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## The Machinist

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# The Machinist

## **Abstract**

This is a review of *The Machinist* (2004).

Trevor Reznik (Christian Bale) hasn't slept in a year, and judging by his jutting bones and sunken cheeks, he probably hasn't eaten during that same amount of time. As several characters tell him: "If you were any thinner, you wouldn't exist."

Reznik, the lead character in *The Machinist* (2005), is a haunted man. An industrial worker, he lives in a sparse, ill lit apartment, and his only real human interaction is with a prostitute, Stevie (Jennifer Jason Leigh), and a waitress Marie (Aitana Sanchez-Gijon). At work he meets Ivan (John Sharian), a man who will change his life. As the film unfolds, Reznik becomes convinced that people are conspiring against him. Post-It notes mysteriously appear on his refrigerator door with a hangman's noose and missing letters. Then there's an industrial accident that's caused by Ivan, and yet no one believes he exists. Is Reznik going crazy? What is real and what isn't?

Billed as a psychological thriller, *The Machinist* is a brilliant exploration of one man's psyche. More importantly, though, you might say that *The Machinist* is a meditation on guilt. The reality of the film is that Reznik has committed a crime. But instead of acknowledging his actions, he flees from them, spiritually and physically. When Marie asks him "Is someone chasing you?" he replies, "No, but they will when they find out who I am." Just who is Reznik? The character will

spend the entire film trying to come to terms with not only who he is but also what he's done.

To unravel *The Machinist*, it's useful to look at Reznik as a modern day penitential. Since he's committed a sin, he's self-imposed a harsh penance, which includes extreme mortification of the body. Not only does he forgo sleep and food, but he also washes his hands with bleach and lye, and, at one point, throws himself in front of a car. Reznik longs for confession, and won't have peace until he confesses his sins. As he says, "I need someone to know." But this is, at least overtly, a secular film, and there aren't any priests waiting in the wings to absolve him. Instead, his confessor is the police force, and once he's unburdened his "soul," he can finally sleep, bathed in the white light of his cell.

Written by Scott Kosar and directed by Brad Anderson, *The Machinist* has a lot in common with *The Sixth Sense*, *Identity*, *Haute Tension*, *Memento* and *Jacob's Ladder*, films that make you think you have everything figured out until you are hit with a twist ending. Your only recourse is to go back and watch them again from the beginning. *The Machinist* only gets better with each viewing because you begin to realize that every line reveals a clue. (Even the title *El Maquinista* carries a double meaning. In English, it has been translated to *The Machinist*, which is essentially what the main character does for a living. However, in Spanish, it can

also mean "engine driver" or "engineer," which provides the central clue to this tale.)

With those repeated viewings, audience members may also begin to pick up on the various symbols that point the way to a whole new realm of understanding. There's a particularly important scene midway through the film in which Reznik and Nicholas, the waitress's son, are taking a funhouse ride called Route 666. Every image that they see reveals something from Reznik's past, present and future. It is also during this ride that Reznik is presented with the first of many pathway choices – select the left tunnel and go to hell, select the other and gain salvation. By the end of the film, thanks to his conscience in the form of Ivan, Reznik finally has the courage to accept his responsibility and choose the right path.

Like Anderson's previous film, *Session 9*, probably the only ghost story set during daylight, *The Machinist* is atmospheric and insightful. Film and literary buffs will enjoy the homages paid to Alfred Hitchcock, Kafka and Dostoevsky. Not surprisingly, this indie film had a difficult time getting made in Hollywood and barely attracted an audience at the box office. It's certainly worth a look, though, and deserves to be better known.