

TWISTED PLEASURES

A surprise ending or unexpected plot turn can make or break a movie. Would *Sixth Sense* have worked as well if Bruce Willis hadn't turned out to be a delusional ghost? Would Norman Bates have been quite as scary if he wasn't also dressing up in women's clothes and calling himself mother?

by Cris Hutton

Movies have been surprising us with twists since the birth of the industry. Indeed, the art of surprising an audience has existed as long as storytelling itself. Suspense and surprise have always been writers' tools; Shakespeare's work is littered with plot twists that would embarrass many screen writers.

There's no doubting that filmgoers liked to be surprised. There's nothing quite like the jolt that comes from realizing that all your previous expectations and beliefs about a story or character have just been turned on their head. Trying to analyse why this might be is like trying to define why we like to laugh. Yet this doesn't mean that simply tagging an unexpected twist at the end of the script will bring public or critical acclaim.

So what makes a successful movie twist? Clearly it's not an easy question to answer, and anyone in possession of the perfect formula would be the filmic equivalent of an alchemist. By definition the best movie surprises are the ones

you just didn't see coming. Yet this leads to what seems to be the fundamental problem in surprising an audience – how do you come up with a plot change that goes against everything your film seemed to be leading to, without making your twist unrealistic or far fetched? How many otherwise decent films have been ruined by an overly ambitious plot turn? Filmmakers must walk a tightrope towards a successful dramatic conclusion.

Another problem with surprise endings is that the rest of movie can become simply an elaborate set up for the twist. The best sign of a great twist movie is when one can watch it a second time and still enjoy the story, even though you know the outcome. With some movies the twist has become so iconic that it's impossible for new generations to watch the film without prior knowledge. Imagine watching *The Empire Strikes Back* without knowing that Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker's father...

Sometimes a successful twist

movie can spawn a succession of poor imitations. M. Night Shyamalan's *Sixth Sense* was such an unexpected money spinner that Hollywood became obsessed with reproducing the formula; Shyamalan himself become something of a joke for his surprise endings in subsequent movies. His audience's expectation of a twist undermined and compromised its shock value and credibility. The best twists come in films where you are not expecting one.

That said, what impresses one viewer as an enjoyable surprise ending might strike another as predictable, clichéd, or unbelievable. Trying to agree on the best movie twist is like trying to choose the greatest movie ever. Yet most film-buffs could come up with their personal top five favourites, given some thought.

Here are mine. If you haven't seen them already, be warned – I give away the twist.



PSYCHO

Okay, we all know the story – don't we? You all thought Mummy's boys were soft and maybe picked on them at school, right? Big mistake! Or it would be if you went to school with Norman Bates, and organized a school reunion at the Bates Motel... Hitchcock's masterpiece features two savage twists. First, his leading lady Janet Leigh is slaughtered in a shower only twenty-five minutes into the film. The audience is led to suspect that Bates's oppressive, paranoid mother is the killer – but it turns out to be Norman (superbly acted by Anthony Perkins) wearing a dress and fright-wig, as her murderous alter ego. *Psycho* changed the face of big screen thrillers and served as a blueprint for much of the horror genre today. Its plot is so well known that it's easy to forget that it actually contains a deftly worked twist in the revelation of Ma Bates's identity. Oedipal transvestitism has never been so scary!



CLICK TO PLAY

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PLANET OF THE APES

Who hasn't wondered what it would be like to be an astronaut who ends up on a planet inhabited by talking monkeys? I have – but maybe only because I've watched *Planet of the Apes* too many times. The unfortunates to experience this fate are George Taylor (Charlton Heston) and his team-mates. It is only right at the end of the film that Taylor – and viewers – simultaneously discover that the Planet of the Apes is actually Earth, in the future, when he finds the



Statue of Liberty, half buried on a beach. While Darwin might have scoffed at the idea that apes would evolve into a superior talking race, and even those of us less versed in evolutionary theory may be skeptical, the film's inverted relationship between man and simian features so many human



evils – intolerance, cruelty and racism – that we can forgive it for pushing the boundaries of belief. By the way, forget the 2001 remake of *Planet of the Apes*. It may be novel to see Helena Bonham Carter dressed up as a chimpanzee, but the film is rubbish otherwise.



3

FIGHT CLUB

The imaginary friend has been a device in many movie plots – nowhere more effectively than in *Fight Club*. If you believed that your imaginary friend was real and looked like Brad Pitt, would you go on to form an underground brawling club and become the leader of your own terrorist cult? Well, Jack (Edward Norton) does, sleeping with a rather more human Bonham Carter in the process, and blowing up a city to the sound of the Pixies.

While some claim to have guessed that Pitt's character Tyler Durden didn't exist outside Jack's head, it's hard to believe them. Aside from the pure surprise of this revelation, *Fight Club* is a satisfyingly dark examination of the male psyche and the shallowness of consumerism and urban society.



THE USUAL SUSPECTS

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Essentially a heist movie, over which the unseen legendary criminal mastermind Keyser Soze looms large. Reputedly, Soze is a man so evil that, when faced with threats to kill his family, he killed them himself, to prove that he feared nobody. A touch extreme perhaps, but effective if you want to be known as

the devil incarnate. The story is told from the perspective of crippled gang member 'Verbal' Kint (Kevin Spacey), the sole survivor of the heist gone wrong, under interrogation by the police. It is only in the final scenes that we discover that Soze is actually the product of Kint's fiendish mind...



If ever there was a twist that made you want to watch a film all over again, this is it. That friends still debate the true identity of Keyser Soze is a testament to the film's genius, or proof that they have nothing better to do. Some dissenters slam the final twist as poorly executed and overly complicated. You decide...

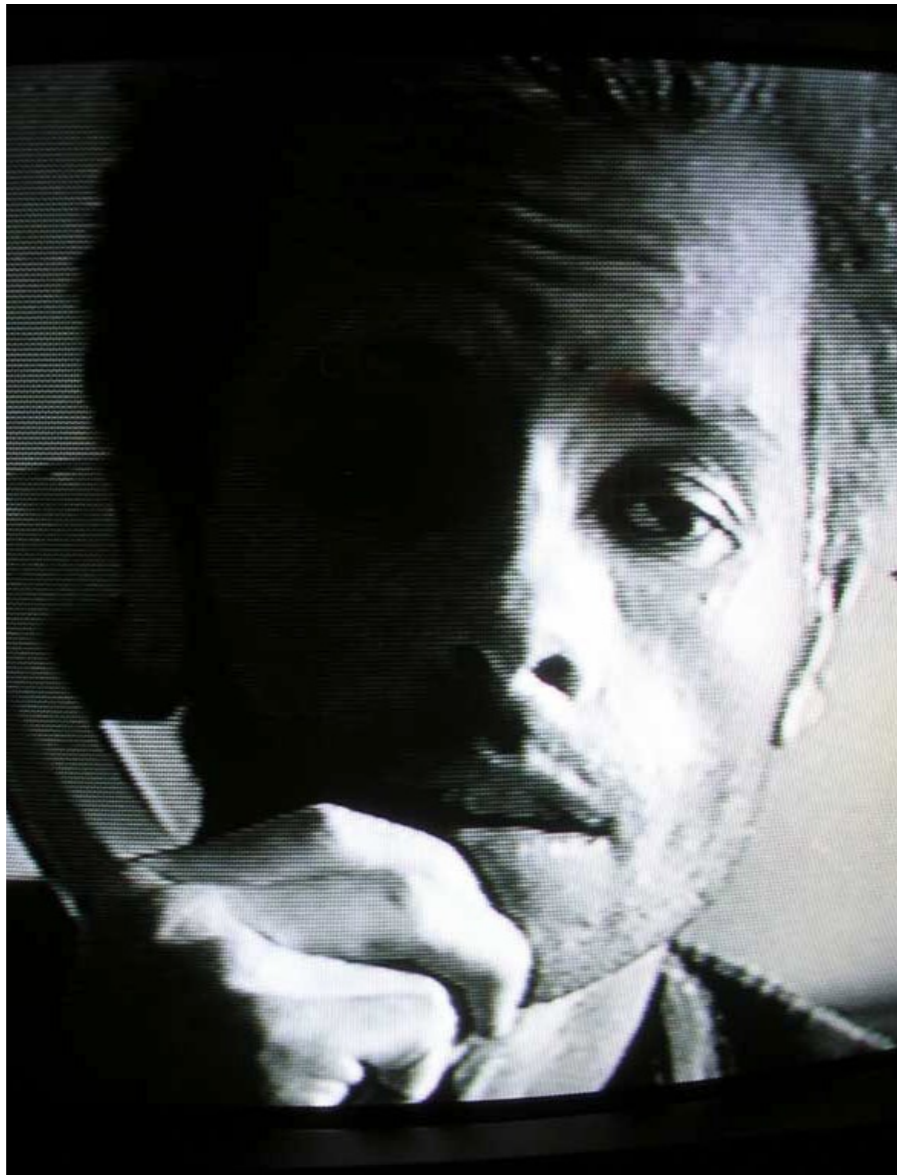


MEMENTO

Amnesia is another good premise for a story, used by many directors since Hitchcock. In *Memento*, Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce) is left with the short term memory of a goldfish after two intruders rape and kill his wife and push Shelby's head into a mirror. The film centres on his quest for revenge on the surviving killer.

Unlike a goldfish, Shelby can tattoo his own body with information or use Polaroid photos to reconstruct the past. The film intersperses scenes shot in colour in reverse chronological order, with black and white scenes in chronological order, so that when each begins we have no idea what preceded it – just like Shelby. This all leads grimly to the story's beginning and the film's ending, when we discover that Shelby has conducted his vengeful search many times before.

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