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Review of The Killing

Michael Adams
City University of New York

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The Killing (Blu-ray)

(Criterion, 8.16.2011)

Before he became a genius Stanley Kubrick made three low-budget films, of which *The Killing* is easily the best: tightly constructed, with fully developed characters, quotable dialogue, and beautiful black-and-white cinematography (by Lucien Ballard). *The Killing*, a racetrack heist released in 1956, is faster-paced than Kubrick's mature style, with much more camera movement. In one of the even better than usual Criterion extras, producer James B. Harris says that Kubrick was consciously emulating Max Ophuls' fluid movements. According to Harris he cast friend Vince Edwards, while Kubrick, with an encyclopedic knowledge of character actors, did the rest of the casting, insisting upon leading man Sterling Hayden over the objections of United Artists. The director also chose Jim Thompson as his co-writer, with the crime novelist providing a fractured-time structure much like that of his novels and greatly expanding the roles played by Elisha Cook and Marie Windsor, who give perhaps their strongest performances ever. The brutal, pathetic scenes between this sluttish wife and weak husband provide many of the film's noir qualities. Hayden's cool robber tells Windsor's shrew, "You've got a great big dollar sign where most women have a heart." Ballard's lighting, often getting startling effects from lamps and bare bulbs, helps make *The Killing* one of the best examples of fifties noir, though Harris says the cinematographer hated the director. Many of the compositions resemble the photographs of Kubrick, a former news photographer, and have a beautiful clarity in this Blu-ray transfer. Those who claim Kubrick had no sense of humor should note the freedom he gives Timothy Carey to portray his hit man as a hipster, the parrot who seems to comment on the final confrontation between Cook and Windsor, and the presence of a race horse named Stanley K. The extras include Kubrick's previous film, *Killer's Kiss*, notably inferior to *The Killing* in terms of story, dialogue, and cast, but still interesting as a warm-up and for its use of Manhattan settings, especially the original Penn Station. Critic Geoffrey O'Brien calls it "a young man's rough sketch." Thompson biographer Robert Polito discusses the novelist's four-year working relationship with Kubrick, evaluates the film adaptations of Thompson's novels, and sees similarities between his *The Killer Inside Me* and Kubrick's [Lolita](#). The best of the extras are two 1984 French television interviews with Hayden, colorful, profane, often disgusted with himself. Hayden talks about his admiration for John Huston, in whose *The Asphalt Jungle* he stars and Joan Crawford's temperament during *Johnny Guitar*. Of *The Killing* Hayden "loved the way the camera was always moving." He found Kubrick cold then but relates a delightful anecdote about how the director helped him at a crucial moment during *Dr. Strangelove*. A final extra is a booklet with an essay by Haden Guest analyzing the style of *The Killing* and an excerpt from a 1992 interview with Windsor.—Michael Adams