

# SAVE THE CAT! GOES TO THE INDIES

The Screenwriters Guide to 50 Films from the Masters



**SALVA RUBIO**

BASED ON THE BOOKS BY

**BLAKE SNYDER**

# 1 MONSTER IN THE HOUSE



It should be no surprise that we start this book about “in-die, auteur and European” movies with one of the most productive genres in independent cinema history: the “Monster in the House.”

MITH films are one of the most primal among the 10 *Save the Cat!*® genres, and also more akin to their commercial or mainstream counterparts. This is completely logical, since many of the classics of the genre are technically independent films, even if they are now mainstream franchises, like *Halloween*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Friday the 13th*.

As we will see, some of the most literally gut-wrenching, terrifying and scary MITH films are still considered in the realm of independent cinema — even consecrated European auteurs have given it a go.

Some of these “small” (by Hollywood standards) films demonstrate how a limited budget can only boost imagination, passion and talent, turning some of the movies we are about to analyze into classics that have shaken up the conventions of genre, if not cinema history itself. Is not an “infectious” British movie (*28 Days Later*) responsible for the resurrection and (ahem) new life of the zombie genre? Did *Saw* not inspire a new, original and successful franchise? We just expect this display of creativity to follow a story as old as time — aren’t we simply re-telling the Theseus, Ariadna (the first “Final Girl”), the minotaur and the labyrinth story?

So if you are a fan of horror films and want to write a MITH, what do you need, besides morbidity, a dark imagination and lots of ketchup?

The first element you need to create is what we call a **monster**. Monsters can come in all shapes and sizes but have one common component: supernatural power. Even if they are (or were) just

humans, there is something in their skills, intelligence, insanity, evil or appearance that makes them superior to the average human — from zombies to the infected (*28 Days Later*), from masked evil beings chasing teenagers in slasher films (*The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*) to the super-evil and super-polite teenagers in *Funny Games*. In any case, the real menace is that that these monsters seem able to take both your body and your soul. As Blake reminded us, make your monsters powerful, or your script's possibilities will suffer accordingly!

The second element you will need is the **house**. We can mean this literally (as in *Les Diaboliques* or *Single White Female*) but the house can also be any “labyrinth” or enclosed space our heroes are trapped in with the monster — from a really small location (the boat in *Knife in the Water*) to places as big as an endless forest (*The Blair Witch Project*) to a whole quarantined country (*28 Days Later*). The houses can be metaphorical too, as the all-encompassing surveillance that unknowingly haunts our characters in *The Lives of Others*. In any case, make sure your characters can't escape!

The third element is a **sin**, because deep within all these films (unlike our “Dude with a Problem” genre, in which everything that happens to the protagonist is undeserved), the characters somehow *earned* the problem. It is a sin of some kind which makes them deserve what they are going through, which is why we see the retribution as some kind of retaliation from higher forces. Perhaps this is why in so many movies the pure, innocent girl in the group defeats evil — she was not condemned like the rest. The sin can be simply hatred (*28 Days Later*), lying (*The Lives of Others*) or disrespect to the supernatural, as in *The Blair Witch Project*. The sin is utterly necessary (except in the “Nihilist Monster” subgenre, as we will see shortly).

There is also a peculiar character whom Blake defined as the **Half Man** that tends to show up in MITH movies. This personage “knows the nature of the beast” because he seems to be in touch with the supernatural, and usually warns our protagonists about dealing with such dark powers. In some cases, he will even help them in their fight — many times suffering because of it, since he should have known better. The Half Men are damaged, flawed, often dark

mentors, like the barbecue man in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* or Wiesler, our POV character in *The Lives of Others*, who knew better the workings of the Stasi because he was a member.

As with the rest of our 10 genres, the MITH category has five subgenres of its own, each with a different twist to better nail the movie you are analyzing or writing.

The first of them is called the **Pure Monster**, dealing with “supercharged beasts,” including zombies or the infected — they are creatures with super-strength, super-animal behavior or super-killer instincts that will hunt down your characters one by one. Just remember *The Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead* or any of its sequels, and you will understand the blueprint.

We also can write the **Domestic Monster**, in which the beast is very much human and the story tends to happen in an everyday environment, with the “monster” being someone who may appear to be just normal or caring — even family! But wait until you incur their wrath. *The Lives of Others*, *Hard Candy* or *The Stepfather* are worthy examples.

Next, let us study the **Serial Monster** variety, which has the workings of the tried-and-true genre called the “slasher film.” The independent and European realm truly have their share of this kind of monster’s doings, as seen in such films as *Cold Prey*, *Halloween* or the über-terrifying (and the sexual tourist’s worst nightmare) *Hostel*.

Our next subgenre is the **Super-Natural Monster**, featuring beings, creatures or entities that come from other realms or dimensions, and thus can torture, kill and maim our bodies... and our souls... for eternity! Hits like *The Ring*, *The Shining*, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* or our chosen example, *The Blair Witch Project*, reflect our deepest fears.

Last, but not the least scary, is the **Nihilist Monster**, the exception to the “sin” requirement. Unlike the rest of the monsters, who seemingly need a provocation to attack, the Nihilist one will assault us just because! No sin is seemingly committed, although ignorance could be one — you didn’t deserve it, you just happened to be passing by or were in the wrong place at the wrong time. The

cruelest of our monsters will get you, like they did in *Saw*, *Cabin Fever*, *Audition* or *Funny Games*.

### **DON'T BE AFRAID OF YOUR MITH**

If you really want to make your characters and audiences suffer, you've found the ideal genre. Here's what you'll need:

1. A "monster" whose powers are or seem supernatural (insanity counts!). They are evil, on the prowl and looking for you!
2. A "house" or an enclosed space where your protagonists will be trapped. It can be physical or metaphorical, as small as an actual house or as big as a whole country. Just make sure your characters have no way out!
3. A "sin" your characters have committed, either in ignorance or perhaps from arrogance — regardless, the sin has really made someone in the dark angry, and now someone else has to pay!

So now that you have sharpened your writing tools, get ready to enter the darkness and prepare to defend against the monster... or to become one!

### **28 DAYS LATER (2002)**

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If you were alive before 2002, you will remember that the zombie genre was pretty much... dead. But just as the deceased have a tendency to rise from their graves, this British film resurrected undead apocalypse fiction, re-animating not only dozens of successful films, TV series and comic books, but turning the genre mainstream again.

Starting with a meager \$8M, director Danny Boyle and writer Alex Garland exploited collective terror by portraying the usually busy and lively city of London as an eerily empty wasteland. They not only gave us an unforgettable view of the city but also struck a

common chord, dealing with the fear against our fellow man and citizens in difficult times.

Many of the worldwide praise for the film also came from the fact that the formerly slow, moaning and dragging (read: boring) traditional zombies were turned into the “infected,” which have very different traits: fast-moving, enraged, agile, vicious... so don’t think about outrunning them! *28 Days Later* is thus an example of the “Pure Monster” genre, in which an unusually powerful beast or animal relentlessly pursues a group of survivors. And aren’t the infected nothing more than “human animals”?

By supercharging them with “rage,” Boyle and Garland are telling us a story about survival in a zombie apocalypse, and also about a more decisive choice — even if we are safe from the virus, can we not be as deadly as the infected when we lose our human values?

MITH Type: Pure Monster

MITH Cousins: *Night of the Living Dead*, *Attack the Block*, *The Mist*, *Dawn of the Dead*, *Dead Snow*

28 DAYS LATER

*Written by* Alex Garland

*Directed by* Danny Boyle

**Opening Image:** TV images of a world in turmoil, violence and “people killing people.” Are they infected by the virus? No, but we soon find out that there is another kind of disease that is not transmitted by blood or saliva, but is equally lethal: the virus of hate, rage and violence, which is our “sin.” Is it possible to live in a world without them? Our story starts with three animal rights activists setting loose some lab monkeys and unknowingly becoming the first victims of the real virus.

**Theme Stated:** The theme is stated early on, when the doctor attacked by the activists answers a question regarding the monkeys. “Infected

with what?” “Rage.” It can be a disease, but also an attitude — violence and hate are just as contagious as a virus, and if spread to the whole population, can it not cause the same amount of harm?

**Set-Up:** Precisely 28 days later, a naked man named Jim (Cillian Murphy), strapped to a bed much like the chimpanzee in the first scene, wakes up to find himself in an empty hospital, seeing afterwards the barren streets and deserted whole city of London. As with all good Set-Ups, this film describes the “systemic problem”: humanity has disappeared off the face of the earth! And Jim seems to be the only survivor, as he wanders the empty city calling out a single word: “Hello.” Jim does not seem afraid, and he is eager to find other people. He still trusts humanity.

**Catalyst:** At minute 12, Jim finds a newspaper and finally learns what happened. After the outbreak, all UK citizens were meant to be evacuated, resulting in global chaos.

**Debate:** Doubts are the foundation of every effective Debate beat. Where have the people been evacuated to? Where must he go now? The answer comes soon, when Jim seeks refuge for the night in a nearby church and is greeted by an infected priest, who shows him (and us) the real effect of the infection — people have been turned into rabid, agile, zombie-like predators who infect each other with blood and saliva. Fortunately, Jim soon finds two other non-infected people, joker Mark (Noah Huntley) and tough-gal Selena (Naomie Harris).

**B Story:** Selena is the perfect B Story Character — not only because of the obvious attraction and sexual tension between her and Mark, but also because her own humanity is at risk. She soon claims that she will kill anyone who gets infected and that “staying alive is as good as it gets.” But Jim seems to know that under that rugged façade, she is a good person, one who can still be “infected” by hatred, losing her humanity. Could he end up being infected himself?

**Break into Two:** After being briefed by Mark and Selena about how the outbreak took place and how there is no government, police, army, TV, radio or electricity, Jim decides that he wants to see his family in Deptford (South East London). Mark sets two rules: to never go anywhere alone and to travel only by day.

**Fun and Games:** And so the Fun and Games beat involves getting out in the open and risking being attacked by the infected. When they finally reach Jim's home, he finds his parents dead and soon after, they are attacked. Mark gets infected, so Selena ruthlessly dispatches of him, showing that her words were true — she will show no remorse! They find two more survivors: Frank and his teenage daughter Hannah. The group can't just hide, as they are running out of water, so Frank makes them listen to a radio transmission by the army promising them help from the 42nd blockade. Selena protests, but Hannah states "We need each other." They decide to go to the blockade, ignoring the recording's warning that "We are soldiers. We are armed." On the way, Jim viciously kills an infected boy. Is his own humanity at stake?

**Midpoint:** The *false victory* comes when they arrive at Waverley Abbey, where they can spend some hours in peace without fearing for their lives. It is a "Midpoint celebration," a "campfire scene" which for them precludes salvation and fills them with hope as they see some wild horses run free. It is also time for some brief *Sex at 60*, as Selena kisses Jim "for a heartbeat." She is obviously not ready for anything more.

**Bad Guys Close In:** The next morning, they find the 42nd blockade, where supposedly salvation awaits. Not only is it deserted, Frank gets infected and is about to attack the group, when a hail of bullets kills him. Jim, Selena and Hannah are saved (or captured?) by a bunch of surviving soldiers under the command of a Major Henry West, who tries hard to be nice to them. He is also the *Half Man* of our movie, as he is keeping an infected soldier,

Mailer, chained “to learn from him.” West’s intentions remain unclear, military discipline is lacking everywhere and he sees the situation as normal, because “people killing people” is what has been happening before and after the infection. Isn’t this the echo of the “sin of violence”? Soon after some of the infected enter the premises, the soldiers show their true plans: to force Selena and Hannah to have sex, because by doing so, “they mean a future.”

**All Is Lost:** Jim grabs Selena and Hannah and tries to flee from the house, but is knocked out, ending their last chance to escape. The lights of the house go out as their hope fades.

**Dark Night of the Soul:** Jim listens to the rant of a sargeant, who thinks that the UK has been quarantined but the rest of the world is still uninfected. Is there hope?

**Break into Three:** It seems that Jim will never find out, since in the morning he is to be shot along with the sergeant. The latter provokes the soldiers, so Jim uses the confusion to escape. And then he sees something: a plane flying overhead. They may have a chance!

### **Finale:**

1. **Gathering the Team:** Jim decides to save Selena and Hannah, and for that he must “gather the team” of soldiers so that he can dispose of them. He rings a siren, kills one of them and leaves West behind, fighting with some infected. But unexpectedly, West survives.
2. **Executing the Plan:** Jim — now moving, behaving and looking like an infected (*synthesis man!*) — enters the literal castle to execute his plan: to release Mailer, the infected soldier, so that other soldiers will kill and infect each other.
3. **High Tower Surprise:** Jim realizes that the soldier who tried to rape Selena is holding her! So from the attic (again, a literal “high tower”), he savagely attacks him as if infected.

4. Dig, Deep Down: When Selena thinks Jim has been infected, Jim “digs deep down” and lets her attack him, but she stops at the last moment, incapable of hurting him. Jim has shown Selena that she still has some humanity inside. They will be able to be together after all. There is still hope!
5. The Execution of the New Plan: The new plan involves running away from the house, which they do in the taxi they brought, while Hannah has her own revenge by letting Mailer kill West. Then unexpectedly Jim is wounded. Will they survive?

**Final Image:** 28 days yet later, Jim wakes up in a country house with Selena and Hannah. Not far away, the last of the infected are dying of starvation. When the survivors hear a plane, they display a huge sign in the green grass. Their “hell” has turned into Jim’s motto: “Hello.”

## THE LIVES OF OTHERS (2006)

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One of 2006’s film sensations, this German story earned a variety of well-deserved prizes, including an Academy Award® for Best Foreign Language Film, truly a remarkable achievement considering it was the first full-length film of director F. H. Von Donnersmark... and shot with a \$2 million budget, earning \$77 million by 2007!

In our post-Snowden world, can there be a better “monster” than the Stasi, the all-knowing secret police with thousands of plain citizen informants that filed every little private secret of the German Democratic Republic people before the fall of the Berlin Wall? And isn’t the whole country a “house” in which citizens can be enclosed and chased by higher powers? Finally, isn’t the arrogance of lying a “sin”?

It is also a good choice for this book because it breaks many expectations — it is not even a traditional horror film, but a political drama. However, all the components of a good “Domestic Monster” are here, even the *Half Man*, that damaged character who knows about

the terrible consequences of dealing with the beast, who in a twist, stars in one of our two storylines. Wait, two?

Narratively, a number of very interesting decisions were made in this film, particularly the fact that there are not one but two parallel and overlapping stories, resulting in two beat sheets, one for each of the male characters, writer Georg Dreyman and Stasi agent Hauptmann Gerd Wiesler. In another creative twist, this results in two consecutive Finales, each with their own 5-point structure! As in many cases, breaking the rules can definitely get you an Oscar®.

MITH Type: Domestic Monster

MITH Cousins: *Straw Dogs*, *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, *The Devils (Les Diaboliques)*, *Knife in the Water*, *Hard Candy*

THE LIVES OF OTHERS (DAS LEBEN DER ANDEREN)

*Written and Directed by* Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck

**Opening Image:** It is 1984, during the tough Socialist regime in East Germany. Any citizen can be interrogated or made an informant by the talented interrogator Gerd Wiesler (Ulrich Mühe), the prototypical Stasi agent with an almost supernatural talent to recognize a liar. He is as ruthless as the State he represents, yet can someone like him become a “good man”? Soon after, we behold the Opening Image of our second protagonist, writer Georg Dreyman (Sebastian Koch), who for now is seen as non-subversive, loyal to the government and innocent about its wrongdoings — very different from the man we’ll see at the end.

**Theme Stated:** “The enemies of our State are arrogant,” says Wiesler to his pupils at University, defining our “sin.” Is it possible for a man to lie to that all-knowing “monster” that is the secret police and get away with it? Interestingly, Wiesler also labels Dreyman on first sight as “arrogant”, joining both themes. By the end of the film, we will see where that “arrogance,” in reality defiance, leads both men.

**Set-Up:** Indeed, when Wiesler's lieutenant, Grubitz (Ulrich Tukur), takes him to see one of Dreyman's stage plays, Wiesler thinks there is something fishy about him... which is also, pun intended, a *Stasis* = *death* moment: suspecting everyone, he will never be able to change. Dreyman's own Set-Up starts in the theater (his "work scene"), then he has a "play scene" dancing with his actress girlfriend Christa (Martina Gedeck). Later we will see them in their "home scene" (also the actual "house" of our MITH).

**Catalyst:** At minute 11, Grubitz receives a mission for Wiesler from Minister Bruno Hempf (Thomas Thieme): to secretly investigate Dreyman, offering political influence and privileges in return. Unbeknownst to Dreyman, this is also the Catalyst for him, since this interest will set the plot in motion.

**Debate:** Why is Hempf interested in Dreyman, an apparently loyal writer? We start to suspect that the author's girlfriend, talented and fascinating but insecure actress Christa, is the primary reason. As Dreyman Debates with Hempf, the only way for artists to avoid blacklisting and to get work in the GDR is to be submissive to politicians, a path Christa will soon follow when coerced by Hempf. In the Wiesler beat sheet, we learn how he lives: he is a lonely man, completely devoid of any human connection or warmth — a life so different from that of Christa and Dreyman.

**Break into Two:** In this overlapping beat, following the minister's orders, a team of Stasi agents wire and bug Dreyman's house, while Wiesler prepares his listening station in the penthouse. Everything is ready for the mission to begin — there is "no turning back" for either of the characters.

**B Story:** The "love" story beat is also dual, since it not only concerns the relationship between Christa and Dreyman, but how Wiesler becomes fascinated by these particular "lives of others" — how his reactions to them are at first based in lies and mutual deceit, and later in truth and sacrifice.

**Fun and Games:** We explore the *upside-down world* of every character. In Dreyman's case, he visits Jerska (Volkmar Kleinert), his old depressed mentor who has been blacklisted by the government, a fate that would await him should he dare defy the Stasi. Dreyman lies to him, if only to give him hope. Jerska gives Dreyman a gift; sheet music for *Sonata for a Good Man*. Wiesler explores the upside-down version of his own lonely world: the full life of a dynamic couple, first discovering that Christa's and Dreyman's life together is also driven by lies, from the petty one he tells her about his ability to knot a tie to the most serious secret she hides — an addiction to pills. There is one lie that Wiesler does not tolerate. He discovers that Minister Hempf is using him to destroy Dreyman's career so that he can have Christa for himself. "Is that why we joined [the Stasi]?" asks a disappointed Wiesler. He then "helps" Dreyman discover Christa's infidelity so that they will split up and he can shut down the stakeout. But much to Wiesler's surprise, Dreyman "lies" — not revealing what he's learned, he just hugs Christa in support. Dreyman understands what it is to "bed" government officials to get work. Shaken by this unexpected show of love and protection, Wiesler decides to learn more about the couple's private lives, caring more and more for them.

**Midpoint:** A *false defeat* comes for Wiesler when he learns that Jerska has hanged himself. And the *time clock starts ticking* for Wiesler as Minister Hempf gets impatient and asks for results from the surveillance, but Dreyman has done nothing wrong. At home, he and Christa argue, and he reveals to her, *publicly coming out*, that he knows about her affair with the politician. Worried about them, Wiesler also stages his own *public coming out* (as *A and B Stories* cross), approaching Christa in a bar as if one of her theatre fans. She is kind and tells him he is a good man... but is he? Minutes later, Christa and Dreyman reconcile and have *Sex at 60*.

**Bad Guys Close In:** Angry after Jerska's suicide, and determined to be a "good man," Dreyman decides to write a denunciation. To keep his identity hidden, sympathetic friends provide an "untraceable"

typewriter with red ink, an act that will attract Bad Guys. Wiesler has to face his own Bad Guys when he starts taking more risks to protect the couple, as first his associate at the wire station and then Grubitz get suspicious. When Dreyman's article is published, more Bad Guys Close In as Wiesler lies to his superiors and risks too much to protect the couple. Regardless of his efforts to keep them together, their love is fading — they start lying to each other once again.

**All Is Lost:** Tired of her continuous rejection, Minister Hempf decides to end Christa's career. All Is Lost for Dreyman when she is arrested on account of her drug addiction and confesses that he wrote the article, but she reveals nothing about the typewriter which would prove he did. With Grubitz becoming certain that Weisler is helping the couple, he summons him for his own interrogation — ironically, the worst possible scenario for a man who understands the cruel workings of the system. This is his own All Is Lost.

**Dark Night of the Soul:** Dreyman laments Christa's arrest, while the *whiff of death* is in the air as Weisler enters the interrogation offices knowing that he may be facing his own demise.

**Break into Three:** When forced to interrogate Christa (*A and B Stories cross again*), she recognizes Wiesler as the fan she met in the bar. Sensing that she can trust him — and as the actress she is — she plays along with his cues, so both of them manage to fool Grubitz. Christa then confesses to Wiesler where the typewriter has been hidden — perhaps he can save them after all, if he gets to it before the other agents.

**Finale:** As pointed out before, this film has two consecutive finales, the first concerning Wiesler.

1. Gathering the Team: Offscreen, Wiesler runs to Dreyman's house to get the typewriter, as Grubitz gathers his own team of Stasi policemen to raid the house.

2. Executing the Plan: Also offscreen, as we will know later, Wiesler regains the machine, missing Dreyman by seconds, but thinking that he has saved him. At the same time, Grubitz carries out his own plan of searching the house.
3. High Tower Surprise: The surprise for Grubitz is that the typewriter is not there, but the surprise for Wiesler is very different, as the unexpected happens — feeling like a traitor to her love, Christa commits suicide by jumping in front of a truck, not knowing what Wiesler had done for her. Now he can do no more.
4. Dig, Deep Down: This could be a good time for Wiesler to lie or confess to save himself, but instead he “digs, deep down” when he refuses to talk to Grubitz, so he will have to suffer the consequences. Wiesler has changed — a *synthesis* character, he used to get the truth in order to condemn people but now he has learned to lie to protect them, even sacrificing himself.
5. The Execution of the New Plan: Wiesler’s new “plan” is a demotion he accepts for doing what he felt was right: opening letters in a cellar for 20 years. But four years later, the Berlin wall falls.

And we have our second finale, regarding the fate of Dreyman. Does it work to have two finales in a row? Well, let’s see it!

1. Gathering the Team: In 1989, Dreyman is still a successful writer. He finds Hempf and he tries to “amend hurts,” confirming to him that despite his naiveté, he was under surveillance the whole time.
2. Executing the Plan: The writer’s plan at this point is to find out more, so he visits the Stasi archives center, where he is given the enormous file about himself.

3. High Tower Surprise: Dreyman painfully learns that Christa indeed betrayed him, but when he finds a red ink fingerprint, he also realizes that a Stasi agent protected them!
4. Dig, Deep Down: Dreyman finds Weisler in the street, but instead of confronting him verbally, he “digs deep down” to wait and tell the story, as a writer would do...
5. The Execution of the New Plan: ...and publishes a book, *Sonata for a Good Man*, dedicated to Weisler.

**Final Image:** Germany is now a free country and Weisler is struggling to survive in this new world. However, when he finds Dreyman’s book in a bookstore, and sees it is dedicated to him, he knows that he made the right choices, because as its title says, he is now a “good man.”

## THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE (1974)

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Five teenage friends on a weekend trip end up being chased by a serial killer who disposes of them one by one, until just a “Final Girl” remains alive... sounds familiar, yes? But there was a pre-*Halloween* time in which the “slasher film” trope was not that well-known, and this low-budget movie not only helped set some of its “rules,” but is also considered a masterpiece.

Widely studied by scholars, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* holds rich cultural themes about late-Vietnam America, like the end of the hippie dream and the counter-culture, and the clash between modern values and rural family lifestyle. Even today, the scandal its supposed grisliness caused still resonates, though little actual violence or gore is shown onscreen.

Story-wise, it is an interesting film to analyze because it has little characterization and a meager plot. Still, there abounds a basic trait, one that Blake mentioned as a special characteristic of MITH

movies: its *primal-ness*, as only survival counts in a film in which death is present everywhere.

In the end, it doesn't matter that we know little about the characters and how barebones (literally, we could say) its structure reads — it leaves us with only our most basic narrative tools to use, namely the BS Beat Sheet. So prepare yourself for a horror feast... although this particular film may not leave you exactly hungry for more.

MITH Type: Serial Monster

MITH Cousins: *Halloween*, *Cold Prey*, *Friday the 13th*, *Hostel*, *Prom Night*

## THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE

*Story by* Kim Henkel and Tobe Hooper

*Directed by* Tobe Hooper

**Opening Image:** After a “based on a real story” roll, gruesome flashes of decaying body parts are shown in darkness, while an eerie newscaster talks about grave robbing, sick crimes and morbid occurrences. The scene finishes with a “grisly work of art,” a statue made of body parts erected under the scorching Texas sun — death is even present in broad daylight.

**Set-Up:** A classic Set-Up for a “Serial Monster” story, five hippie teenagers drive out of their usual environment for a weekend trip, although the reason is not a happy one: they must check to see if the grave of Sally and Franklin’s grandfather has been desecrated. Although not much is said about the characters, we know that wheelchair-bound Franklin is quite a whiner, Jerry is the sarcastic one, Sally is quite naive, Kirk is the tough one and Pam is addicted to horoscopes — and we might note that all signs around them are ominous and evil, so their “sin” is ignoring them.

**B Story:** Our “relationship” story here is among family, as there is great tension between Franklin and Sally. They are fighting; things are sour between them. He does not seem all that welcome on the

trip and behaves like a peevish brat, which makes all of them uncomfortable, and tries Sally's patience. Later, we will meet a different set of siblings that seem to get along way better, because a family that *slays* together... *stays* together! (There goes my \$1 dollar joke.)

**Theme Stated:** When the group reaches the cemetery, they meet several locals, mostly drunk rednecks who can't take their eyes off Sally, and one of them utters a foreboding rant: "Things happen hereabout they don't tell about. I see things..." What are those things and why don't they talk about them?

**Catalyst:** On their way from the graveyard they find Hitchhiker, a weird young man who freaks them out by telling how his brother and grandfather used to work at the local slaughterhouse, and that his family has "always been in meat." Afterwards, he takes a knife from Franklin and slices him in the arm, also cutting his own hand! They kick him out of the vehicle, but he smears a strange symbol with his own blood on it, a new dark sign.

**Debate:** "There are moments when we cannot believe what is happening is true," says the newspaper horoscope in pure Debate fashion, and that seems to happen to the group. What must they do now? Before answering the question, they need to refuel, so they stop at a gas station, where they also inquire about Franklin's old house. The strange Old Man (Jim Siedow) warns them not to go around it, as "those things is dangerous.... You are liable to get hurt."

**Break into Two:** Still ignoring every warning, the teens go back to the road to visit the old house, with Franklin thinking about the strange hitchhiker and eating some weird-shaped barbecue.

**Fun and Games:** At last, Sally and the others can relax when they arrive at the old family house. Even though it is ramshackle and dirty, it holds great memories for Sally, and everybody's laughter fills the place, except for Franklin, who is unable to freely move around and share the good times. Even as they laugh, there are more ominous

signs found in the house, but Kirk and Pam pay no attention to them as they decide to go for a bath at the creek. It's dry, and they hear a motor humming in the distance, so maybe they can get some gasoline. Unluckily, after not noticing another sign (a human tooth), Kirk gets killed by a huge strange man in a dead skin mask. Meet Leatherface (Gunnar Hansen), model for many serial killers to come, as Pam can attest after being killed in one of the most cruel and iconic deaths in cinema history.

**Midpoint:** As night begins to fall (a sign of the *ticking clock*), *stakes have been raised*. Now getting the gasoline is a matter of life and death, although the remaining friends still don't know it. While Sally utters her "public display" as a hero — "We'll protect you" — is she really capable of protecting anyone? Can she even save herself? In any case, *A and B Stories* cross as Franklin keeps whining about his lost knife, driving Sally mad, still hiding the fact that she did not want him there. Franklin wonders about the signs they have seen and Sally can only answer: "Everything means something, I guess."

**Bad Guys Close In:** A characteristic of this beat is that "the group disintegrates" even more, with Jerry leaving them to search for his friends and entering Leatherface's home. After finding Pam in a refrigerator, he is killed too. Back at the van, Franklin wants to go with Sally even if he is a physical and emotional burden for her, as they inadvertently attract the attention of Leatherface, who appears out of the dark and dispatches of Franklin with his trademark chainsaw. With the enemy as close as he can be, Sally tries to get away in the dark countryside, running among dead trees and branches, at the same time becoming one of the screen's greatest "scream queens"!

**All Is Lost:** Sally finds salvation in the gas station, where the Old Man they met at the beginning protects and comforts her. As there is not a phone, the man decides to get his truck. This might seem like an All Is Won moment, but Sally's mistake has cost her a final chance of survival.

**Dark Night of the Soul:** In this beat, major characters “contemplate death,” and that is exactly what Sally does when she is left alone in the room, watching the barbecue meat and listening to more horrible news on the radio, reminding her — and us — that the real world hides danger too.

**Break into Three:** That danger is confirmed when the Old Man returns to the room with a sack and a strange smile, revealing that his intentions are not good. After disarming and tying up Sally (temporarily depriving her of her proactivity), he puts her in the car and drives her to a home we know all too well. They find Hitchhiker on the way, revealing that he is family (some say brothers) with him and Leatherface, a dark *Moment of Clarity* for Sally.

**Finale:**

1. Gathering the Team: The Sawyers are reunited (read: gathered) for the first time in the film, including Grandpa, “the best killer in the family,” who can barely move, but can definitely enjoy the blood that Hitchhiker gets from Sally’s finger before she passes out.
2. Executing the Plan: Literally “executing,” as when Sally wakes up, the family decides to carry out their plan to terminate her suffering by killing her, the slaughterhouse-old-school way, and let’s just say it (gasp!) involves a hammer.
3. High Tower Surprise: When Hitchhiker is about to finish off Sally, he gets overconfident and she manages to free herself, jumping out of a window and finding herself on the loose at dawn.
4. Dig, Deep Down: But Sally is still not yet safe. She must “dig, deep down” and run for her life while Hitchhiker chases her, slicing her with his straight razor, while Leatherface and his chainsaw are not far behind.

5. The Execution of the New Plan: At this point, Sally's new plan is to stop a vehicle to get away, something she almost accomplishes when a cattle truck runs over Hitchhiker. Still chased by Leatherface, she jumps in the back of a pickup and barely escapes alive.

**Final Image:** A blood-soaked Sally laughs hysterically in the car, and we know for sure that after losing all her friends and experiencing so many horrors, she is not and will never be the innocent girl she was at the beginning. As for Leatherface, he is left angry and frustrated, swinging around his chainsaw in the middle of the road, showing again that some horrors still await us in broad daylight.

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## **THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT (1999)**

"Supra-natural Monster" films, said Blake, are among the most frightening ones, and how could they not be so, considering that not only are our lives at the stake... but our souls, too? The reason is that the "monster" in these films can "strike anywhere, haunt our dreams until we can't tell what is real — and what isn't."

Just ask Heather Donahue, Michael C. Williams and Joshua Leonard, the three filmmakers who "in October of 1994 became lost in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland, while shooting a documentary," this film being their "found footage." Were these events real or not?

That was the question that tens of thousands of people were asking themselves all over the world because of the smart internet campaign — at the time, one of the first — that launched this film, budgeted at reportedly less than \$23,000, with box-office receipts of almost \$250,000,000 (and yes, we counted all those zeroes right!).

We have also chosen this film because it features some interesting creative solutions, like the use of primarily three main characters, its lack of location changes (the forest being the "house") and its visual first person narrative. Also, legend says it sprang from a

35-page outline, with its dialogue mostly improvised — yet the editing of its 19 hours of footage to 81 minutes rendered a film that neatly fits our Beat Sheet.

MITH Type: Supra-Natural Monster

MITH Cousins: *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, *Cabin in the Woods*, *Requiem*, *The Witch*, *Paranormal Activity*

## THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT

*Written and directed by Daniel Myrick & Eduardo Sánchez*

**Opening Image:** After an onscreen warning that our story and its characters' fates are true, the film starts, as it will finish, with a blurry image. When the focus sharpens, we meet film director Heather Donahue, whose "Blair Witch Project" is the documentary that she intends to shoot about a mysterious Maryland witch. What will she find out in the process and how will it change her and her world?

**Theme Stated:** We are shown some pre-Halloween decorations, and Heather asks her companions, and possibly herself, "Do you believe in ghosts?" Are supra-natural creatures real — or not? This notion will be tested during their whole misadventure.

**Set-Up:** In *Save the Cat!® Strikes Back*, Blake gave us a tip for any Set-Up: to visit the "at home, at play and at work places" of our protagonist to know her better. So the film starts in the safety of Heather's "home," and soon we visit "work" where we meet co-worker Josh, the nice, reasonable 16mm cameraman. Enter also shy, quiet sound mixer Mike, after which they "play" buying groceries for the trip. At this point we know more about Heather and her *six things that need fixing*: she is bossy, insistent, controlling, manipulative, self-centered and everything has to be done her way. Quite a basis for a character arc!

**B Story:** Our "love story" centers on the care and respect the team must learn to feel for each other. As we will see, at first they are

not that close, brought together to make the documentary. But as the movie progresses, they will be tested and face difficult circumstances, so they will need to stick up for each other. Will they be capable of that?

**Catalyst:** They begin shooting the documentary, interviewing people who more or less believe in the Witch and provide unsettling details about its legend — focusing on the story of Rustin Parr, a man who killed seven children under the Witch’s command. The group also meets Mary Brown, a seemingly crazy old lady who claims she once met the Witch and lived to tell it. Well, have you had a good look at her fence door?

**Debate:** At this point, do they believe in the Witch? They keep driving, joking around, perhaps to hide their concerns, thinking that Mary was crazy. These laughs are also their “sin” — because their disrespect and disregard as they invade the Witch’s territory will bring disgrace in the end. As they reach the woods, they leave their car behind and find Coffin Rock, a place where a gruesome killing took place. “That happened here,” claims Heather for her documentary. But does she believe it?

**Break into Two:** The trio spends their first night camping in the woods. The next day, Josh says he heard strange noises in the darkness, a kind of cackling. They joke about that, but things get worse as they realize they are lost. What don’t they realize? As must happen in an effective Break into Two, there is “no way back.” The Witch is already hunting them and they may never get out of the forest — not even if they die — as their souls would be trapped forever in the woods with her. Josh asks Heather if she believes in the Witch yet. “I don’t know,” she answers.

**Fun and Games:** Is there something Fun in being lost in the woods searching for a cemetery? As much as I wouldn’t want to experience it, the group has fun mocking each other and playfully joking around in the forest. However, they get serious after they find something

strange: seven stone piles, one of which Josh accidentally knocks over. That night they hear weird noises again, and get more and more nervous as Heather continues being mean to them. Thinking that some locals are playing a prank, they decide to go back to the car, but they don't seem able to find the way. And any possible Fun ends on the third night, when they hear noises again and upon waking up, they find three more stone piles around their tent.

**Midpoint:** A *false defeat* comes when they realize they have lost the map, *raising the stakes* as it is now harder to get home. The situation becomes *public*, and violent, when Mike reveals that he threw the map away in frustration, *raising the stakes* even more. A physical fight ensues in which the worst of each character surfaces, as Heather blames Mike for everything, again not taking any responsibility. She will not even let the boys have the compass, ignoring the possibility that her changing might save them all.

**Bad Guys Close In:** One of the characteristics of this beat is that “the team disintegrates,” a condition that is particularly threatening for all-controlling Heather, since she no longer has power over the others. Still they “stick” together, finding strange eerie stick men hanging from the trees. The two guys want to get out of the woods but Heather keeps filming — self-centered, the documentary still goes first for her. That night Bad Guys really do Close In, as the trio first hears terrorizing children’s voices and then their tent is shaken by someone outside. The next morning, they find their stuff thrown around, and Josh’s clothes are stained with a blue slime, as if marked. He, the reasonable one, gets really angry, psychologically torturing Heather by filming her.

**All Is Lost:** They realize they are in the same place in the forest where they began. How can that be possible? “There’s no one to help you,” repeats Josh to a crying Heather. The next day, Josh is missing and Heather and Mike can’t find him no matter how much they try. They are indeed “worse off than when the story started.”

**Dark Night of the Soul:** Alone, sitting among dead leaves, Heather reflects on what has happened, still ready to blame the others, as she thinks that Josh just ran away. She also laments that she will have to carry his camera.

**Break into Three:** For the first time, Heather negotiates with Mike about what to do next. Desperate, he asks “Which was worse, the wicked witch from the East or the wicked witch from the West?” They decide to go east. Do they still have a chance?

**Finale:**

1. Gathering the Team: Their new collaborative spirit works to make them, for the first time, a team, as they comfort each other joking, talking about the things they like and even, later, hugging each other for the first time.
2. Executing the Plan: As stated, their plan is to head east until they find the way out of the woods, still terrified about what they hear on the way. But night is not far away.
3. High Tower Surprise: After they hear Josh screaming in pain again during the night, in the morning they discover a strange package made of branches and their friend’s shirt. Heather looks inside and finds blood, teeth and other body parts. Though scared as hell, she decides to say nothing to Mike, possibly because she now cares for him.
4. Dig, Deep Down: The next night, Heather “digs, deep down” and finds the inner strength to apologize to the camera, which she found impossible before, acknowledging how difficult it has been for the others to deal with her and for the first time conceding that everything has been her fault.
5. The Execution of the New Plan: The last night, upon hearing Josh’s cries again, they decide to get out of the tent, finding a nearby house where the cries came from. Braver (or crazier)

than ever, Mike goes inside the house and is knocked over in the basement by an unseen attacker. When Heather follows him, she is attacked too, her camera rolling on the floor.

**Final Image:** The last image is a blurry one, like the feeling we have about what happened in that basement. As much as we know that the experience changed Heather and her friends forever... was the Witch's legend true in the end? Do supra-natural beings exist? What happened with the three filmmakers' bodies and souls? Do you really want to know the answer?

## **FUNNY GAMES (1997)**

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Can you write a psychological horror film in which the sadistic "monster" knows you are watching the movie? Austrian writer-director Michael Haneke literally played games with audiences in this film with some of the most horrid home invasion tropes. It's one of the best and most terrifying "Nihilist Monster" films that you will ever behold.

This MITH subgenre deals with a cruel kind of creature, one that looks for victims whose "sin" is not clear to them, and who do not know why something so horrible and seemingly undeserved is happening. Nihilist Monsters, besides being sadistic, says Blake, play with "games of life and death" (hence, this movie's title).

Were we bad persons, bad parents, bad citizens? The Nihilist Monster does not care and will not tell you, as he will not disclose his seemingly absurd rationale for torturing people. For this reason, Haneke shot a film about the depiction of violence in media and used meta-cinema techniques to further "play" with the rules of narrative, montage and point-of-view to make his effort even more horrifying.

The result is an interesting example of how to bend many of cinema's rules, like altering traditional feature film timing with a celebrated (and nerve-chilling) 10-minute panoramic shot while keeping intact, as we will see, a completely tight structure (which was also kept in the 2007 shot-by-shot — even made in the same

house — remake with Tim Roth and Naomi Watts). So, shall we press “play”... or “rewind”?

MITH Type: Nihilist Monster

MITH Cousins: *Cabin Fever*, *Cube*, *Green Room*, *Audition*, *Battle Royale*

## FUNNY GAMES

*Written and directed by Michael Haneke*

**Opening Image:** A movie like this has to start with a game, of course, albeit a very innocent one. A well-to-do family heads for a vacation, while playing “who’s the composer” as they listen to classical music, and the wife Anna (Susanne Lothar) is winning. Then, violent jazz-grindcore metal music by Naked City blasts in (non-diegetically) like the assault they are going to suffer. Will they be alive by the end?

**Theme Stated:** “Did daddy look?” asks Anna, inquiring if husband Georg (Ulrich Mühe) cheated. The rules of the game are our theme. But what happens if unbeknownst to the players, those rules include horror movie conventions, the same from the genre the characters are starring in? And what happens if the “monster” knows the rules and could even cheat?

**B Story:** Our “love story” refers to how Anna and Georg can keep their love alive when they are about to suffer an ordeal which will force them to endure psychological and physical torture. Can they still love each other under such terrible circumstances?

**Set-Up:** The family arrives at their country house near the lake and they “set up” their vacation, filling the fridge and getting their sailboat ready. They also have a strange encounter with their usually friendly neighbors, who act cold and uninterested, while they are accompanied by two unknown young persons dressed completely in white. Little son Georgie (Stefan Clapczynski) misses his girlfriend Sissi, and family dog Rolfi seems uneasy, especially when neighbor

Fred and one of the white-gloved youths (introduced as “the son of a business colleague”) come to say hi. Another kind of Set-Up is purely visual: a knife is left forgotten in the sailing boat.

**Catalyst:** At minute 11, “flabby” Peter, the other white-gloved youth, arrives at the house, and ever so politely — as with everything they will do (including torture) — asks for some eggs for their neighbor friends, with whom they seem to be on familiar terms, so Anna does not suspect anything.

**Debate:** How crazy can a “normal” situation like this get? Well, things get slowly more weird as Peter does not know how to answer Anna’s Debate questions. What do they want the eggs for? How did he get in the house? Peter tries Anna’s patience when he drops the eggs, gets the home phone uselessly wet and asks for more eggs. And things get stranger as Paul, apparently the smarter one, enters the house and asks her to try their golf clubs. Outside, Georg notices Rolfi’s sudden silence, and when he arrives home, he finds Anna, temper lost, trying to kick the white-clad duo out of the house.

**Break into Two:** Clueless why Anna is so mad at the duo, Georg tries to persuade the pair to leave the house, but they just confront him provocatively. So at minute 25, an angry Georg slaps Paul, setting things in motion — Peter breaks his leg with a golf club. The violence has started and there is no turning back. Let the “funny games” begin!

**Fun and Games:** What is it like to be in a home invasion with two sadistic Nihilist Monsters? Paul is seemingly eager to have Fun and play Games. Indeed, the *promise of the premise* of being in a home invasion is delivered with flair. The family is very scared as the first games begin, one being “where is the dead body of our dog?” As Anna searches for it, Paul breaks the fourth wall and winks at “us,” signaling his “Nihilist Monster superpower”: he knows the rules of horror narrative and will follow them or break them for our viewing “pleasure.” More horrible games ensue as Georg agonizes over his broken leg and Georgie seems paralyzed by fear.

**Midpoint:** *Stakes are* (terribly) *raised* as Paul bets that in 12 hours (*the ticking clock!*), the family will be dead, and for the second time, Paul asks “us” if we think they have a chance of winning. “You are on their side, aren’t you?” But the bet is rigged: “They’ll lose in any case. Obviously.” Unhappily for us, at Midpoint we get a whiff of *Sex at Midpoint* too: *A and B Stories cross* as loving husband Georg is forced to tell his wife to undress, or their child will suffer the consequences. Then a *false victory* ensues: as his parents fight the assailants, Georgie is able to flee from the house.

**Bad Guys Close In:** Georgie runs away, and has to dip into the lake and swim to reach the neighbors, where he expects to get help. But he sees Paul “closing in” and hides in the house. Paul playfully chases him in the empty home, and Georgie finds his dear girlfriend, Sissi, dead. He then takes a rifle and aims at ever-smiling Paul, who even advises him on how to use it... but the chambers are empty. At home, Peter chills out watching TV, when Paul arrives with Georgie and the rifle. The *clock keeps ticking* when Paul asks for the time — they must think about their bet, so they play a new game with the family: “Eeny meeny, miny, moe.”

**All Is Lost:** Paul merrily goes to the kitchen to fix himself a sandwich, and a loud bang is heard. When he comes back, the TV set is splattered with blood. Can there be anything worse for a family than having their only son killed? It is also All Is Lost for Paul, who reprimands Peter — he has killed the child, so now they will not get anything from the others. So surprisingly or not... they leave the house.

**Dark Night of the Soul:** The DNOTS beat is particularly long (10 minutes!) and nerve-wracking despite its stillness (which should inspire calm). Anna silently “contemplates the death” of her child, her defeated husband and the destruction of her family.

**Break into Three:** Now that the killers have gone, Anna frees herself and Georg, trying to think what to do next. They attempt to fix the phone, but it won’t work, and her husband is too hurt to escape with

her. *A and B Stories* cross again as Georg asks Anna to forgive him of his “sin”: not being able to protect his family. Anna kisses her husband, showing their love is intact, and off she goes for help.

**Finale:**

1. Gathering the Team: Anna tries to gather “a team” to help her, first visiting the neighbors and then stopping a car. At home, Georg does likewise trying to call someone on the phone. But unluckily for them both, the team is really gathered when Paul and Peter arrive again, this time with Anna. Has a golf ball ever been so menacing?
2. Executing the Plan: The plan is a new game, in which Anna is forced to participate, but she tries to refuse. So exactly (and we mean exactly) at the 95-minute mark, Paul complains, saying the film is not even feature length yet! “You want a real ending, with plausible plot development, don’t you?” he asks us.
3. High Tower Surprise: Suddenly, Anna takes the rifle and shoots Peter in the belly, instantly killing him. Maybe she can win, after all! But her High Tower Surprise awaits: As master of the rules of this game, Paul gets the video remote and rewinds *the movie itself*, reviving Peter and preventing Anna from taking the rifle. In retaliation, they kill Georg.
4. Dig, Deep Down: The next morning, Anna is taken to the boat with the two men and they sail away. Remember the knife Haneke ostensibly set up in the beginning? Anna uses it to “dig, deep down” and try to cut her ties. But it is useless — it was just a red herring, and she is easily disarmed.
5. The Execution of the New Plan: While Peter and Paul discuss the limits of reality and fiction, he kisses Anna goodbye and drowns her in the lake. At one hour from the deadline, he has won the bet. How couldn’t he?

**Final Image:** A very similar image to the beginning: Paul enters a family's property, and they ask for some eggs that Anna supposedly needs. The woman kindly complies, and boy, we know the Nihilist Monster is going to start his cycle of torture and violence again. For the last time, he looks at us from the screen, knowing that we know too... and maybe we want to watch.