Scorcese strikes again

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Martin Scorsese's film "Shutter Island" provides no certainties. Not in its characters, not in its narrative, not its point of view, and especially not in its ending. Instead, it offers a plethora of possibilities. It is these possibilities that make the film so complex, so haunting, and such a joy to watch.

The story takes place in 1954 at Shutter Island, a prison of sorts for the criminally insane, that is located off the coast of Massachusetts. U.S. Marshall, Teddy Daniels (Leonardo DiCaprio), and his new partner, Chuck (Mark Ruffalo), are called to the island to investigate the disappearance of a patient named Rachel Solando. It is quickly learned that things are not as they seem. A major storm is brewing. The guards are on edge. The orderlies are no help. The inmates stare the two men down. After meeting suspiciously tight lipped doctors Cawley (Ben Kingsley) and Naehring (Max von Sydow), Teddy realizes something is not right about the place.

As Dr. Naehring observes, Teddy is a man of violence. He has no sympathy for the inmates. Dr. Cawley refers to them as patients and Teddy calls them prisoners. Teddy is prone to migraines, flashbacks, and nightmares. He sometimes dreams of the horrors he witnessed as a WWII soldier while liberating a Nazi death camp. Sometimes, he dreams of his dead wife, who was killed in a fire, and pleads to hold her one last time. These dream sequences are some of the most beautiful and eerie scenes in the film. As the movie progresses, questions are asked, voices are raised, and secrets are exposed. To delve any deeper into the plot would be a spoiler to those who have not yet seen the film.

At its core, "Shutter Island" is comparable to a haunted house type movie. Its monsters are not ghosts or goblins, but real people. For that reason the film is that much more scary. It's a mystery and psychological thriller. I cannot help but compare the film to Stanley Kubrick's "The Shining." When looking at Scorsese's filmography as a whole, "Shutter Island" is unique much in the way "The Shining" stands out in Kubrick's list of credits. While neither are the respective directors' definitive films, they are triumphs of their genre nonetheless. Scorsese's best work is almost too tough to watch because of its gritty realism ("Raging Bull," "GoodFellas"). "Shutter Island" is quite the opposite. Instead of pounding the audience with reality, it causes the viewer to doubt what they are seeing. When is the last time a film made an audience question almost every scene?

Scorsese is one of our greatest living directors and an avid film historian. His knowledge of classic film noir obviously influenced the film's tone. He had the cast watch Jacques Tourneur's "Out of the Past." As the title of that 1947 classic suggests, noir characters always struggle to cope with events from their past. Teddy is no different. Elements of Val Lewton and Alfred Hitchcock's work are also evident. Red Herrings and MacGuffins are numerous. Scenes where Teddy bolts up in bed after a nightmare and climbs the lighthouse stairs are similar to those in Hitchcock's "Vertigo." For Scorsese, imitation really is the sincerest form of flattery.

The film sustains its dark, mysterious mood throughout its entire runtime. From the moment I first saw the island in a magnificent wide shot, the strange, apprehensive feelings began to take hold of me. The atmosphere is bleak and gloomy. The sky is almost always gray. I could practically sense the storm moving in. Cinematographer Robert Richardson does an amazing job of creating a gothic look and feel for the film. The soundtrack underscores the film's creepiness. Thunder crashes as the storm rages outside. Heavy panting echoes through the long, maze-like corridors of Ward C. Robbie Robertson's music immediately began to work on me as soon as the lights went down. A single note on the piano at the right moment gave me goose bumps. Even the silence kept me on the edge of my seat. Call it ambience, call it tone, call it whatever you want. It is truly frightening.

DiCaprio brings his A-game, as does the rest of the cast. I have always felt that his greatest performance came in another Scorsese vehicle, "The Aviator." After seeing him in "Shutter Island" however, I might have to re-think that. His work in the film's third act is simply electrifying. I often tell people that Leo is one of the greatest actors of this generation. His performance here only cements my claim. Ruffalo is excellent as Teddy's right hand man. Kingsley, with his devilish grin, is extremely effective as the doctor who never seems to be telling as much as he knows. Take one look at von Sydow's former SS officer and you'll get why Teddy suspects he is hiding something. Williams' final exchange with DiCaprio will give you chills. Ted Levine, Patricia Clarkson, Emily Mortimer and Jackie Earle Haley share just one scene apiece with DiCaprio, and each one is a high point.

Viewers who pay close attention will be left wondering about a lot of things. How could a patient escape a locked cell without any outside help? The island is miles from the nearest land so where could she be hiding? What is the law of fours? Is it just a coincidence that the man who started the fire that killed Teddy's wife is a patient at the facility? Who's perspective are we viewing the story through? If it's Teddy's, is his wounded psyche reliable enough to trust? How many times do we actually see Rachel Solando? Once? Twice? Maybe more? These questions don't detract from the film, they simply add to its appeal.

There are implications about the outcome, but nothing is confirmed. Some scenes play tricks on the eyes. Others make the audience second guess what they saw. There are plenty of "did that really just happen" moments. The state of the investigation is not the only element called into question. I began to wonder about Teddy's state of mind. It requires multiple viewings to catch clues that could have been easily missed the first time around. I make reference to a scene in which Teddy and Chuck are interrogating a female patient. Chuck gives the woman a glass of water. She seems to raise her empty hand to her mouth and make a drinking motion the way a mime would. But in the next shot she sets an empty glass back on the table. Is Teddy seeing the same thing? Or Chuck? Or the woman? Neither the film nor the director owes us any explanation. And therein lies its genius.

And then there is the ending. It will probably divide the audience. Some will be blown away. Some will be less than surprised. Some will claim they knew it all along. Others will wonder what really happened. It does not matter anyway. The final act is powerful and unforgettable But it is not the payoff that makes the movie so intriguing. It is the film that proceeds it. A movie's ending is only effective if the rest of the picture does its job. I could not help but smile during the end credits, realizing that I knew almost nothing for sure. Teddy's last words are cryptic. What have his few days on Shutter Island really done to him? Is it a wicked twist? Or a twist within a twist? Rod Serling would be proud.

"Shutter Island" is a film that makes a lasting impression by offering its audience numerous possibilities. Some viewers want to be told exactly what to think. They want a clear cut story with a definitive beginning, middle and end. They want to know what happened and at what point and for how long. Sorry, but this is a movie that requires brain power. Scorsese succeeds in crafting a haunting film that provides no certainties. Except for one: "Shutter Island" will continue to work on its audience long after the film fades to black.