

Shutter Island

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [April 6, 2010](#) issue



Director Martin Scorsese goes for broke in *Shutter Island*. The style is a particularly gaudy brand of expressionism. The production design is dominated by dried-blood reds and smeary browns. Robert Richardson's cinematography is more radically underlit than the old Universal monster pictures from the early 1930s. But the movie is a fiasco.

It's sort of a ghost story, set in 1954 on the grounds of an experimental institution for the criminally insane outside Boston. The ghosts haunt Teddy Daniels (Leonardo DiCaprio), a federal agent who travels to Shutter Island with his partner (Mark Ruffalo) after a patient escapes. Daniels requests the assignment for personal reasons: his wife died in an apartment fire, and he suspects that the arsonist wound up in the building on the island that houses the most frightening inmates. He also comes to suspect that the lighthouse at the edge of the estate may be the site of shocking experiments conducted by the genteel director (Ben Kingsley) and one of his colleagues (a malevolently smiling Max von Sydow). So Daniels skulks around in the dark and the fog, while a storm strands him and his partner on the island. All that's missing are voodoo rituals and an exorcism.

The best thing about *Shutter Island* is the production design. Dante Ferretti has constructed a nightmare landscape, with cells that resemble tiered caves and a lighthouse that beckons almost mockingly at the foot of a rocky cliff. But the events

that transpire on these evocative sets make no sense. For example, Daniels pays so little attention to his job that you keep forgetting that he wasn't deployed to Shutter Island for the sole purpose of tracking down the alleged arsonist.

And the plot has a twist that's supposed to explain all the baffling nonsense that has come before.

No bona fide spinner of scary tales would operate in so clumsy a manner, throwing all his cards in the air and revealing the trick that essentially starts the whole narrative over again. In a crack thriller you should be able to see the craft as the story line is laid down, as the screens are shifted to reveal glimpses of the mystery's solution. We shouldn't have to keep wondering why the characters are behaving like dolts while the plot meanders into one unexplained corner after another.

The ensemble acts up a storm, but not to much effect. DiCaprio, so splendid as Howard Hughes in Scorsese's *The Aviator*, is reduced to conveying anguish and confusion through a series of eye tics. DiCaprio takes his assignment far too seriously; at least Kingsley and von Sydow have fun with their sinister-shrink roles. You feel sorry for Michelle Williams: she's stuck playing Teddy's dead wife, who keeps popping up to offer him woeful guidance. Could there be anything less rewarding than playing the figment of the hero's imagination?

Ruffalo and Patricia Clarkson, who plays a one-time doctor at the institution, march through their roles as if they were actable (they aren't), while the usually terrific Jackie Earle Haley can't catch a break: his one scene is lame Grand Guignol, and you barely register Haley in all that shadow.

The new Mel Gibson action picture *Edge of Darkness* begins with a masterfully creepy shot of bodies bubbling up in a bay under a full moon; then the movie collapses. The only good scene in *Shutter Island* also involves corpses in a watery grave, and the two actors featured in it manage to play it straight. You wonder if it's that sequence that convinced Scorsese he should make this movie. But by the time he gets to it the movie is long past saving.