# Part Two

# EARLY KUBRICK

## I. No Other Country but the Mind

*Fear and Desire*, Kubrick's first feature, is seldom exhibited and therefore merits a brief plot summary for those who haven't seen it. As the film opens, four soldiers have crashed their plane behind enemy lines in an unnamed, abstract war. The downed men scout their immediate terrain and then construct a raft in order to float down a river and rejoin their unit. Their plan is delayed when an enemy reconnaissance plane flies overhead and nearly spots them. Through binoculars, they see a landing strip, plus an enemy command post housing a general and his military guard. They move to the cover of a forest and as night falls they come across another house where a couple of enemy soldiers are eating a meal. Storming the house, they kill the inhabitants, devour the leftover food and seize whatever weapons they can find. The next morning they return to the river, where three lovely young women are fishing with nets; when one of the women approaches, they take her prisoner, bind her to a tree and leave the youngest of their group to stand guard while the others camouflage the raft. But the young soldier is almost cracking under the strain of the mission and when left alone he goes berserk. Babbling incoherently, he embraces the girl and unties her. When she tries to escape, he shoots her and runs off into the forest.

At this point, the most aggressive of the remaining soldiers convinces the other two that their only meaningful action would be to attack the enemy outpost and kill its commanding general. He sets up a diversion: under cover of night, he floats down the river on the raft, firing at the general's guards. His two cohorts move quietly to the unguarded building and shoot the general and his aide; but in doing so, they seem to be killing older versions of themselves. (The general and his aide are played by the same actors who attack

them.) Running to the nearby field, they board the enemy aircraft and fly back to their unit. Meanwhile, the soldier on the raft, mortally wounded, floats further down river and comes upon the insane young soldier who had run away. Back at home base, the two soldiers who escaped confer with their commanding officer and then go down to the river and wait, hoping that their comrade on the raft will make it through. Out of a mist the raft emerges, carrying the dead comrade and the young soldier, who is raving mad.

Baldly summarised, *Fear and Desire* might sound like a reasonably typical, if unusually grim, war movie. Despite its familiar generic elements, however, the film is explicitly designed as an allegory and bears the marks of 'artistic-ness' at every turn. On the literary level, it employs stream-of-consciousness passages, philosophical soliloquies and allusions to Mark Twain, John Donne, William Shakespeare and T. S. Eliot. (The closing shot of the two men on the raft alludes to Gericault's nineteenth-century painting, *The Raft of the Medusa*.) The photography, which involves striking *plein air* effects of mist, fog and dappled light, reminded contemporary critics of Kurosawa's recent art-house hit, *Rashomon* (1950). The editing, especially in scenes of grotesque violence, is strongly reminiscent of Eisenstein and the Soviet school. The story is filled with symbols (including a dog named 'Proteus'), and everything comes to an end in a mood of despair and absurdity. Along the way, the film also features the perversely sexy scene of the young woman being strapped to



a tree and lustfully embraced by the crazed soldier, thus offering titillating material for art-theatre advertisements. (Predictably, ads for the film emphasised this scene.)

This is not to say that *Fear and Desire* is a cynical pastiche. On the contrary, it's a personal work of high, if failed, artistic ambition. Financed with money Kubrick had borrowed from his father and a rich uncle, it involved only a small 'family' of collaborators. The script, originally weighing about three pounds and entitled *The Trap*, was written under Kubrick's supervision by Howard O. Sackler, who would later win the Pulitzer Prize for *The Great White Hope* on Broadway. The modernistic music was composed by Gerald Fried, who had first worked with Kubrick on *Day of the Fight*. Kubrick's then wife, Toba Metz, functioned as 'dialogue director' and production assistant, and Bob Dierks, one of Kubrick's studio assistants at *Look* magazine, was credited as 'production manager'. Most of the other work fell to Kubrick himself, who not only produced, directed, photographed and edited the film, but also chauffeured the cast and crew to locations in California's San Gabriel Mountains.

*Fear and Desire* was shot in 35mm black and white with a rented Mitchell camera (an instrument Kubrick had never used) equipped with a standard series of prime lenses: 25mm, 50mm, 75mm and 100mm. There are no complicated camera movements in the film, probably because Kubrick had no tracks or other equipment to facilitate movement. There is also no direct sound, in part because Kubrick was unfamiliar with sound-recording technology and in part because his earlier work as a director of documentaries had involved photographing everything silently and then adding narration, music and sound effects. He seems to have believed that the production would move more swiftly and economically and that he could be freer to compose dynamic compositions in available light if the soundtrack were completely post-synchronised. This proved a major error, affecting the artistic quality of the film, much of which sounds tinny, and greatly increasing its total cost.

Sometime in the 1960s, Kubrick removed the film from circulation. The only print known to have survived, located at George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, was shown without Kubrick's co-operation in 1991 at the Telluride Film Festival in Colorado and then again in 1994 at the Film Forum in New York, on both occasions to mixed responses. At the time of the latter showing, Kubrick issued a statement to the New York newspapers saying that *Fear and Desire* was nothing more than a 'bumbling, amateur film exercise ... a completely inept oddity, boring and pretentious'.[1] A quite different opinion has recently been offered by Paolo Cherchi Usai, the chief curator at Eastman House, who, in the course of a detailed critical analysis, argues that Kubrick tried to suppress his first picture because it 'proclaims with unadulterated immediacy the major creative strategies of the director's oeuvre that would follow in coming years'.[2] Undoubtedly, *Fear and Desire* has several things in common with other Kubrick films, but Usai's argument is unconvincing. Had the picture been an artistic success, there would have been no reason for Kubrick to want it forgotten, however much it revealed his future methods or interests. Few people who have been able to see the film would praise it as anything more than the work of an interesting director who suffered from insufficient resources and perhaps a certain artistic hubris. If it had no

credits, we might never connect it with Kubrick. Because we know who directed it, however, we tend to search out the themes, images and 'expressive' elements that signal the auteur and portend his later work.

The most obvious connection between *Fear and Desire* and Kubrick's later pictures is that he often made war movies, guiding his actors through grisly battle scenes like a field general. He is usually described as an 'anti-war' director, but in certain respects that description is inadequate. Few if any directors – even John Wayne – are pro-war in the sense that they believe military combat is a virtue in itself; on the other hand, a great many directors are patriotic or propagandistic, justifying war in the name of democracy, socialism, humanitarianism, nationalism, religion or some other non-military value. What makes Kubrick distinctive is his refusal to provide a rationale for war or any explanation for military conflict beyond self-destructive human drives. In every film he made about the subject, the 'enemy' is either unseen or virtually indistinguishable from the protagonists and the violence is convulsive and arbitrary. (*Spartacus* is an exception to the rule and a film Kubrick disliked precisely because of its idealism and sentimentality.) At the same time, probably for much the same reason that he was fascinated with prize-fighting, Kubrick seems attracted to the stark dramatic conflicts and the *imagery* of war. A skilled director of scenes of violence, he often makes us see the physical grace and potentially beautiful geometry of military tactics alongside their chaos, brutality and absurdity.

*Fear and Desire* treats these interests in a more overtly allegorical and generalising fashion than Kubrick's later work, although it might be noted that several of his other pictures – especially *Spartacus*, *2001* and *A Clockwork Orange* – can be read as allegories. Notice as well that many generic war movies have something allegorical about them: put two men in a fox-hole or pose them against a barren, bombed-out landscape and, simply by virtue of emptying out the *mise en scène*, you have the makings of *Waiting for Godot* or some kind of symbolic commentary on the human condition. Likewise, almost any war movie that focuses on small groups in combat – John Ford's *The Lost Patrol* (1934), Denis Sanders's *War Hunt* (1962) and Kubrick's own *Full Metal Jacket* – tends to become a kind of allegory or parable. In certain Hollywood films about World War II, the symbolism is quite conscious; Howard Hawks's *Air Force* (1943), for example, gives us a bomber crew representing a cross-section of America and transforms a single aircraft into an emblem of the nation (a technique Kubrick would later satirise in *Dr. Strangelove*).

And yet *Air Force* and the other movies I've mentioned also elicit what Erich Auerbach calls a 'realist' mode of interpretation – that is, they deal with recognisable historical situations, even though most of their characters are fictional and have symbolic functions.[3] By contrast, *Fear and Desire* is manifestly ahistorical and anti-realist. The four soldiers are costumed somewhat oddly, not quite like the American military, and the aircraft that flies over their heads in an early scene is a commercial Piper Cub of the sort that young Kubrick himself piloted. At the very beginning, as the camera pans slowly across an empty landscape, an off-screen narrator tells us that we are supposed to read the story as pure allegory:



> There is war in this forest – not a war that has been fought, nor one that will be, but any war. And the enemies that struggle here do not exist unless we call them into being. For all of them, and all that happens now, is outside history. Only the unchanging shapes of fear and doubt and death are from our world. These soldiers that you see keep our language and our time, but have no other country but the mind.

The lost patrol in *Fear and Desire*, like those in other war movies, is composed of men with sharply different personalities and social backgrounds; but unlike the quasi-allegorical figures in the typical combat picture, none of Kubrick's soldiers is especially likeable and the group never bonds into a single fighting unit. One of the most insistent motifs in the film is that, contra John Donne, each man is an island. At best, their various social classes, mental dispositions and ethnic or regional backgrounds tend to merge into a pessimistic and sometimes pretentiously philosophical chorus. Lieutenant Corby (Kenneth Harp) is a WASP intellectual who tries to philosophise about war and ultimately finds it meaningless: 'it's all a trick we perform because we'd rather not die immediately'. Sergeant 'Mac' (Frank Silvera) is a dark-skinned proletarian who feels bitter resentment towards officers and raging frustration about his empty life: 'I'm thirty-four years old and I've never done anything important – when this is over I'll fix radios and washing machines.' Private Fletcher (Steve Coit) is an easygoing, rather feckless southerner who becomes morbid and confused: 'I don't want what I used to want. But somehow there's nothing else to want . . . I'm all mixed up.' Private Sidney (Paul Mazursky) is a sensitive young New Yorker who lives in constant fear: 'Nobody's safe here! Are they watching me? . . . Don't die here!'

Norman Kagan has remarked that 'In a way, the four soldiers are like the exploded fragments of a personality.'[4] *Fear and Desire* could, in fact, be viewed as an allegory of the psyche – a form that dates at least as far back as the *Psychomachia* of Prudentius in the Middle Ages. But Kubrick has no cosmology and no coherent map of the mind (beyond a generalised notion of the intellect and the instincts) to support either a metaphysical or a psychological allegory. Instead, he offers a secularised, existential view of society, which he depicts in a perpetual state of combat – 'a blazing island with gunfire around it', as one of the characters says. The result is a country of the mind resembling the bleak, cruel world of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, minus Hobbes's conservative belief in the civilising authority of religion and royalty. Gilles Deleuze has made the intriguing observation that, in Kubrick's major films, 'the world itself is a brain, there is an identity of brain and world'.[5] That idea finds literal expression in *Fear and Desire* but here, as in many of the later films, the 'brain' is in conflict with itself; Reason is unable to prevent Eros, Thanatos, or whatever uncontrolled, instinctive urges one might postulate from producing havoc or dissolution. The sense of crisis is even more acute at the level of phenomenology. In a particularly interesting discussion of the ontological status of the brain-as-world, Jason Sperb reminds us that later Kubrick pictures such as *The Shining* 'increasingly reveal the country of the mind as an arbitrary and often illusory . . . façade that masks the ambiguity of the story world beyond'.[6]

Kubrick himself, in a letter to Joseph Burstyn, described the film as both 'allegorical' and 'poetic', a drama of '"man" lost in a hostile world – deprived of material and spiritual foundations .... imperiled by an unseen but deadly enemy who, upon scrutiny, seems to be almost shaped from the same mould'.[7] Thus, when the four soldiers attack the house in the woods, the men they kill are shown chiefly as silhouettes, isolated body parts or corpses, and are barely distinguishable from their attackers. Inside the enemy command post, the aging general and his aide wear Germanic uniforms and drink heavily, but otherwise they are doubles for Lieutenant Corby and Private Fletcher. (Like Corby, the general broods pessimistically about the war: 'I'm trapped. What is a prison for me? I make a grave for others.' Like Fletcher, the aide is smiling, compliant and untalkative.) When Corby administers a *coup de grâce* to the dying general, who is pleading for mercy, Corby realises that he is looking into his own face. The only true 'other' in the film is the female captive (nicely played by Virginia Leith, a Kubrick 'discovery' who went on to have a brief Hollywood career), a mute objectification of the men's fear and desire, who dies a senseless death. The quotation marks that Kubrick placed around '"man"' in his letter to Burstyn seem to have been knowingly ironic, emphasising his intention to allegorise a specifically masculine psychology rather than a general human condition.

All this might have been powerfully disturbing, but parts of the film are weakly executed. Despite the dramatic ironies of the plot and Lieutenant Corby's occasional attempts at sardonic wit, *Fear and Desire* is Kubrick's most humourless picture. The pacing of the climactic episodes is lugubrious and the staging of the attack on the enemy command post is amateurish, lacking the dynamism Kubrick usually brought to such material. The acting doesn't help. Kenneth Harp's performance as Corby is stilted and pompous, rather like a bad television announcer, and Paul Mazursky (later to become an important writer and director) portrays Sidney with an unmodulated, annoying hysteria. The best actor of the group is Frank Silvera, a Jamaican who had attended Northwestern University Law School and then turned to theatre. The only true professional in the cast, Silvera played the rebel slave Nat Turner on the New York stage and went on to act in various ethnic roles in Hollywood – a Mexican in Elia Kazan's *Viva Zapata!* (1952) and an Italian in Roger Corman's *The St. Valentine's Day Massacre* (1967). He brings an authentic feeling of anger and self-loathing to the character of Mac, perhaps aided by the fact that this movie was a step down in his career.

But *Fear and Desire* also exhibits a good deal of cinematic talent. The daylight photography creates subtle variations of tone and mood in difficult outdoor locations, and Kubrick shows flair in his use of optical wipes, radical distortions of space and quick shifts between overt speech and inner monologue. Although he is associated with long takes and a moving camera, his style in this film is heavily dependent upon quick cutting between bold graphic compositions and is a forceful reminder that he had made a careful study of Pudovkin. He regularly suspends the rules of continuity, ignoring the 180-degree rule and using establishing shots sparingly; and, because he likes to jump from telephoto to



wide-angle views, his cutting in the dialogue scenes has an almost cubist effect. His most powerful display of montage is the first assault on the two enemy soldiers in an isolated house, which is depicted in twenty-one brief shots with clever Foley effects and no background music. As in Soviet films, the sequence is composed of a kind of visual metaphor and metonymy: two dying men's heads lolling back at different angles; a table knife lying in a pool of dripping stew; a hand flailing at a bowl of food and squeezing it between the fingers; a hand relaxing and dropping a piece of soggy bread; a pair of bizarrely twisted legs seized by their pants and dragged off screen. At the end of the sequence, we see a dead hand in a bowl of stew and hear a voice saying, 'Sidney, better get something to eat.'

Another of the film's effective montages is the sex scene between Sidney and the female captive, which has a kinky, sadomasochistic quality typical of Kubrick. In this case, a young woman is wearing a light summer dress and is bound to a tree with a military belt. She never speaks, but her eyes show panic as she watches Sidney lose control. We see a close-up of his knee pressing between her legs. Her face registers fear, but then, as she realises that he might be persuaded to untie the belt, she smiles. When Sidney cups water in his hands and brings it to her, she smiles again, and in an extreme close-up she laps at the water and licks his palms. He runs his hands over her face and she throws her head back so that he can kiss her throat and shoulder. As he crouches to embrace her, she seems to dominate. Reaching around her body and groping at the belt, he mutters eagerly, 'You'll put your arms around me!' When she breaks free and runs, Sidney pleads for her to stop and then shoots her. She falls without a sound, and Kubrick cuts to two deliberately mismatched close-ups of her motionless face, showing it first as if she were lying on her stomach and then as if she were lying on her back.

Considered apart from the legacy of Kubrick's other films, *Fear and Desire* may seem insignificant – especially when we consider that it was released in the same year as Fritz Lang's *The Big Heat*, Alfred Hitchcock's *I Confess*, Howard Hawks's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Vincente Minnelli's *The Bad and the Beautiful*, Samuel Fuller's *Pickup on South Street*, Anthony Mann's *The Naked Spur* and George Sidney's *Kiss Me Kate*. (Among the non-Hollywood productions of 1953 were Herbert Biberman's *Salt of the Earth*, Federico Fellini's *I Vitelloni*, Kenji Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu*, Carol Reed's *The Man Between* and Roberto Rossellini's *Voyage in Italy*.) The biggest award-winning and box-office success of the year was another war movie: Fred Zinneman's *From Here to Eternity*. In this environment, Kubrick's film was anomalous and even a bit strange – not a Hollywood production, not a work of political agitation and not a foreign art film. Despite its unusual aspects and its claim of being 'outside history', however, *Fear and Desire* belongs to its own time in more ways than one. It can be viewed as what Thomas Allen Nelson calls 'a youthful grab-bag of 1950s bohemian negativism and existential self-congratulation' (p. 22), and, as we've seen, it received commercial exhibition by virtue of its suitability to the art cinema of the period. Notice also that it was made during the last months of the Korean War, a conflict that marked the end of the qualified optimism of the Roosevelt era. A blacklist was on its way, a conservative government had

been elected and there were few idealistic causes in which intellectuals wanted to believe. *Fear and Desire*'s apparent retreat from history marks it as an historical artefact – a 'realist' allegory after all. The battle-weary faces of Kubrick's four soldiers were much closer in appearance to newsreel images of GIs in Korea than to the characters in almost any war movies Hollywood had produced during the 1950s. (Exceptions to the rule are Samuel Fuller's *The Steel Helmet* [1951] and *Fixed Bayonets* [1951] and Anthony Mann's *Men in War* [1957].) Moreover, unlike *From Here to Eternity* and every other Hollywood attempt to criticise the military, *Fear and Desire* offered no comforting suggestion that the basic institution was sound and healthy; it depicted warfare as inherently brutal and meaningless. In the future Kubrick would deal more directly with actual wars but in this instance he was responding, in at least some measure, to real conditions with a serious and not merely sophomoric pessimism.

## II. Dream City

Soon after *Fear and Desire* opened in New York, Kubrick set out to make another low-budget feature under the auspices of his own company, which he dubbed 'Minotaur Productions'. In July 1953, via legal representatives, he submitted a script entitled *Along Came a Spider* to Joseph Breen of the Production Code Administration, who rejected the project on the grounds that it contained 'scenes of nudity and suggested nudity, excessive brutality, attempted rape, illicit sex . . . treated with no voice of morality or compensating moral values'.[8] Kubrick then transformed the idea into a somewhat less sensational film, initially entitled *Kiss Me, Kill Me.* Once again, the script was written by Howard O. Sackler (without credit, using Kubrick's story-line), the music was composed by Gerald Fried and the cast was made up of Frank Silvera and a small group of inexperienced players. Kubrick was director, photographer and editor. At first he planned to shoot the picture with direct sound, but when the microphone boom interfered with his careful lighting of interiors, he abandoned the idea and once again constructed a completely post-synchronised soundtrack.

This time the project was a film noir – the sort of picture that was suited to mainstream entertainment but at the same time amenable to Kubrick's artistic touches. Eventually entitled *Killer's Kiss*, it concerns an erotic triangle between a failed New York prize-fighter named Davy Gordon (Jamie Smith), a self-destructive taxi-dancer named Gloria Price (Irene Kane) and a neurotic gangster named Vince Rapallo (Silvera). Shortly after being knocked out in the ring and deciding to give up his career in boxing, Davy sees Vince manhandling Gloria; he comes to her rescue, falls in love and persuades her to go with him to Seattle, where he plans to work on a horse ranch owned by his uncle. The jealous Vince, who is Gloria's employer in the Pleasure Land dance hall, intervenes and tries unsuccessfully to have Davy killed. In an eerie sequence staged in a loft filled with department-store mannequins, Davy has a fight with Vince and kills him. All this is narrated in flashback by Davy, who is waiting in Pennsylvania Station for the train to Seattle, hoping that Gloria will join him. At the last moment, she appears and they embrace passionately.



During the production, Kubrick was able to procure a photo spread about the making of the film in *Life* magazine, shot by his friend Alexander Singer. Censors required the deletion of two scenes, one showing Davy pushing Gloria down on her bed after he kisses her and the other showing an obviously homosexual man searching for an apartment in Davy's building; the PCA report also insisted that the climactic battle between the hero and the villain not go too far in 'exploitation of the nudity of the mannequins'.[9] Kubrick himself deleted a brief sequence halfway through the picture, showing Davy and Gloria walking together in the city and deciding to get married.

Much of the film's charm derives from the way it combines pulp fiction and a documentary feel for the streets of New York with a certain hand-crafted asperity. One of its most fascinating sequences reveals a vivid contrast between Kubrick's gritty realism and the emerging society of the spectacle: Davy and Gloria visit Gloria's workplace at 49th and Broadway during a peak hour of the evening as crowds are bustling past and bright lights are blinking everywhere. The sequence was shot on location with a hidden Eymo camera using high-speed, black-and-white film stock, and the actors, who were unknown to the public, mingled with pedestrians on the street. The soundtrack consists mostly of traffic noise. In the background are bizarrely animated advertisements, lit shop windows and the bubbling marquees of movie theatres featuring the latest CinemaScope and Technicolor productions; but the dense array of attractions looks like a crazy fairground, and life on the pavement, captured with grainy immediacy, is harsh and oppressive.

Sequences like this one prompted Gavin Lambert, writing a review of *Killer's Kiss* in *Sight and Sound*, to praise Kubrick for taking 'a kind of neo-realist approach to human behavior, a feeling for the place and moment'.[10] A documentary atmosphere had, in fact, become fairly typical of Hollywood in the period, especially in the film noir. Henry Hathaway's *Kiss of Death* (1947) and Jules Dassin's *The Naked City* use extensive footage of life on the New York streets; Rudolph Mate's *D.O.A.* (1950) contains scenes of Edmund O'Brien running down the crowded sidewalks of San Francisco; and Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly*, released in the same year as Kubrick's film, provides a virtual roadmap of Los Angeles. A somewhat later film of the type, Alexander Mackendrick's *The Sweet Smell of Success* (1957), was photographed by James Wong Howe in locations very near to the ones in *Killer's Kiss*, although here, as in most of the other pictures I've named, police cordoned off the streets and extras were employed. What makes *Killer's Kiss* relatively special is that it documents the city with such immediate urgency and unglamorous authenticity. In his fine book on urban space in the American film noir, Edward Dimendberg compares Kubrick's film to photographer William Klein's 1956 book, *Life Is Good and Good for You in New York*, which depicts Manhattan as a world of 'anomie and seediness'.[11] Dimendberg argues that *Killer's Kiss* represents the metropolis 'to a degree unparalleled by most of the films noir of the 1940s' (p. 136), and that it constitutes a kind of allegory about a moment in history when the easily negotiable, pedestrian spaces of the city are beginning to give way to postmodern fragmentation, commodification and suburban dispersal: as he points

out, the film opens with ground-level shots inside Pennsylvania Station (a landmark that would be destroyed in the 1960s), emphasising the open, almost contemplative waiting room and the peaceful light from the barrel-vaulted ceilings; then it takes us to the violent and tawdry spaces of a boxing arena, a dance hall, a bustling street and a mannequin factory – settings where Davy and Gloria become alienated and objectified.

If *Killer's Kiss* looks slightly different from other films noir, that is undoubtedly due to its raw, guerilla style of shooting and its indebtedness to a photographic tradition I've already described: the black-and-white street photography of the New York school. The film carries several allusions to the New York photographers – in its subway scenes, for example, and in an episode that makes an indirect reference to Weegee, who had worked as an advisor on Robert Wise's *The Set Up* (1949), a film noir about boxing photographed chiefly in a studio. Wise's film ends with an aging boxer being cornered in a blind alley and beaten to death by thugs. In Kubrick's film, two hoods beat a boxer's manager to death. The scene is staged in an actual alley rather than a studio set, and it feels truer to the blood and squalor of Weegee's crime photos. (As the terrified fight manager scurries from one corner of the alley to another, he moves past a sheet of plywood bearing a crudely painted sign: 'No Toilet.')

But Kubrick's style is also in many ways different from Weegee's. For one thing, Weegee's nocturnal photos have less to with the architecture of the city than with the grotesquerie of people caught in the glare of a flashbulb against a black limbo. Some of Kubrick's still-camera work for *Look* magazine, especially the photos of Walter Cartier that influenced the boxing sequences in *Killer's Kiss*, was unquestionably in this tradition; for the movies, however, Kubrick frequently employed wide-angle lenses, radically low- or high-level camera positions, silhouetted figures against dramatically lit backgrounds and a whole arsenal of techniques we associate with a director like Orson Welles. Some of the most arresting images in *Killer's Kiss* also draw on conventions of cityscape photography that date back to figures like Alfred Stieglitz (the stunning shot of the bright disk of the sun disappearing slowly behind the Manhattan skyline), or on a kind of poetic-naturalistic school of still-camera portraiture (the close-up of Gloria looking out of her apartment window, her face softly reflected in a pane of glass), or on a more ironic technique that shows people in relation to architecture and signage (the extreme wide-angle shot of Gloria mounting the stairs of Pleasure Land, where the floor is covered with a chessboard pattern and a sign above her head says 'Watch Your Step').

In this film and all his later work, Kubrick never forsook his predilection for the natural or 'practical' lighting he had used as a photo-journalist, but his images are more textural, more sensitive to gradations and qualities of light, than Weegee's ever were. Then, too, Weegee's pictures of ghetto life and the New York *demi-mondaine* are chiefly about human faces and tight groupings of highly individuated figures; his is a city of vivid characters, whereas Kubrick's is a city of anonymous crowds and empty spaces. Probably because Kubrick was shooting without official permission and with no money to hire extras, he



photographed several key sequences in the grey light of dawn, when there were relatively few people around – for instance, the scenes in Pennsylvania Station, or the shots of Davy and Gloria exiting their apartment building on 8th Avenue. The dynamically shot and edited chase sequence near the end of the film, when Davy jumps out the window of a loft on 24th Street, runs down a blind alley, climbs a fire escape and sprints across a rooftop, has an eerie effect precisely because the city seems uninhabited. Even indoors, Kubrick couldn't afford to show crowds, so he gives us a prize-fight and a ballet in which the 'audience' is completely hidden in darkness. Through these and other techniques, he makes New York a surreal place, just as most of the tabloid photographers had done. In a photographer like Weegee, however, the surrealism is vernacular, unself-conscious and teeming with life. In *Killer's Kiss* it feels deliberate, uninhabited and untouched by a populist impulse.

*Killer's Kiss* is equally interesting at the level of the soundtrack. Kubrick's decision to avoid direct sound recording is less problematic here than in *Fear and Desire* because the dialogue is sparse, exposition being provided by off-screen narration. The narrative is so complex that we have two flashbacks within Davy's flashback – first, when Gloria talks about her confrontation with Vince and, second, when she talks at greater length about her childhood and the death of her family. The second of these retrospective stories is represented less like a conventional flashback than like a mental image or an avant-garde movie; on the visual level, it consists entirely of a ballet solo performed by Kubrick's second wife, Ruth Sobotka, a dancer and designer with the New York City Ballet, who performs against a black limbo. (Perhaps significantly, Sobotka had previously appeared in the Man Ray episode of Hans Richer's surrealist anthology film, *Dreams that Money Can Buy* [1947].) Even though Davy is presumably in charge of everything we see, the off-screen narration shifts easily from his voice to Gloria's, just as the visual point of view shifts between the three leading characters. Sometimes narration drops out altogether for long stretches during which the actors work mainly in pantomime. Several conversations occur on a telephone, which makes the job of dubbing somewhat easier, and the actors now and then deliver lines outside the frame or with their backs to the camera. On the few occasions when speech is photographed directly, there is a slight mismatch between the image and the ambient quality of the sound, but this only enhances the air of strangeness and oneiricism.

Gerald Fried's musical score is comprised chiefly of three interwoven elements: a martial theme associated with Davy's life in the ring, a romantic theme associated with Gloria and a Latin jazz theme associated with Vince and his gang (the Latin music anticipates Henry Mancini's score for Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil*). A great deal of what we see relies upon nothing more than non-diegetic music and dubbed sound effects in support of three fundamental editing techniques from the silent era – parallel editing, which historians tend to associate with Griffith, point-of-view editing, which is usually associated with Kuleshov or Hitchcock, and montage, which derives from Eisenstein and the Soviets. By virtue of its almost total reliance on editing rather than dialogue, *Killer's Kiss* could be

described as what Hitchcock liked to call 'pure cinema'. It even contains several echoes of Hitchcock, among them a protagonist who gazes through his rear window, a painting that seems to mock one of the characters and a scream that dissolves into the sound of a train whistle.

Not unlike Hitchcock, Kubrick often told interviewers that he considered the average talking picture uncinematic. Speaking to Maurice Rapf in 1969, he remarked, 'In most films you have a bunch of guys talking to each other and you make use of about three or four sets and that's about it. There really isn't a lot to look at, and everybody is waiting for the big action sequence'.[12] *Killer's Kiss* offers plentiful evidence of his interest in the plastic qualities of the medium. He offers us a compendium of stock characters and situations from the universe of noir and he ends with a 'big action sequence', but through his dynamic, slightly unorthodox manipulation of image, sound and *mise en scène*, he makes the familiar seem strange.

Everything begins in primal movie fashion, with a dark screen and the chugging sound of a train starting on a journey. We see a low-level, deep-focus image of a young man wearing a knitted tie and a sports coat, smoking and pacing the nearly empty floor of Penn Station in soft grey light. As the credits appear, the sound of the train fades into the distance, followed by a public-address announcement of the next train and the ring of a bell. 'It's crazy how you can get yourself in a mess sometime,' the young man's off-screen voice says. He explains that his troubles originated a couple of days ago at the time of his big fight with a boxer named Rodriguez. A wavy dissolve accompanied by percussive martial music takes us into the past, where we see a brief montage copied almost directly from Kubrick's documentary about Walter Cartier: a fight poster hanging from a lamp post and another in a barbershop window show the face of the narrator and tell us that his name is Davy Gordon.

Cut to Davy's darkened one-room apartment. Wearing a polo shirt and slacks and viewed from a slightly high angle, he studies his face in a dressing-table mirror (another image borrowed from *Day of the Fight*). A quick series of inserts shows family photos pasted around the mirror: a farmhouse; a blurred image of a woman in rural dress standing near a front porch (next to it a couple of ticket stubs from 'Washland' on 9th Avenue); a cow; and an older man in the woods. No dialogue has been spoken, but we already know a good deal about the leading character. Davy continues studying his face, flattening his nose with a finger to see how it would look if it were broken; then he steps away from the mirror, crosses to a sink and pours a glass of water. As he paces, the camera pans and shows all four walls of the cramped room. Among the strange items hanging on the wall are a machete and a mandolin; we also see a window, outside of which, across a short, dark space, another window reveals an attractive blonde dressed in a sweater and skirt moving about her own room. Davy pays no attention and crosses towards the next wall, where he bends down to look at a goldfish bowl beneath a lamp. At this point Kubrick cuts to one of the film's most flamboyant images – an 'impossible' reverse-angle close-up, positioned in the space that



the wall occupied in the previous shot, looking through the bowl at Davy. His features, which were previously distorted by his own hand, are now grotesquely twisted. Kubrick uses a telephoto lens to flatten the perspective and at the same time uses the bowl to create a fisheye effect; as a result Davy looks at once mashed in and weirdly elongated, as if he had been beaten into putty.

Davy glances out of the window towards Gloria and then walks over to his bed, where he lays down fully dressed. An insert shows that his clock reads 6.50. Cut to another 'impossible' angle, the camera positioned in the wall space behind the clock and the bedside telephone, looking towards the window and the neighbouring apartment. Kubrick adds fascination to the minimal decor by arranging framed pictures within the picture; we've seen Davy framed by a mirror that holds several tiny snapshots and in this shot we see Gloria framed by two identical window frames. (To the right of her image is yet another frame – a picture tacked to the wall of Davy's room.) The tightly enclosed apartment becomes a sort of camera obscura, with a single opening that shows a brightly lit figure across the way.

The voyeuristic moment is interrupted by the ringing of a telephone. Davy's manager is calling from a payphone in a gym; strangely lit, as if he were standing in front of a process screen, he begins the film's first exchange of dialogue, making arrangements with Davy

to meet for that evening's fight. Now Gloria's subjectivity is briefly introduced. We cut to her room – a space nearly identical to Davy's but decorated with curtains, a checquered tablecloth and nylons drying on a line. Sipping coffee, she paces around, goes to her window and looks out. A close-up shows her gazing at the adjacent apartment. Cut to a wide shot from her point of view through the two window frames, showing Davy as he packs a bag. In close-up, Gloria sips coffee and gazes for a long time. She might be interested in Davy, or she might be daydreaming. She finishes her coffee, takes a trenchcoat from her wardrobe and exits her apartment.

Kubrick continues to draw parallels by cross-cutting between the two characters as they individually walk down three flights of stairs to the street below. Davy arrives first and takes a letter from his mailbox. He and Gloria exit the building side by side, walking towards a bright new convertible parked at the curb. Davy turns and walks off down the street. Cut to a close view of Vince, who steps out of the convertible dressed in flashy gangster's attire. He stares at Davy, who looks back over his shoulder as he enters the 8th Avenue subway. After Vince puts Gloria into the car, he remarks, 'You're doing alright for yourself.' 'What do you mean?' she replies, and then realises what Vince is talking about. 'Oh,' she says, 'he just lives in the building.' But Vince recognises Davy and smiles. 'We can watch him tonight on TV,' he says as he starts the car and drives off.

On the almost empty New York subway, Davy reads the letter he just received, and we hear the unintentionally laughable, country-hick voice of Uncle George, the letter-writer: 'Deer Dayvee. We still haven't heard from yuh yet this month.' Davy smiles affectionately. A direct cut takes us to a wide shot of a boxing arena, where two fighters can be seen in a pool of light, surrounded by blackness from which an unseen crowd cheers wildly. Cut to a dressing room, where Davy's hands are being taped by his manager as the crowd outside continues to cheer. Here and in the subsequent shots of the fight, Kubrick restages scenes from his documentary on Walter Cartier, using the same hand-held Eymo camera, the same low-level camera positions and the same jagged cutting style. First, however, he gives us a shot of Times Square at night, followed by a brief descriptive montage of the busy city. The choice of documentary shots is odd: an automated figure of Santa Claus pokes out its tongue to lick a candy apple; hot dogs steam on a vendor's tray; ice-cream sundaes revolve on a turntable; a neon sign in a store window reads 'Photos', and beyond it conventional portraits of families and young soldiers in uniform are displayed on a wall; most bizarrely of all, a tiny plastic baby swims around in a pan of water.

These shots create a slightly disturbing feeling because, even though we are situated in the midst of a city whose noises we hear in the background, we see no people – only images, simulacra and automata, as if the film were foreshadowing the climactic fight in a mannequin factory. The dehumanised atmosphere is reinforced by a series of documentary shots depicting the façade of the Pleasure Land dance hall. Above a gaudy sign ('Couples Invited/Dancing Partners') is the painted image of a blonde with large breasts who faces right; over another ('Dancing Tonite/Hostesses') is a brunette who faces left. As Edward



Dimendberg has pointed out, these billboard images rhyme with the photos of male boxers we've seen in flyers at the beginning of the film. At the Pleasure Land box office, a man smokes and sells tickets for a dollar, his face entirely hidden from view. Inside, the camera tracks laterally across a large room in which we see tough-looking bouncers standing against the wall and eccentric couples dancing to a hollow-sounding tune piped over a loudspeaker. (This is the only occasion in the movie when Kubrick used a large group of extras, who were recruited from his friends in Greenwich Village.) Cut to Gloria's dressing room, where we hear the distant music and see a make-up table and a pair of high-heel shoes. Standing before a mirror in the smoky glare, Gloria removes her sweater to reveal a black strapless bra. Cut to Davy's dressing room: his face and naked torso are being greased by his fight trainer; Davy warms up by throwing a few punches at his manager's hands, and we hear the crowd roaring outside.

While Davy and Gloria, the two entertainers, prepare their bodies, Vince is seen alone in his small office above the dance hall, drinking and smoking a big cigar. The lighting is exceedingly noirish and the room decorated in surreal, unmotivated fashion with turn-of-the-century theatrical posters and what looks like a weird advertisement for blue jeans. (This is the first of many instances in his career when Kubrick will decorate the set with fascinating kitsch. The two largest posters, barely glimpsed in this shot, depict violent tableaux from stage melodramas; in one of them a figure is spreadeagled in front of a buzz saw and in another a man stands with arms raised in front of a gigantic cannon.) Vince looks through venetian blinds at the dance floor below, turns on a television set and switches off the office lights. Grotesquely lit by the glare from the TV screen, he listens to an announcer introducing a boxing match between 'two game boys' – Kid Rodriguez, 'undefeated in twenty-two professional encounters', and Davy Gordon, 'the veteran'. An insert of the TV screen shows two fighters meeting in the ring to talk with the referee. (Kubrick appears to have photographed an actual broadcast, not bothering to adjust the shutter speed of his camera so as to eliminate television scan lines. One of the most popular shows on the CBS network in the early 1950s was the Wednesday-night 'Pabst Blue Ribbon Fights', which the broadcast resembles.) The announcer tells us that Davy Gordon, age twenty-nine, is a clever boxer who has been 'plagued by a weak chin and the unlucky knack of being at his worst for the big ones'.

Cut to Vince, who stands by the office window, smiling dreamily. He goes downstairs and pulls Gloria off the dance floor, roughing up her partner in the process. In the moments that follow, Kubrick cross-cuts between Davy, who is beaten by Rodriguez, and Gloria, who is embraced and pawed by Vince as he forces her to watch the fight on TV. The fight itself is a cinematic *tour de force*, recreating many shots from the match Kubrick had photographed for *Day of the Fight*, but adding subjective views from Davy's point of view as he is repeatedly floored by his opponent. Less bloody than similar boxing sequences from other films noir of the post-war era (*The Killers* [1946], *Body and Soul* [1947], *The Set Up*, *Champion*), it nevertheless looks far more tough and authentic, in part because the two

to meet for that evening's fight. Now Gloria's subjectivity is briefly introduced. We cut to her room – a space nearly identical to Davy's but decorated with curtains, a checquered tablecloth and nylons drying on a line. Sipping coffee, she paces around, goes to her window and looks out. A close-up shows her gazing at the adjacent apartment. Cut to a wide shot from her point of view through the two window frames, showing Davy as he packs a bag. In close-up, Gloria sips coffee and gazes for a long time. She might be interested in Davy, or she might be daydreaming. She finishes her coffee, takes a trenchcoat from her wardrobe and exits her apartment.

Kubrick continues to draw parallels by cross-cutting between the two characters as they individually walk down three flights of stairs to the street below. Davy arrives first and takes a letter from his mailbox. He and Gloria exit the building side by side, walking towards a bright new convertible parked at the curb. Davy turns and walks off down the street. Cut to a close view of Vince, who steps out of the convertible dressed in flashy gangster's attire. He stares at Davy, who looks back over his shoulder as he enters the 8th Avenue subway. After Vince puts Gloria into the car, he remarks, 'You're doing alright for yourself.' 'What do you mean?' she replies, and then realises what Vince is talking about. 'Oh,' she says, 'he just lives in the building.' But Vince recognises Davy and smiles. 'We can watch him tonight on TV,' he says as he starts the car and drives off.

On the almost empty New York subway, Davy reads the letter he just received, and we hear the unintentionally laughable, country-hick voice of Uncle George, the letter-writer: 'Deer Dayvee. We still haven't heard from yuh yet this month.' Davy smiles affectionately. A direct cut takes us to a wide shot of a boxing arena, where two fighters can be seen in a pool of light, surrounded by blackness from which an unseen crowd cheers wildly. Cut to a dressing room, where Davy's hands are being taped by his manager as the crowd outside continues to cheer. Here and in the subsequent shots of the fight, Kubrick restages scenes from his documentary on Walter Cartier, using the same hand-held Eymo camera, the same low-level camera positions and the same jagged cutting style. First, however, he gives us a shot of Times Square at night, followed by a brief descriptive montage of the busy city. The choice of documentary shots is odd: an automated figure of Santa Claus pokes out its tongue to lick a candy apple; hot dogs steam on a vendor's tray; ice-cream sundaes revolve on a turntable; a neon sign in a store window reads 'Photos', and beyond it conventional portraits of families and young soldiers in uniform are displayed on a wall; most bizarrely of all, a tiny plastic baby swims around in a pan of water.

These shots create a slightly disturbing feeling because, even though we are situated in the midst of a city whose noises we hear in the background, we see no people – only images, simulacra and automata, as if the film were foreshadowing the climactic fight in a mannequin factory. The dehumanised atmosphere is reinforced by a series of documentary shots depicting the façade of the Pleasure Land dance hall. Above a gaudy sign ('Couples Invited/Dancing Partners') is the painted image of a blonde with large breasts who faces right; over another ('Dancing Tonite/Hostesses') is a brunette who faces left. As Edward



Dimendberg has pointed out, these billboard images rhyme with the photos of male boxers we've seen in flyers at the beginning of the film. At the Pleasure Land box office, a man smokes and sells tickets for a dollar, his face entirely hidden from view. Inside, the camera tracks laterally across a large room in which we see tough-looking bouncers standing against the wall and eccentric couples dancing to a hollow-sounding tune piped over a loudspeaker. (This is the only occasion in the movie when Kubrick used a large group of extras, who were recruited from his friends in Greenwich Village.) Cut to Gloria's dressing room, where we hear the distant music and see a make-up table and a pair of high-heel shoes. Standing before a mirror in the smoky glare, Gloria removes her sweater to reveal a black strapless bra. Cut to Davy's dressing room: his face and naked torso are being greased by his fight trainer; Davy warms up by throwing a few punches at his manager's hands, and we hear the crowd roaring outside.

While Davy and Gloria, the two entertainers, prepare their bodies, Vince is seen alone in his small office above the dance hall, drinking and smoking a big cigar. The lighting is exceedingly noirish and the room decorated in surreal, unmotivated fashion with turn-of-the-century theatrical posters and what looks like a weird advertisement for blue jeans. (This is the first of many instances in his career when Kubrick will decorate the set with fascinating kitsch. The two largest posters, barely glimpsed in this shot, depict violent tableaux from stage melodramas; in one of them a figure is spreadeagled in front of a buzz saw and in another a man stands with arms raised in front of a gigantic cannon.) Vince looks through venetian blinds at the dance floor below, turns on a television set and switches off the office lights. Grotesquely lit by the glare from the TV screen, he listens to an announcer introducing a boxing match between 'two game boys' – Kid Rodriguez, 'undefeated in twenty-two professional encounters', and Davy Gordon, 'the veteran'. An insert of the TV screen shows two fighters meeting in the ring to talk with the referee. (Kubrick appears to have photographed an actual broadcast, not bothering to adjust the shutter speed of his camera so as to eliminate television scan lines. One of the most popular shows on the CBS network in the early 1950s was the Wednesday-night 'Pabst Blue Ribbon Fights', which the broadcast resembles.) The announcer tells us that Davy Gordon, age twenty-nine, is a clever boxer who has been 'plagued by a weak chin and the unlucky knack of being at his worst for the big ones'.

Cut to Vince, who stands by the office window, smiling dreamily. He goes downstairs and pulls Gloria off the dance floor, roughing up her partner in the process. In the moments that follow, Kubrick cross-cuts between Davy, who is beaten by Rodriguez, and Gloria, who is embraced and pawed by Vince as he forces her to watch the fight on TV. The fight itself is a cinematic *tour de force*, recreating many shots from the match Kubrick had photographed for *Day of the Fight*, but adding subjective views from Davy's point of view as he is repeatedly floored by his opponent. Less bloody than similar boxing sequences from other films noir of the post-war era (*The Killers* [1946], *Body and Soul* [1947], *The Set Up*, *Champion*), it nevertheless looks far more tough and authentic, in part because the two

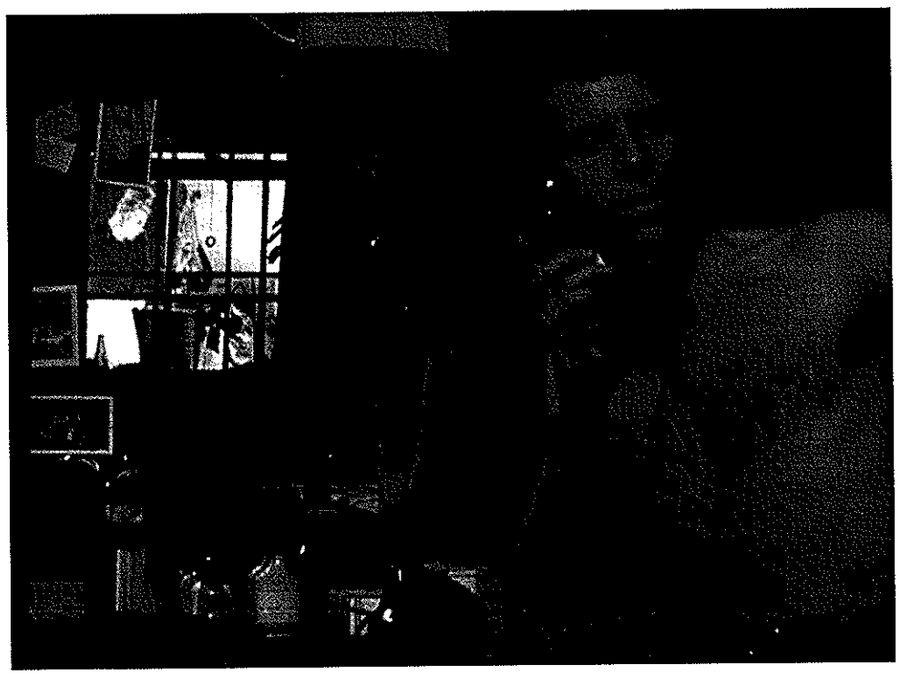
actors are quick on their feet and seem to know something about boxing. The juxtaposition of the fight in the ring and the sexual grappling in Vince's office imbues everything with a distinctly sadomasochistic eroticism, revealing one of the sublimated meanings of boxing as entertainment.

The action between Gloria and Vince as they watch the fight is ambiguous, anticipating some of the perverse, decadent voluptuousness that Kubrick later created in one of the best moments in *Spartacus*, when a small group of Roman nobles and their wives are given a private viewing of a gladiatorial contest. There is also a subtle racial implication to the embrace between the gangster and the taxi-dancer, as if Kubrick were trying to create a frisson of forbidden sexuality. Here, as in *Fear and Desire*, Frank Silvera is cast in the role of a primitive, his somewhat African features placed in sharp contrast with Irene Kane's aristocratic blondness and extremely white skin, which is displayed by her backless dress. Vince takes her bare shoulders in his hands and points her towards the off-screen glow of the TV. Like the woman tied to the tree in *Fear and Desire*, she is both abject and possessed with a kind of sexual power over her captor. At first she seems puzzled, but as Vince silently gropes her, she begins to understand the reason for his excitement. After Davy is knocked down twice by Rodriguez, she looks frightened and yet somewhat aroused. Cut to the fight arena, where Davy goes down for the third and last time; as he is being helped to his corner



a voice from the crowd yells, 'Go on home, you bum! You're all through!' The TV announcer tells us that 'For Gordon tonight must have come as a bitter pill indeed.' Vince embraces Gloria and kisses her on the neck. Smiling slightly, she turns to look towards the flickering light of the TV. Vince smiles and so does she. As they kiss, Vince bends towards her hungrily, putting his hand behind her head, pressing her roughly to his mouth and turning her naked back to the camera. She responds, but her arms don't fully embrace him. Fade out to the rising sound of hot Latin jazz.

Davy and Gloria, already paralleled in several ways, have been humiliated at the same moment. Fade in to an eloquent hidden-camera shot of Times Square at night, showing Gloria in the distance, wearing her trenchcoat and crossing the street like a zombie. The camera moves from left to right, framing her at the bottom centre of the screen with her legs out of view. A forlorn figure backed by the cavernous city and clouds of steam rising from the street, she passes a sharply dressed man, perhaps an actual passerby, who stares briefly at her. Cut to Davy, who is shirtless in his darkened room, drinking a can of beer and brooding. When a light comes on across the way he moves to the window. The camera tracks forward to show his torso reflected in the glass. We hear music from a distant radio and in the next apartment we see Gloria, who seems desperate and a bit unsteady as she takes off her shoes and belt.



Davy's telephone rings again. A close-up of his profile shows him looking intently towards Gloria. He answers the phone and stands with his back to his dressing table, with Gloria reflected in the mirror behind him. The shot is filled with frames within the frame (the mirror, the various snapshots pasted to the mirror and the two windows), creating a sort of dark comedy of voyeurism: Davy is shirtless and Gloria is undressing, and Davy has to answer a call from his Uncle George. In the mirror, Gloria strips down to a black slip and steps out of view as Davy politely explains to his uncle that this isn't a good time to talk. As Davy hangs up, Gloria reappears in pyjamas and turns out her light. Romantic music can be heard from the distant radio. Davy winds his clock, turns off a lamp and stretches out on his bed in the cell-like room. Fade to black.

The next sequence, one of the most memorable in the film, depicts Davy's dream, although we learn that fact retroactively. A direct cut shows a negative image of a narrow, littered street containing a few parked cars in what looks like a desolate area of Soho. The camera, equipped with a wide-angle lens and positioned as if it were mounted atop a car, races down the empty street towards an infinite horizon, the buildings on either side sheering past at high speed. A jump-cut jerks us back to a previous spot and the camera continues to race forward, going nowhere. We hear tense music, a muffled voice from the invisible crowd at Davy's boxing match ('Go on home, bum!') and then a woman's scream. This is the first use of a 'tunnel' view that Kubrick would often employ, always with a riveting effect. The dream is both an expression of Davy's anxiety and a kind of sinister premonition, for the street we see is the same one where the climactic violence of the film will unfold.

Davy awakes to Gloria's scream, sees Vince shoving her and rushes across the apartment building's rooftop to find the stairway to her room. When he arrives, Vince has fled, and Davy can only ask Gloria what happened. 'Well,' she says, 'about an hour ago . . .'. Percussive Latin jazz rises on the soundtrack and a wavy dissolve marks a transition to a flashback, which opens with a tight, vivid close-up of Gloria, her face lit from below as she hovers beside her closed door and listens to Vince's knock. When Vince enters, he seems pathetically contrite yet still dangerous. We never learn what happened in his office but the implication is sexual assault. Gloria backs away, putting a table between the two of them. 'Go away,' she says, but Vince ignores her and whines, 'All my life I've always spoiled the things that meant the most to me . . . . If only you knew how low and worthless I feel!' Circling the table, he grasps her arms: 'I want to set you up right . . . Just tolerate me!' Kubrick cuts to a close-up of Gloria, breaking the 180-degree line to create a violent effect. 'To me you're just an old man,' she says. 'You smell bad.' When she threatens to scream, he tries to cover her mouth. The camera spins into a 'swish pan' reminiscent of *Citizen Kane* and the flashback ends. Davy tells Gloria, 'Don't think about it any more,' and promises to sit with her while she sleeps.

The film's love theme plays in the background as Gloria falls to sleep. Davy looks at a small doll suspended from her bedpost. Commentators usually describe the doll as a symbol of innocence but it has a distinctly strange look: tattered, wearing a sort of blond fright



wig, it stares with open eyes and dangles from the bed like a hanged figure. Davy turns out a light and moves about Gloria's room, fingering the stockings and lingerie drying on a clothes line, smelling a bottle of perfume on a dressing table, reading a postcard, opening and shutting a music box and gazing at a pair of framed photographs. His interest in Gloria may be benign but it has a fetishistic and voyeuristic quality.

The remainder of the film observes the oldest of Hollywood formulas: boy meets girl, boy loses girl and boy gets girl. But all the characters have darkly 'psychological' motivations. Davy's curiosity about Gloria seems perverse, if only because of Kubrick's weird *mise en scène*. Gloria's difficulties with her love-life become apparent on the next day, when, during a sunny breakfast in her room, Davy asks, 'Who are those people in that picture over there, and how did you get mixed up with that dance-hall guy?' An insert shows the pair of framed photographs from the previous sequence – a swarthy and rather distinguished older man with thinning hair and a moustache and a ballet dancer in costume. For this shot Kubrick used photos of his own wife and her father. Significantly the male figure bears a certain resemblance to Frank Silvera in the role of Vince Rapallo.

Gloria identifies the two people as her father and her sister Iris, and explains that they have something to do with why she became involved with Vince. 'I never told anybody before,' she says and, in a lengthy monologue accompanied by a dream image of the sister performing a ballet, she reveals her secret life. Iris, it seems, was eight years her senior. 'She adored Daddy, and of course she was his favourite.' The father was a successful writer and the mother a great beauty; they 'were very happy. Then I was born and mother died on the same day.' As time passed, Iris grew to resemble her mother, and Gloria became increasingly jealous. When a rich man asked Iris to marry him and give up her career as a ballet dancer, she refused; but then her father became seriously ill and needed constant medical care. Iris married the rich suitor, gave up dancing, and sat by her father's bedside every day. 'I guess I hated her more than ever now,' Gloria says. When the father died, Iris went to his bedroom, put on his favourite record of one of her ballets, and committed suicide by cutting her wrists. 'She left me a note,' Gloria tells us. Then, a few days later, Gloria was passing Pleasure Land, where she saw a 'dancers wanted' sign. 'I don't know what possessed me. That depraved place. I kept thinking, at least Iris never had to dance like this . . . . Then I started to feel less unhappy.'

Gloria's story is filled with Freudian themes: sibling rivalry, guilt over the death of her sister and ambivalence towards the gangster who resembles her father. By dancing in the club, she finds expiation for her guilt and at the same time unconsciously 'wins' by parodying her sister's romantic relationship with Daddy. There may be a therapeutic value in her confession but she hardly seems ready for a relationship – especially with Davy, who comes from a working-class world about which she knows little other than her experience in the dance hall. Because Kubrick chose to cut a scene showing Davy and Gloria spending the day walking in the city, their attachment looks all the more hasty and questionable. After kissing Gloria only once (and grasping her hair in the same way Vince had done),

Davy declares his love. In a less threatening version of the same scene she had just played with Vince, she tries to move away from him. 'Love me? That's funny,' she says. She sits on the bed and he kneels at her feet. The scene ends with an image of night falling over Manhattan.

Back in his office, Vince is drinking heavily when a call from one of his underlings informs him that Gloria is quitting and coming to get her paycheque. On his desk is a book-leaf pair of framed photographs similar to the one on Gloria's dressing table, and the strange artwork on his walls seems to reflect his state of mind. He scowls at one image in particular – a cartoon showing a couple of turn-of-the-century vaudeville characters who appear to look back at him in mockery. Cut to an 'impossible' shot from the point of view of the picture. Vince hurls his glass of whisky at it. (Kubrick suspends a piece of glass in front of the camera so that the picture frame/camera lens seems to shatter.)

The subsequent action is standard melodrama, ironically inflected and skilfully shot and edited. Intending to leave for Seattle, Davy and Gloria go to Pleasure Land so that she can claim her pay. Davy plans to meet his manager and collect his earnings from the boxing match, but is momentarily drawn away when a drunken Shriner grabs his scarf and runs off with it. (The Shriner is played by David Vaughn, a friend of Kubrick and a trained dancer, who moves far too theatrically to convey a tourist on a bender.) Vince sends his goons to beat or kill Davy, but they end up killing the manager by mistake. Because Gloria can provide evidence of the murder, Vince kidnaps her and hides her in a loft on 24th Street, where the *mise en scène* is worthy of the theatrical posters in Vince's office: the blonde Gloria is tied to a chair on a raised platform while her dark guards play poker under a naked light-bulb. Davy rides to the rescue but Gloria's captors trick him and, for the second time in three days, he is knocked out. The episode is especially interesting for the way it subverts expectations: the hero fails in his quest and the heroine begs to return to the villain. 'Listen, Vinny,' Gloria says in a rational tone, 'don't kill me. I don't want to die. I'll do anything you say.' When Vince asks if she loves Davy, she replies, 'I don't know. I don't think so. I've only known him for two days.'

As he regains consciousness, Davy hears much of this and decides to save himself by diving out a second-storey window to the street below. Fleeing from Vince and one of his gunmen, he ends up in a storeroom full of mannequins, where he and Vince fight to the death with a spear and an axe. In its own low-budget way, this climactic action is worthy of comparison with the cinematic bravura at the ending of Welles's *The Lady from Shanghai*. Violence and suspense are mingled with a grotesque visual wit. When Davy enters the room to the sound of eerie music, he passes a row of nude female figures (one with its torso twisted awry from its legs), a row of male heads, a hand and the figure of a little girl; suddenly, a shadowy figure in the distance seems to come alive: a repairman working on the mannequins like a *demiurge*. When Vince enters close behind Davy and knocks out the repairman, Kubrick cuts to a shot of Davy hiding among the male heads, his profile pointed in the same direction as theirs. Later, as Vince and Davy flail away at one another like a couple of awkward gladiators, they become entangled with the mannequins and it becomes difficult to tell whether they are striking each other or the fake bodies.



The visual confusion between the characters and the mannequins not only heightens the degree of violence and suspense but also has a thematic significance. The mannequins share something with the strange doll in Gloria's room, with the plastic baby swimming around a pan of water on Times Square, with the lifeless photographic images in Davy's mirror, with the empty New York streets and with the characters themselves. As Dana Polan has pointed out, all the players in *Killer's Kiss* are 'either flat or awkwardly or overly histrionic, and this, plus the distancing provided by a quite disembodied tone in the clumsy post-synchronization, serves to make [the characters] somewhat dull'.[13] Far from being a flaw in the movie, however, the relatively flat characterisations and the zombie-like dialogue are consistent with Kubrick's tendency to place less emphasis on individuals than on what Polan calls 'social roles'. The film systematically overturns or deglamorises the stereotypes upon which the characters are based (the boxer has a glass jaw, the taxi-dancer comes from an artistic family with a blighted past, and the gangster is neurotically insecure), and at the same time it keeps the characters at an emotional distance, making them seem alienated and a bit robotic. Notice also that, while the characters are dehumanised, the dolls or mannequins are made spooky, as if they were possessed of spirit or mentality. This is perhaps Kubrick's ultimate joke, which he will complicate and enrich as his career progresses.

Still another dark joke arises from the fact that most of the mannequins are women. In the midst of their wild struggle, Gloria's rival lovers begin hurling female body parts at one another. At one point Davy picks up the entire body of a woman and throws it at Vince, who swings his axe and chops the body in half. Davy then picks up another woman's body and throws it, following up with a woman's torso and leg. Later, Davy pushes Vince down on a pile of nude female bodies, tries to spear him and misses, in the process getting his spear stuck in the lower half of a woman, which Vince swings at and chops apart. The battle becomes a symbolic comment on the jealous impulses of both men, but it also functions in a general way as a comment on the tendency of commercial modernity to fragment and fetishise the body parts of women. Kubrick depicts the men's struggle in a frightening, suspenseful fashion that also makes them look inept. At several points he uses wide shots that run for a fairly long time, so that we see the two combatants stumbling, floundering, falling and growing weary. Sweat and dust cling to their exhausted faces in close-ups, and when Davy finally manages to push Vince down and spear him, the action looks squalid rather than chivalric. Kubrick cuts from Vince's scream to a close-up of the head of one of the mannequins, lying upside down and lit from below like a figure in a horror movie. The scream and the image dissolve to a loud train whistle in Penn Station, returning us to the place where we began.

Several commentators, among them Alexander Walker and Thomas Allen Nelson, have compared *Killer's Kiss* to a fairy tale, which is a form of narrative that most Hollywood movies replicate on a structural level. The comparison is apt because the film gives us a

story about a fair maiden who is rescued by a kind of knight errant from the clutches of an ogre. The tone Kubrick maintains throughout, however, is more appropriate to the sombre, perverse romanticism of surrealist fantasy. The ending, in which Gloria shows up at the last minute to join Davy at the train station, was no doubt conceived in an attempt to make *Killer's Kiss* a commercial venture and is the closest thing to a Hollywood conclusion in Kubrick's career – and yet it seems bizarre, because we've just seen the lovers betray each other. When Davy embraces Gloria, their pose resembles the two previous kissing scenes: the woman's face is turned from the camera and the man grasps her hair passionately. Gloria has no luggage, the departure of the train for Seattle has already been announced and there seems no place for the couple to go. Audiences can view the ending as conventionally happy or as a perfunctory conclusion to a genre movie whose real aims are more disturbingly dreamlike. In either case, with this project Kubrick proved his readiness to enter the truly professional phase of his career.

## Notes

1. Quoted in Vincent LoBrutto, *Stanley Kubrick: A Biography* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1999), p. 91.
2. Paolo Cherchi Usai, 'Checkmating the General: Stanley Kubrick's *Fear and Desire*,' *Image* vol. 38, nos 1–2: p. 27.
3. See Erich Auerbach, 'Figura', in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), pp. 11–76.
4. Norman Kagan, *The Cinema of Stanley Kubrick* (New York: Continuum, 1997), pp. 19–20.
5. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 205.
6. Jason Sperb, *The Kubrick Façade: Faces and Voices in the Films of Stanley Kubrick* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006), p. 2. See also Jason Sperb, 'The Country of the Mind in Kubrick's *Fear and Desire*', *Film Criticism*, vol. 29 no. 1 (Autumn 2004), pp. 23–37.
7. Quoted in Kagan, *The Cinema of Stanley Kubrick*, p. 9.
8. Production Code Administration file on *Along Came a Spider*, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles.
9. Production Code Administration file on *Killer's Kiss*, Margaret Herrick Library, Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles.
10. Gavin Lambert, '*Killer's Kiss*', *Sight and Sound* vol. 25 no. 4 (Spring 1956), p. 198.
11. Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 144. All further references are to this edition, and page numbers are indicated in the text.
12. Maurice Rapf, 'A Talk with Stanley Kubrick about *2001*', in Gene D. Phillips (ed.), *Stanley Kubrick Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), p. 77.
13. Dana Polan, 'Materiality and Sociality in *Killer's Kiss*', in Mario Falsetto (ed.), *Perspectives on Stanley Kubrick* (New York: G. K. Hall, 1996), p. 93.

# Part Three

# KUBRICK, HARRIS, DOUGLAS

## I. The Criminal and the Artist

French critics Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton once argued that most examples of film noir are told more or less from the perspective of criminals or psychopaths. If we accept this argument, several of Kubrick's movies have something noir-like about them, including *Lolita*, *Dr. Strangelove*, *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Shining*. The list could be extended to *2001*, where parts of the action are viewed from the point of view of a homicidal computer, and to *Barry Lyndon*, whose eponymous hero grows up to become a rogue and a scoundrel. The most obvious case, however, is *The Killing*, which Kubrick regarded as his first truly professional film.

Soon after Kubrick and James Harris formed a partnership and set up an office on West 57th Street in New York, Harris went to a nearby bookstore and picked up a copy of Lionel White's *Clean Break*, a thriller about a race-track robbery, told from the point of view of the criminals, which he brought to Kubrick as a potential source for their first production. Part of the book's appeal for Kubrick no doubt lay in its setting at a sporting event but the plot was also an attraction because one of the directors he admired, John Huston, had recently made the most influential of all heist movies, *The Asphalt Jungle*. Both he and Harris were intrigued by the jazzy, non-chronological time scheme of White's narrative, which could be reproduced and even improved upon in a film. Harris quickly located White's agent and spent $10,000 for the motion-picture rights, in the process outmanoeuvring no less a personage than Frank Sinatra, who had been dithering over buying the novel for one of his own projects.

Lionel White had begun his career as a true-crime writer for the pulps and was good at creating suspenseful, 'cinematic' plots (a later film noir based on one of his novels is *The Money Trap* [1966], directed by Burt Kennedy). What Kubrick needed in addition, as his previous two films had shown, was someone who could provide vivid characters and pungent dialogue. To this end he had a brilliant idea: he suggested that Harris-Kubrick hire Jim Thompson, the darkest of all the *maudit* authors in the world of pulp crime fiction. Thompson's unsettling series of paperbacks for Lion Books – including *The Killer inside Me* (1952), *Savage Night* (1953) and *A Hell of a Woman* (1954) – are told from the point of view of psychopaths or disintegrating personalities, and are situated artistically somewhere in the subversive borderland between trash and the avant-garde; as Robert Polito has put it, all the Thompson crime novels are 'fueled by a lurid intelligence that bulldozes distinctions between sensational and serious culture. Like Weegee's photographs of spectacles and murders . . . [they] revel in their own shaky, contradictory status' (p. 4). This was precisely the sensibility that inspired *Killer's Kiss*, and it gives *The Killing* its distinctive tone.

In 1955, Kubrick and the alcoholic, forty-nine-year-old Thompson began work in New York on an adaptation of White's novel, initially entitled *Day of Violence* and then *Bed of Fear*. Kubrick wrote a treatment, breaking the action down into sequences and leaving Thompson to provide most of the dialogue. (Harris also made contributions.) Although Thompson would continue to work with Kubrick on later projects, he was reportedly apoplectic when he saw the credits for the completed movie, which listed Kubrick as the author of the screenplay and Thompson himself, in smaller print, as a secondary contributor. To anyone familiar with either Lionel White's novel or Thompson's fiction, this credit seems to understate Thompson's importance. Kubrick and Thompson obviously shared a black-comic viewpoint and an interest in sadomasochistic relationships, but the film's dialogue, especially in scenes involving the bickering married couple George and Sherry Peatty (Elisha Cook Jr and Marie Windsor), has the true Thompson ring:

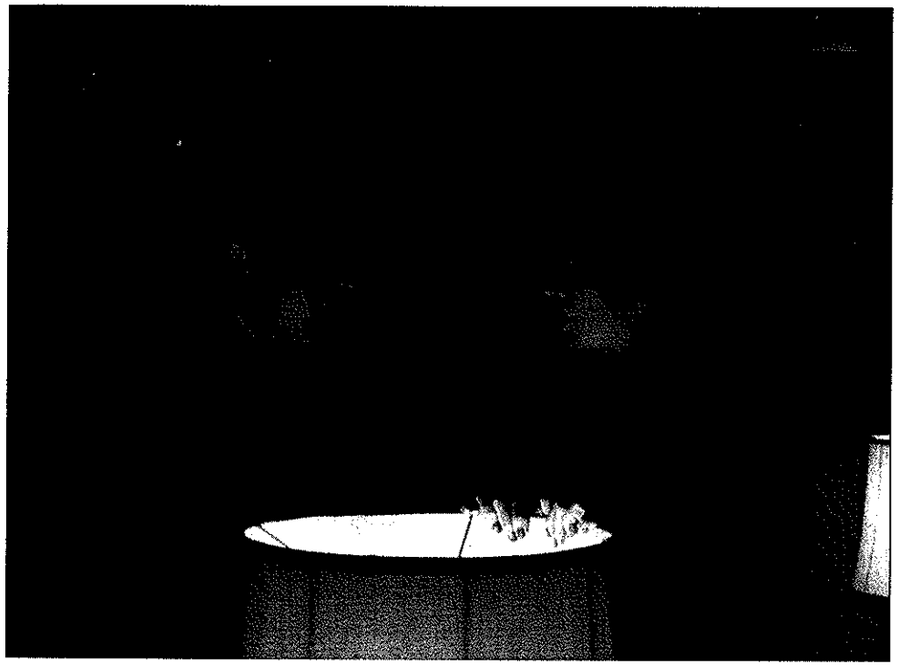
GEORGE: I been kinda sick today. I keep getting pains in my stomach.
SHERRY: Maybe you've got a hole in it, George, do you suppose you have?
GEORGE: A hole in it? How would I get a hole in it?
SHERRY: How would you get a hole in your head? Fix me a drink, George, I'm beginning to get pains myself.
GEORGE: Sherry, can't I ever say anything at all without you joking about it?
SHERRY: Hurry up with that drink, George. The pains are getting worse.

The screenplay preserves the basic time scheme of the novel, which, like the movie, deals with ex-con Johnny Clay's attempt to organise a band of amateurs to help him pull off a $2-million robbery. ('I'm avoiding the one mistake that most thieves make,' Johnny explains in the book. 'These men, the ones who are in the deal with me – none of them are professional crooks. They all have jobs, they all live seemingly decent, normal lives. But they all have money problems and they all have larceny in them.') The film, however, pays less attention than White had done to Johnny's personal history and motivations, and it changes the novel's ending, in which Johnny is shot and killed by George Peatty. It also changes or eliminates certain of White's characters. In the novel, Marvin Unger is a court stenographer and an anal personality who is seething with class resentment and has no particular attachment to Johnny. Michael Henty (O'Reilly in the film) is a gambler who has both a wife and a daughter to support. George Peatty is a big man, and his wife, Sherry, is a diminutive vixen, who is having an affair with both the petty gangster Val Cannon and the corrupt cop Randy Kennan. (When Cannon discovers her knowledge of the impending race-track robbery, he beats the information out of her.) As in the case of most movie adaptations, the screenplay is more economical than the novel, eliminating minor characters, simplifying the story and quickening the pace of the action; at the same time, it amplifies and places greater emphasis on sexual motives – Unger's passion for Johnny, George's jealousy and sense of inferiority, Sherry's desire to hold on to a virile younger man – all of which threaten the success of the robbery. This stress on sexual desire accounts for the film's early title, *Bed of Fear*, and for the large number of scenes played on or around beds.



When the script was submitted for the approval of the Production Code Administration, the Hollywood censors overlooked its sexual innuendos, including the implied homosexuality of Marvin Ungar (Jay C. Flippen). The PCA wrote to Harris warning that the film should limit itself to firearms 'for which a license can be obtained', which meant that the race-track robbery could involve no automatic weapons. Kubrick wrote back, complaining that in Samuel Fuller's recent film, *The House of Bamboo* (1955), 'Robert Ryan uses a German P38 pistol, which is, as far as I know, a fully automatic weapon.' (In the completed film, Sterling Hayden uses a sawn-off shotgun with a machine-gun grip.) The censors were equally concerned because one of the robbers in the film is a policeman. Harris-Kubrick agreed to the PCA suggestion that the script should be read by Captain Stanley Sheldon of the LAPD for 'any suggestion he may have regarding the character'.[1] Whether or not Sheldon offered comments, nothing was changed, and one of the best jokes in the script remains in the film. As patrolman Kennan is about to leave for the race track on the day of the robbery, a woman in a housecoat comes running up, shouting 'Officer, oh thank heaven! Come quick! They're killing each other!' Kennan drives off, leaving the woman standing in the street. The only remaining censorship problem had to do with the word 'nigger', almost never heard in films, in a scene dealing with an altercation between a hired gunman and a black parking-lot attendant. Harris-Kubrick was told that the word could remain only if the attendant reacted to it in an overtly hostile manner.

Once PCA approval was obtained, Kubrick and his associates moved to Los Angeles for the filming. Kubrick's earlier, shoe-string productions had taught him virtually every craft involved in the making of motion pictures, but *The Killing*, despite its cheapness, gave him the invaluable assistance of professional technicians and an experienced Hollywood crew.



There were no problems with the sound recording and the camera was supplied with a dolly that Kubrick used impressively. The studio orchestra that performed Gerald Fried's driving, Stravinsky-esque jazz score included such musicians as André Previn, Pete Candoli and Shelly Manne. The only tension grew out of Kubrick's relationship with his director of photography, Lucien Ballard, who had previously worked with Josef von Sternberg and who later become Sam Peckinpah's favoured cameraman. Kubrick didn't belong to the cinematographers' union and wasn't allowed to photograph the film (except for a few hand-held shots), but he clashed with Ballard over camera lenses and *découpage*, always asserting final authority. At one point he completely rejected the location footage Ballard and his crew had shot at Bay Meadows race track in San Francisco and sent his friend and associate producer Alexander Singer to the track, where Singer single-handedly photographed a horse race using the same type of Eymo camera that he and Kubrick had employed in *Day of the Fight*.[2]

The film offers plenty of evidence that Kubrick's photographic decisions were correct. As in most of his other work, he realistically motivates the lighting, but his realism usually results in a boldly exaggerated effect: Val Cannon (Vince Edwards) and Sherry Peatty face one another over a table lamp like figures in a horror movie; Mike O'Reilly (Joe Sawyer) leans forward under a lamp and we see every line of his face and every crinkle of his bent



cigarette; the criminal gang gathers around a table lit by a single overhead bulb, and the black limbo around them prefigures the surreal 'War Room' in *Dr. Strangelove*. Kubrick also moves the camera in vivid fashion. Perhaps the most striking instances are the sequences involving George and Sherry, the first of which, running for over five minutes, is composed of only five shots, one of them a very brief close-up. In a fine analysis, Mario Falsetto has pointed out how the succession of long takes and leisurely movements across the room tends to 'efface the passage of time', providing the viewer with a feeling of real duration in a film that otherwise juggles the chronology and urgently moves from one place to another.[3] At other junctures, the motion of camera and characters is more sweeping and energetic. Near the end of the film, when the gang is waiting for Johnny to appear with the loot from the robbery, the camera moves restlessly around the room along with George Peatty, viewing him from a distance as he walks away and looks out a window, framing the whisky glass in his hand as he walks into the extreme foreground, and occasionally pausing to linger on other characters as he walks past them. In many other cases, the moving shots have an unusually ostentatious quality because Kubrick employs a wide-angle lens and a low camera level in conjunction with fairly rapid lateral or forward-backward tracking motions. The short lens, which Kubrick insisted upon in an early argument with Ballard, distorts both time and perspective; thus when Johnny Clay walks forward past a row of motel cabins, he looms slightly above us and seems to take unnaturally broad steps, like a giant striding across deep space. Shots of this sort are perfectly in keeping with the relentless march of the film's narration and the pulsing rhythm of Fried's music, helping to create an atmosphere of thrusting power.

Lateral movements of the camera, which become a motif in the film, have a similar quality, but their slightly weird look also has something to do with the way Kubrick treats objects or people in the extreme foreground. In the opening scene, we move first right and then left with Marvin Ungar as he walks past a background of race-track cashiers and isolated betters, while in the foreground, almost at the point of the picture-plane, motionless figures slide across the screen like the bars of a cage. These figures face the camera and look above it, as if studying the racing results posted on a wall; the camera seems to be inside the wall, viewing everything from an 'impossible' position similar to the one Kubrick often used in the static shots of *Killer's Kiss*. The same effect can be seen at later points. When Johnny Clay is introduced, the camera frames his hand opening a bottle of beer and then pans and tracks to the right as he steps back, turns and crosses the entire length of a three-room apartment, speaking to someone off screen as he moves past a shadowy foreground of window curtains, wall ornaments and walls between rooms. The basic technique dates back to at least the 1930s, when Hollywood films often created a kind of optical wipe by tracking with a character past a wall between two rooms of a set; in this case, however, partly because of the low camera level and the wide-angle lens, and partly because we slide past items of decor that seem to be attached to or lined up against a transparent fourth wall, the movement looks especially bizarre.

Such things are probably to be expected from a director who began his career as a photographer. More surprising is the unusually high calibre of the acting in the film. This was the first picture in which Kubrick had the benefit of an experienced cast, most of whom were often cast in film noir. Johnny Clay's touchingly insecure girlfriend Faye is played by Colleen Gray, who had appeared in *Kiss of Death*, *Nightmare Alley* (1947) and *Kansas City Confidential* (1952); the gambler-cop Randy Kennan is Ted de Corsia, who had often been cast as a heavy, most memorably in *The Lady from Shanghai* and *The Naked City*; the sad-faced gangster Leo is Jay Adler, who had worked in *Cry Danger* (1951), *Scandal Sheet* (1952), *99 River Street* (1953) and *Murder Is My Beat* (1955); the bartender Mike O'Reilly is Joe Sawyer, who had been a tough guy in *Gilda* (1946); the minor-league crook Val Cannon is Vince Edwards, who had acted handsome killers in *Rogue Cop* (1954) and *The Night Holds Terror* (1955); and Joe Piano, the owner of a cheap motel, is Tito Vuolo, who had impersonated mobsters or working-class Italians in *The Enforcer* (1951) and many other hardboiled films.

The names of most of these actors were unfamiliar to the public, but their faces had been seen so often in crime pictures that they immediately evoked vivid personalities. As I've already noted, they were joined by a couple of less familiar figures who greatly enhance the grotesque atmosphere: Kola Kwariani as Maurice, the strong man hired to distract race-track police, and Timothy Carey as Nikki, the sharpshooter hired to kill the lead horse in the Lansdowne Stakes. More centrally important are Sterling Hayden as Johnny, a slight variation on the character Hayden had played in *The Asphalt Jungle*; Marie Windsor as Sherry, a tough, sexy woman similar to the ones Windsor had embodied in *Force of Evil* (1948) and *The Narrow Margin* (1952); and the iconic Elisha Cook Jr as George, a homicidal little man of the sort Cook had created again and again following his indelible portrayal of Wilmer in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). All three of these actors were typecast, and yet their performances were never better. Hayden, with his ham-sized fists, booming voice and sailor's gait (he was a former ship's captain and a lifelong sailor), lends an air of proletarian nobility to the leading role, but Kubrick seems to have encouraged him to behave in a less sentimental fashion than John Huston had done, understating the scenes in which he demonstrates kindness (as when he tells Joe Piano that his son Patsy is doing well at Alcatraz, or when he sits on Marvin Ungar's bed and wishes him goodbye), and emphasising his physical energy and strength of will. Windsor and Cook, meanwhile, play their roles on the knife-edge of absurdity, pushing slightly beyond realistic convention and into caricature.

At the most general level, the style of *The Killing* as a whole can be described in terms of a clash between the 'rational' qualities of its jigsaw-puzzle plot and the 'irrational' qualities of its pulp eroticism and black-comic absurdity. One of the places where this clash is most evident is in the relationship between the portentous narration and the decidedly grotesque *mise en scène*. The style of narration was quite familiar to audiences of the time, having been widely used in Louis de Rochement's documentary-like crime dramas at 20th Century-Fox in the years after World War II, and in radio and TV police-procedurals such



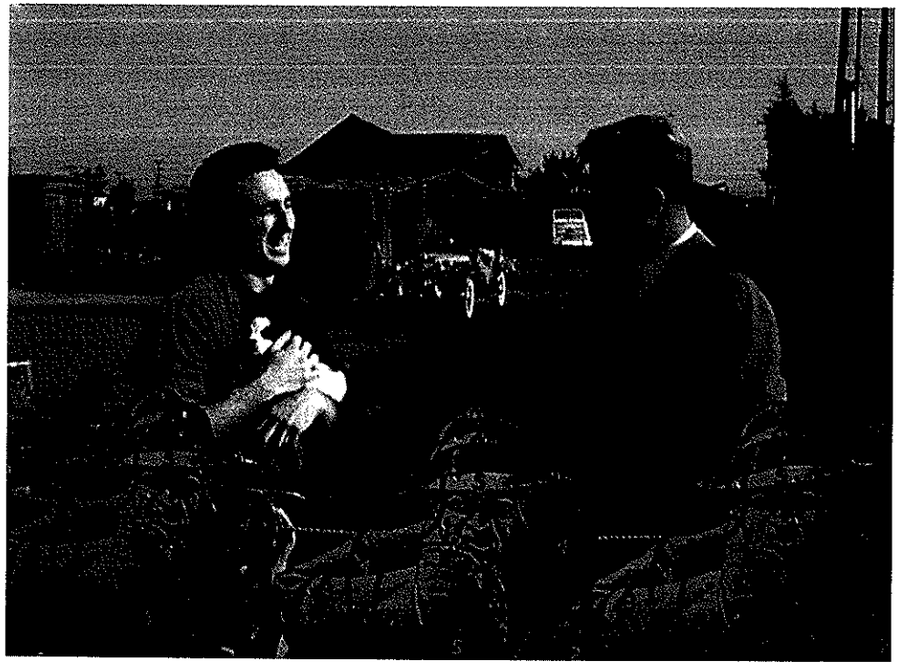
as *Mr. District Attorney* and *Highway Patrol* in the 1950s. Jack Webb's just-the-facts narration of *Dragnet* is descended from the technique, but the particular vocal style in *The Killing* was associated above all with news or documentary announcers, who were chosen on the basis of their deep, authoritative voices and featureless enunciation. Kubrick's own *Day of the Fight* had employed *CBS News* announcer Douglas Edwards as its narrator, and the early scenes of *The Killing*, in which we see documentary race-track footage and hear a narrative voice, are very similar in feeling to that film. But Kubrick was also aware that such voices had been parodied in the 'News on the March' segment of *Citizen Kane*. Perhaps for that reason, his crime film, which manipulates time in a fashion that owes something to *Kane*, allows the tonal disparity between the narration and the dramatic action to create an ironic effect.

The nameless narrator of *The Killing* tells the story in the past tense and from an omniscient perspective, withholding at least one important piece of information (Randy Kennan's particular role in the heist) and ceasing his commentary at the point when the story reaches a double climax, with the killing of Sherry and the fiasco at the airport. On one occasion, he explains what a character is thinking: 'He began to feel as if he had as much effect on the final outcome of the operation as a single piece of a jumbled jigsaw puzzle has to its predetermined final design.' At a few other junctures, he tries to build suspense: 'At seven that morning, Johnny Clay began what might be the final day of his life.' In general, however, his function is simply to make it easier for us to follow the complicated time scheme. Everything we see transpires during a single week, but the plot is designed to follow an individual character's activity on a specific day and then jump backward or forward in time to follow another character on the same day.[4] To make sure that the audience is properly oriented, the narrator is aided on the day of the robbery by a public-address announcer at the race track, whom we hear making the same announcement of the Lansdowne Stakes at five different points, usually accompanied by the same footage of horses being led out to the starting gate. Viewers who are sufficiently attentive (or obsessive) can use these cues to try and fit together the pieces of the plot, but in so doing they will discover anomalies. Mario Falsetto has pointed out two manifest errors: Johnny Clay's farewell to Marvin Ungar in Marvin's apartment takes place 'at 7.00am', but in the next sequence the narrator says that Johnny arrived at the airport at 'exactly 7.00am'. The shoot-out between George Peatty and Val Cannon takes place shortly after 7.15pm, but in the next sequence the narrator says that Johnny arrived at Joe Piano's motel 'forty minutes before, at 6.25'.[5]

Was the normally well-organised Kubrick simply nodding when the pieces of the film were put together, or did he intend to suggest that the narration is unreliable? There's no completely satisfactory answer to the question, but I suspect he regarded the narration as a mere expository device and was inclined to subtly joke about its authority. The film obviously wants us to decipher a temporal puzzle, but its convoluted plot is only a clever variation on a clichéd set of genre conventions, aimed at satisfying our rational impulses while releasing a darker, more perverse energy. Much of the pleasure derives from the way

an almost military plan for committing a robbery is presented as a dreamlike montage – a shattered form of storytelling that allows us to become absorbed in the fascinating, sometimes lurid, grace notes of particular images, settings and scenes.

As one minor example, notice something as commonplace as Joe Piano's motel, a real-life setting that nicely conveys a sense of rootless poverty in Los Angeles. As Johnny pulls up to the office, one of the nearby doors opens and an ordinary-looking woman who seems to be a prostitute walks out, followed by a man in work clothes. When Johnny enters his rude, clapboard cabin, a carpenter's notation, '78x09', is still chalked on the inside of the door. A similar rawness inflects the scenes involving Nikki, who has heavily lidded eyes, a grin that freezes into a rictus and a habit of speaking hipster slang through his teeth. 'Yeah, Pops,' he says to Johnny, 'you could take care of a whole roomful of people with that gun.' (Later in the film, a similar gun does just that.) When he and Johnny converse, we become aware of vividly contrasting rhythms: Nikki lazily strokes the puppy in his arms while Johnny delivers an unusually long speech at top speed and in near monotone, describing the entire plan and building to an absurdist climax: 'Suppose you do get picked up? What have you done? You've shot a horse. It isn't first-degree murder, in fact it isn't even murder – I don't know what it is. The best they could get you on would be inciting a riot or shooting horses out of season.'





Nikki's later interaction with a black parking-lot attendant is more disconcerting. The scene is designed to create a perverse, Hitchcock-style suspense, forcing us against our normal sympathies to root for the bad guy: we want Nikki to get rid of the attendant, who is an impediment to the robbery plan. The attendant, however, is a sympathetic black man acted by James Edwards, who had previously appeared in Stanley Kramer's *Home of the Brave* in which he plays a psychosomatically paralysed soldier who is shocked out of his paralysis by an Army psychologist who deliberately calls him 'nigger'. (Edwards also appeared as a boxer in Robert Wise's *The Set Up* and as a psychologically traumatised Korean War veteran in *The Manchurian Candidate* [1962].) Kubrick does everything to encourage our sympathy for him – he's a handsome young war veteran with a lame leg, who seems intelligent but whose only employment is a menial job. Nikki, on the other hand, is a smarmy, manipulative fellow who drives a sportscar and is bent on shooting a horse. When Nikki first tries to gain entrance to the closed lot, the attendant towers over him and looks excessively angry, as if he were neurotically asserting an ability to say no to a white man. In response, Nikki adopts the outrageous stratagem of pretending to be a fellow wounded veteran – a paraplegic, no less, who fought in the Battle of the Bulge – at the same moment stuffing money in the attendant's pocket. The attendant now becomes subservient, almost fawningly apologetic. First, he brings Nikki a programme for the race, then a horseshoe for luck. 'I sure do appreciate the way you treated me, Mister,' he says. His attempt to make conversation about the horses and the weather feels weakly motivated, annoying and even a little embarrassing. The combination of deference and obtuseness – plus the danger of the situation and the fact that the race is about to start – makes the audience even more anxious for him to go away. Nikki accomplishes this goal by dropping his mask of cordiality and calling the attendant 'nigger' – a word that threatens our engagement with the mechanisms of suspense. The attendant limps off and angrily throws the horseshoe to the ground, his gesture eventuating in poetic justice: after Nikki shoots Red Lightning, he backs his car over the horseshoe, gets a flat tyre and is shot by a policeman. Nevertheless, Nikki's insult and the attendant's slightly odd behaviour linger uncomfortably in the mind, making *The Killing* more slyly cruel in its humour than an ordinary thriller.

The scenes between George and Sherry are even more memorable, almost to the point where the film's subplot becomes more compelling than the robbery itself. A savage parody of marriage, their relationship is treated with deadpan solemnity. During the couple's first conversation, the calm gaze of the low-level camera and the temporal duration of the shots serve to intensify the perversity of the situation. The sequence is worth study because of the way it treats cinematic space, developing into a graceful dance between the camera and the actors. At the beginning, the narrator tells us with his customary stern seriousness that it was precisely 7.15pm when George arrived home. We see George entering a narrow hallway and putting down his lunchbox. As in the earlier shot when Johnny Clay walks across his apartment, the camera moves with the character as he crosses the room,

passing a door frame, a lamp and various shadowed objects in the extreme foreground. (The sequence involving Johnny ended with a conversation between him and Fay near their bed; this was followed by a sequence showing Mike O'Reilly returning home and crossing his apartment to talk with his bedridden wife; now we come to George, who arrives home to find Sherry in bedclothes.)

Both George and the camera come to a stop as they arrive at Sherry, who reclines on a lounger in the foreground, leafing idly through a glossy magazine. To borrow the title of one of Jim Thompson's novels, she's a 'swell-looking babe' – a large, voluptuous presence exaggerated by the wide-angle lens and the low level of the shot. Wearing a low-cut sleeping gown and arranged in a pose that offers her ample bosom to the camera, she seems to have been lolling around all day, although she must have spent lots of time on her artificial lashes, lipstick and dyed blonde, permanent-waved hair. The apartment behind her is small – a double bed in the corner takes up most of the space – but more elaborately decorated than any other room in the film, indicating Sherry's need for domestic finery: we see flowered wallpaper, a parrot in a cage, a TV set, a pair of bed lamps with pagoda-shaped shades and a couple of framed Oriental prints hanging over the bed in a his-and-hers arrangement. Jazz music is playing softly on a radio. Sherry reacts with mild disgust when George bends down to kiss her on the cheek, and when he sits near her feet, she looks like a pulp-fiction



dominatrix (the ideal woman of George's fantasies). She speaks in a tone of weary contempt, without even looking up from the magazine. A potentially violent undercurrent runs beneath both characters' words, but Cook and Windsor play most of the scene in soft, intimate fashion, giving a subtextual weight to every line they speak. One more turn of the dramatic screw and we would be in Pinter or Albee country.

After mixing a drink and telling Sherry about a happily married couple he has noticed that day, George says 'I'm tired', and we cut to a new angle as he rises and crosses to the birdcage at the other side of the room. Sherry follows and when they stand facing one another, she looks six inches taller than him. She adopts a mock sweetness: 'You want me to call you Papa, isn't that it, George? And you want to call me Mamma.' At this point, the pace of the conversation and the level of anger rise slightly, the two actors briefly overlapping one another, the caged parrot (vaguely reminiscent of the cockatoo in *Citizen Kane*) squawking in counterpoint. 'You know all the answers,' George says in lame rebuke, and Sherry steps on his line. 'You go right ahead,' she says. 'Of course it might be the last words you ever say, but I'll try to kill you as painlessly as possible.' Ignoring her, George explains that he has to go out tonight. 'I don't suppose there's anything for dinner.' She crosses to the window, lights a cigarette and tells him sure there is, there's a whole elaborate menu, and it's all down at the grocery store.

Throughout, Windsor does an amusing job of letting us see how Sherry manipulates George by shifting from one character type to another. Depending on her needs, she can become a castrating vixen, a scorned woman, a temptress, and even a loving companion. 'Tell me something, will you, Sherry?' George asks. 'Tell me one thing. Why did you ever marry me?' Sherry frowns and finishes her drink, the ice tinkling in the glass. 'Oh, George,' she says in a patronising and self-pitying voice, 'when a man has to ask his wife a question like that, well, he just hadn't better, that's all.' She lounges on the edge of the bed and we cut to a low angle as George again sits near her feet. 'You used to love me,' he says, 'at least, you said you did.' She reminds him that he 'made a memorable statement too,' when he promised that they would become rich. 'Not that I really care about such things, you understand, as long as I have a big, handsome, intelligent brute like you.' George tells her that they're going to have money, 'hundreds of thousands'. At first Sherry is derisive: 'Of course you are, George. Did you put the right address on the envelope when you sent it to the North Pole?' Then she realises he's serious. He gets up and crosses in front of her, standing partly out of frame in the foreground, the glass in his hand visible at the right corner of the screen. Sherry looks up at him and for a moment the relative size of the two characters is reversed, so that George seems to dominate. 'You've never been a liar, George,' Sherry says, almost to herself. 'You don't have enough imagination to lie.'

In a brief, wordless close-up, George refuses to comment. Cut to a new angle, looking across the room from the vantage of Sherry's dressing table. 'I see,' she says. Giving a little flip to the silk handkerchief in her hand, she rises from the bed and flounces over to her dressing table, where she sits, turns on a lamp and begins combing her hair in the

mirror. She's once again the largest figure in the frame. George meekly follows and sits behind her. Between them, in the distance, we can see the marriage bed and the two Oriental prints of a man and a woman. 'Sherry, Sherry, honey,' George softly pleads. 'Don't be so sore at me .... You know I'm crazy about you!' Sherry takes a mascara brush from a small case, spits on it and begins amplifying her already enormous lashes. 'Don't you be surprised if I'm not here when you get home,' she says in a pouting tone. 'Don't you be at all surprised.' Quietly, evenly, George warns her, 'You better be here, you hear me, Sherry? If I ever caught you with another man . . .' Sherry now transforms herself into a neglected wife: 'But why? You have no use for me .... You say one thing and then you do another.' George hesitates. 'Well, I could tell you a little bit about it, I guess, but you have to promise to keep it quiet.' Sherry turns to look at him, smiles and speaks in a honeyed, submissive tone: 'Why of course, darling.'

The image immediately dissolves to a close shot of a rumpled bed in the apartment of Sherry's lover, Val Cannon, a man she would probably describe as a 'big, handsome, intelligent brute'. Val wears a black muscle shirt and has apparently been entertaining another woman; in his presence, Sherry becomes a clingy, insecure girlfriend. After they make love (signified by a fade to black and a rising sound of bongo drums), we see her cuddled next to him on a couch, lit by a table lamp that brings out her age and vulnerability. We begin to realise that Sherry's previous scene with George is motivated by something more than a desire for money; she hopes to buy Val by showing him how to hijack the loot from the race-track robbery.

Every encounter between Sherry and George is governed by a barely repressed contest for power, but the two actors never allow this contest to eventuate in loud voices or violence. The inevitable explosion is saved for a point near the end of the film, when George bursts into a crowded room, firing a gun at Val and yelling 'The jerk's right here!' Val's shotgun goes off, leaving bodies strewn around like the devastated mannequins in *Killer's Kiss*. George is the only man left standing; mortally wounded, his face shredded with buckshot, he summons all his strength for a last confrontation with Sherry. Kubrick uses a hand-held camera to show George's subjective point of view as he stumbles out of the apartment. Then we see George from Johnny's point of view as he sprawls on the hood of Johnny's car and staggers across the road to his own vehicle. The two men drive off in opposite directions, barely avoiding the police.

George's final moments with Sherry have exactly the same black-comic tone as before. The sequence begins with a low-angle shot of Sherry, wearing a black slip and packing two bags on her unmade bed. Muted saxophone jazz comes from a radio. She hears someone enter, turns and calls out in the voice of a happy housewife, 'How'd it go, dear?' Seen from an even lower angle, George staggers through the door, his face and shirt bloody, a gun in his hand. He bumps into the caged parrot behind him, who squawks, 'Watch out! Pretty Polly!' In close-up, George speaks softly. 'Sherry! Why? Why did you do it?' Ignoring the blood and the gun, Sherry tries to conceal her fear with a ludicrously sweet reply. 'Do? Do



what, dear? I don't know what you're talking about. I was just getting some clothes ready to go to the cleaners.' When George weaves and stares back at her, she pauses, drops the smile and shifts into a nagging tone that conceals an undercurrent of guilt. 'So you had to be stupid. You couldn't even play it smart when you had a gun pointed at you. Well, you better get smart and get out of here while you can still walk.' With his last breath, George says, 'I love, you, Sherry.' Not without some concern, she replies, 'George, you better go on and go. You look terrible.' The parrot squawks again and George shoots. With her dying words, Sherry once again attacks his masculinity: 'It isn't fair,' she says in a self-pitying whine as she grasps her stomach. 'I never had anybody but you. Not a real husband, just a bad joke without a punch line.'

Nothing ever changes for George and Sherry, nor for Johnny and Fay, who find themselves the victims of another 'bad joke' at the airport. Because of its dark, twist-of-fate conclusion, *The Killing* has often been treated by critics as a template for Kubrick's subsequent work, which usually involves a careful plan that goes disastrously awry. Among Kubrick's many commentators, Thomas Allen Nelson places the strongest emphasis on this theme, describing the failure of the robbery plan and the other failed schemes in later pictures in terms of a metaphysical conflict between order and contingency. Of course, the capture of Johnny Clay is determined in the last analysis by the Hollywood Production Code, which insisted that crime could not pay; even so, Kubrick chose to have the robbery foiled not by methodical police work but by the capricious winds of fortune. The closing scenes consist of nothing more than a quick series of ironic accidents: a suitcase with a weakened clasp; an officious airline attendant who insists that the suitcase is too large to be brought into the passenger compartment of an aeroplane; a rich old lady who baby-talks to her poodle and then allows the dog to dash across the airport runway; and an overloaded baggage cart that swerves to avoid the dog, tipping over the suitcase and scattering $100,000 into the swirling wind of a propeller. These events have more in common with the existentialist absurdity of John Huston's *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1945) than with the bloody climax of Lionel White's *Clean Break*, in which a jealous George Peatty hunts down Johnny Clay at the airport, shoots him and then accidentally runs into a moving propeller. In Kubrick's version, Johnny is shocked and numbed, as if he has glimpsed a cosmic truth. Like a hulking zombie, he is guided through the airport waiting room by the diminutive Fay, who tries unsuccessfully to hail a cab. 'Johnny,' she cries, 'you've got to run!' Johnny simply turns and looks at two plainclothes cops advancing towards him, their weapons drawn; 'Yeah,' he says in a dead voice. 'What's the difference?'

In my own view, the failure of the robbery has less to do with contingency than with the evident passions and weaknesses of several of the criminals – in particular the lack of intelligence and the combustible mixture of lust, greed and jealousy in the triangle created by George, Sherry and Val. The robbery develops alongside a criminal counterplot involving the unfaithful wife and her lover, and the gang's success is momentarily threatened by Marvin Ungar's love for Johnny, which causes Marvin to show up drunk at the track on a

day when he is supposed to be out of sight. But even without these sexual complications, most people in the original audience knew that the criminals would never be allowed to get away with their loot. Maybe on some level the audience actually *wanted* the criminals to fail. Kubrick calls attention to that possibility in the film's most self-reflexive scene, which is staged in a chess club similar to the one Kubrick had belonged to in New York: Maurice, sounding like a film-noir version of Friedrich Nietzsche, tells Johnny that, 'In this life we have to be like everybody else – the perfect mediocrity, no better, no worse. I often thought that the gangster and the artist are the same in the eyes of the masses. They're admired and hero worshipped, but there is always present an underlying wish to see them destroyed at the peak of their glory.'

As if to undercut the somewhat pretentious effect of this statement, Johnny, who is Kubrick's *alter ego* in the sense that he masterminds a complex plot, gives a wry, nonsensical reply: 'Yeah, like the man said, life is like a glass of tea, huh?' An air of doomed inevitability nevertheless hovers about the film, the only question being in what particular ways the plan will go wrong. The seeds of destruction are planted quite early, in the scenes between George and Sherry, and the demands of the genre are satisfied by an overdetermined conflict between rational planning and primal emotion. This conflict is at the core of Kubrick's later films, though it's seldom dramatised more effectively than here, where the split between disciplined reason and wild instinct is starkly clear. Where *The Killing* is concerned, the criminal was required to be a failure, but the artist responsible for the film succeded.

## II. Ant Hill

There are vexed questions of authorship surrounding *Paths of Glory*, but everyone agrees that the film originated with Kubrick during his abortive stay at MGM in the mid-1950s, when he proposed to James Harris that they adapt a novel Kubrick remembered reading as a teenager in his father's library: Humphrey Cobb's *Paths of Glory* (1935), based on the true story of five French soldiers in World War I who were falsely accused of cowardice and shot by a firing squad. The novel had been inspired by a 1934 *New York Times* report of a recent French trial in which the two surviving widows of the soldiers were awarded approximately seven cents each in reparation; of no great literary importance, it nevertheless provided a harrowing account of trench warfare and a disturbing picture of how generals treated their troops as cannon fodder. Upon publication, it enjoyed a favourable critical reception in the US and spawned an unsuccessful 1938 Broadway theatrical adaptation by the well-known playwright and screenwriter Sidney Howard; by the 1950s, however, it was virtually forgotten. Kubrick believed it had cinematic possibilities and knew that, since it was unfamiliar to the contemporary audience, it could be easily acquired and freely adapted. He and Jim Thompson developed a script, which was later revised by Calder Willingham. As we've seen in an earlier chapter, however, MGM rejected the project. The film was ultimately financed by United Artists – this entirely because of Kirk Douglas, who, after reading the



Kubrick–Thompson–Willingham script, agreed to star in the picture on condition that Kubrick would direct other films for Douglas's production company.

Besides originating with Kubrick, the completed film is everywhere marked by Kubrick's stylistic and thematic preoccupations – among them a skilful deployment of wide-angle tracking shots, an ability to make a realistic world seem strange, an interest in the grotesque, and a fascination with the underlying irrationality of orderly, almost glamorous military action. World War I is a particularly apt subject for Kubrick because it was generated by a meaningless tangle of nationalist alliances and resulted in over 8 million deaths, most of which can be blamed on benighted politicians and incompetent generals, who arranged massive bombardments and short, suicidal charges across open ground. As literary historian Paul Fussel has pointed out in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1997), one of the war's grisliest and most symptomatic events, the Battle of the Somme in 1916, known to ordinary troops as 'The Great Fuck-Up', was the largest and in many ways most senseless military engagement in human history. It began with a sustained, one-week shelling of German trenches from over 15,000 guns but, when the shelling stopped and the British charged, the outmanned Germans simply pulled their machine guns from deep, well-engineered tunnels and mowed them down. On that single day, 60,000 of the British were killed, and it was almost a week before 20,000 others who lay mortally wounded in no man's land stopped crying out for help.

André Breton derived the concept of 'black humour', which is central to Kubrick's work, from the writings of the proto-surrealist Jaques Vache, a soldier in the French army during World War I. It isn't surprising that *Paths of Glory* was greatly admired by another surrealist, Luis Buñuel, and was just as greatly disliked by the French government, which in 1958 was involved in the Algerian war. Through political pressure, the French managed to have the picture dropped from the Berlin Film Festival and banned from theatres in France and Switzerland for two decades. Their reasons were obvious. Like Cobb's novel, the film involves the French high command's attempt to achieve a 'breakthrough' by attacking a heavily fortified mound of dirt called the 'Ant Hill'. (The novel calls it the 'Pimple'.) The attack has no apparent strategic value and is supervised by a vain general, who has been led to believe it might result in a promotion. When the charge is stopped in its tracks, the general orders his artillery to fire upon his own troops. When his order is refused, he tries to have a large number of men shot by a firing squad on the grounds that 'only dead bodies would show the attack was impossible'. Ultimately, he agrees to have three non-commissioned soldiers chosen by their unit officers, tried in summary fashion and shot as examples. After the execution, the general and his immediate superior enjoy a breakfast of croissants in a luxurious chateau and congratulate themselves on how wonderfully the men died. In the last shot, the troops are ordered back to the trenches for another senseless battle.

*Paths of Glory* is quite different in tone from the most famous of the previous movies about World War I. *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) and *Grand Illusion* (1937) take a

critical yet humanist approach to the war; the two versions of *The Dawn Patrol* (1930 and 1938) provide spectacular images of aerial combat waged in the spirit of a doomed aristocratic code; and *Sergeant York* (1941) offers populist and patriotic mythologising. To find something similar, we need to compare *Paths of Glory* with Robert Aldrich's *Attack* (1956), which concerns World War II, or with Kubrick's other war films. Here, as elsewhere, Kubrick underlines war's absurdity by making the two sides virtually indistinguishable from one another, as if he were trying to illustrate a famous line from Walt Kelly's *Pogo*, a 1950s' comic strip that satirised the McCarthy era: 'We have met the enemy and he is us.' From the beginning of his career until the end, on the rare occasions in his war pictures when soldiers come face to face with someone from behind enemy lines, that person is either a mirror image or a woman. In *Fear and Desire* and *Full Metal Jacket*, the woman is killed in disturbing fashion. Where *Paths of Glory* is concerned, the conflict is internecine and the enemy simply unseen, consisting of nothing more than lethal gunfire and bombardment emanating from the smoke and darkness at the other side of no man's land; the film deviates from Kubrick's usual pattern only in the sense that, at the conclusion, when the French encounter a female German captive, she becomes less an object of perverse desire and murderous anxiety than a sort of maternal figure, producing a flood of repressed nostalgia and a momentary dissolution of psychic and bodily armour.

In certain other ways, however, *Paths of Glory* is quite atypical of Kubrick – most notably in the sense that, aside from *Spartacus*, which also stars Kirk Douglas and which Kubrick later disowned, it is the only one of his pictures that centres on an admirable character with whom the audience can feel a comfortable identification. Colonel Dax, as portrayed by Douglas, is not only given more close-ups and point-of-view shots than anyone else in the movie, he is also a paragon of heroic virtue. A handsome and brave officer, he takes the front-line position in a deadly charge on the Ant Hill, picking his way through a withering storm of gunfire, weaving around massive casualties and returning to the trenches to try and rally a unit of troops that have remained behind. Before the war, Dax also happens to have been 'perhaps the foremost criminal lawyer in all France'. When corrupt generals select three innocent soldiers to be executed, he passionately and eloquently comes to the men's defence. Against impossible odds, he's never afraid to speak truth to power. Near the beginning of the film, he tells the general in command of the regiment that Samuel Johnson once described patriotism as 'the last refuge of scoundrels' and, at the end, he angrily denounces an even more important general in patented Kirk Douglas style, with the body and face contorted in righteous anger and the voice pitched somewhere between a sob and a shout: 'You're a degenerate, sadistic old man,' he says, 'and you can go to *hell* before I ever apologise to you again!'

In other words, for all its grimness and horror, *Paths of Glory* is also a star vehicle designed to give its audience the pleasures of melodrama – a form Kubrick usually avoided or treated ironically, in the manner of the film noir or the art film. I should pause here to explain that I use the term 'melodrama' to indicate a suspenseful, emotionally charged plot filled



with action and last-minute rescues – a plot grounded in moral conflict, in which good usually but not necessarily wins. Melodrama of this sort is the cornerstone of classic Hollywood and of the liberal social problem picture with which Kirk Douglas was sometimes associated. Kubrick, a social pessimist by disposition, disliked it for reasons he articulated in an interview with Michel Ciment: 'Melodrama,' he said, 'uses all the problems of the world, and the difficulties and disasters which befall the characters, to demonstrate that the world is, after all, a benevolent and just place' (p. 163). *Paths of Glory* never goes that far, but it features a benevolent hero who battles evil, who witnesses the positive humanity of ordinary people and who survives to fight another day.

Some critics have argued that Dax is less than a hero because he remains a loyal officer of a corrupt regime. This may be one of the film's subtle ironies, but neither Humphrey Cobb's novel nor the theatrical adaptation by Sidney Howard give us such an upright and courageous character, and neither offer the same emotional consolations. Both earlier versions end abruptly, with the execution of the innocent soldiers (presented off-stage in the case of the play), and in neither does Dax play an especially significant role – at any rate, he doesn't lead an assault across no man's land, and he isn't the defence attorney at the court martial. Humphrey Cobb's depiction of the attack on the Pimple lacks even a vestige of heroic spectacle; when one of the officers climbs out of his trench to signal a charge, à la Douglas in the film, he is decapitated by machine-gun fire and his body falls on the men below. By contrast, the film gives Douglas an opportunity for derring-do and Kubrick the opportunity for bravura tracking and zooming shots across no man's land. It also creates the impression that the survivors in Douglas's unit might have reached the Ant Hill if not for the cowardice of Lieutenant Roget (Wayne Morris), who keeps his men in the trenches.

Surprisingly, the earliest, pre-Kirk Douglas version of the screenplay, which survives in Douglas's papers at the University of Wisconsin, was in at least one respect even more melodramatic. In his autobiography, *The Ragman's Son*, Douglas says that when he and the production crew arrived in Munich, he was given what he thought was a new script, revised by Kubrick with the help of Jim Thompson, containing numerous pages of cheap dialogue and ending with a last-minute reprieve of the three condemned soldiers: '[T]he general's car arrives screeching to halt the firing squad and he changes the men's death sentence to thirty days in the guardhouse. Then my character, Colonel Dax, goes off with the bad guy he has been fighting all through the movie . . . to have a drink, and the general puts his arm around my shoulder.' According to Douglas, when he confronted Harris and Kubrick about the revisions, Kubrick calmly replied, 'I want to make money.' Douglas threw the script across the room and launched into a tirade worthy of his film performances. 'We're going back to the original script,' he declared, 'or we're not making the picture.'[6]

The script that provoked this outburst is undated but signed by Kubrick and Thompson. It ends very much as Douglas says, but is somewhat morally ambiguous in that it makes the villain a bit less ruthless and the hero a bit more political. The last pages involve a conversation between Colonel Dax, who has more or less blackmailed the corps commander into

saving the condemned men, and General Rousseau, the division commander who insisted upon the execution and has now been relieved of command (in the released film this character's name is General Mireau). Dax says that he has 'always had the greatest professional respect' for Rousseau, and that it will be 'a great loss to the army' if the general is cast aside. The two men fall silent and walk along together, until Rousseau asks, 'Which of us was on the side of the angels, I wonder?' Dax seems puzzled, and Rousseau explains:

GEN. ROUSSEAU: Tyranny gave birth to the Magna Carta. Callousness and indifference to human welfare brought about the French Republic. And so on through History. It may be that progress comes really through a kind of challenge. And who is to say that if those men had been shot today, that it wouldn't have been a step towards the end of a certain kind of despotism in the army?

COL. DAX: General, you have a very strange theory there. I am not at all sure I agree with you.

GEN. ROUSSEAU: I'm not at all sure I agree with myself. You know, when they say that man is a rational animal, what they really mean is that he has a limitless ability to rationalize ... I am undoubtedly a very wicked man – but I don't feel wicked inside. Though, I suppose that's a prerequisite for being labeled truly wicked.

COL. DAX: Labels are fine for tin cans, but not for people. I don't know, perhaps every man is as righteous as the circumstances of his life allow him to be.

GEN. ROUSSEAU: That doesn't explain very much, Colonel.

COL. DAX Perhaps there are no explanations .... I was just thinking of a conversation I had with a client of mine who was an Atheist. I asked him how he could possibly believe that Christianity was a failure – that it hadn't worked? Very simple, he said. It was never tried ....

GEN. ROUSSEAU: Colonel, may I ask you to join me at the Chateau for some coffee?

COL. DAX: I'd be very happy to, sir. I might even suggest something a little stronger, if it isn't too early for you.

ROUSSEAU laughs and puts his arm around DAX's shoulder.

GEN. ROUSSEAU: It isn't too early for me, Colonel. In fact, I'd say it was rather late.

They walk away from the camera. The last fading strains of the band are heard.

THE END [7]

If we look closely at the completed film, we can see how a 'happy' ending similar to this one might have been achieved even in the script Douglas preferred. Two scenes, neither of which is in the source novel or the play, are especially significant. On the eve of the execution, the artillery officer who had been ordered by General Mireau to fire on his own troops comes to Dax's room and says, 'I have something to tell you that may have a great bearing on the court martial.' In the next scene, Dax interrupts a party at the commanding officers' chateau and has a tense argument in the library with General Broulard. 'Oh, by the way,' Dax says towards the end of their confrontation, 'were you aware that General Mireau



ordered his own battery to fire on his men?' This remark might have functioned as a dramatic *peripeteia*, enabling Dax to blackmail the high command into giving the three soldiers a nominal sentence in the guardhouse. As the film stands, however, our hero's last-minute effort comes to relatively little – Gerneral Broulard simply assumes that Dax is angling for Mireau's job.

What Douglas wanted, and what he got, was a film based on the second and third drafts of the script, which had undergone revisions by Calder Willingham. Shortly before his death in 1995, Willingham claimed that he was the author of '99%' of *Paths of Glory*; the completed script, he said, contained only two unimportant lines of dialogue by Kubrick and nothing by Jim Thompson (quoted in Polito, p. 405). Thompson's biographer, Robert Polito, has argued that Thompson was responsible for at least half of the movie, and the material retained from the early script I've quoted above supports his argument. It should also be noted that a great deal of the film's dialogue comes straight from Cobb's novel – including most of the big speeches in the trial scene, which Cobb writes in the form of a play. We may never sort out who contributed what to the screenplay, and Kubrick's reported motives for his attempt to change scripts are not convincing. Polito has offered the shrewd suggestion that Kubrick was playing 'ego chess' with Douglas, giving him an early draft in which Dax is a more politically expedient character, in order to make sure that the completed film wouldn't be compromised by further build-up of the star's role (pp. 404–5).

One thing is clear: the making of *Paths of Glory* involved a struggle between director and star. Douglas, who in print has called Kubrick 'a talented shit', portrays himself as the guardian of the film's integrity (p. 305). But Douglas also made sure that the film would be a proper vehicle for his stardom – even to the point of the unwritten rule that virtually every one of his pictures after his breakthrough role in *Champion* had to contain a scene in which he takes off his shirt. Sure enough, in his first scene in *Paths of Glory*, which has no equivalent in either the novel or the play, he is shown naked to the waist, washing his face from a basin of water in his underground bunker. Nearly all the major differences between the novel and the film can be accounted for by a need to build up Douglas's role, giving him plenty of melodramatic actions to perform. The emotionally shattering execution is one of the few places where his character is a marginal figure, witnessing a horror from the sidelines. After the execution, the film departs from the novel by creating two additional scenes – both written by Calder Willingham and used, according to Willingham, despite Kubrick's initial reservations – that give evidence of Colonel Dax's moral authority and of the innate goodness of humanity (neither of these scenes is in the final draft of the script).

Willingham claimed that during the production he argued with Kubrick that 'the stark brutality of ending the film with the execution of the soldiers would be intolerable to an audience and philosophically an empty statement as well' (quoted in Polito, p. 406). Kubrick ultimately agreed, even though the book and the play derived from the book had ended with the execution. In the first of Willingham's added scenes, General Broulard calls Dax to the chateau and allows him to witness General Mireau's humiliation. Mireau draws

himself up to attention. 'So that's it!' he says. 'You're making me the goat – the only completely innocent man in this whole affair!' He marches off in a huff, and Broulard offers the regimental commander's job to Dax, who abandons decorum and calls Broulard a degenerate. In the next scene, Dax stands at the window of a roadside café and witnesses his men as they first ogle and hoot at a captured German girl (Susanne Christian, later Christiane Kubrick) and then tearfully join her in singing '*Das Lied vom treuen Husaren*'.

In the last analysis, it might be said that the authorship of *Paths of Glory* has something to do with the tension between Kubrick, a dark satirist, and Douglas, a star whose flamboyant acting style and personal worldview were dependant upon melodramatic effects. Both men wanted to be the star, and in this case the clash between the auteur and the actor was reasonably productive. It should be remembered that Douglas was a sincere liberal whose films tend not only to highlight his stardom but also to communicate his social convictions. *Champion*, which gave him stardom, was a left-wing project whose producer was later blacklisted; Douglas helped to break the blacklist by crediting Dalton Trumbo for *Spartacus*; and Douglas's personal favourite of all his Bryna productions was another liberal allegory, *Lonely are the Brave* (1962), also scripted by Trumbo. From the scripts of *Paths of Glory*, he and Kubrick fashioned a dark, in some ways melodramatic film that allows Douglas to function as the voice of liberal reason and humanism, a character who tempers Kubrick's harsh, traumatic view of European history.

The credits for the completed film begin by announcing 'Bryna' production but also say that we are watching a 'Harris-Kubrick' production. Douglas comments wryly on this phenomenon in his autobiography: '[W]herever we went, Stanley made sure they stuck signs saying HARRIS-KUBRICK like FOR RENT signs .... It amused me ... I'm surprised that he didn't want the signs to just say KUBRICK. It amused me less years later when Kubrick told people I was only an employee on *Paths of Glory*' (p. 250). For his own part, Kubrick never responded to Douglas. In an unpublished 1962 interview with Terry Southern, however, he admitted that during the production there was discussion about letting the soldiers escape execution: 'there were some people who said you've got to save the men, but of course it was out of the question .... it would just be pointless. Also, of course, it really happened.'[8]

Ultimately, Kubrick might be said to have won his battle for authorship, because *Paths of Glory* is not only a skilful adaptation but also a director's picture in which the total 'performance' – acting, photography, *mise en scène*, cutting – is at the heart of the narrative's power. The film greatly intensifies the dramatic force of the novel (and of Sidney Howard's unsuccessful stage version) by eliminating minor characters and paring down the action that leads up to the attack on the Ant Hill. In moving from page to screen, it also achieves a brilliant realisation of the novel's 'cinematic' elements, especially by virtue of Kubrick and cinematographer George Krause's naturalistic location photography and the sharp visual and aural contrasts Kubrick draws between the chateau where the generals manage the war and the trenches where the war is fought.



Jonathan Rosenbaum has pointed out to me that the Schleissheim Palace just outside Munich where much of *Paths of Glory* was photographed is also a setting in Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961). The coincidence is especially interesting if one thinks of the *Marienbad*-like qualities of Kubrick's *The Shining*, which uses a Steadicam to explore the haunted corridors of a vast hotel. All three films depict upper-class intrigues amid the architecture of a decadent past – huge buildings made up of echoing spaces, luxurious furnishings and fascinating geometrical patterns. Where *Paths of Glory* is concerned, Kubrick was to some degree influenced by the elegant, *fin de siècle* settings in the films of Max Ophuls. According to actor Richard Anderson (Major Saint-Aubin in the film), on the first day of shooting Kubrick announced to the cast and crew that Ophuls had just died and that the moving-camera shots in the sequence they were about to perform would be dedicated to him (quoted in LoBrutto, p. 138). The sequence in question (written, according to Robert Polito, chiefly by Jim Thompson) is more dynamically and emphatically edited than a typical Ophuls movie, but it contains important moments when the camera dollies with the actors as they walk around a large room, engaging in a sort of perversely Ophulsian choreography. Kubrick makes excellent use of natural light and, in a style reminiscent of *Citizen Kane*, allows the room's sonic reverberation to make us feel the contrast between close-up and distant voices. The sequence is also noteworthy for the way the editing, camera movement and blocking of the actors help to signal the emotional undercurrents and shifts of tone in the conversation.

First we see a high-angle shot looking down from an immense ceiling as the tall, aristocratic General Mireau (George Macready) crosses a marbled floor to greet Broulard (Adolphe Menjou). 'Hel-lo, George!' Mireau says expansively, and we cut to an eye-level view, the camera moving left as the two men, their chests covered with medals, smile a little too broadly and walk along together, passing an indistinct background of imperial splendour. 'This is splendid! Superb!' says Broulard, his voice echoing off the walls. Mireau smiles modestly. 'Well,' he says, 'I try to create a pleasant atmosphere in which to work.' Broulard keeps up the flattery, almost to the point of suggesting that his compatriot is a little too comfortable: 'You've succeeded marvellously! I wish I had your taste in carpets and pictures!' The camera pans as he and Mireau approach a French-empire table and chairs, where Mireau stops, indicates a seat and turns, revealing a nasty duelling scar on his left cheek. 'You're much too kind, George, much too kind,' he says, his smile fading. 'I really haven't done much.'

A brief series of shot-reverse shots reveals the purpose of the visit: Broulard announces top-secret plans for 'something big', and Mireau, eyes gleaming, hands clasped almost prayerfully, intuits the attack on the Ant Hill. Broulard praises Mireau as a 'mindreader' and remarks, 'Paul, if there's one man in this army who can do this for me, it's you!' But Mireau resists, declaring that it would be 'out of the question' to expect his decimated and fatigued division to hold the Ant Hill, even in the unlikely event that they could capture it. Broulard rises and walks away from the table to a more authoritative position. 'Well, Paul,' he says,

looking back at the seated Mireau. 'There was something else I wanted to tell you; however, I'm sure you'll misunderstand my motives.' Mireau gets up expectantly and the camera dollies forward with him towards Broulard, who circles an eighteenth-century settee in the centre of the room. 'Talk around headquarters,' Broulard says, 'is that you are being considered for head of 12th Corps.' He takes Mireau's arm and they walk forward towards the camera, which dollies backward to keep them in frame. Broulard explains the need for a 'fighting general' as head of the Corps, and points out that Mireau's record is good enough for the promotion; he also implies that any refusal to attack the Ant Hill might have a bad effect on the impending promotion: 'No one would question your opinion – they'd simply get someone else to do the job.' The two men pause at a table, where Mireau, realising what is at stake, abstractedly pours himself a drink. Broulard pats him on the arm: 'So, you shouldn't let this influence your opinion, Paul.' Mireau suddenly becomes aware of what he is doing. 'Cognac?' he offers. 'No thanks, Paul,' Broulard says. 'Not before dinner.'

Broulard suavely takes a seat and a close-up shows him watching Mireau, who, in a wide shot, paces back and forth, his voice pitched like an orator: 'George, I'm responsible for the lives of 8,000 men .... The life of any one of those soldiers means more to me than all the stars and decorations and honours in France!' A reverse angle shows Broulard rising and walking into the distance at the other side of the room, where he pauses and turns,



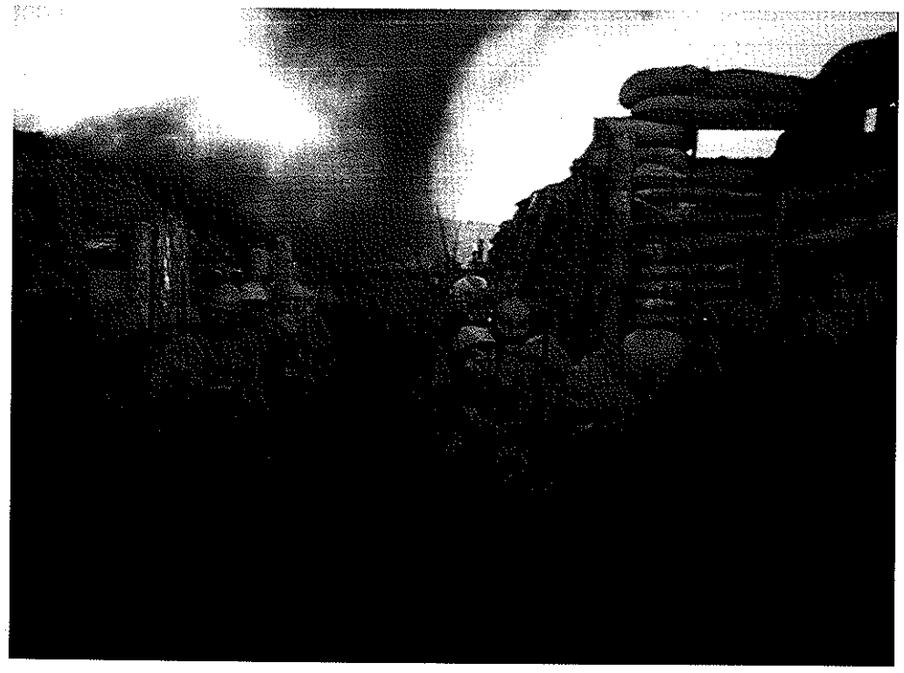
rather like a duellist aiming a shot, and raises his own voice: 'You think this attack is absolutely beyond the ability of your men at this time?' In a large close-up, Mireau smiles and speaks quietly: 'I didn't say that, George.' He walks forward, the camera dollying with him as he vigorously announces, 'Nothing is beyond those men, once their fighting spirit is aroused!' He takes Broulard's arm and they turn, walking back across the room, the camera following. They completely circle the settee and move towards the camera as Mireau asks for artillery and replacements to support the attack. Broulard replies, 'We'll see what we can do, if you're sure you can get along with what you have.' He pats Mireau on the back and reassures him, 'You are the man to take the Ant Hill!' The camera stops its movement as the two men turn again and walk off into the distance, where they become silhouetted and slightly conspiratorial figures. Daylight spills from the big windows behind them, leaving soft, long shadows on the marble floor, and their voices become distant echoes. 'When did you say you see this coming off?' Mireau asks. 'No later than the day after tomorrow,' Broulard answers. 'We just might do it!' Mireau says, driving his fist into his hand with a hollow-sounding smack that punctuates the end of the sequence.

The baroque chateau and the graceful movements of the camera have an ironic effect, as if they were illustrating Walter Benjamin's famous observation that every achievement of human culture is also a monument to barbarism. The irony is made explicit when a direct cut takes us to the Ant Hill, a meaningless, undistinguishable mound of dirt on the horizon of a wasteland, seen by an anonymous soldier through a slit in a trench. What follows is a reverse dolly of approximately a minute and a half's duration, showing General Mireau marching forward along the trench, visiting his troops. A litter containing a wounded solder is borne past as the general, followed closely by his fawning aide Saint-Aubin, moves briskly down the route, pausing occasionally in an attempt to inspire the regiment with fake bonhomie and pompous military clichés. The wide-angle lens and low camera level lend his movement force, and his peacock uniform makes a sharp contrast to the battle-weary men, some wearing bloody bandages, who stand at attention as he passes. The sky is grey; the dusty soldiers are cramped together along the dirt walls of the trench; and the cold air produces steam when people speak. Gerald Fried's non-diegetic music consists of nothing but a snare drum beating out an ominous march. In the background, we hear the intermittent sounds of machine-gun fire and bursting shells, some of which strike near the lip of the trench, causing Mireau to flinch slightly, even though he is trying to present an image of confidence. (The bombardments owe their effectiveness to special-effects technician Erwin Lange, who used explosive devices to toss dirt and heavy, shrapnel-like shards of black cork high into the sky.) In an implausible but poetically appropriate coincidence, Mireau pauses near the three men who will later be chosen for execution. 'Hello there, soldier,' he says to Private Ferol (Tim Carey), 'ready to kill more Germans?' He asks if Ferol is married, and when he learns not, he shouts, 'I'll bet your mother's proud of you!' Next he stops at Corporal Paris (Ralph Meeker). 'Hello there, soldier,' he says, 'ready to kill more Germans? Working over your rifle, I see. It's a soldier's best friend – you be good to it, and

it'll always be good to you!' At this point a huge explosion goes off, forcing Mireau to duck and keep on walking. After a long space, he arrives at a chubby, grinning sergeant who is standing next to Private Arnaud (Joe Turkel). 'Hello there, soldier,' he says again, 'ready to kill more Germans?'

The long take ends here, with a sudden close-up of the grinning sergeant, who is clearly mad. When Private Arnaud explains that the sergeant can't respond properly because he is shell-shocked, Mireau flies into a rage, slapping the sergeant with almost enough force to knock him down. (The scene would have reminded audiences in the 1950s of a much-publicised event of World War II, when General George Patton slapped a soldier in an army hospital.) 'There is no such thing as shell shock,' he announces, and orders the miscreant taken out of the unit. The general and his aide start off again, the camera following them. 'You were right, Sir,' Saint-Aubin says. 'That sort of thing could spread .... I'm convinced that these tours of yours have an incalculable effect on the men!' The camera punctuates the end of the sequence by halting and allowing the two officers to walk away just at the moment when a couple of exhausted soldiers enter from a trench to the right and walk toward us.

A bit later in the film, Kubrick returns to the same trench to show Colonel Dax preparing for the charge on the Ant Hill. This sequence, lasting approximately two minutes and consisting of eight cuts, constitutes one of the most impressive 'tunnel' images of Kubrick's





career – an iconic moment for both the film and the director, and clear evidence of Kubrick's ability to generate poetic or dramatic emotion through the power of photography and sound recording. Unlike General Mireau's similar walk, Dax's is shown from the character's subjective point of view. In the first shot, however, the camera seems to be showing us the scene independently of any character; we move straight down the trench, looking through a wide-angle lens from an eye-level position, while scores of dirty, unshaven men packed shoulder to shoulder on either side of the walkway gaze silently back at us. Kubrick takes his visual cue from the first page of Cobb's novel, which describes the soldiers as having a 'grayish', 'constipated' look. Everything is in shades of grey – the overcast sky, the wooden pallets at the base of the trench and the massed figures covered with a chalky powder that makes them resemble statuary. A great many of the men are smoking cigarettes or pipes while an incessant artillery bombardment goes off around them. Amid the overwhelming noise, smoke and dirt, the soldiers (played by a German police unit) are sharply individuated, their fatigued faces and grubby uniforms arrayed in a line that leads off to infinity.

A reverse shot shows Dax walking forward, the wide-angle camera retreating before him as he grimly passes among his men, ignoring a bomb blast that makes everyone else duck. The bombardment increases – rushing, high-pitched sounds, followed by shattering explosions that arrive with increasing regularity. At least twenty-five blasts go off during the

two-minute sequence: a distant shell, then two close shells, then three bunched together, then another, and another, and another, until the soundtrack is filled with whooshing, shrieking and concussion. In one of the point-of-view shots, Dax sees the troops lean hard against the trench, hunched and turning their faces away. In the penultimate shot, the camera moves through a cloud of smoke in which only a few ghostly figures are visible, as if it were journeying into the underworld.

Prior to the assault, we hear General Mireau argue that troops under his command are expected to 'absorb bullets and shrapnel, and by doing so make it possible for others to get through'. He estimates that 5 per cent will be killed by their own artillery ('a very generous allowance'), 10 per cent in no man's land and 50 per cent in taking and holding the hill. In the actual assault, it looks as if nearly all the men in Dax's unit are killed. The attack opens with a lofty crane shot of the battlefield as the troops surge out of their trench like swarming maggots on a rotted surface. Against a cacophony of machine-gun fire, explosions and yells, Dax repeatedly blows a whistle to summon his men forward. Kubrick uses multiple cameras to photograph the action, but most of the sequence involves two types of reframing: steady tracking shots from left to right, in which the troops scurry in wave-like oscillation across shell holes and mounds of dirt, and hand-held shots (operated by Kubrick himself) that zoom in and out on Dax as he leads the charge. The bodies of dead and wounded soon litter the field, and a bomb lands squarely on one of the corpses, apparently blowing it to smithereens.

The remainder of the film, which is paced more slowly, is devoted to the ritual killing of three more men amid the baroque stairways, ballrooms and gardens of the chateau. Kubrick stages the trial scene in a palatial, relatively empty room with a chessboard pattern on the floor, where marching feet and judicial rhetoric are given minatory reverberation. General Mireau lolls elegantly across a sofa on the sideline; Saint-Aubin, the prosecuting officer, paces back and forth and smirks at the proceedings; and the three accused men are lined up on chairs facing an impatient, irritated chief judge (Peter Capell). The drama arises not from any doubt about the outcome, but from the breathtaking ease with which standards of evidence are dismissed, and from the kinetic effects of photography and editing. Telephoto close-ups of the lawyers and judges alternate with extreme wide-angle shots of the accused soldiers, who, when they are called forward to testify, seem to be standing at attention in a crazy-house.

As usual in Hollywood movies with foreign settings, most of the cast in *Paths of Glory* speaks in American accents, but the villains have trained voices and 'European' enunciation. By all accounts, Kubrick seldom supplied his players with specific notes or keys to interpretation; when the film was completed, however, he left instructions for dubbing the actor's voices into foreign languages. Where Kirk Douglas was concerned, he wanted to keep the actor's innate emotionalism somewhat in check, and to make it clear that Colonel Dax is loyal to the army: 'Be careful not to let Dax wear his heart on his sleeve. Despite the conflict with his commanding officers he is always a soldier; *and never let him indulge in*



*self pity, or, for that matter, never let him break his heart over the injustice being done to his men*' (Kubrick's emphasis). Douglas's antagonist, George Macready, had often been cast as a supercilious aristocrat and a man we love to hate (most memorably as Balin, the fascist villain in *Gilda*), but Kubrick tried to keep him from seeming too melodramatically evil: 'Extremely dignified, superb diction, *strong*, aristocratic. In his own mind, general Mireau is never, even for a moment, aware of the selfish motives that seem to guide his actions .... He is proud of his rank and very ambitious but *he is not a scheming villain. The job here is to play him as sympathetically as possible and to make us believe he always means what he says*, no matter how cliché-ridden it may sound, and no matter how blatantly cruel and selfish it may seem' (Kubrick's emphasis). As the more calculating General Broulard, Adolph Menjou, who had recently been a prominent right-wing witness in the HUAC investigations into communists in Hollywood, had other qualities to offer. An urbane star in silent movies directed by Chaplin, Lubitsch and Griffith, Menjou later proved to be especially good at rapid-fire dialogue (see *The Front Page* [1930], *Stage Door* [1937] and one of Kubrick's favourite films, *Roxie Hart* [1942]). Kubrick may have wanted to exploit Menjou's recent political activities, but the actor's continental charm and distinctive voice were even more important: 'Strong, perfect pronunciation, as close as possible to Menjou's own voice, which is something rather unique and special. Intellectual but warm. He has a

Machiavellian brilliance which he hides in a cloak of warmth and friendliness. *When he is warm and friendly, he must really be warm and friendly. We must never feel he is pretending to be warm*.... He means what he says about doing things for the good of the war. *Don't help the audience hate him*' (Kubrick's emphasis).

About the minor players, Kubrick had equally interesting things to say. Wayne Morris, who plays the cowardly Lieutenant Roget, was a veteran of Warner Bros. in the 1930s and 1940s; a handsome, Nordic type, he never quite achieved stardom, perhaps because his voice lacked authority. Kubrick realised that Morris's slight whine made him perfect for the role: 'A voice that a big man should have but revealing its insecurity as subtl[y] as possible. Middle-class, average education.... He is not mean, he is weak. He is the kind of man who tries to get along in life by being a "nice guy"'. For other players, the instructions were brief but explicit. On the inimitable Timothy Carey as Ferol: 'He has a quality that is really unique and almost impossible to duplicate. The biggest danger with him ... is overdoing the thing. Favor the too normal rather than the too abnormal.' On Joe Turkel as Arnaud: 'Lower-class but not back-gutter slang.... Don't let him get too self righteous either. At the court martial [he] feels a bit guilty despite the unfairness of his being there.' On Ralph Meeker as Paris: 'Strong, manly, middle class, a good soldier.' And, finally, on Emile Meyer, unforgettable in that same year as the sadistic cop in *Sweet Smell of Success*, who was cast against type as Father Dupree: 'Try and match his *lower-class, rough voice*. It's a pleasant relief from the stereotype priest.'[9]

These notes demonstrate Kubrick's close attention to social class. Alexander Walker has even gone so far as to argue that Kubrick was making a movie about 'war as the continuation of class struggle'.[10] It should be pointed out, however, that the film is more liberal than revolutionary in its political spirit: Dax, the most heroic and morally upright figure, is a member of the officer class and Corporal Paris, the most capable of the three condemned soldiers, attended the same school and has the same background as the lieutenant who selects him for execution. To be sure, class divisions are everywhere apparent, and the film's satire is aimed directly at the military hierarchy. (When Dax volunteers to be executed in place of his men, Broulard immediately replies, 'This is not a question of officers!') Even so, the most vivid conflicts are dramatised in the arguments between Dax and the two generals. There are also class implications of a debatable, stereotypical sort in the different reactions of the three condemned men to their executions. Private Ferol, played with customary drollery by Carey, is a slow-witted reprobate and lumpen-proletarian chosen to stand trial because he is deemed a 'social undesirable' ('Me?' he says. 'A social undesirable?'). On the eve of the execution, he eagerly chews on a roast duck sent by General Mireau, then spits it out when he thinks it might be drugged. When Corporal Paris mutters that a cockroach crawling across the floor of the barn will be alive tomorrow and will have 'more contact with my wife and child than I will', Ferol purses his lips, reaches off screen to bash the cockroach and wryly announces, 'Now you got the edge on him.' But when a priest arrives to announce that there will be no reprieve, Ferol begins sobbing like a child. As he is led to execution (in a wide-angle subjective shot similar to Dax's



journey down the trench), he threatens to upset the 'dignity' of the occasion by clutching a set of prayer beads and whimpering, 'Why do I have to die? Why don't they die?' For his part, the working-class Private Arnaud becomes drunk and tries to attack the priest, only to be punched by Corporal Paris and driven backward into a post that cracks his skull; unconscious, he's carried to execution on a stretcher and pinched awake for the firing squad. It is Paris, the somewhat more educated and socially well-placed figure, who manages to salvage his dignity, though it could be argued that he becomes a sort of collaborator in the spectacle of execution. At first, he cringes and begs pathetically for his life, but then he accepts the last rites and marches stoically to his death, refusing a blindfold from his apologetic former schoolmate.

The execution scene, played against the background of the chateau and its formal grounds, gains emotional impact not only from Kubrick's manipulation of space, but also from his deliberate pacing. Although the sequence is skilfully edited, it gives the impression that events are unfolding in real time; the camera advances inexorably towards the three stakes where the men will be positioned and shot, its passage lengthened by the wide-angle lens. And the visually elongated, elaborately drawn-out ceremony – which involves a parade-ground full of soldiers, a row of decorated officers and numerous reporters from the newspapers – looks grotesquely overblown in relation to the three pathetic figures who are being executed. The spectacular background helps to reinforce the central irony of Humphrey Cobb's novel, which takes its title from a line in Thomas Gray's 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard': 'The paths of glory lead but to the grave.' But when the killing happens, Kubrick gives the audience nowhere to look except at the executed men; capital punishment in all its remorseless efficiency and crude brutality is faced square on, without distant architecture or picturesque embellishment.

Calder Willingham may have been correct in arguing that audiences needed some kind of relief after the trauma of the execution, but the effectiveness of the film's last scenes has more to do with the director's taste than with the writing itself. When the captured German girl melts the hearts of a rowdy band of French infantrymen, everything could easily have descended into sentimentality. Kubrick avoids this danger by virtue of *typage*, naturalistic lighting and the skilful way he modulates from a mood of barbaric carnival to a mood of love and grief. The tavern owner (Jerry Hauser) introduces the girl in the style of a borsht-belt comic, but her halting, amateurish singing, plus the montage of individual figures in the audience, gives the scene a rough-hewn authenticity. Using mostly non-professionals from the area around Munich, Kubrick shows an array of faces – a handsome but rather sadistic-looking fellow who shouts 'louder', a pale-skinned boy, a grey-bearded older man, a student, a peasant, all gradually moved to tearful humming. The song is Frantzen-Gustav Gerdes's 'The Faithful Hussar', a 'folkish' tune from the '*Befreiungskriege*' of the early nineteenth century, when Napoleon's army occupied the Rhineland. It can still be heard in southern Germany during the February carnival; it speaks of love and death during war, and resonates ironically with the bloody history of the region, which extended into World War I:

*Es war einmal ein treue Husar*
*Der liebt sein Mäedchen ein ganzes Jahr . . .*
*Und als man ihm de Botschaft bracht,*
*Das sein Liebchen im Sterben lag,*
*Da liess er all sein Hab und Gut*
*Und elite seinem Hertzliebchen zu.*
*Ach, bitte Mutter bring ein Licht*
*Mein Liebchen stirbt.*

(There was once a faithful hussar/ Who loved his girl all year long . . ./ And when he was brought the news/ That his sweetheart lay dying,/ He left all his goods behind/ And rushed to his heart's true love./ Oh please, Mother, bring a light,/ My sweetheart is going to die.)

This song seems all the more ironic when Colonel Dax, after listening to it, is informed that his troops have been ordered back into action. As he walks into his quarters and closes the door in the face of the camera, Gerald Fried's non-diegetic score picks up Gerdes's sweet melody, orchestrating it as military march. The absurd war goes on and the film ends with the survivors returning to their original roles. I suspect that what most people remember



about the picture as a whole is not so much the heroism of Colonel Dax as the brilliant photographic *grisalle* of trench warfare, the execution of three soldiers in the name of patriotic honour, and the brief interlude of nostalgia before the barbaric system asserts itself again. This may have been the director's plan from the beginning and the reason why critics have given relatively little attention to the film's production history, its relationship to a relatively unknown novel and its underlying political tensions.

## III. Dolores, Lady of Pain

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, the story of a European paedophile's obsession with a prepubescent American girl (or, as the paedophile puts it, the story of an 'enchanted traveler' who finds himself 'in the possession and thralldom of a nymphet')[11], was first published in the United States in 1958 by G. P. Putnam's Sons, and has since become such a canonical work that the controversy surrounding its original appearance may be difficult to appreciate. Kingsley Amis, the author of *Lucky Jim* and other celebrated comic novels about sex, wrote in the British journal *The Spectator* that Nabokov's book was 'thoroughly bad in both senses: bad as a work of art, that is, and morally bad'. *Lolita* was denounced in the British parliament, banned in the UK, banned twice in France (where it had originally been published by the Olympia Press, a purveyor of what Billy Wilder once described as the sort of books you can read with one hand) and attacked as 'repulsive' and 'disgusting' by Orville Prescott in *The New York Times*. Before G. P. Putnam's took a chance with the novel, most American publishers had rejected it outright. Simon & Schuster reportedly turned it down because Mrs Schuster refused to have her name on 'that dirty book'. Even James Laughlin of New Directions, a press that specialised in avant-garde literature, refused to publish it. (Laughlin claimed it might reflect badly on Nabokov's wife and son.)[12]

But *Lolita* also had important defenders among the most distinguished literary figures of the day. Upon its original European publication, Graham Greene selected it as one of the best books of the year. When it appeared in the US, Lionel Trilling praised it as a story about romantic love, not about the mere sex he associated with another recent book, the best-selling Kinsey report. So intense were the public reactions for and against the book that it became a blockbuster success, selling 3 million hardback copies of its first US edition, remaining number one on the best-seller list for fifty-six weeks and quickly being translated into fifteen languages. At the height of the craze, unauthorised Lolita dolls were being sold as toys in Italy.

Nabokov was surprised by his good fortune. As he later boasted, he had dared to write about one of at least three themes that were virtually taboo in American publishing, the other two being 'a Negro-White marriage which is a complete and glorious success resulting in lots of children and grandchildren' and 'the total atheist who lives a happy and useful life, and dies in his sleep at the age of 106' (p. 314). His book even attracted the interest of Hollywood, where it fell into the hands of Stanley Kubrick, a director well suited to bring it to the screen. Nabokov and Kubrick had a number of traits in common, including an