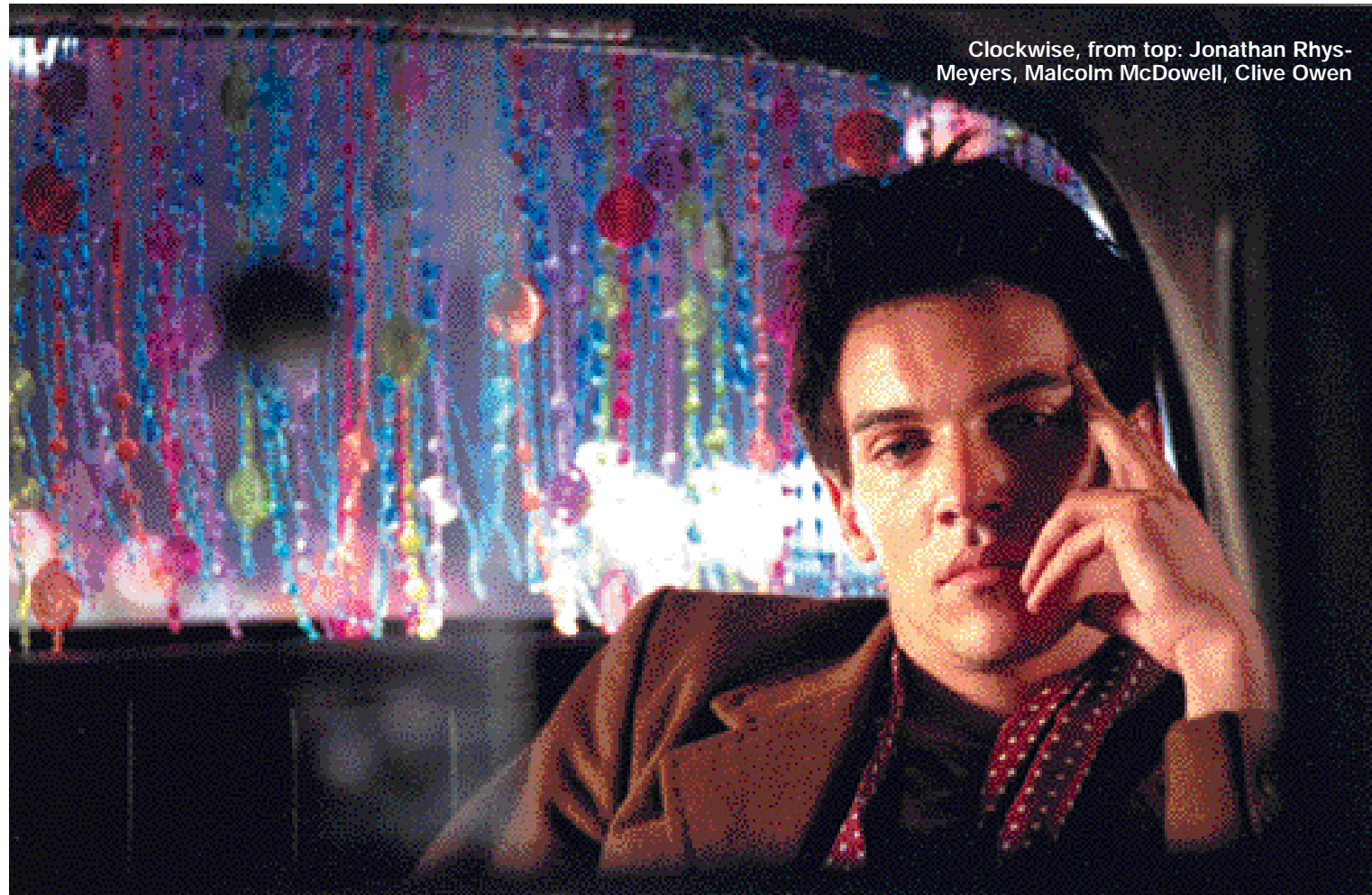
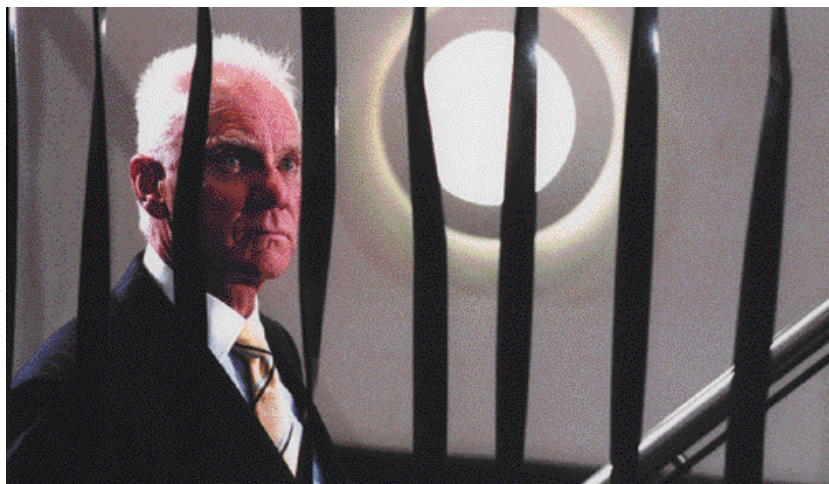


THE MECHANICS OF FATE



Clockwise, from top: Jonathan Rhys-Meyers, Malcolm McDowell, Clive Owen

MIKE HODGES REVISITS THE LONDON UNDERWORLD IN *I'LL SLEEP WHEN I'M DEAD*, A COMPLEX MEDITATION ON DOOMED LONERS AND THEIR DESTINIES BY GARY INDIANA



In “The Manipulators,” an episode of the 1972 British TV series *The Frighteners* written and directed by Mike Hodges, a trainee at an unidentified organization is obliged to spy on, and make harassing phone calls to, a young couple with a baby. He observes the effects of his calls, and much else, from the windows of a flat opposite theirs, as he is himself being monitored by a supervisor. Via wiretap and the fragmented window view, we see or hear the couple bickering, the husband falling apart under mounting stress, attacking his wailing infant, then strangling his wife when she comes in from work.

The trainee’s every impulse is to intervene. There is ample time after the baby’s death to keep its mother out of harm’s way. The supervisor forbids this. The trainee becomes hysterical as he hears, and partly sees, the worst happening. Finally, the supervisor picks up the phone, dials the flat, and tells the person on the other end to show himself in the window. The man appears, holding up the perfectly unharmed baby, followed by his equally unharmed “wife.” It has all been a test, which the trainee, alas, has failed. The supervisor then shoots and kills him.

This tightly compressed drama, which has a tickling comic undertone, with cutaways to a slide lecture on behavior modification foreshadowing the gruesome climax, could serve as a template for Mike Hodges’s later films. Its atmosphere of lethal absurdity and its picture of the intolerable as the normal condition of things can be found as easily in his travesty epics, *Flash Gordon* (80) and *Morons from Outer Space* (85), as in ink-black hyperrealist works like *Croupier* (98) and the director’s latest film, *I’ll Sleep When I’m Dead*.

Valery’s “machines for creating anxiety” come to mind in connection with such Hodges movies as *The Terminal Man* (74), *Black Rainbow* (89), *Croupier*, and even the light-headed pastiche of *Pulp* (72). The specific anxiety activated by these films is the fear of manipulation: by computers and science in *The Terminal Man*, by occult and unknowable powers in *Black Rainbow*, by the Mafia in *Pulp*. The apprehension of being controlled by hidden forces, of fate confirming paranoid suspicion, suffuses Hodges’s early television films, *Suspect* (74) and *Rumour* (70), reaching its ultimate refinement in the retroactive poison released in *Croupier*’s closing scene.

I’ll Sleep When I’m Dead raises a broader sort of anxiety, as a prolonged meditation on fate. It suggests that fate may be the product of reciprocal misunderstandings as well as the inevitable end of a logical chain of causality. As in many of his films, Hodges here creates a sense of imminent catastrophe, partly through the use of parallel narratives whose connection is kept in abeyance for an abnormally long time, and a fluid temporal structure that puts us slightly behind or ahead of the story we’re piecing together. As nothing gratuitously digressive ever occurs in a Hodges film, every scene demands an unusual attention to small details and bits of dialogue.

In his new film, the last night in the life of Davey (Jonathan Rhys-Meyers), an instantly appealing young man—cocky, self-assured, seductive—is intercut with scenes of a shaggily bearded, haunted, and foreboding-looking man (Clive Owen) who lives in a caravan deep in the woods. The man hears a car, turns off his lights, and observes a gang viciously beating someone. When they leave, he walks over for a close look at the semiconscious victim, starts to turn away as if it’s none of his business, then returns to help him. Davey moves through the London night, followed by a black car. He deals some cocaine at a swank

party. He goes home with a drunken woman he has picked up elsewhere, makes love, gets dressed, leaves the woman’s flat, and flags a minicab.

Inside the black car there are three men: one, silver-haired and imperious, is clearly in charge. The woodsman brings the beating victim to the remote cottage indicated on the man’s driver’s license. We see him getting laid off from his forest-clearing job. He eats breakfast in a diner. He heads for London in his white van. Meanwhile, Davey has been seized on a dark street, dragged into a warehouse, and raped by the silver-haired man, Boad (Malcolm McDowell), as Boad’s accomplices hold him down. He staggers back to his flat in a sickened daze, ignores the greeting of his landlady as she leaves for work, lurches into his bathroom, vomits, fills the tub with water, and sinks down into it fully dressed. Soon the tub is full of blood.

Even getting this far in describing *I’ll Sleep When I’m Dead* requires a storyboard, or an ambidextrous shifting of tenses. Each scene has an amplitude of detail and nuance, seeming complete in a crisp and unanticipated way; its apparent disconnection to the one that follows feels like the implacable neural set changes of a dream. We learn, eventually, that the woodsman is Davey’s older brother, Will Graham, who once controlled gangster activity in the area of London where the film plays out; that he was married to, or living with, Helen (Charlotte Rampling), who owns an upscale restaurant; that he had a breakdown three years earlier, abandoned Helen, Davey, and his gangster life, fled north, staying constantly on the move, before finally breaking off all contact. What we don’t learn is how Boad and his cohorts could possibly have known that Davey’s cab would sputter to a halt where it did, forcing him to walk the rest of the way, or that a handily broken-into warehouse would exist in the particular alley where it appears. Similarly, when Helen asks Will why he is suddenly there, he answers that it’s “because of Davey,” though he couldn’t have known when he headed south that his brother had committed suicide, or was going to.

These bits of illogic are magical operations rather than flaws, Buñuelian pleats in the fabric of a doom-weighted picaresque. The black car incarnates Fate, a mechanism for making corpses. Will’s beat-up van, a magic box containing what remains of his life, suggests the vulnerability of a sacrificial offering—we can almost imagine the vehicle itself propelling him southward.

Scattered inside and between the alternating scenes of the two brothers are almost imperceptible clues, hints, puzzle pieces. A subplot follows Davey’s friend Mickser (Jamie Foreman) as he discovers Davey’s

corpse, goes to Helen's restaurant demanding her help in finding Will, clocks his anger when she tells him, truthfully, that she doesn't know where he is. We see him getting cornered by Turner (Ken Stott), the current mob boss, and subtly warned that if Will turns up, he should bury his dead and clear off again. All that follows has a slightly different kind of opacity. Will wants to know why Davey killed himself. He makes contact with Helen and with

he once operated as a heavy; in *I'll Sleep*, the movement is reversed. In both films, the return of the exile sets off fatal consequences.

The more oblique procedures of *I'll Sleep* indicate that its differences from the much earlier film are more significant than its similarities. They reflect a much thicker psychological soup than existed between Hodges's characters in the early Seventies. *Get Carter's* brutality remains logical and true to Hodges's ideas about fate, but by now fate has become contingent and intimately linked to chance. In *Get Carter*, the people Carter hunts turn out to be his former associates. In *I'll Sleep*, the revenge object has no connection to the protagonist's abandoned underworld. While both films might be read as meditations on inevitability and the inescapability of the past, *I'll Sleep* raises the possibility of a small window of escape, or a narrow passage between inexorable forces, only to shut it as an aesthetic or ethical option. Hodges invests this version of fate with the full weight of tragedy, although to a certain eye it could also appear an extremely dark farce, turning on the notion of unintended consequences following from seemingly honorable intentions.

Carter remains a hard case in his new London life. However affected he may be by his brother's death, he hasn't undergone any significant inner transformation since his Newcastle days. He has only become more professional and more sociopathic. (As various characters tell him throughout the film, he's "a real bastard.") Will still has a reflexive brutality available in his nature. But as we see from his hesitant impulse to help the beating victim in the forest, he has learned to mistrust his own bad instincts. Abjection clings to him like a wet sheet. He has, in a manner of speaking, been cornered into self-consciousness, by what he tells Helen is "grief for a life wasted." Will's slouching posture, and the way he ignores the taunts of Turner's bodyguard, signal to his former rivals that he's broken down, a threat to nobody. But

Turner refuses to believe it.

Turner's paranoia is mirrored by Boad, the car dealer who attacks Davey. Turner knows that Will has all the qualities he lacks, and therefore needs to destroy him; the same is true of Boad with respect to Davey. This is, strangely, underscored by the fact that Will's voiceovers, which bookend the film, use exactly the same phrases to evoke Davey, albeit in different cadences, that Boad uses to snarl his contempt for him.

It's possible that London itself plugs Will into its dire mechanisms, reduces him to the promptings of instinct, though it's more likely that only the inexplicable—i.e., Davey's rape—has the power to override the self-control he has achieved in solitude. Simply by showing up, however, he becomes a menacing presence in the underworld's zone of exaggerated masculinity and its futile rituals of threat and physical violence.

Hodges finds this realm endlessly, repulsively fascinating. In *Get Carter* and *Pulp*, the absurdity of violence is inferred from its surplus, with beatings and gunshots as punctuation. The loony militarism depicted in *Flash Gordon* and *Morons from Outer Space* reflects Hodges's acid disdain for the institutionalized violence of the larger systems in which figures like Carter float about like pieces of enraged lint.

Both *Croupier* and *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead* approach this theme in a more contemplative, not to say strangled, way. Little overt violence occurs in either film, only enough to show how deeply embedded it is in the protagonist's wiring. In both films, the voice of calm sanity emanates from a female character, Marion (Gina McKee) in *Croupier*; Helen in *I'll Sleep*. (In *Get Carter*, women are brainless playthings and soulless chippies.) Helen warns Will to "forget the funeral," that unless he leaves he'll be destroyed—an accurate prediction. She will be destroyed as well, though Will "transforms" himself shortly before discharging his rage, shaving off the beard he sprouted in the north, dressing up for the funeral, retrieving a stash of money and a slick car, planning his exit with Helen. But by this time, there's really no exit.

Hodges's recent films have an almost mournfully submerged tone, an exasperated weariness over an endless cycle of cruelty fueled by the will to power. This is represented most cogently in *Croupier* with shots of the spinning roulette wheel,

in *I'll Sleep* by the image of Davey's shoe tip slowly floating up to break the surface of his bloody bathwater.

Hodges's films engage two distinct narrative approaches, each in its way undermining the linear scanning of plot. The first, which occurs in *Croupier* and several other films, is the implicit or explicit framing of the action within the point of view of a character reporting to an imaginary audience. Jack Manfred (Clive Owen), in *Croupier*, is writing a novel and telling it to us. For the most part, his voiceover agrees with what we see onscreen, merely turning the image's eternal present into the past tense. But Jack's novel also shapes our perception of him beyond what we see, interposing a fictional persona who may or may not coincide with the Jack we observe.

In the TV film *Rumour*, Hodges uses the urgent voice of a Fleet Street hack (like Will, also dead before he finishes narrating) as an overgloss that often works against the image. The parodic hard-bitten prose on the soundtrack often has a purely adhesive relation to what's onscreen. This also happens in *Pulp*, in which the dime-store novelist played by Michael Caine is less an unreliable narrator than one whose apprehension of what's occurring is continually undermined by whatever happens next. *Morons from Outer Space* also features a reporter who becomes hopelessly entangled in his "story."

While many films use the trope of a journalist solving a mystery while pursuing a scoop, Hodges's are often layered by this device to question a manufactured, consensual reality. At the outset of *Black Rainbow*, for example, Tom Hulce's newsman believes he finally sees the vanished



medium he has been tracking down for years, that he photographs her, even talks to her. At the film's end, the developed photos reveal an abandoned house overgrown with kudzu.

Hodges's other favorite narrative strategy informs *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead* and involves a warping or looping effect vis-à-vis temporality, not entirely unlike the editing style of Nicolas Roeg, though Hodges's reasons for using it are both more legible and more aesthetically persuasive than the almost aleatory approach Roeg's films take. The malleable rendering of chronology in *I'll Sleep* echoes several of Hodges's films, notably *Black Rainbow*, which uses time itself as a metaphysical conundrum. (We never exist entirely in the present but live partly in the past and perhaps partly in the future, too.) Technically, *I'll Sleep* is "narrated," at both ends, by Will's voiceover. Something of *Black Rainbow's* slithery, paradoxical elusiveness persists in *I'll Sleep*, given that by the end Will is dead by implication, within an hour or so of the film's internal time, yet "alive" via the voiceover thought-bubble. Hence his spoken thoughts about Davey ("What's there to say he was ever alive?") are also the film's thoughts about Will.

In effect, it's hard to tell which parallel events are simultaneous, which are premonitory, which are "past," and which are imaginary. The film's internal

time, unless I've missed something, extends only from the night of Davey's attack to the day before (or, perhaps, the day of) his (scheduled, undepicted) funeral—three or, at most, four days, and more probably two or three. Assuming that Will has gone to Boad's house a second time, alone, after his first surreptitious visit with Mickser—something I infer because (a) a party is taking place the first time and (b) Will still wears a beard on the first occasion, and in the film's penultimate scene he's beardless—then time has been carefully bent out of shape in order to throw the "reality" of this scene into question. And, by extension, the reality of everything we've seen.

In the hands of a director less ingeniously skilled and pointedly skeptical about the reality of anything, this kind of ambiguity might read as an expedient trick. *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead* registers as anything but: it is, rather, the self-consuming artifact par excellence, a consummate work of art that tears itself to pieces as it moves along and reconstitutes itself, in the end, as an impossible object worthy of endless contemplation.

Thanks to David Thompson for supplying some rare videotapes.

Gary Indiana is currently filming an especially nasty film about a production of Strindberg's *Miss Julie* based on his years as a theater director and completing a feature-length video inspired by Francis Ponge's *Le Savon*.



his former crew. Helen has nothing for him. His old crew expect him to pick up his earlier life and reclaim his gangster territory from Turner. What began as the alternating stories of two brothers becomes an intercutting between Will's quest and Turner's growing conviction that Will's presence threatens his dominance—which becomes a certainty when Will's gang, quite on their own, truss up Turner's bodyguard and leave him struggling on the jetty of Turner's riverside estate. It's easy to miss the connective tissue: some things flash by quickly, and unless you register a brief shot of the old crew cackling over their little victory in a speeding car, you might assume that Will has attacked the bodyguard, who baited him in an earlier scene. But it's an essential feature of Hodges's bleak and bemused view of things that Will's fate is sealed by his friends rather than his enemies.

I'll Sleep When I'm Dead holds up a distorting mirror to Hodges's first feature, *Get Carter* (71), which remains his best known. Both concern a man seeking the truth about his brother's death and determined to wreak vengeance on the person responsible. In *Get Carter*, this figure goes north from London to Newcastle, where

