

A Nihilistic Killing: “*What’s the Difference?*”

by Erika Yang

There lies an exploration of the purpose of life in Kubrick’s films. Often accompanying this existentialist search is an underlying thread of nothingness to create an intricate dance between liveliness and nullness, a concept that takes its roots in his earlier films. Kubrick emphasizes a nihilistic outlook on life in *The Killing* through the breakdown of different perspectives during a high stakes event and the repetition of conjoining mundane scenes to ultimately nullify the guise of difference, connecting these two techniques to the formal themes of the film noir genre in which the film is styled.

The heist is intended to change the lives of its members, releasing them from their daily prisons. For Johnny, freedom from a life of serial crime; for George, love from a loveless marriage; to name a few. The group is united in their goal, yet formally and narratively, they are separated and alone. Narratively, there is a strong emphasis on a ‘need-to-know’ basis with each member only aware of their own part in the operation as well as adhering to the predetermined structure of the heist. The narrative separation then leads to the formal isolation of each member in the film’s structure, with each member essentially having their individual plot play out over the heist. This intentional separation creates a focus on each character, providing some foundation to their motivations for participating in the heist. It highlights their seeming importance to the ploy at hand. Without Mike, there would be no distraction for the guards; without Johnny, there would be no money collected; without George, there would be no entrance to the money; without Nikki, there would be no money to collect; and so on. Yet one by one, they all fall down. Everyone plays their role, and once their role is over, there is nowhere left for them to go. For the ones that escape the heist unscathed, they’re left waiting for the money, again

based on the predetermined plan. Everything in regards to the heist itself is so meticulously planned out that when something steps out of that framework, everyone becomes at a loss for what to do. Most of the members of the heist reunite in this apartment to collect the fruits of their labor after being separated during it, but this reunification is disrupted by another party.

Formally, this switch is most apparent in the aftermath of the heist where the remaining members await Johnny. At 1:13:28, after George shoots, Kubrick sets us up for the typical shot/reverse shot except the characters on the other side of George are dead, instead maintaining a roaming eyeline match as the camera moves according to George. We then deal with a change in technical perspective as we navigate through the apartment from George's first person point of view. The camera and George are viewing from the same perspective. This is the first and only break from the formal third person point of view and occupies barely half a minute of screentime. Yet despite the small pocket of time, this temporary switch marks the beginning of the end. The change in perspective drives two types of disorientation: for George, it is the realization of what he's done; for the audience, it is the realization that we are viewing from George's perspective. George makes his way to the door, but what will happen after he walks through that door? The shootout was not part of the plan.



Figure 1. George's eyeline match.

Rather than finding out immediately, we then go back forty minutes to Johnny after the heist. And this highlights the complexity of time in the film. During the heist, time feels constant due to the different perspectives of the heist. We run through part of the heist for one member, but then we essentially go back in time to view the heist from the perspective of a different number, creating an illusion of stillness. Kubrick insists upon viewing the heist from the perspective of each member. He creates a loop that is repeating in time but not content, combating the traditional notion of a loop as perhaps monotonous due to the repeating nature. However, the loop ends when the members it has been looping around end. Once the remaining cast dies off in the apartment, the film is free to focus entirely upon Johnny, the one person who knew everything about the operation. But the heist isn't over yet. It only seems like it's over when Johnny realizes he must be the one to get away with all the money, but he needs to get away with all the money first, which he ultimately doesn't, leaving us with the final words of 'What's the difference?' when Fay tells him to run. Indeed, what is the difference between running and staying? All throughout the film, Kubrick has put the characters in positions of apparent control and poised them for success, only to strip it all away, nullifying all of their efforts. After all, what good is money when you're not alive to use it? The whole purpose of the heist was for the heist crew to rob enough money to improve their otherwise seemingly mundane or troubled existences. Except they were never meant to succeed. The operation was set for failure as soon as George leaked it to Sherry who ensured that if they did succeed, Val would be the one to mug them of the money. George would have never been able to keep Sherry regardless of the outcome of the heist. The heist is a façade that the characters have crafted to provide the semblance of a better life than the ones they currently lead. But if their lives are no better

(essentially nonexistent) after the heist, then what was it all for? Would there have even been a difference had they succeeded?

Kubrick, like the characters, has created a guise of difference with the heist, except that he was well aware of the ultimate outcome in that there is no real outcome. By detailing each individual member's experiences during the heist, he convinces the audience that there is some importance to each of them – that their role matters enough to be granted this dedicated time slot. It may be the same general event (the seventh race) replayed over and over again, but the different people involved give it liveliness, providing a literal fresh perspective to the event. But given the eventual result of their work, there might as well have been no heist to begin with since everyone ends at the same place they started or dead. Kubrick has created a trap for both his characters and his audience to realize the nihilism of life. The variety in perspectives sets up the misdirection that there is a meaningful purpose in life. He provides an ephemeral hope for those struggling to turn their life around only to dash them in the end with his reality.

Repetition of an image can become either monotonous or aggravating depending on the presentation. Regardless, it draws attention to the image. It is especially interesting that in a film where a general event repeats itself, Kubrick only actually repeats two specific sequences – when the white horses pulling the stable and the race horses pulling into the track for the seventh race. The sequence first appears at the beginning of the film around 1:30 and we don't see it again until the seventh race, where Kubrick then proceeds to repeat that scene three times within ten minutes towards the end with the same announcer dialogue too.

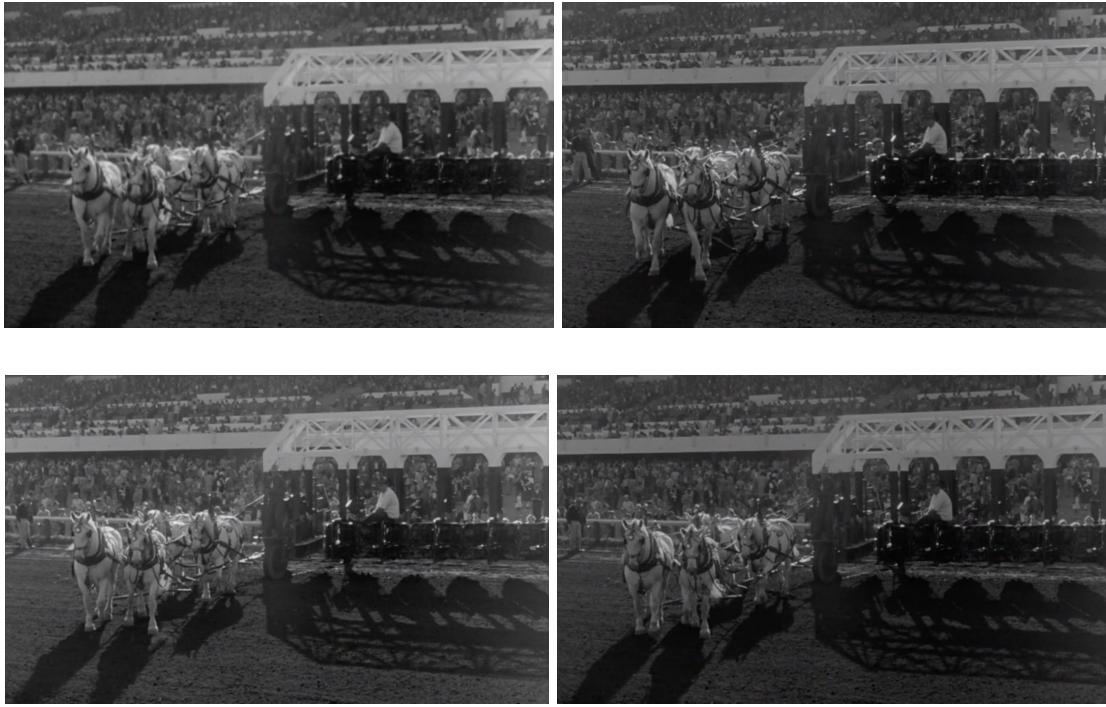


Figure 2. The four repeated scenes.

Visually, there also does not seem to be anything that differentiates any of these sequences from the other, leading to the assumption that Kubrick is reusing the same shots each time. While the different perspectives of each of the crew members might have made it less immediately obvious that we are revisiting the same time period, the repetition of the exact same shot sequence acts as a reminder of the loop that Kubrick has enclosed upon the audience during this time. The main difference, however, lies in the duration of the shots. Examining the three sequences at the end, they all begin with the same white horses pulling in. The first of the three allows for the white horses to cross to the right of the frame before dissolving to the race horses lining up.



Figure 3. The first of the final three sequences where the horses fully cross the frame.

The second of the three is almost identical except the white horse scene is cut off once the horses near the foreground of the frame and then it dissolves to the race horses lining up. The final repetition then only allows for the first few seconds of the white horses before cutting back to the heist entirely, not repeating the race horse lineup. The gradual reduction of the repeating sequences placed towards the latter part of the heist acts as a marker that our time in the seventh race and in this heist is running out. We're allowed the time to let the white horses almost fully walk across the frame the first time the sequence is repeated, and the following scene of the race horses lining up facing the left can be construed as a direction back in time since on a timeline, going left is usually going back further into the past. It serves as a reminder that while we have been revisiting the same time period albeit from different perspectives, this loop is coming to a close, and then we have the last repetition that doesn't repeat the race horses lining up scene. After this final repetition, we only see Johnny's side of the last part of the heist, and we only catch back up with the remaining members after Johnny initially secures the money (aka when the main heist is complete).

Through this repetition, Kubrick has established a reminder for the audience that what they are viewing all occupies the same timeframe. Yet the effect of including all the different viewpoints can lead the audience to forget this, thinking that the story is progressing in time

when it is not actually. When Kubrick inserts the repeated reminders though, it is like a rude awakening – a disruption to the supposed reality we are in. It builds up an uneasiness that what is being presented is not as straightforward as it may initially seem.

This illusion of progression harkens back to *The Killing*'s roots as a film noir. We see many of the genre's techniques played out in the film, the most relevant of which for this topic is the manipulation of time or the complex chronological order as defined by Schrader. He claims the effect of "hopelessness and lost time." In conjunction with Schrader's other claim that film narration (another film noir technique) "creates a mood of *temps perdu*," we can see how Kubrick begins to construct the film as nihilistic. He uses film noir's premise of lost time and nostalgia to convey the meaningless loop of life. Dedicating specific areas of time to each member constructs the illusion of meaning and importance but Kubrick kills them off one by one, nullifying that importance by nullifying their existence altogether. The passage of time presented in the film noir style emphasizes that nullification. By constantly reverting back to the past, Kubrick doesn't necessarily create that flavor of nostalgia but an interest in people's lives, yet that interest is not one that pans out in the end. He inverts the audience's perception of the events and raises the question of whether or not the heist was even worth it. The narration placed such an emphasis on the exact adhesion to the details of the heist, instilling the belief that if even one operation failed, that would mark failure for the whole heist. It sets the audience up to expect success if all these parts are carried out as intended and through that success, a happy ending for everyone involved.

Schrader claims the overarching theme of film noir to be "a passion for the past and present, but also a fear for the future." We see how this is present in *The Killing* with Kubrick's consistent return to the different viewpoints for the heist, creating a reluctance to progress the

heist and a sense that the heist might be considered a high point in each of the characters' lives, especially given the context that the heist is supposed to be a life changer for all the members involved. The fear for the future is evident as even though the main heist itself is seemingly complete once Johnny gets away from the racetrack with the money, the money is never actually secured and distributed. Each attempt to do so is thwarted by an outside party, and the money is always in danger of being repossessed. Connecting this with a nihilistic perspective, Kubrick's manipulation of time removes the poignancy of the passage of time, and as a result, the poignancy of life as well. By not allowing the characters to progress from their old lives despite a large coordinated effort, he showcases the trivialness of their lives and of life in general. We are presented with a group of people who want to change their lives for the better (even if the method in which they try to enact this change is morally questionable) and even though they succeed with their plan of action, they still ultimately fail in the end. The crew all end up either dead or arrested and the money is lost in the wind. All of their efforts were for naught. It is a killing in the monetary sense, the physical sense, and the metaphorical sense. Yet this feeling of hopelessness doesn't reveal itself until the very end. In fact, Kubrick plays with the audience until the end at the airport, allowing some hope for Johnny to at least get his happy ending. Life in *The Killing* operates under this illusion of hope and mobility until the end when we realize nothing mattered. It begets the question of was there ever real hope to begin with or were these characters always destined to live their lives out in their predetermined manners and any attempt to break out of the set lines would result in a worse life. No matter how many times we may want to go back to the past and relive from different perspectives, does any of it really matter? Each member from the different perspectives failed in their attempts to break out of their molds after all. Examining the film in its film noir style places a highlight on the usage of time and how that

affects Kubrick's nihilism as we see how that passion for the past is really the result of a bleak future. Going back into the past in *The Killing* is a way to provide a temporary purpose to the characters' lives, but as soon as that purpose is over, so are their lives essentially. Purpose in life is ephemeral in this film, giving rise to Kubrick's nihilistic perspective on life. The lack of a true grounded purpose reveals the lack of meaning in the lives presented in the film.

The Killing's usage of different perspectives and repetition in conjunction with its film noir lens of time spotlights Kubrick's beginning roots of nihilism in his films. Why do we do what we do? What is it all for? What's the difference? Through ways of a heist movie, he creates a comfortable illusion for the audience only to upend that comfort with a nihilistic realization at the end of the movie when all the painstaking details and planning from the rest of the film is proven to be essentially worthless. If all the effort to change one's path in life is nullified, what is the meaning in life? In a way, Kubrick presents life as a MacGuffin – existing to only progress but without any actual importance. The desire to advance in some aspect of life is at the heart of the characters' motivations in *The Killing*, but they end up failing at just living, motivating a nihilistic outlook on the lack of meaning in life. However, it is not necessarily a concrete claim that life is trivial, but a probing question and one that can be considered in much of Kubrick's future work. We can begin to examine the roots behind this apparent fascination with life (or lack of life) and whether this view changes throughout the rest of his films. If we take *The Killing* as a starting point in Kubrick's exploration of life and nihilism, how does that frame his films that center around war (*Paths of Glory*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Dr. Strangelove*) or his films that center around humanity and society (*2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Barry Lyndon*)? Kubrick's habit to give and take away purpose in the lives of his characters lends itself raises a multitude of questions

surrounding his attitude towards life itself, and *The Killing* helps to lay the groundwork by providing a nihilistic viewpoint on the matter, leaving room for future exploration.