

15 Best Identity Crisis Movies of All Time

By Vishnu Warriar, June 26, 2017

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What happens when you remain oblivious to objective reality around you? Is reality even objective or is it just a matter of perspectives? The infinitely complex human psyche creates deceptive images around us, making us believe what we see is real. But perhaps what's real to us might not be so for the world around us. This is what identity crisis is all about. We've had many films with this theme and a lot of them are among the best ever made in cinema. This article takes a look at the list top movies about identity crisis. You can watch some of these best identity crisis movies on Netflix, Hulu, or Amazon Prime.

1. Persona (1966)



Perhaps the most obvious entry on the list, 'Persona' is quite simply the best film about identity crisis. It tells the story of Alma, a nurse who is given the responsibility of taking care of a mute actress named Elisabeth. They soon move to an isolated cottage where Alma shares deeply intimate and disturbing secrets of her past life with Elisabeth. They bond in strangely mysterious ways to the point of their personalities getting merged. They switch their roles and question each other's actions and the choices made by them in their past life. There is a whole lot of pain, sensuality, vigour and sadness that Bergman infuses the film that makes it such a deeply personal experience.

2. Synecdoche, New York (2008)



You don't expect things to be straightforward in a Charlie Kaufman film. In his directorial debut, Kaufman anatomises the psyche of Caden Cotard; an ailing theatre artist working on a grand stage production that could turn out to be his magnum opus. Caden's extreme commitment to the play begins to blur the lines of fiction and reality around his world. His seething angst as an artist and the desire to feel important all over again have made him an absolute shell of a person as he sees his life goes by through his world, painfully witnessing the deaths of his loved ones.

3. Mulholland Drive (2000)



With 'Mulholland Drive', David Lynch crafted some of the most puzzling, terrifying and heartbreaking mysteries ever in cinema. There really is no comprehensive explanation for what happens in the film. Betty is a young, charming, ambitious woman with dreams of making it big in the world's most glamorous film industry. She meets an amnesiac woman who is lost in her identity. A dreamlike Los Angeles is slowly turned into a nightmarish web of devastating realities as Betty is revealed to be Diane; a desperate, insecure woman madly in love with an actress named Camilla Rhodes who resembles Rita. Lynch leaves us to interpret the reality of the film and our understanding of the plot and the characters helps us to interpret the true identity of its characters.

4. 3 Women (1977)



In Robert Altman's surreal avant-garde masterpiece, identity is distorted and reality is blurred. '3 Women' tells the enigmatic relationship between a woman and her roommate. Their relationship gets increasingly complex as their personalities blend in mysterious ways as their identities become indistinguishable. The plot is further complicated with the entry of another woman, the wife of a bar owner, who gets entangled with the other women. Altman infuses a dreamlike, almost seductive quality to the film as it provides a very ambiguous view of the reality surrounding its characters, not letting us have a precise and concrete view of the identity of any of the characters.

5. Under the Skin (2013)



'Under the Skin' is, without a doubt, one of the most fascinating films to have come out this decade. Featuring a career best performance by Scarlett Johansson, it follows an otherworldly woman who lures lonely men into her van. Scarlett's character has no touch with the human world and lacks any kind of emotions. It's her struggle with identity and sense of belonging to this world that make way for a searing tale of self-discovery. Her constant interaction with human beings begins to question her identity and existence in this world. It's deeply affecting, haunting and intellectually stimulating.

6. Dead Ringers (1988)



One of the masters of horror, David Cronenberg, is someone who loves to screw the humanity in people. His cinema is about the physical embodiment of the human fear. In his world, there is a frightening indistinguishability between the real and the unreal. 'Dead Ringers' tells the story of twin gynaecologists whose relationship begins to deteriorate over a woman. It's a sordid tale of dual identity and the feeling of losing one's identity out to the other. 'Dead Ringers' is probably Cronenberg's thematically richest film as he explores the twins' psyche, delving into the madness that consumes them inside.

7. Lost Highway (1997)



Talk about identity crisis and David Lynch's name is sure to pop up. I am not sure why 'Lost Highway' isn't among Lynch's most celebrated works because clearly this is quintessential Lynchian surrealism at its rawest and most seductively intriguing. We have a man, convicted of murdering his wife, who gets morphed into a young, mechanic and escapes jail to start a new life. He develops a relationship with a sensually enigmatic woman. The two parallel stories are mysteriously linked with each other but Lynch never intends to explain the bizarre sequence of events that happen throughout and keeps the mystery of his characters' identity intact.

8. Memento (2000)



Towards the end of Christopher Nolan's 'Memento', the protagonist tells himself, "I have to believe in a world outside my own mind. I have to believe that my actions still have meaning even if I can't remember them. I have to believe that when my eyes are closed, the world is still here." Never has a man's identity crisis captured so brilliantly in cinema. Leonard lives in a world of distorted memories and made up truths. His inability to accept the truth puts him in a state of perpetual denial as he constructs a world of his own.

9. Fight Club (1999)



Flamboyant, clever, stylish and exuberant, David Fincher's cult classic thriller is a film that questions identity and plays with our perceptions of reality. An everyman grows increasingly tired of his corporate job and teams up with a charismatic soap salesman and starts an underground fight club. The protagonist is suffering from insomnia and anxiety disorder. His mind creates a certain reality around him that lets him escape the clutches of modern life and live a life, devoid of money, expectation and superficiality.

10. Take Shelter (2011)



Jeff Nichols is one of the most underrated indie filmmakers working in American cinema today. 'Take Shelter' might just be his best work to date and sadly remains a highly overlooked thriller. It tells the story of a man struggling to deal with the demons of his mind as his nightmares get blown out to the reality around him and he fails to distinguish between the real and the unreal. Nichols' direction is terrific as the atmospheric tension builds throughout the film and we get a sense of the protagonist's troubled state of mind. Reality is ambiguous as he sense the earth nearing its end and the film never really explains the logic behind his thoughts and visions.

11. Enemy (2013)



Dennis Villeneuve's stylish psychological thriller centres around two men who physically resemble each other. The film is very much Lynchian in its tone and explores the theme of duality with a highly ambiguous plot. We see Anthony and Adam as two different people but the film does not explain who is real. 'Enemy' is sure to remind you of some of Christopher Nolan's early thrillers but is a lot more ambiguous. We never really know who among the two is real or perhaps one is an abstract representation of the other's subconscious. It's tense, atmospheric, intriguing, bizarre and philosophical on many levels.

12. Black Swan (2010)



Darren Aronofsky's highly acclaimed psychological horror depicts the artistic pain of a dancer set to play the role of White Swan in a stage production of Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake ballet but is emotionally distraught at the thought of competing with someone better than her for the same role. Her mind begins to lose control over reality and gets caught up in a nightmarish world she could never return from. Aronofsky crafts an intriguingly creepy atmosphere that perfectly balances the ambiguity of reality inside the mind of the protagonist as the concreteness of her identity becomes blurred and hazy.

13. The Machinist (2004)



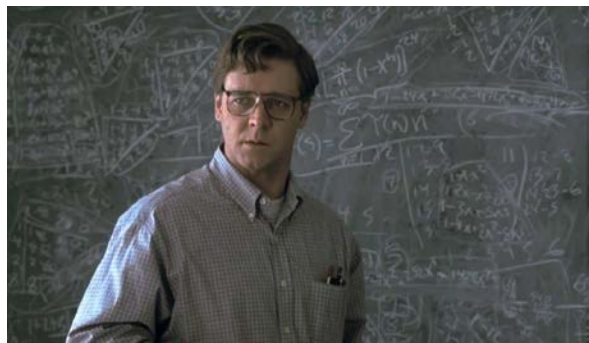
'The Machinist' tells the story of Trevor Reznik, an insomniac industrial worker who begins to question the reality around his existence after a series of bizarre incidents that occur at his home and workplace. Trevor accidentally killed a boy with his car and drove away. His mind is plagued by guilt and as a result turned into an insomniac. His troubled mind causes him to see things segregated from reality as his warped mind gets pushed to the darkest extremes. The film is incredibly well crafted and deeply atmospheric with a staggering performance by Christian Bale in the lead.

14. Shutter Island (2010)



Martin Scorsese's haunting psychological thriller tells the story of Ted Daniels; a mentally disturbed detective who comes to an isolated asylum on an island with his partner to investigate the disappearance of a woman. We soon discover that Ted is actually a patient of the asylum and that he killed his schizophrenic wife who drowned their children. Prolonging guilt has put him in a state of denial as he makes up his own story to forget the brutalities of truth. He creates his own world and sees people around him as characters of that universe.

15. A Beautiful Mind (2001)



Yes, it's sappy, melodramatic and formulaic but it works at many places. 'A Beautiful Mind' depicts the life of John Nash; a mathematical genius who begins to develop paranoid schizophrenia. His life changes forever as he struggles to deal with himself and begins to question his true identity and the kind of pain his existence brings on to the people around him. His brilliant mind helps him confront the true demons of his inner self. It's overdone at many places but it works on some level as there's a good amount of humanity that manages to affect and move us despite how manipulative or dramatic it may seem.