

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Death in fragments</b>
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Source	<i>Soho Weekly News</i>
Date	1976 Feb 19
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	32
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	The killing of a Chinese bookie, Cassavetes, John, 1976

## O N F I L M

## Death in Fragments

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The Killing of a Chinese Bookie  
Columbia I & II

Perhaps an hour, perhaps more into John Cassavetes' 131-minute new movie, things began making sense for me. Not the story, which I don't wholly understand yet—but the style, and the less focused



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of events we've never been made privy to. That, together with the elliptical, largely improvised dialogue; and a camera that occasionally seems to have only a passing interest in what's going on; makes for more practical difficulties in following the movie than you may find necessary. I begin to find them necessary, and the discovery of such necessity—a discovery common to all art—is one of the handsomest rewards for putting up with *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*.

The bookie—clearly a crime-lord much bigger than that—we see just for a moment, on the occasion of his death. An old man, rich, vulnerable, sybaritic, he is shot in his bath by one Cosmo Vitelli, who owns a club on Sunset Strip, and who kills only to erase a ruinous gambling debt. The movie is Cosmo's story, from the few days before to his few hours after the killing—Cosmo with his contacts and his club girls and his appealing, none too lucid, philosophy of life. What saves his story—and will kill him—is that he has a task that



Ben Gazzara

the thing runs on crossed ignition wires he has no key to open the trunk for the jack and the spare tire), literally builds its excitement on feeling for an improvisation, which is Cosmo's style and the film's main way of understanding him. Much of that killing is brilliantly photographed, the action caught in intermittent pools of light on the grounds of the bookie's dark, well-guarded estate. But it chemistry, reminiscent of the London sequences, the best parts of *Husbands*, holds things together. And that depends on the half-parody, half-passionate, presence of Cosmo's girls. They are at the center of the movie. They help define him when he is flush with orchids, champagne, and a rented limousine. And he returns to them when his time is out and he asserts a role in the face of the other roles life is forcing him to play.

He is in love with one of them, a beautiful black girl named Rachel (Azizi Johari), who doesn't trust him. But all of them, Sherry (Alice Friedland), with the spectacular breasts, and Margo (Donna Gordon), who's too short to get a job in a fancier club, and the others, become a frieze for Cosmo's actions. Indeed, they are the only context for him we know. Knowledge comes hard, and in bits and pieces—which is a rationale for Cassavetes' camera, a rationale that doesn't always work, but works often enough to whet the appetite for more. All personality suggests mystery, even the least complicated. Cassavetes insists on

stronger in the end.

To some extent, *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* builds around Ben Gazzara as Cosmo, his presence as much as his performance—since I am not convinced that at any given moment he is altogether sure of what he is going to say. Gazzara seems all method, just as the film seems all method, and he is remarkable to watch groping inward for the right quality of hazy, life-



Soto Joe Hugh



Azizi Johari



Meade Roberts



Alice Friedland



Robert Phillips



John Red Kullers



Timothy Carey



Seymour Cassel



Donna Marie Gordon



Morgan Woodward



Al Ruban

performances, and the talk, and the feeling for a world at once intimate and utterly impersonal in its demands. *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* is Cassavetes' toughest movie, and his most interesting, the first to my mind in which method and meaning totally agree. Even the title gives some idea. After *Shadows*, *Faces*, *Husbands*, *A Woman Under the Influence*, after so many films suggesting a quality or attempting a portrait, this one openly proclaims an action. It is a nutty action to be sure, bizarre from the edges right into the center, but it the movie with a middle and an end—though I'm not so confident I can locate a beginning. That's true in a philosophic sense only. Cassavetes' actual technique goes the other way round—to cut from a sequence before it's ended, sometimes just after it's begun; so the characters will often be living in terms of a lot

helps define him and the time he wastes or puts to use, and that determines his doom. With any Cassavetes movie you have to stay loose—with this one, the loosest of all. It makes all the difference to have a fate more specific than merely growing old, or bored, or crazy, to hang some of that looseness on.

During some passages everything tightens up—the actual killing; Cosmo's later struggle to escape the gang that now wants to eliminate its amateur hit man. These passages are valuable not only because they are good in a fairly conventional suspense-movie way, but also because they help crystallize, re-define, and justify the main interests of Cassavetes' method. Thus the hit, which begins with the virtual kidnapping of Cosmo, and continues as the hot car the gang provides him develops a flat on the Freeway (and because

takes such a sequence in a sense to certify the way so much else is photographed—rather casually in relation to the camera frame—and to suggest some reasons you might grow to like it.

When the camera pans right across the stage in Cosmo's joint, the Crazy Horse West, and you pick up maybe four torsos, six legs, and seven feet, but no heads or faces you can pin them to, you are in the presence of a fairly special kind of film-making. It is as if the cameraman didn't know quite where to go, and he was asking a lot on faith until he found out. He doesn't really find out, and given the nature and the quality of the show at the Crazy Horse West, he couldn't. Each number, an elaborate fantasy combining sex and sadness with a kind of desperation not seen since the original *Blue Angel*, has been produced into a shambles. Only the sexual

no explanations, but rather a celebration of what you can't understand in easy ways.

Cosmo has a lead performer, a Mr. Sophistication (Meade Roberts), who is fat, aging, probably homosexual, and articulate in unenlightening ways. He sings while the girls strip, and I suppose he gives a degree of soured class to a show that otherwise is mainly flesh. Cosmo isn't so close to him, but I suspect they may be paired within a world that keeps requiring both passion and detachment from its principals. At the other extreme is the gang (with Seymour Cassel, Timothy Agoglia Carey, Robert Phillips, Morgan Woodward—a really wonderful collection of insinuating or menacing creeps), and they are involvement with a reality that is slimier than anything on Cosmo's stage. His own pathetic pretense, the attachment he has to his club and his people, turns out

sustaining cliché. I like his way of being in the film—as I like Meade Roberts, or Seymour Cassel's, or Donna Gordon's, or all the others. He is engaged in more than two hours of almost unstructured gesture, which seems difficult, and beautiful when it works, as it frequently does. A lot is wasted, but enough is saved to establish a character and his fate along all the points with which he last makes contact. As for fading out of life, this could be how it looks and feels. I am caught by its pathos and even its glamor.

I assume that *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* won't be very popular, and I doubt that many critics will think it's very good. I do, almost in spite of myself. Even its confusions—a feature of any Cassavetes movie—seem valuable. And I think they are worth the time and the patience to let them have their way. ●