

Patterns-1956: Winners and losers in the corporate world.

Patterns – a movie I'd not heard about until recently – is probably the grittiest 83 minutes I've seen about the rise and rise of Corporate Man.

Thematically, it's all about the subjugation of the individual to the dictates of capitalist enterprise and consumerism. From a sharp script by Rod Serling, Patterns is, of course, quintessentially American; this type of story, however, could play out in just about any other similar environment in most other countries – and particularly with today's corporate globalization.

In a nutshell, the story shows how a younger manager from a subsidiary company is elevated to the board level to replace an aging VP whom the CEO wants to sideline (at least) or remove entirely (at worst). Ed Begley, with his usual acting expertise, plays the VP-on-the-out Bill Briggs; Everett Sloane almost overplays the arrogant and vitriolic CEO Walter Ramsey; Van Heflin, as the aspiring exec, Fred Staples, initially brings a stereotypical 'aw-shucks' attitude to the boardroom and makes friends with Briggs. Heflin is particularly effective in that type of role: honest, easy-going, wanting to please, and with his trade-mark wry smile.

Ironically, Staples doesn't realize he's been promoted to replace Briggs; nor does Briggs realize Staples is a threat – until it's too late for him to fight it effectively. What's even more ironic, however, is the manner in which Ramsey succeeds in convincing Staples to take up the job Briggs vacates. As Staples leaves Ramsey's office with a vastly improved contract, does he realize he is his master's creation even while thinking he is still his own man? Poor fool...or sharp operator?

Serling is, without doubt, condemning the Darwinian corporate world where only the fittest survive. Yet, he finishes the story with the protagonist's acceptance and continuance of that model, obviously signifying his own accordance – even if he doesn't like it. In other words, capitalism might often taste bad, but it's good for you, in the long run. And, regarding fine principles about being fair, and giving the other guy a break, well, as Staples says: "I want the job". Most can easily relate to that.

In stark black and white, no musical soundtrack, and most of the action taking place in a half-dozen sets and a few establishing shots, this is minimalist filming that relies on great dialog and acting, essentially – much like the TV stage play from which it is derived. Watch particularly for Briggs' exit from his job and the final confrontation between Staples and Ramsey: totally riveting.

There are some good comparative films from that same 1950s timeframe: Executive Suite (1954) and The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit (1956) are two often quoted. Both are excellent films about corporate life. A different slant on what it takes to get to the top is Sweet Smell of Success (1957), with Burt Lancaster and Tony Curtis trying to outdo each other in the sleaze stakes.

On the other hand, I should mention *The Fountainhead* (1949), Ayn Rand's novel of Individualism Triumphant in the form of Howard Roark, genius architect, played by Gary Cooper. It's a curious counterpoint fantasy to all of the above stories in that it champions the individual artist over the corporation as the saviour of the capitalist world. So, forget the philosophy underpinning Rand's story and just watch it for Cooper and Patricia Neal steaming up the windows.

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Rating: 8

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