's eye becomes, from *The Killing* on, more detached, more objective, shorn of illusions and sentiment, the films adding up to a panorama of the human comedy. It is a bigger, more anthropological vision, informed by genuine knowledge of science, technology, power structures and the sweep of history. It is a vision of the grandest kind, part of an ambition to understand and to know, which I believe was really his quest. But back in 1955, aged 27, when he lived in an apartment in Greenwich Village, I wonder if he too looked out onto rear windows, fed his goldfish like Davey, took the subway, joined the crowd in Times Square, watched a boxing match, ran across the city to meet his wife or a friend. I don't believe he just played chess.

© Ron Peck

**Ron Peck is a filmmaker who made *Nighthawks (1978)* and the boxing film, *Fighters (1991)*.**

## CONTEMPORARY REVIEWS

*Although both **Killer's Kiss** and **The Killing** opened in British cinemas when the films were still new, neither was given the courtesy of a press show. Indeed, **Killer's Kiss** was barely reviewed at all, except by the **Monthly Film Bulletin** (a journal of record that sought to cover every film opening in Britain), but **The Killing** escaped that fate thanks to a band of London critics who, outraged that a film of such obvious artistic merit was being treated as a disposable frippery, wrote such lengthy and enthusiastic reviews that they ultimately shamed United Artists into giving it a proper West End showcase.*

[*Killer's Kiss*] is a small-scale film of distinct quality. The writer-director-cameraman-editor, Stanley Kubrick, is evidently a promising young talent. His story is conventional – perhaps deliberately so – and the melodrama of the second half seems thin and contrived. But within this framework he has done some interesting things. Atmospherically the film is excellent: a dance-hall, a New York street, an apartment room, are established with a series of quick, telling images, rich in detail and evocative power.

(Gavin Lambert, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, March 1956)

*The Killing* announces the arrival of a new boy wonder in a business that soon separates the men from the boys. At 27, Writer-Director Stanley Kubrick, in his first full-length picture, has shown more audacity with dialogue and camera has seen since the obstreperous Orson Welles went riding out of town on an exhibitors' poll. What's more, Director Kubrick made his entire movie for a price (\$320,000) that would hardly pay for the lingerie in an Ava Gardner picture, with the result that *The Killing* seems likely to make a killing at the cash booths.

(*Time*, 4 June 1956)



Without being Press-shown for the critics, without a West End premiere, without any publicity headlines, a brilliant thriller has been buried away as a second feature on the Gaumont circuit. I am glad to be able to open up the grave and pronounce the corpse still horribly alive and kicking. Written and directed by Hollywood's newest miracle boy, 27-year-old Stanley Kubrick, *The Killing* is a fascinating exercise in criminal craftsmanship.

(Alan Brien, *Evening Standard*, 26 July 1956)

The movie bears a good many similarities to the much-praised *Rififi*, another story of a carefully planned crime, and one in which the same pattern of wholesale retribution occurs. But *The Killing* sticks to its business all the way through, while *Rififi* takes time out for some curious Spillane-type nonsense. The American crime movie, if anyone is concerned about its being taken over by the French, still seems alive and kicking.

(Hollis Alpert, *Saturday Review*, 4 August 1956)

*The Killing* was written and directed by Stanley Kubrick, a young man who is certainly going to leave his mark on the American cinema. On the evidence of this work he is already very nearly the peer of John Huston in the vital matter of blending character-study with the quick, slick development of an ingenious plot: his only limitation (in the highly cinematic field of crime thrillers) would seem to be that, at present, his emphasis is a little too obvious and, therefore, too slow. There are occasions in *The Killing* when one wishes that he would get on with his enthralling story - he waits just a little too long to stress a point of character or a dramatic moment. In other words, he has not, as yet, quite the assurance of the complete master. Yet he is capable, even now, of certain touches of ingenuity which are all his own.

(*Manchester Guardian*, 8 July 1956)

*The Killing* is only a slight, unpretentious affair but it displays its virtues like a champion midget wrestler flexing his muscles. Nothing is superfluous and everything is hard and effective. It is perhaps typical of the film industry that when they have a thriller of more than average intelligence and of more than average box-office power they should tuck it away without showing it to the Press or giving it a respectable run in the West End. There has never been a parent more eager to disown its potential geniuses.

(Milton Shulman, *Sunday Express*, 29 July 1956)

This new production reveals an exciting extension of the talents intermittently displayed in *The Killer's Kiss* [*sic*]: here, the observation is more acute, the seedy, violent world of vice more ruthlessly probed. The long central sequence depicting the raid itself is remarkably sustained and employs a complex series of short, inter-related scenes culminating in the robbery as seen from Johnny's viewpoint. Both here and in the ironic climax, the direction is firmly, almost mathematically, controlled with the tension kept at high voltage. [...] The handling of the large cast of seasoned character players, the harsh, unflattering lighting and the percussive score all reflect Kubrick's markedly personal idiosyncrasies. It is interesting to speculate on what he might achieve with a subject less fashionably violent and corrupt.

(John Gillett, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, August 1956)

*Compiled by Michael Brooke*



## ABOUT THE TRANSFERS

*The Killing* is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.66:1 with mono sound. The HD master was produced by The Criterion Collection and delivered by MGM via Hollywood Classics.

The digital transfer was created in 2k resolution on a Scanity film scanner from the 35mm original camera negative. The original mono soundtrack was remastered at 24-bit from the 35mm magnetic audio reels. All picture grading and restoration, as well as all audio work was completed by The Criterion Collection.

Transfer Supervisor: Lee Kline/Criterion  
Colourist: Sheri Eisenberg/Colorworks, Los Angeles

*Killer's Kiss* is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.37:1 with mono sound. The HD master was supplied by MGM via Hollywood Classics

## SPECIAL THANKS

Laure Audinot, Daniel Bird, Michel Ciment,  
The Criterion Collection, Barry Forshaw,  
Scott Grossman, Hollywood Classics, INA,  
Lee Kline, Peter Krämer, Kevin Lambert, Alistair Leach,  
Elsa Lonne-Smith, Michael Mackenzie, MGM, Ron Peck,  
Jon Robertson, Jennifer Rome, Melanie Tebb,  
Twentieth Century Fox, Ben Wheatley

## PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by Anthony Nield  
Executive Producer: Francesco Simeoni  
Production Assistants: Louise Buckler, Liane Cunje  
Technical Producer: James White  
QC: Anthony Nield  
Proofing: Michael Brooke, Anthony Nield  
Authoring: David Mackenzie  
Design: Jack Pemberton





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