



**RETURN OF THE OUTSIDER:  
THE FILMS OF MIKE HODGES**

# The Terminal Man

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

## A contemporary review

In 1969 the first hapless chimpanzee was directly linked by radio to a computer which took over the functioning of its brain. In 1971, according to Michael Crichton, the first human could have been similarly implanted, and with his novel *The Terminal Man* he set out to demonstrate the method and the possible consequences of placing the brain under artificial control. Crichton's case is so plausible it sounds like yesterday's news – more of a post-mortem than a warning (if warning it is; there is a characteristic ambivalence here). A patient is fitted with a tiny computer connected to wires inserted in the brain, intended to nullify the homicidal effects of brain damage; but his brain finds the computer's signals so pleasant that he is soon stimulated into a state of perpetual violence. He wanders the city in this malfunctioning condition, somewhat to the detriment of friends and acquaintances, until cured like so many renegades by a gunshot or two. One recalls that in *The Andromeda Strain* and in *Westworld*, Crichton went sailing off into melodrama for the concluding scenes.

The film of *Terminal Man*, adapted and directed with admirable assurance by Mike Hodges (who made *Get Carter* and *Pulp*), is faithful to both the best and the worst of Crichton. With the spectacular assistance of Richard Kline's photography, Hodges creates a mood of precarious efficiency that exactly catches the Crichton tone. In their crystal labyrinth of screens, monitors and mirrors, his hospital characters tremble with the unrecognised expectation of failure, checking printouts like horoscopes before daring to operate. Their maverick victim is one of the four million Americans still behaving irrationally in a society where computerisation toils for order and method. Man is not, Crichton would remind us (like Asimov and Clarke and, dare one say, Mary Shelley before him), an exclusively rational creature; to ignore his innate perversity is to increase the chances of breakdown. Hodges picks up Crichton's cues and improvises superbly: as orderlies snigger coarsely in the corners in the tradition of Frankenstein's imbecilic assistants, the brain surgeons posture with fragile arrogance, vomiting with terror before the operation, smug at its apparent success, and stunned when it goes wrong.

On one level, *Terminal Man* is about vanity, its causes and its consequences. On the surface, most obviously, it's about light and dark, a formal counterbalance used by Hodges in a sometimes effective, sometimes pretentious manner. For the opening shot, a helicopter rises slowly through darkness until its spotlight dazzles the camera lens; George Segal, bound for computerised zombiehood, is wheeled from the night into the false daylight of the hospital, eventually to be swallowed again by darkness as the camera pans down the walls of his grave. Hodges constantly poses white figures against black, or stands them awkwardly among blocks of monochrome furniture, incompatible with physical or mental comfort; the listless party sequence and the frankly unbelievable environment of the psychiatrist's home

are settings that reinforce the sense that man is gradually programming himself to extinction.

At times like the splendid tracking shot across row after row of desk screens on which Segal is describing his fears of mechanical superiority, Hodges is impressively precise in style. Elsewhere, as in the big murder scene, he simply seems to have tried too hard: a parrot trembles in its cage, an extract from *Them* whistles suspensefully on the television set, a girl paints her fingernails black, and the killer's eyes snap open. We are in for high-gloss mayhem – all splashing blood and punctured waterbed and fluttering rose-petals. In slow-motion, accompanied by Bach, and rounded off by close-ups of the formal patterns of flowing liquid, the sequence ends in a kind of vulgarised beauty.

Even at its worst – in the crude suspense of a fist breaking through a locked door or the colourful but idiotic scenes at the cemetery – *Terminal Man* certainly makes good watching. And if George Segal has little opportunity to do more than roll his eyes and intensify his air of dejected preoccupation, it's pleasing to see Joan Hackett again, coping in wistful horror with a world of wisecracking chauvinist surgeons and suicidal patients. That Hodges (not Crichton) gives her a quote from *The Wasteland* and plants her cowering in the bathroom as the killer pounds up the stairs, seems an act of fate rather than of misjudgment; she has the exact vulnerability for either extreme. We could have done with the likes of her in *Westworld* (which Crichton wrote almost simultaneously with *Terminal Man*), and the likes of Hodges too, for that matter. The story of a robotic monster bent on vengeance, however, could perhaps be allowed to rest now for a year or so.

### **Philip Strick, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1974-75**

---

#### **THE TERMINAL MAN (DIRECTOR'S CUT)**

*Directed by:* Mike Hodges

©: Warner Bros Inc.

*Production Company:* Warner Bros.

*Produced by:* Mike Hodges

*Associate Producer:* Michael Dryhurst

*Unit Production Manager:* Bruce Fowler Jr

*1st Assistant Director:* Dick Moder

*2nd Assistant Directors:* Leonard S. Smith Jr, Robert Dijoux

*Script Supervisor:* Margaret Tary

*CASTING:* Nessa Hyams

*Screenplay by:* Mike Hodges

*Based upon a novel by:* Michael Crichton

*Director of Photography:* Richard H. Kline

*Camera Operator:* Albert Bettcher

*Film Editor:* Robert L. Wolfe

*Art Director:* Fred Harpman

*Set Decorator:* Marvin March

*Costume Designer:* Nino Novarese

*Make-up:* Leo Lotito Jr, Fred Williams

*Hairdresser:* Sherry Wilson

*Goldberg Variation No. 25 by:* J. S. Bach

*Goldberg Variation No. 25 played by:* Glenn Gould

*Sound by:* William Randall

*Dubbing Mixer:* Hugh Strain

*Sound Editor:* Nicholas Stevenson

*Photographic Equipment by:* Panavision

#### **Cast**

George Segal (*Harry Benson*)

Joan Hackett (*Dr Janet Ross*)

Richard A. Dysart (*Dr John Ellis*)

Jill Clayburgh (*Angela Black*)

Donald Moffat (*Dr Arthur McPherson*)

Matt Clark (*Gerhard*)

Michael C. Gwynne (*Dr Robert Morris*)

Normann Burton (*Detective Captain Anders*)

William Hansen (*Dr Ezra Manon*)

James Sikking (*Ralph Friedman*)

Ian Wolfe (*priest*)

Gene Borkan, Burke Byrnes (*Benson's guards*)

Jim Antonio (*Richards*)

Jordan Rhodes (*questioner no. 1*)

Dee Carroll (*night nurse*)

Jason Wingreen (*instructor*)

Steve Kanaly (*Edmonds*)

Al Checco (*Farley*)

Fred Sadoff (*police doctor*)

Jack Colvin (*detective*)

Lee DeBroux (*reporter*)

Robert Ito (*anaesthetist*)

Victor Argo (*orderly*)

USA 1974©

100 mins

#### **BECOME A BFI MEMBER**

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](http://bfi.org.uk/join)

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at [www.bfi.org.uk/signup](http://www.bfi.org.uk/signup)

#### **BFI PLAYER**

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on [player.bfi.org.uk](http://player.bfi.org.uk)

Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email [prognotes@bfi.org.uk](mailto:prognotes@bfi.org.uk)

The British Film Institute is a charity registered in England and Wales No. 287780