CLOAK & DAGGER

Directed by Richard Franklin
Produced by Allan Carr
Distributed by Universal Pictures
Released in 1984

This film belongs to another time. *Cloak & Dagger* is an underrated example of efficient, empathetic storytelling, relying on the relative freedom of children in the pre-helicopter-parent days of the '80s, the absence of cell phones (the car phone in the Cadillac being a justifiable exception), and the twilight of realistic toy pistols in order to hit its plot points. The movie does a good job employing the screen's capacity for ambiguity. The action doesn't have to be commented upon or interpreted, unlike a book. Thus, we don't know if Davey is really seeing a murder—when there's no body at the bottom of the stairwell (especially since we already know he is seeing Jack Flack when no one else can) we begin to wonder. He does have an active imagination, and memories of The Boy Who Cried Wolf necessitate caution. (This concept was previously explored in the 1949 film *The Window*, based on a short story by Cornell Woolrich [of *Rear Window* (1954) fame].)

Soon, as the movie begins to settle into the conventions of the chase, and the danger becomes all too real, we begin to sour on Jack Flack. His brand of jaundiced amorality chafes. We become complacent, thinking we've figured him out, tolerating his role as a sounding board for Davey, so we can know what the boy is thinking when no one is around.

But when Jack's diversion—forcing Davey to kill an UZI-armed Rice—results in bullet wounds, the symbolism compounds upon itself. At first it seems Jack is o.k., it's just that his bullet-proof beret doesn't seem to deflect real bullets. Davey laments that he was tricked by Jack, and smashes his Jack Flack token underfoot (anticipating/causing Jack's demise).

Jack accepts this rebuke amicably, commenting that all boys grow up eventually. The trick is, Jack knew Davey had to kill. It happens in their games all the time, but Davey recoiled at the prospect. He thinks if he can stop this 'game' his reality will change. No, he must throw off this last vestige of innocence and become a man; he will have to take a life, because it's the only way to save Kim.

Jack, perhaps sensing his time is up, sacrifices himself to force Davey to save himself and save Kim. Jack can only remain as the adjunct to a child. If the child becomes a man, Jack is gone. And Davey must grow up, right now. Jack's sacrifice also anticipates the selfless heroism of the story's real hero, Davey's father, Hal. He looks like Hal (is this a projection of Davey's subconscious or something more that we're seeing?), either because Davey wishes his dad were his hero, or because he knows, deep down, his father—when Davey's life is on the line—will come through.

Yes, Hal is the true hero, the man who will rescue his son, and (like Jack Flack) somehow defy the odds and cheat death in the final showdown with George and Eunice MacCready (two of the most original villains in film history).

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As Jack begins to die, Davey begs him to stay—he is still trying to hang on to his childhood—but this is impossible. He knows what it means to take a life (even in self-defense, it's a burden), and there's no going back.

Cloak & Dagger never takes the easy way out. This PG-rated film treats violence with more maturity than contemporary R-rated films of the period like *Commando* (1985). Death is permanent, and there's nothing lighthearted about it. Accordingly, there's a strange *frission* in this movie that invites comparison to European films—like *The Tin Drum* (1979), *Malena* (2000), and *Monsieur Ibrahim* (2003)—that involve (with exploitive candor) the intersection of children and their burgeoning sexuality (something blessedly rare in American cinema apart from aberrations like *Kids* [1995] and *The Blue Lagoon* [1980]). In *Cloak & Dagger* we're dealing with extreme violence (or, at least, the threat of it) forced on innocent children, brought to you courtesy of the director of *Psycho II* (1983). This is an inversion of the European model. To them, sex is nothing special (they'd say it's nothing to be ashamed of), and the vaunted 'right of passage' is best memorialized upon a 70-foot screen. In contrast, American cinema is predisposed to violence, while Europeans find it vaguely repellent.

They think we're nuts. We think they're sick.

There is an innate dramatic tension, a steady pulse of vitality and dread that infuses violent films (especially in the horror genre—provided the tropes aren't taken too far), and incorporating a child in the scenario—someone inherently vulnerable and sympathetic—raises the stakes. As a bonus, this tension makes a film about two kids running around San Antonio with a bus pass more accessible for adults, especially those who have kids and can identify with Hal and Marilyn, the distracted and put-upon parents. The end result is tasteful and tactful. Subtlety works wonders. The film is actually scariest when Davey realizes the kindly gray-haired couple he ran into on the boat ride and at the Alamo are the couriers for the government secrets embedded in the Cloak & Dagger video-game cartridge. The old woman is pleased to show she is missing two fingers (thereby revealing she is the spy [and reveling in her own wickedness]) before calmly preparing, and with a sudden thrust administering to Davey, a chloroform-laden handkerchief. The sudden claustrophobia, the stunning betrayal, the incongruously benign surroundings of an innocuous Ford Fairmont front seat, only heighten the disorienting terror. This is the stuff of nightmares. Aided by a judicious use of point-of-view shots, the scene is a knock-out for kids.

Almost totally devoid of sentiment, championing the everyday heroics of real men with real problems leading their families the best they can, *Cloak & Dagger* is an exciting, intelligent, and accessible adventure that qualifies as one of the best 'children's movies' since *The Black Stallion* (1979). Boasting career-best performances by Henry Thomas and Dabney Coleman, an aggressive Brian May score, and beautiful location photography by Victor J. Kemper, this is a forgotten favorite, still relevant for a new generation.

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