CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521581834 - Thrillers
Martin Rubin
Excerpt
More information

PART ONE

Approaches

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521581834 - Thrillers
Martin Rubin
Excerpt
More information

1

Introduction

The label *thriller* is widely used but highly problematic. To the foolhardy writer setting out to define the subject, it might seem impossibly broad and vague.

The American mass-circulation magazine *TV Guide* includes "Thriller" as one of the categories used to describe the movies in its weekly listings. However, the way this label is applied seems more arbitrary than illuminating. In one randomly selected week, the tongue-in-cheek horror film *Basket Case* (1982) was listed as a Thriller, while its sequel *Basket Case 2* (1990) was deemed a Comedy. *Black Widow* (1987), in which a policewoman sets out to snare a psychotic femme fatale who targets wealthy businessmen, was designated a Thriller, whereas *The Banker* (1989), in which a policeman sets out to snare a psychotic businessman who targets prostitutes, was considered a Crime Drama. Michael Crichton's *Looker* (1981), mixing speculative technology with murder investigation, was listed as a Thriller, yet the similarly themed *Coma* (1978, directed by Crichton) and *The Terminal Man* (1974, based on a Crichton novel) came under the headings of Mystery and Science Fiction, respectively.

An anthology series entitled *Thriller,* hosted by horror icon Boris Karloff, ran on the NBC network from 1960 to 1962, during which time it presented a wide-ranging variety of ghost, horror, mystery, spy, gangster, and crime stories – backed by the host's authoritative assertion, "Let me assure you, my friends, *this* is a thriller!" Lawrence Hammond's 1974 book *Thriller Movies* and John McCarty's 1992 book *Thrillers* both specifically exclude horror films from their surveys; but the lyrics of pop singer Michael Jackson's 1982 hit "Thriller" (as well as the visuals of its music video) concentrate exclusively on horror-film imagery.

A *genre* is a set of conventions and shared characteristics that have historically evolved into a distinct, widely recognized type of composition within an art form. The pastoral poem, the Christmas carol, and the still-life painting are examples of genres within their respective art

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521581834 - Thrillers
Martin Rubin
Excerpt
More information

forms. In terms of the forms of fictional film and literature covered in this book, *genre* refers to a certain conventionalized category of story, such as detective, western, science fiction, and horror.

One cannot consider the thriller a genre in the same way that one considers, say, the western or science fiction a genre. The range of stories that have been called thrillers is simply too broad. Films as diverse as the stalker horror movie *Halloween* (1978), the hard-boiled detective film *The Big Sleep* (1946), the Harold Lloyd comedy *Safety Last* (1923), the grim police drama *Seven* (1995), the colorful Hitchcock spy film *North by Northwest* (1959), the seaborne disaster film *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), the science-fiction monster movie *Alien* (1979), and the early serial *The Perils of Pauline* (1914) can all be considered thrillers.

The concept of "thriller" falls somewhere between a genre proper and a descriptive quality that is attached to other, more clearly defined genres – such as spy thriller, detective thriller, horror thriller. There is possibly no such thing as a pure, freestanding "thriller thriller." The thriller can be conceptualized as a "metagenre" that gathers several other genres under its umbrella, and as a band in the spectrum that colors each of those particular genres.

Because of the amorphous boundaries of the thriller, this book has a multichanneled focus. It deals with several genres to which the concept of thriller can be applied and extracts the overarching, "thrilleresque" common denominators that link them. This thrilleresque quality is more compatible with some genres than with others. It attaches itself easily to such genres as spy, horror, and various subsets of the crime film; other genres, such as westerns, musicals, and war films, are less receptive. On the other hand, within a single genre – for example, science fiction – there may be some films that are clearly thrillers (e.g., the 1956 alien-invasion drama *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*) and others that do not fit the label so well (e.g., the 1971 satiric fable *A Clockwork Orange*). To help clarify this issue, Chapter 6 compares two detective films, one a thriller, the other not – or much less so.

Genre analysts such as Tzvetan Todorov, Fredric Jameson, and Rick Altman have proposed that a genre comprises two types of element: *semantic* (i.e., related to the specific signs used to produce meaning) and *syntactic* (i.e., related to the general relationships between those signs).[1] Another way of stating this concept is that a genre operates on two interrelated levels: a level of specific themes and iconography (e.g., cowboys, saloons, six-shooters, Southwestern landscapes, re-

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521581834 - Thrillers
Martin Rubin
Excerpt
More information

venge themes in the western) and a level of general relationships, patterns, and structural elements (e.g., again in the western: the opposition between wilderness and civilization, the fraternal relationship between hero and villain, the hero's movement between social rejection and acceptance). In thrillers, because of the widely varying forms they can take, the presence of iconographic elements that conventionally connote "thriller" is weak or nonexistent. (A thriller might contain gangsters or ghosts, fedoras or space helmets.) Although some of the iconographic and thematic elements of individual thriller-related genres are mentioned when those genres are covered in this book, its attempt to define the thriller necessarily concentrates on conceptual, relational, and structural elements.

The remainder of this introductory chapter deals with concepts that are applicable to the thriller itself rather than to its position amid the constellation of genres. These are basic, general concepts; more advanced and specific concepts are covered mainly in Chapter 2, as well as in some of the film-analysis chapters (Part III).

The thriller is a *quantitative* as well as a qualitative concept. It involves not just the presence of certain qualities but also the extent to which they are present. Virtually all narrative films could be considered thrilling to some degree, because they contain suspense and action and a sense of departure from the routine world into a realm that is more marvelous and exciting. At a certain hazy point, however, they become thrilling enough to be considered thrillers. The thriller is by nature an imprecise concept, loosely and at times arbitrarily applied – as indicated by the above citations of the *TV Guide* movie listings and the *Thriller* television series.

In relation to the issue of quantity, the thriller often involves an *excess* of certain qualities and feelings beyond the necessity of the narrative: too much atmosphere, action, suspense – too much, that is, in terms of what is strictly necessary to tell the story – so that these thrilling elements, to a certain extent, become an end in themselves.

Important to the concept of thriller is not just an excess of feelings but the question of *which* feelings are emphasized. The thriller works primarily to evoke such feelings as suspense, fright, mystery, exhilaration, excitement, speed, movement. In other words, it emphasizes visceral, gut-level feelings rather than more sensitive, cerebral, or emotionally heavy feelings, such as tragedy, pathos, pity, love, nostalgia. In a 1963 essay entitled "How to Write a Thriller," Ian Fleming, creator of

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521581834 - Thrillers
Martin Rubin
Excerpt
More information

the superspy James Bond, stated that his books were aimed "somewhere between the solar plexus and, well, the upper thigh."[2] The thriller stresses *sensations* more than sensitivity. It is a sensational form. This property links the thriller to the sensation-oriented "cinema of attractions" prominent in early film history (see Chapter 3). It also links the thriller to such popular amusements as the carnival, fun house, Ferris wheel, merry-go-round, and roller coaster – a link that is sometimes literalized by having these devices conspicuously featured in the films themselves. Examples include the baroque fun house that climaxes Orson Welles's topsy-turvy film noir *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948), the Viennese Ferris wheel on which the disoriented hero meets the enigmatic Harry Lime in Carol Reed's postwar thriller *The Third Man* (1949), the merry-go-round that goes berserk at the end of Alfred Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* (1951) [Fig. 1], the title attraction wherein several foolish teenagers tempt fate in Tobe Hooper's horror film *The Funhouse* (1981), and the various rides and attractions through which the policemen scramble in John Landis's comedy-thriller *Beverly Hills Cop III* (1994), much of which is set in a Disneyland-like amusement park.

The thriller involves not just the presence of certain feelings in excess but also a *combination* of those feelings. Just as a roller coaster makes us laugh *and* scream, the thriller often works to double emotions, feelings, sensations: humor *and* suspense, fear *and* excitement, pleasure *and* pain. Harold Lloyd, in his silent-comedy "thrill pictures," sought to combine laughter and fright in a way that sharpened both responses; Alfred Hitchcock, in such classic thrillers as *The 39 Steps* (1935) and *North by Northwest,* joined comedy and suspense in a mutually reinforcing manner.

These doubled emotional responses also involve *ambivalence.* The viewer is pulled in opposite directions – between anxiety and pleasure, masochism and sadism, identification and detachment – and this tension is a great part of what gives thrillers their kick. A thriller works to undermine our emotional stability (in contrast to the whodunit, a very stable form, as discussed in Chapter 6). It creates an off-balance effect. The viewer is suspended between conflicting feelings – and this suspension is related to the concept of suspense, one of the primary ingredients of the thriller (see Chapters 2 and 7).

The overload and combination and ambivalence of feelings that the thriller creates, with a resultant lack of stability, produce a strong sensation of *vulnerability.* As on a roller coaster or in a fun house, there is a certain loss of control that constitutes an important part of the thrill.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521581834 - Thrillers
Martin Rubin
Excerpt
More information

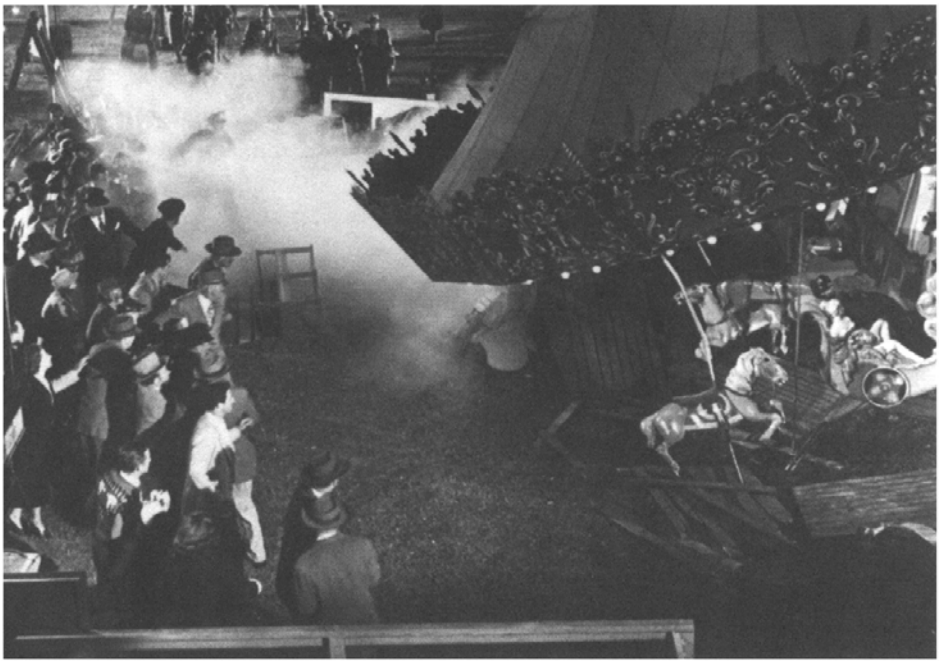


Figure 1. *Strangers on a Train:* End of the ride on a berserk merry-go-round. (The Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive)

Thrillers characteristically feature a remarkable degree of passivity on the part of the heroes with whom we as spectators identify. These heroes are often acted upon more than they act; they are swept up in a rush of events over which they have little control. The thriller creates, in both hero and spectator, a strong sense of being carried away, of surrendering oneself. Control–vulnerability is a central dialectic of the thriller, closely related to sadism–masochism. The thriller is a form with strong sadomasochistic appeal: We derive pleasure from watching characters suffer (e.g., Cary Grant hanging from the edge of a cliff in *North by Northwest*), but we ourselves also suffer by virtue of identifying with those characters. The thriller puts both hero and audience through the wringer.

Of possible relevance to these issues is the etymology of the word *thrill,* which comes from a Middle English root meaning "to pierce." This association relates to the aggressive, sadomasochistic nature of the thriller, and also to its visceral, sensational side: A thrill is a sharp sensation, as if one had been pierced or pricked by a sharp instrument.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521581834 - Thrillers
Martin Rubin
Excerpt
More information

Also intriguing is the similarity between the words *thrill* and *thrall* (slave, captive). These meanings come together in the word *enthrall,* which carries connotations both of being enslaved, captured, and of being thrilled, spellbound. Similarly, in a thriller, it is as if we give ourselves up to be captured, carried away, in order to be thrilled, to receive a series of sharp sensations.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521581834 - Thrillers
Martin Rubin
Excerpt
More information

2

Critical Overview

The existence of critical and theoretical writings that deal explicitly with the thriller as a general category (rather than with one particular thriller-related genre, such as detective or horror) is limited. The majority of the few books that have been written on the general subject of the movie thriller – such as Brian Davis's *The Thriller* (1973), Lawrence Hammond's *Thriller Movies* (1974), and John McCarty's *Thrillers* (1992) – are primarily picture books that provide descriptions of several thrillers, with a minimal effort to define the underlying concepts that distinguish the thriller from other types of movies. More substantial approaches have been offered by academics Ralph Harper, Jerry Palmer, and, especially, Charles Derry.

Charles Derry, Ralph Harper, Jerry Palmer: Thrillers in General

In *The Suspense Thriller* (1988), Charles Derry, a genre-studies specialist who has also written books on the horror film and on the TV series *thirtysomething*, takes a taxonomic approach to the movie thriller: He is primarily concerned with classifying different categories of thriller rather than with tracing the historical evolution of the form. Derry limits his discussion of the "suspense thriller" to crime films that lack a central, traditional detective figure and that feature a protagonist who is either an innocent victim or a nonprofessional criminal (e.g., the scheming lovers of many a film noir). He excludes from his defined area several types of film to which the loose label of thriller has been frequently applied, including detective films (hard-boiled as well as whodunit – see Chapter 6), police films, heist films, horror films, and spy films whose hero is a professional spy. Derry finds nonprofessional and/or victim protagonists essential to the suspense thriller, because these characters are placed in unfamiliar situations that enhance their vulnerability and thereby produce greater suspense.[1] The present

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521581834 - Thrillers
Martin Rubin
Excerpt
More information

book also notes the special advantages of the amateur-protagonist case but allows that other varieties can provide sufficient suspense, vulnerability, and mystification to qualify fully as thrillers.

Similarly to myself, Derry sees the suspense thriller as a broad "umbrella genre" that cuts across several more clearly defined genres.[2] However, rather than classifying different types of thriller according to traditional, widely recognized generic categories, such as spy, detective, and film noir, Derry proposes fresh categories based upon the films' thematic and plot content (e.g., the thriller of acquired identity, the thriller of moral confrontation, the innocent-on-the-run thriller).

Derry also introduces concepts drawn from two books written by specialists in the field of psychology: Michael Balint's *Thrills and Regressions* (1959), which discusses thrills in terms of the subject's attraction or aversion to dangerous situations, and Altan Löker's *Film and Suspense* (1976), which sees cinematic suspense as deriving mainly from the creation of a sense of guilt in the spectator. These psychological concepts are only lightly and intermittently applied in the bulk of Derry's book, which consists of often perceptive analyses of numerous thrillers and the categories into which they are grouped. The analytic sections of *The Suspense Thriller* rely primarily on the identification of recurring narrative patterns in the various thriller subgenres. Derry's approach here recalls that of the folklorist Vladimir Propp, whose methodology, famously used to analyze Russian fairy tales, has become a cornerstone of genre theory. Derry makes an especially convincing case in these terms for the "innocent-on-the-run" film as a coherent genre – quintessentially represented by the Hitchcock classics *The 39 Steps* (1935) and *North by Northwest* (1959) and also encompassing such films as the bleak conspiracy thriller *The Parallax View* (1974), the train-based comedy-thriller *Silver Streak* (1976), and the nightmarish farce *After Hours* (1985).

The thriller has been dealt with specifically as a literary form in Ralph Harper's *The World of the Thriller* (1969) and Jerry Palmer's *Thrillers* (1979). Harper, a humanities professor specializing in existential philosophy, interprets the thriller in terms of his specialty. He compares the central concerns of classic thriller authors, such as John Buchan and Graham Greene, to those of existential philosophers, such as Sören Kierkegaard and Karl Jaspers, and of major novelists frequently associated with existentialism, such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Franz Kafka.

According to Harper, thrillers (especially spy thrillers) simulate existentialism by envisioning a modern world filled with chaos and ab-

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521581834 - Thrillers
Martin Rubin
Excerpt
More information

surdity. Like the solitary individual examined and exalted by existentialism, the thriller hero is cut off from his previously secure bearings of community, habit, tradition, and religious assurance. He is thrust out in the cold (as spy novelist John le Carré might put it) or "thrown into the world" (in the words of existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre) and placed in crisis situations where he must nakedly confront absolute questions of identity, morality, faith, and death.[3] However, Harper notes, the thriller is a hybrid form, softening the stark extremes of existentialism with more reassuring notions of heroism and poetic justice, whereby individual effort is ultimately effective and a sense of moral order is at least temporarily restored.[4]

Although brief, Harper's book is quite diffuse, its ideas presented in the form of random observations rather than a structured argument. *The World of the Thriller* is peppered with intriguing insights that are left frustratingly underdeveloped. The book fails to establish that the existential dimension of thrillers amounts to much more than a miscellany of superficial resemblances, or that it accounts for more than a small fraction of the thriller's central concerns, or that it sufficiently distinguishes the thriller from other forms of action-oriented "crisis fiction," notably the war novel and the adventure tale.

Thrillers, by the British communications professor Jerry Palmer, is a wider-ranging effort, attempting to define the thriller in terms of its basic structure, literary roots, ideology, and sociological background. Palmer's central premise is distinguished by its elegant simplicity. In his view, the thriller can be reduced to just two essential components: a hero and a conspiracy. The basic thriller plot consists simply of the hero defeating the conspiracy.[5]

Palmer requires of the thriller hero a certain stature and ability: He (as in Harper's book, the possibility of a thriller heroine is neither excluded nor mentioned) must be "professional" and "competitive." In Palmer's terms, this means that the hero is uniquely competent. He is not an amateur or "average citizen"; he remains self-reliant and isolated (thereby diminishing the possibility of love); and he is successful – he always defeats the conspiracy. By these criteria, Palmer nominates as quintessential thriller heroes the superspy James Bond and the supertough private eye Mike Hammer.[6]

Moreover, Palmer insists that the thriller hero monopolize the reader's sympathy and allegiance. We must approve of the hero's actions and adopt his moral perspective to the virtual exclusion of all others; this unequivocal desire to see the hero succeed is what, in Palmer's view, creates thriller suspense. It is therefore possible to have sus-

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org