

# Martin Scorsese's *Shutter Island*: Mysterious and sinister, but headed where precisely?

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*Screenplay by Laeta Kalogridis, based on the novel by Dennis Lehane*

Martin Scorsese has set his latest film, *Shutter Island*, in 1954, a year after the end of the Korean War and in the midst of the Cold War. This historical backdrop, including the threat of a nuclear conflict between the superpowers, helps suffuse the gothic thriller with a sense of acute paranoia and foreboding.

There is some real potential here.

Based on the 2003 novel by Dennis Lehane (*Mystic River*), the movie opens as United States Marshal Ted Daniels (Leonardo DiCaprio) and his new partner Chuck Aule (Mark Ruffalo) arrive at Shutter Island off the coast of Massachusetts, on which Civil War-era barracks now house an institution for the criminally insane. The pair of agents have been summoned to investigate the fate of an inmate who has seemingly vanished into thin air, despite the asylum's tight security.

Ted is a deeply anxious man. On the boat trip from Boston to the island, he is seasick. There is also an internal illness. He is plagued by flashbacks of the Dachau concentration camp where he and other US soldiers executed German guards in cold blood as they tried to surrender ("A war crime if ever there was one ... No self-defense, no warfare came into it. It was homicide"). Visions of the mangled corpses of the camp's victims also haunt him.

Along with these frightful images embedded in his psyche are hallucinations—in unnaturally vivid colors—of his beloved wife Dolores (Michelle Williams), who died in a fire two years earlier. Her imaginary appearances serve as a portal into Ted's inner, tormented world, further unbalanced by the fact that the arsonist who set the deadly fire is housed at the institution. Ted is maniacally focused on the case.

Missing from the institution, and the subject of the investigation, is Rachel (Emily Mortimer), a woman who murdered her three children. Managing the twisted-faced inmates is the placid Dr. Cawley (Ben Kingsley). More

menacing is his colleague Dr. Naehring (Max Von Sydow), whom Ted suspects may be a former Nazi. A hurricane theatrically blasts and drenches the landscape.

Various facts begin to point to the possibility that the institution is host to a secret mind-altering government project. This, despite the claims of Dr. Cawley that he is a staunch proponent of the "talk therapy" school of psychiatry; he condemns both the old school of psychosurgery and the new school of psycho-pharmacology ("Buy stock [in the latter] gentlemen, you'll be able to retire to your own island").

As the film winds toward its conclusion, however, the mysterious and sinister atmosphere is deflated by the script itself. *Shutter Island* is essentially lobotomized.

It is difficult to discuss the film's overall impact without giving away its contrived and implausible ending. One can say this much: Scorsese's wrongheaded notion that evil is inherent in human nature permits him to place world-historical tragedies, such as the crimes of the Third Reich, on the same plane as individual misdeeds and psychoses.

Is it not possible that events of the magnitude of world war and fascism, symptoms of a diseased social order, might help drive an individual out of his or her mind? Scorsese, a former seminary student, unfortunately, has never bothered himself with such questions. He seems all too satisfied to fall back on the nonsense about mankind's Fall and Original Sin, or some version of the same.

At one point, the hospital's warden says to Ted: "There is no moral order as pure as this storm we've just seen. There is no moral order at all. There is only this—can my violence conquer yours?"

As the WWSWS noted in its review of *The Departed* (2006): "Scorsese has a fixed, frozen vision of life and human characters that has not evolved or deepened in more than three decades of filmmaking." This intellectual impasse finds expression in his repeated inability to put together a convincing drama. He does not see or understand life and, above all, history, as a cognizable process, something that can truly be made sense of. Reality takes the shape in his

films of disturbing, often overwrought fragments, each individually bent out of shape because it does not form part of a worked through whole.

Further, it is troubling to note the remarkable films that Scorsese cites as his inspirations for *Shutter Island*: producer Val Lewton/director Jacques Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) and *Shock Corridor*, Samuel Fuller's hard-hitting 1963 drama about life in a mental institution. These are intense, artistic films (if eccentric in some cases) that captured important features of the social and psychological climate of their day.

Scorsese, on the other hand, is unable to fashion his dense images into a graceful, integral whole. The efforts by DiCaprio, a talented performer, do not survive the many transitions required of his character. Some of the other actors, including Ruffalo, Williams, Kingsley and Patricia Clarkson (who plays one of the versions of Rachel the missing inmate), were less burdened and fared better.

All that being said, the film does possess a disturbing quality. Despite the claims of Kingsley's Dr. Cawley that his clinical methods are the most humane and advanced in the psychiatric field, some of the scenes in the institution conjure up Abu Ghraib, where US military personnel horribly abused Iraqis.

Moreover, it is revealed in the course of the film that Cawley's facility receives funding from the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), lending credence to the suspicion that the institution is being used for foul experiments.

One of *Shutter Island*'s strongest moments comes in an eerie scene between Ted and Rachel 2 (Clarkson). The authorities are creating an agent, she asserts, "who can't be interrogated because his memory banks are wiped clean. They're creating ghosts here ... Ghosts to go out into the world and do ghostly work ... Where they've begun is much the same place the Soviets have—brainwashing. Deprivation experiments. ... The Nazis used Jews. The Soviets used prisoners in their own gulags." Here, in America, she adds, patients are being tested on Shutter Island.

Whether or not any of the more disturbing claims are true, partially true, or only fantasies, is Scorsese suggesting that under conditions where large-scale crimes have been committed by the authorities, the popular imagination—with some legitimacy—will inevitably fear the worst? And is he making specific reference to the fevered and often paranoid psychological climate in the US at present?

In any event, if Scorsese had been genuinely interested in pursuing the issue of government conspiracies, his movie might have been more intriguing. As it stands, the filmmaker never establishes a firm baseline reality from which to launch any investigation or to ground character

development. Rather, *Shutter Island* is a labyrinth full of dead-ends.

Scorsese has made a horror film in which capitalism's true horrors—World War II, fascism, the Cold War, the HUAC witch-hunts and the covert CIA mind experiments—are presented incoherently (and essentially blamed on 'man's inhumanity to man'). They float nightmarishly in the film like ghost ships at sea.

But, as research has revealed, US government mind-control experiments were indeed being conducted at this time. Beginning in the early 1950s, Project MK-ULTRA was the code name for a covert CIA operation. A precursor of the program began in 1945 when Operation Paperclip was established to recruit former Nazi scientists, some of whom had expertise in torture and brainwashing. Several of these had been identified and prosecuted as war criminals during the Nuremberg Trials. As in the *Manchurian Candidate*, the goal was to create an agent who could carry information and not have the mission tortured out of him or her.

In December 1974, investigative reporter Seymour Hersh exposed MK-ULTRA in a *New York Times* article which documented secret experiments carried out on American citizens at numerous institutions during the 1960s and even earlier.

University of Wisconsin historian Alfred McCoy's book, *A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation, from the Cold War to the War on Terror (American Empire Project)*, documents the "cruel science of pain" that was developed for extensive use in Southeast Asia, Central America, Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantánamo and secret black sites globally.

Neither the book nor the film of *Shutter Island*, unfortunately, has the courage of its convictions. It would have been more on point if Scorsese had given real expression to the spirit and traumas of the mid-1950s.



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