

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **KILLER'S KISS** (1955)

Stanley Kubrick

**OVERVIEW** Kubrick's second film, as low-budget as his first, is a stylish crime-cum romance noir about a boxer in New York City, his love affair with a dance hall girl and his struggle with her gangster boss. Still only twenty-six, and surviving on welfare checks, Kubrick had to borrow money from his uncle to finance the project. The plot is original and the filmography is excellent, utilising gritty street scenes and quick cuts to underpin the overall atmosphere of fear and tension. The pace is fast, the action is violent and the storytelling is superb. Kubrick's wife, the ballerina Ruth Sobotka, was the art director and also performed a long dance sequence as Gloria's dead ballet dancer sister. If the happy ending seems out of sync with the rest of the film that is because it was a non-negotiable demand by United Artists, who bought and released the film. It was good enough to win Best Director prize at the Locarno Film Festival.

**SYNOPSIS** The story, which unfolds over two days, concerns three characters: Davey, a boxer; Gloria, a dance-hall girl; and Vincent, her boss. It is a classic plot, a love triangle, that includes violent deaths and a happy ending. Davey, a has-been boxer, rescues Gloria when she is sexually attacked by Vincent. Quickly, they recognise themselves in the other, fall in love and plan to leave their lives in New York and escape to the West coast. First, though, they have to get some money owed to them, from their bosses. Vincent will not let Gloria go because he's sexually obsessed, with her. He orders his thugs to get rid of Davey, but they kill the wrong man and kidnap Gloria. Now, Davey and Vincent engage in a last-man-standing battle. After being knocked out and chased across roof tops, Davey kills Vincent in a spectacular fashion. During the subsequent arrests and questioning by the police, Davey loses contact with Gloria. Standing in the train station, he is resigned to travelling alone, until, at the last moment, she runs up to him and they kiss.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

**Davey** Davey, the male lead, is a boxer.

**Gloria** Gloria is a dance-hall girl and also Davey's neighbour.

**Vincent** Vincent is Gloria's boss.

### STORY

*Train station* As the credits roll, we see Davey standing alone in the echoing hall of a cavernous train station in New York. He paces around, pensive, oblivious to the movement around him. He is worried, but we don't know why.

*Neighbours* Next we see Davey in his apartment mentally preparing himself for a big fight. He is nervous and edgy. Through his window, across the courtyard, in another apartment (and borrowing just a little from Hitchcock), we see a woman (Gloria) also getting ready to go out to work. She casts a glance at him. Both of them are alone and don't seem to know each other. They leave their apartments at the same time and nod to each other on the stairs, as neighbours. A man in a flashy car is waiting to pick up Gloria; he is Vincent, her boss. As Davey rides the subway to the boxing arena, he reads a letter from his uncle in Seattle.

*Boxing ring and dance hall* At the arena, Davey has his fists heavily taped in preparation for the fight. Then the camera shifts to the dance hall, with photos of buxom hostesses, like Gloria, who is preparing herself for work. Vincent watches the boxing match on television as the announcer says that this is a big fight, pitting Davey, the has-been veteran, against an unknown youngster. Vincent goes out to the hall and pushes aside Gloria's dancing partner, a man in uniform, who pushes back. Two of Vincent's thugs remove the man. Vincent escorts Gloria into his office, where they watch the fight on television.

*Boxing and love-making* During the long fight sequence on television, Davey gets knocked down a couple of times but beats the count and stands up to take yet more blows. Watching in his office, Vincent is stimulated by the gladiatorial display and moves closer to Gloria. After taking a ferocious beating, Davey is knocked out. Turned on by the action, Vincent begins to paw Gloria.

*Uncle George* Later, while sulking in his apartment, Davey looks across the courtyard and sees Gloria. Like him, she is ready for bed, in her pyjamas. His uncle George calls on the telephone, commiserates with him about his loss and offers to send him on a little holiday, implying that his career is over. Davey says he'll think about it.

*Scream in the night* Davey goes to bed and has a nightmare and hears the jeers from the audience who saw him lose the fight. He wakes to screaming and sees Gloria being accosted by Vincent in her apartment. He scrambles up fire escapes, across roof tops and into her apartment. Vincent has scuttled away, with a scowl of revenge on his face.

*Flashback* When Davey comforts Gloria and asks what happened, we see a flashback of Vincent entering her apartment, trying to make love to her. He claims that he loves her and will take her away from her crummy little flat. But she refuses him. Having heard what happened, Davey reassures Gloria that she is safe.

*Breakfast* The next morning, Davey goes to check on her and they have breakfast together. He says he's about to go to Seattle and work on his uncle's apple farm. Then he asks about her, about the framed photographs on her dresser and how she got mixed up with Vincent.

*Gloria's story* She tells him that she had an older sister, who was a beautiful ballerina and was their father's favourite. Then came tragedy. The day Gloria was born, her mother died and her father never recovered. Her sister had a marriage proposal from a rich man who demanded that she give up dancing and become a wife. She refused, but later married him because her father got ill and required expensive care. One day, their father died unexpectedly, and her grieving sister committed suicide. She left a note to Gloria, explaining that she always loved her, despite their tensions. Now, with no income or support, Gloria accepted a position as dance-hall girl.

*Lovers' plans* Drawn to each other by their mutual vulnerabilities, they kiss and (probably) make love that day. She says she wants to go with him to Seattle and they make train reservations. Gloria tells the dance hall that she is coming by that evening to pick up her last week's salary. Davey arranges to meet his manager to get cash from him.

*Wrong man murdered* Together, they go to the dance hall. As Davey waits on the pavement, she goes in and meets Vincent, who is angry and refuses to give her the money. She leaves and goes outside, where Davey's manager is waiting to meet Davey, as arranged. But Davey isn't there because he ran after someone who stole his scarf. Vincent sends his thugs to tell Gloria to come back and collect her money. After she goes inside, the thugs mistake Davey's manager for Davey and kill him in an alley.

*Gloria kidnapped* When Gloria comes out with her money, she meets Davey and they go to their respective apartments to pack. Davey takes his suitcases to Gloria's apartment, which is strangely empty, and sees police enter his apartment. He overhears them explain that his manager was found 'with his head bashed in.' He figures out that Gloria's boss must be responsible and goes back to the dance hall just in time to see Vincent drive off.

*Confrontation* Davey follows in a taxi and confronts him with a gun. Vincent explains that Gloria is being held in a loft and drives him there. Davey surprises the thugs guarding Gloria, takes their guns and lines them up against a wall while he attempts to untie Gloria. But he cannot untie her with one hand and tells one of the thugs to do it. In the confusion, they jump him and knock him out. Frightened, Vincent will kill her, Gloria tries to convince him that she loves him. But he shakes her off and says he's not a sucker.

*Escape and chase* Davey regains consciousness and jumps through a window, landing on the street outside. Vincent and one of the thugs chase him down the street. Scrambling up and down fire escapes and fleeing across roof tops with a foggy bridge in the background, Davey hides in a warehouse with hundreds of mannequins.

*Battle of mannequins* Vincent enters and knocks out the warehouse manager, losing his gun in the process. Vincent and Davey stalk each other among the naked female figures. Vincent grabs an axe from the wall, and Davey defends himself by hurling parts of the mannequins at him. They end up jousting, Vincent with the axe and Davey with a long metal pole, like medieval knights. Finally, Davey impales Vincent.

*Train station* Cut back to the opening scene, where an anxious Davey paces around the train

station. He tells us through a voiceover that his killing of Vincent was chalked off as self-defence and the two thugs were charged with the manager's murder. Gloria and Davey were questioned separately at the police station and let go at separate times.

*Reunion* He hasn't seen Gloria since then and he is resigned to travelling to Seattle alone. He shrugs, throws away his cigarette and goes through the turnstile to the platform. At the last moment, Gloria appears and they kiss.

## THEMES

*Loneliness* A fundamental theme in this film is isolation, the loneliness and even alienation, of its two main characters. The story begins with an extended shot of a man standing alone in a train station (the now-demolished Penn Station in NYC). All around him, people are moving, but he is alone, worried that his girl has betrayed him and won't show up. We don't fully appreciate his agony until we see the rest of the film, which is essentially flashback, but we sense his intense loneliness. This is Davey, a man who showed promise but never achieved anything, a frustrated failure. After he loses his big fight, he is in his apartment, talking on the phone, again alone. Then he sees Gloria, who, like him, is alone and lonely. She, again like Davey in the boxing ring, has an audience at the dance hall. Later, though, we see her after work, crossing the streets, going home by herself. Then we hear her backstory: she lost her mother when she was born; her father died soon after and her sister committed suicide. She is like an abandoned child. The film tells the story of how these two loners fall in love, and it underscores that theme with its cinematography. The characters are often shown in wide-angle shots, with buildings or bridges looming over them. They run into alleys or dead-ends. They are not only lonely, they are also insignificant and trapped.

*Violence* A second major theme, and one that Kubrick will perfect in his later films, is the twinning of violence and sex. This duality is brilliantly dramatised in the opening sequence, alternating shots of the boxing with those of dancing. Both the violent boxer (Davey) and the attractive dancing girl (Gloria) prepare themselves physically and put on a uniform. The display of male violence on TV excites Vincent sexually and prompts him to seek out Gloria on the dance floor, which nearly erupts into violence when Vincent cuts in on her dancing partner. As Vincent continues to watch the boxing match, he is further stimulated and makes sexual advances toward Gloria. In the ring as well as in the office, two bodies are in physical contact, one attacking the other. The close relation between violence and sex is also illustrated in perhaps the most famous scene of the film, when Vincent and Davey fight in a warehouse of female mannequins. They are motivated by jealousy, competing for Gloria, and they use barbaric weapons, such as an axe and long pike. But then they begin to hurl parts of the mannequins at each other, legs, arms and whole bodies. As many critics have pointed out, this is a sensational display of misogyny, men tearing apart female bodies in a primitive clash of male egos. All the key locations, the boxing arena, the dance hall, the office and the warehouse, are spaces where violence and sex are intertwined.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

*Davey* Davey is a 'gentle giant.' He is a life-long boxer, but he has a sweet smile and feeds his fish before going out to smash someone's face in the boxing ring. He is also washed up, a boxer with a long career of promise without success. He shows his kindness when he rescues Gloria, and he displays his sensitivity when he listens to her life-story.

*Kind* Davey does not hesitate when he hears his neighbour scream. He throws on some clothes and scrambles across the roof top to get into her apartment. Vincent has already fled, and he is able to comfort Gloria, sitting by her bedside like a nurse. 'Don't worry,' he says. 'He won't come back. Just close your eyes. I'll sit with you for a while.' His immediate instinct is to come to the aid of his neighbour and protect her. Later, as she sleeps, he looks around her room, touches her nylons and smells her perfume. The rugged boxer appreciates feminine softness.

*Tough* At the same time, Davey is tough, even brutal. He is a boxer, after all. We see him take punch after punch in the ring, until he is knocked out. That much is expected, but a more revealing sequence comes at the end, when he confronts Vincent and his thugs. When he is knocked out, this time by the thugs, he stages a sensational escape, jumping through a window and running away, pursued by his enemies. The chase scene culminates in the mannequin scene, where Davey does battle with Vincent. This primal male struggle only comes to an end when Davey impales Vincent with a long, pointed metal pole. It is so gruesome that it is only partially shown on camera.

**Moody** With his violent yet tender behaviour, it is not surprising that Davey's inner world is disturbed. His brooding presence is clearly illustrated in the opening shot, and again at the end, when he paces around the train station. His thoughts are revealed in a voiceover: 'I guess the whole thing was pretty silly. Know a girl for two days, fall in love. So I cashed my check, sent flowers to Albert's [his manager's] widow and here I am.' He feels that, yet again, he has been a failure, not just in the ring, but also in love. Earlier, in the loft, he overheard Gloria confess (in an attempt to deceive Vincent) that she didn't really love him. How could she? She only met him two days ago? No, she used him, flirted and fled. He's alone again, on his way to Seattle.

**Gloria** Gloria is young, attractive and innocent. True to her name, she shines brightly (blonds, it seems, had a special photogenic allure in black and white films). But she is lonely, having lost her parents and her older sister. Working in a dance hall is beneath her (she calls it a 'depraved place'). She is vulnerable to predators like Vincent, whom she can't fully separate herself from because she needs the money. But she is also loyal in her attachment to Davey.

**Vulnerable** We gain insight into Gloria's character in the scene at the breakfast table, when she tells Davey about her life. 'I've never told anyone before,' she says and then tells a great deal. She explains that her older sister was the favourite, that her mother died when she (Gloria) was born, that her father died of disease and that her sister committed suicide. She doesn't cry as she speaks, but we can hear the desperation in her voice. She is too proud to ask for help, but Davey understands that she, just like he, is essentially on her own. She works in a place she hates, where she has to endure the sexual advances of her boss, only because she needs the money. Now, we see the significance of the doll that hangs from her bedstead. She is as vulnerable as a little girl.

**Self-respect** Although she has to put up with Vincent's pawing, she draws the line at kissing to maintain her self-respect. This quality is illustrated in the scene when Vincent comes to her apartment and apologises for him forcing her to kiss him in the office earlier that night. He then tries to take advantage of her, dressed in night clothes, but she is adamant that she wants no part of it. 'Go away,' she says firmly. 'Get out.' He pleads with her, but she says she doesn't care and then delivers the killer line. 'Can't you get it,' she says. 'You're just an old man who smells bad.' Still, he won't relent, which forces her into the scream that wakes Davey. Throughout this scene, Gloria remains in control. Despite her vulnerability, she has enough self-respect to be strong.

**Cagey** Gloria also shows us that she is clever when necessary, as illustrated in the scene in the loft. Davey, who has come to rescue her, lies unconscious on the floor. With her last hope gone, she is afraid that Vincent will kill her. He's said it before, as a threat, and now he has a reason: she knows that he is responsible for the murder of Davey's manager. Cornered, she turns on the sex appeal, kissing Vincent and saying, 'Listen, Vinny. Don't kill me. I'll do anything you say. Anything.' 'You love him, don't you?' Vincent says, tilting his head toward Davey lying on the floor. 'No, I don't think so. I've only known him two days.' When the chips are down, Gloria is not above using her only weapon to save her skin. It doesn't work, but she shows us that she is cagey.

**Vincent** Vincent is a narcissistic predator, a small-time gangster and a self-pitying Romeo. He wears shiny suits, drives flashy cars and chomps on long cigars as he runs his little empire, a dance hall, where young women are paid to partner lonely men. He desires Gloria, who keeps him at arms length, and he becomes jealous when she rejects him for Davey. Then all his animalistic instincts drive him to his own death.

**Jealous** Vincent's weak ego is demonstrated in an early sequence. He sees Gloria nod to her neighbour, Davey, who Vincent knows is a failed boxer. When Vincent watches the tv coverage of Davey's fight, he appears to remember her and goes out to the dance hall to find Gloria. She is dancing with a soldier. Vincent pushes the man away and claims Gloria. Here, we understand that Vincent cannot tolerate another person having what he wants. He pays Gloria to dance with other men, but when he senses that she might desire another man (Davey), he rushes out and prevents her from dancing with a stranger. He is jealous because he has no confidence in his own abilities to attract a woman, no self-respect. He may be a successful businessman, but, like Davey, he knows that he is a failure in life.

**Self-pitying** One consequence of that lack of self-respect is self-pity. This is the most important element in Vincent's character, which propels him to grovel in front of Gloria in a significant scene. After he has pawed her in his office, he shows up at her apartment when she is going to bed. Now, the rich and powerful man asks to be forgiven. When Gloria refuses to accept his apology, he

becomes pathetic. 'Please, Gloria. Please,' he pleads with her. 'All my life I've always spoiled the things that meant the most to me...You don't have to forgive me, just tolerate me.' Poor Vincent! He is just another sad case, a man who looks powerful on the outside but is hollow inside. Gloria, wisely, does not fall for her self-pity and throws him out with a wild scream.

*Vindictive* 'Hell hath no fury like a woman spurned,' they say. And the same is true of a man, especially a jealous, self-pitying narcissist like Vincent. His fury is expressed in the scene in the loft, when (with Davey unconscious on the floor) Gloria tries to save her life by offering herself to Vincent. Now, it is she who is begging him not to kill her. 'You said you were mad about me,' she reminds him. But he sneers at her and repeats her words back to her: 'And I'm an old man who smells bad, remember?' She claims she didn't mean that and kisses him, but Vincent is too aggrieved to fall for her tricks. 'You thought you were too good for me,' he says. His pride has been deeply wounded, his ego has been damaged and he wants revenge.

*Ruthless* Jealous, egotistical and self-pitying, Vincent can also be ruthless when necessary, especially when attempting to defend his masculine honour. This quality is dramatised in two scenes. First, when he sends his thugs down to the street to take care of Davey, his rival for Gloria. The thugs murder the wrong man, and Vincent claims he didn't order a killing, but he did sanction the violence. The same crazed mixture of male ego and sexual desire drives him at the very end, when he nearly kills Davey with an axe. He doesn't succeed, but not for want of trying. Vincent will stop at nothing to achieve his ends. He is ruthless.



(Davey and Gloria)



(Mean streets of Brooklyn)



(Gloria and Vincent)