

THE KILLING [1956]

by

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This film was the *Pulp Fiction* [1994] of its day – a breakthrough film of a young talent intent on standing all long-held film tradition on its head.

The Killing was the breakthrough film for director/screenwriter Stanley Kubrick. His first few films were obscure and low budget, but for "The Killing" he was given more to work with: a better cast and a bigger budget. This film promptly got the attention of Hollywood, not just because of its quality, but its cynical attitude, subtle black humor, tight direction, and editing. Also noted by many was the then-original technique of presenting scenes out of chronological order, but without framing them as flashbacks.

The story is a crime drama, a robbery that despite meticulous planning goes awry. In this, it is similar to *The Asphalt Jungle* [1950], which also starred Sterling Hayden. Since he is older in *The Killing*, Hayden's role has changed from enforcer to organizer.

The target is a racetrack, to be robbed during the seventh race. A strongman (Joseph Turkel as the ironically named "Tiny") and a sniper (Timothy Carey as the perhaps more subtly name "Nikki Arcane") create diversions, while corrupt track employees (Elisha Cook Jr. as "George Peatty" and Mike O'Reilly) provide Hayden entrance to where the money's kept. The problem is, Cook has confessed the plan to his adulterous, cynically ambitious wife (Marie Windsor) whose lover (Vince Edwards) is equally ruthless. (Interestingly, Turkel and Carey would show up as French soldiers in Kubrick's next project, *Paths of Glory* [1957].) I suspect that Hayden's semicomical bluster landed him the role of the general obsessed with bodily fluids in Kubrick's best film, *Dr. Strangelove* [1964]).

In the fashion typical of most 1950's crime dramas, the moral seems to be that crime doesn't pay, with the plotters all reaching their due comeuppance. However, what is new is that, in Kubrick's view of the noir world, exhaustion is worse than death.

The use of flashbacks to interrupt the linear, forward-moving narrative was a source of concern for many people – including Sterling Hayden's agent – and United Artists were slow in releasing *The Killing*. But it is this very technique that marks the

film as different from its predecessors. While the technique is common today, especially in television drama, where the Master Scene often involves cutaways to a parallel present or the past, in the 1950s it was perceived as confusing, and anti-dramatic. But it is a completely logical narrative form, just like the reconstruction of a crime by various witnesses at a trial. Maybe Kubrick was influenced by Akira Kurosawa's *Roshomon* [1950]. It is really just a variation of the frame narrative, popular in nineteenth century literature and used quite successfully in Kurt Siodmak's 1949 crime drama *Criss Cross* [1949].

Kubrick uses it to establish the principals and their common purpose, then repeats the technique during the execution of the robbery. Far from betraying the moments of dramatic significance, it in fact sets you up for unexpected drama and irony. While you anticipate the shooting of the horse, you don't anticipate the shooter's swift death. While you anticipate the intervention of Val, you don't expect the sudden deaths of the gang.

The Killing is Kubrick's first truly "professional" film, the first made with backers other than his family. It was his third feature. Before, Kubrick made two short documentaries with RKO-Pathé: *Day of the Fight* [1950] and *Flying Padre* [1951]. *The Killing* was made on a shoestring budget of only \$330,000 (a very small amount even in 1956).

Unfortunately, the film wasn't very successful when first released. That wasn't exactly a good thing, considering part of the budget included Kubrick's salary (which he sacrificed for back-end participation in the profits).

Today, *The Killing* stands as a milestone in American filmmaking, and a film that, to this day, is riffed on by contemporary filmmakers. Kevin Smith acknowledges the film in *Chasing Amy* [1997], when Ben Affleck refers to others as "patzer" – taken from the chess-playing Maurice character in *The Killing*, as he discusses a chess game with two other players in the Checker/Chess hall. "Patzer" was also riffed on by Ben Kingsley's character in *Searching for Bobby Fisher* [1993].

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