

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE KILLING (1956)

Stanley Kubrick

OVERVIEW Kubrick's third film clearly showcased the young director's talent. *The Killing* (which refers not to a murder but to a theft) is a tense and ambitious crime thriller. Noir at its best, even the shadows seem to have sharp edges. And the cutting back and forth between the characters is a technique that matches the intricate design of the robbery plan. The film was adapted from a now-forgotten novel (*Clean Break* by Lionel White), and the script was written by Jim Thompson, another crime novelist at the time. *The Killing* was the first of three Kubrick films produced by James Harris, who had to use his own money to bring it to the screen. The film did not do well at the box office but has since become recognised as an early noir classic.

SYNOPSIS An ex-con named Johnny constructs a perfect plan to steal \$2 million from a race track and then recruits a team of individuals to carry it out. The plan is intricate, like the workings of a clock, each part separate but reliant on the others. Each gang member has a domestic or personal story, too, which adds considerable drama to the plot. Everything goes according to plan, except that the wife (Sherry) of one of the men (George) has her own parallel plan of her own and enlists her lover to steal her husband's share of the cash. A shoot-out leaves everyone dead, save Johnny, who has all the money and is about to escape with his girlfriend. At the last moment, though, an animal's rash decision reveals his crime and he is arrested.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Johnny	Johnny is the leader and mastermind of the gang.
Marvin	Marvin is an old friend of Johnny's and member of the gang.
Randy	Randy is a corrupt policeman and member of the gang.
Mike	Mike is a bartender and member of the gang.
George	George is a teller at the race track and member of the gang.
Sherry	Sherry is George's wife.
Maurice	Maurice is an old friend of Johnny's who is recruited into the gang as a muscle-man.
Nikki	Nikki is a rifleman recruited into the gang.

STORY

Scene of the crime The credits roll over a panoramic view of a horse race course, followed by the horses getting into place and then the race itself. The camera shifts to the nearly empty betting hall inside, where a man walks toward the bar with a preoccupied air.

Marvin A voiceover explains that 'at exactly 3:45 on that Saturday afternoon, Marvin Onger was perhaps the only one among the hundred thousand people at the track who felt no thrill at the running...He was totally disinterested in horse racing and held a life-long contempt for gambling. Nevertheless, he had a five dollar win bet on every horse in that race. He knew that this method of betting would result in a loss, but he didn't care. What would the loss of twenty or thirty dollars mean in comparison to the vast sum of money at stake?'

Secret address Marvin orders a ginger ale and strikes up a conversation with the bartender, who appear to whisper a message. Before Marvin leaves, he leaves a piece of paper with a handwritten address: '504 W Olive Apt 4B 8pm.' The bartender carefully pockets the paper and Marvin walks across the hall to the betting window where he slips the teller a betting slip, on the back of which is written the same address. During this slow sequence, the camera cuts to the frenzied energy of the horse race itself.

Bent copper An hour earlier, the voiceover continues, in another part of the city, policeman Randy Kennan had some personal business to attend to. Kennan enters a bar and locates a man, a loan shark to whom he owes money. Kennan promises to pay back the \$3000 within two weeks when he's in line for a big payoff. 'It's a sure thing,' he says, confidently.

Johnny Next, we are introduced to Johnny, fresh out of jail but ready to embark on another heist. He tells his long-suffering girlfriend that they'll come into a lot of money. 'You know,' he says, 'the biggest problem I made before was shooting for peanuts...better be sure the rewards are worth the risk because they can put you away just as long for a ten-dollar heist as for a million-dollar heist.' His girl has implicit trust in him and believes whatever he says. He tells her to buy plane tickets and to meet him at the airport on Saturday night.

Mike Then, we watch Mike Riley, the race track bartender, come home to his ill wife, who is sleeping. He takes out the piece of paper given to him and sees the address on it.

George Finally, George, the race course teller, goes into his apartment and tries to talk to his bored and beautiful wife, Sherry. She orders him about and makes fun of him, especially his failure to provide her with the luxuries she craves. He, too, promises her riches. Although he's been sworn to secrecy, he tells her about the plan to steal the money at the race track. When George leaves for the secret meeting at 504 W Olive Apt 4B, she goes to her lover's apartment and tells him about the planned robbery and suggests that he in turn take the money off George. She also tells him the address of the secret meeting, having seen the piece of paper in his coat pocket.

The plan Johnny heads a meeting of the gang (George, Mike, Randy and Marvin) and explains that he has hired two other men: one is a sharpshooter and the other is a thug, who will start a fight in the betting hall. Johnny has not told these two hired men about the bigger plan, the heist. Then Johnny shows them a drawing of the race track, which he tells the others to update so that it's accurate down to the inch. The job, he says, will be worth 2 million, the takings from the day. He also goes through the details of what time the armoured car will arrive to pick up the money and who is in it.

Sherry snoops Hearing noise at the closed door, Johnny opens it and sees Sherry, George's wife, snooping. Johnny knocks her out and the others turn on George, knowing that he must have talked about the secret meeting. Johnny lets her go, but George gets cold feet about the heist, thinking that the business is too risky. Sherry uses her charms to persuade him to stay the course.

Two recruits Three days later, Johnny meets Maurice, an old friend at a chess club. Maurice is a muscle-man, whom Johnny recruits to play a crucial role in the plan: he will start a fight in the betting hall and keep it going in order to draw away the police and allow Johnny to enter the back room, where the money is kept. The final recruit is Nikki, an expert man with a rifle. His job is to sit in the race course car park and shoot the leading horse during the big race. Again, the idea is to create confusion.

Preparations Next, Johnny rents a motel cabin for a week, where he stores an empty guitar case. He goes to the airport and buys two tickets for a night flight. Then he goes back to the motel and tells the manager to allow a friend of his to go into his cabin that afternoon. Finally, he conceals a rifle in big box of flowers, and deposits the box in a bus station locker and drops the key in Mike's mailbox. Mike says goodbye to his ill wife, finds the key, takes the flower box from the locker, goes to the race track and locks it in his personal locker in the staff room.

Sherry and George About the same time, Sherry is solicitous toward George and talks dreamily about all the money they're going to get. When George tries to shut her up, she hints that Johnny 'took advantage' of her, which enrages George and allows her to confirm her suspicion that the robbery will take place that afternoon.

Randy Now, policeman Randy plays his part. He calls the station and reports that his car radio is not working properly, thus creating a cover story to explain why didn't get the call from the dispatchers about the robbery. Then he drives to the track, making sure he is on time, and parks his police car below a window in the back wall of the betting hall.

Diversion As the horses get set for the big race, Maurice enters the betting hall and starts a fight, drawing in the police. With everyone's attention diverted, a door marked 'no entrance' is opened from the inside by George and Johnny slips through it.

Marksman Nikki parks his convertible with a direct sightline to the track. The parking attendant is so talkative that he has to use the 'N' word to drive him away. When the horses come down the track, Nikki shoots the lead one and tries to drive off but is shot by a police officer.

Hold-up Having gained entrance to the back office, Johnny goes to Mike's locker, takes the shotgun from the flower box, puts on a mask and holds up the betting office. When all the cash has been

stuffed inside a duffel bag, Johnny throws it out a window to Randy, who is waiting in his police car. Johnny escapes.

Shoot-out Gathered in a house, George, Randy, Marvin and Mike listen to the radio report of the sensational robbery. Randy explains that he drove the bag of money to the motel cabin and left it for Johnny to pick up. Now, the four of them are waiting for Johnny to come with the cash. There's a knock on the door, but they open it to a man with a gun. He is Sherry's lover, with an accomplice. George comes out of another room and shoots the lover dead, but not before the others are also killed and George takes a hit. George makes it home, where Sherry is expecting to see her lover. He shoots her and then falls dead himself.

Escape In a mini-flashback, Johnny picks up the money bag and drives to the house, expecting to find his friends there. When he sees a wounded George stagger out and drive off in his car, Johnny flees. It had been agreed beforehand that in the case of emergency, the person with the cash would flee and that everyone would receive their share later. He buys a large suitcase, stuffs all the money inside and waits for evening.

Airport Johnny meets his girlfriend at the airport, as planned, and they check in. He is forced to relinquish his large suitcase, which he wanted to carry onto the plane himself, but it is checked through. A large crowd waits for arriving passengers on the plane Johnny and his girl are about to board. They all watch as the luggage of the departing passengers is ferried across the runway in a baggage trailer.

Arrest A dog escapes from someone in the crowd and runs onto the tarmac, forcing the driver of the trailer to swerve. Johnny's suitcase tumbles off and opens, releasing a flurry of dollar bills, all two million of it. Johnny is apprehended by the police.

THEMES

Hope The various dreams of the characters add a thick layer of drama to the plot of this tense crime thriller. Meek George, the teller in the betting hall, is besotted with his blasé wife, Sherry, and tries to convince her that he will soon be able to provide for her expensive needs. He hopes that he will finally win her love and that their marriage will be a success. Sherry, in turn, dreams of getting her lover to steal George's cut so she can leave George. Mike, the bartender, is also married and hopes to be able to afford expensive medical treatment for her. Hearing him, his wife, says, 'I know dear.' Mike hears the disbelief in her voice and says, 'I know I've made a lot of promises in the past, but this time it's not just talk. You'll have doctors who'll make you well again.' 'Of course, dear,' she says, again unconvinced but not wanting to challenge her husband. Marvin, who acts as messenger and financial backer, also has a dream, that Johnny, who he regards as his son, will have a better life with the new money. And Johnny himself promises his girlfriend, who is afraid that he'll land back in jail, that everything 'will be all right.' These various hopes, dreams and promises transform the crime story into a human story.

Greed One of those human hopes turns out to be the Achilles Heel in the perfect plan. Like the gang members, Sherry, the two-timing wife of George, wants money. But she wants the cash so that she can run off with her lover. Her greed is the selfish kind, not the better kind that we see in the others (paying for medical expenses for an ailing wife, for example). Her greed is different because she is not part of the gang, a tight-knit group held together by friendship and male rapport. Sherry throws a spanner into the works when she and her lover devise a plan to steal the stolen money.

Crime The primary organisational theme of this film is the plan to pull off a perfect crime. Johnny, the criminal mastermind, has designed a fool-proof strategy that will result in making him and several others very rich and, naturally, very happy. The film proceeds with clockwork precision, a quality enhanced by the narrator's frequent voiceovers, which tell us the day and exact time of each gang member's movements. This storytelling technique puts us, as viewers, in the position of seeing the whole picture, a privilege afforded to no one else (save Johnny). The three other core members (George, Mike and Randy) know each other but not the two extra recruits (muscle-man and rifleman). Those recruits, in turn, know only themselves. This is the genius of Johnny's plan: it is broken down into parts that together provide the answer to the puzzle. But no one knows the overall design, which, as Johnny explains, ensures everyone's safety. Johnny moves the gang members like pieces on a chess board, a metaphor suggested by his meeting with Maurice at a chess club (inspired by the fact that Kubrick met the film's producer while playing chess.) The clock is set ticking, the various parts click into place and the heist is successful, just as its mastermind predicted. However, there are also

the ambitions of the various individuals involved.

Jealousy A second major human flaw, unforeseen by Johnny, is George's jealousy. He is possessive of Sherry from the very beginning, which means that Sherry can manipulate him into divulging the critical information of the day of the theft. Later, the whole plan backfires when the insanely jealous George panics and shoots Sherry's lover. From that point on, Johnny and his plan are reeling on the road, like a car with a flat tire. If only Sherry hadn't been so greedy, if only George weren't jealous. If only.

Serendipity Johnny did not count on Sherry's greed or George's jealousy, and neither could he, or anyone else, anticipate the other thing that brings him down. At the airport, it appears that he and his girlfriend will escape by plane. He has to check in the suitcase with the money, but so what? He can pick it up at the other end. Success is in sight. Until a dog runs on to the tarmac and forces the driver of the baggage trailer to swerve. The cash-stuffed suitcase flies open and everything is, literally, exposed. It was a perfect plan, except for a woman's greed and a dog's sudden decision.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Johnny Johnny is not only good-looking, he is also the brains of the gang, the mastermind, who has planned a perfect crime. He is all business, though we also see his soft side with his friends and his girlfriend. He is tough and displays little emotion, but he is not violent or cruel. He is like a chess player, surveying the board and his opponent, planning his next move. He is in control, or at least he likes to think he is.

Dispassionate Johnny's strength is that he keeps cool, never gets angry or loses his head. That quality is clearly illustrated in a scene he has with Sherry, George's double-crossing wife. When she stupidly snoops on the gang's secret meeting, Johnny slaps her so hard she passes out. George comes up with the excuse that she found the address in his pocket and suspected that he was seeing another woman. 'She came to check up on me, that's all,' George says with a smile. But Johnny's stone-hard face doesn't change and tells the others to take him away. When she wakes up, Sherry tries to seduce Johnny with her considerable charms, but he doesn't fall for that, either. 'I can read you like a book,' he tells her. 'You're a no-good, nosey little tramp. You'd sell out your mother for a little cash... You've got a great big dollar sign there, where most women have a heart.' She goes to kiss him, but he tells her to 'beat it' and keep her mouth shut. This is classic Johnny. He sees right through her, doesn't mince words and makes fast decisions.

Intelligent Johnny is also an intelligent person. He can 'read' people, like Sherry, which enables him to choose the right person for the right task in his master plan. And the plan itself is the product of an extremely sharp mind, in its design and timing. This quality is displayed in the scene where Johnny first assembles his core team (Mike, Randy, Marvin and George) and lays out the scheme. They are sitting around a table, with whisky and cigarettes, their faces lit only by a low overhead bulb. 'You mean there're two other guys, and we don't even know who they are?' Mike asks in disbelief. 'That's right,' Johnny says, warming to his task. 'You don't know who they are, and they don't know who you are. Make sense?' The others nod. Then George wants to know how much their cut is, and Johnny says calmly, 'They're not in on the basic plan. They're getting paid to perform certain, definite duties at a certain, definite time.' This is Johnny's brilliant idea: keep the parts of the plan separate to minimise the risk.

Resigned Johnny has thought of everything. He is in control of events. He has his future in his hands. He is confident and efficient. But, beneath the surface, there is also a streak of resignation, a world-weary acceptance that things might go wrong. This aspect of his character is shown only once, and very briefly, in the very last and very brilliant shot of the film. He and his girlfriend have just watched the suitcase fall off the trailer and the cash inside flutter around on the runway. They quickly leave the terminal. They could still escape. His girlfriend waves frantically to get a taxi. Curiously, Johnny does nothing. They turn and see that the police have spotted him and are about to arrest him. 'Johnny,' she says, 'you've got to run.' But Johnny shrugs and says, 'What's the difference?' He is smart enough to know when he has lost the chess game, and smart enough to accept the consequences without a fight. In that final moment, when everything he has hoped for falls apart, we see a man who, despite his outward optimism, knew all along that he might fail.

George George stands in sharp contrast to Johnny. He is meek, henpecked, needy, jealous and capricious. In other words, he is out of control, which makes him the one who ruins Johnny's perfect plan. It is not irrelevant, also, that while Johnny is tall, George is short, even shorter than his

domineering wife.

Meek George's meekness comes out in his first scene. He arrives home from the race track to find his wife lounging around the apartment, as usual. He tries to tell her about a loving couple he saw on the way home, but she cuts him off. He asks her why she married him, and then if she loves him. All the time, she throws out cruel, mocking answers. George is hurt, but he lacks the self-respect to stand up for himself, get angry or leave. He is the classic henpecked husband, whose wounds are painful for others to see. Only at the end of the scene does he gain a little confidence, when he promises that he will soon have a lot of money, enough, he thinks, to buy her love.

Jealous Given his servile devotion to his wife, it is not surprising that George is jealous. And given his general lack of control, his jealousy is more like an insane obsession. This element of his character is revealed in a scene that comes after Sherry has been caught snooping at the gang's secret meeting. Now, George and Sherry are having breakfast and she drops a hint about Johnny having done something to her. Immediately, George's eyes widen in fear and disbelief. 'Sherry,' he says, 'what are you trying to tell me?' Knowing that she can turn him against Johnny, she implies, without any details, that Johnny had his way with her. George is speechless. He puts his hand over his face, as if to block out the hurt and the shame. That anguished expression of jealousy is important because it explains why, later on, George goes berserk when Sherry's lover confronts the gang. On impulse, George finds a gun and shoots him, triggering a shoot-out that leaves everyone dead.

Sherry Sherry is a superb femme fatale. She is sexy and selfish; deceptive and manipulative. She has a sharp tongue and a streak of cruelty. And she is smart.

Cruel Sherry is not unusual in not loving her husband, but she does take particular pleasure in hurting him. Her almost pathological cruelty is on full display in her scene, when George has come home from work. As he tries to make conversation, she responds flippantly, mocking him with her every reply. When he says he saw something 'sweet' on his way home, she says, 'A candy bar?' When he asks if she wants to hear his story, she sighs wearily and says, 'I can't wait. Go ahead and thrill me, George.' When he says that he's going out and wants to know if there's any dinner for him, she smiles and says, 'Of course, there is, darling. All sorts of things. Steak, potatoes, asparagus.' When he says he doesn't smell anything, she says, 'That figures, because you're too far away from it.' Baffled, George asks what she means. 'You don't think I'd cook for you. It's all down at the shopping center.' Bored with her own repartee, she lights a cigarette and exhales.

Manipulative Sherry can turn on the charm when she wants to, as shown in a scene after she has learned about the plan and enlisted her lover to steal George's share of the cash. Now, when George is her key to wealth, she is as sweet as a rose. 'Want some more coffee,' she purrs at the breakfast table. When he suggests that she go back to bed, she says it's her duty to get breakfast for her husband. 'Sherry, you sure you're feeling all right?' he asks. In reply, she fondles his hand and says how their marriage will improve after they get the money. 'Your problems will be my problems,' she says loftily. 'I'll stop thinking about myself so much.' Her sudden change is designed to calm George down (he's nervous about the robbery planned for that same day) so that he will not make a mistake and that she will get her hands on his share of the money. George is easily fooled, but she is a master manipulator, too.

Clever Sherry is also clever. She knows how to make George tell her what she needs to know about the plan, so that her lover can steal George's cut. The crucial piece of information she wants is when the robbery will take place. In the same scene described above, she wheedles this detail out of George at the breakfast table. 'You're worried about the robbery, aren't you?' she says affectionately. George agrees and she says casually, 'It's today, isn't it?' George refuses to confirm it, but she bats her eyelashes at him and says, 'Oh, George, you can't fool me. Today is the day we get our money, isn't it?' George again refuses to answer, which prompts Sherry to play her trump card and invent the story of Johnny sexually attacking her. Now, with George upset and off-guard, she coaxes him to confirm what she suspected: the robbery will take place that day. Sherry is almost as intelligent as Johnny.



(Johnny explains the perfect plan)



(George and Sherry)



(Johnny during the robbery)