
THRILLERS

The thriller is perhaps the most popular and widespread movie genre – and the most difficult to define. Thrillers can contain gangsters or ghosts, space helmets or fedoras. They change our familiar modern world with a spirit of exotic, old-fashioned adventure. They give us pleasure by making us uncomfortable: Anxiety, vulnerability, and fright are all part of the thrill.

Thrillers provides the first comprehensive, in-depth treatment of the movie thriller, from silent serials to stalker films, from Alfred Hitchcock to Quentin Tarantino, from *The Great Train Robbery* to *L.A. Confidential*. Martin Rubin's accessible, wide-ranging volume – designed to appeal to students and general filmgoers alike – shows how this visceral, supercharged genre has employed suspense, speed, and sensation to keep us on the edge of our seats throughout a century of American cinema.

Martin Rubin was the Film Program Director of the New York Cultural Center and an Associate Director of the San Francisco Film Festival. He has taught film courses at various institutions, and his publications include the book *Shotstoppers: Busby Berkeley and the Tradition of Spectacle*.

GENRES IN AMERICAN CINEMA

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THRILLERS

Martin Rubin

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To Penney

You thrill me: . . .

Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	page xv
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiv

PART I. APPROACHES

1 Introduction	3
2 Critical Overview	4
Charles Derry, Ralph Harper, Jerry Palmer: Thrillers in General, 9 • G. K. Chesterton: The Transformed City, 13 • Northrop Frye: Heroic Romance and the Low-Mimetic Mode, 15 • John G. Cawelti: The Exotic, 21 • W. H. Matthews: Mazes and Labyrinths, 22 • Pascal Bonitzer: Partial Vision, 25 • Lars Ole Sauerberg: Concealment and Protraction, 30 • Noël Carroll: The Question-Answer Model, 32	

PART II. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

3 Formative Period	39
Proximate: Firerunners: Fiction, Melodrama, Amusement Parks, 40 • Attraction Films and Chase Films, 44 • D. W. Griffith and the Rise of Narrative Film, 47 • Evolution of the American Serial, 50 • Louis Feuillade and the French Serial, 54 • Fritz Lang and the Thriller Metropolis, 57 • German Expressionism, 63 • Harold Lloyd and the Comedy of Thrills, 65 • Monsters of the Early 1930s, 70	
4 Classical Period	79
Alfred Hitchcock and the Rise of the Spy Film, 79 • Detective Films of the 1940s, 80 • Film Noir, 89 • Semidocumentary Crime Films, 96 • Anticomunist Spy Films, 100 • The Powell Cup Cycle, 102 • Syndicate Gangster Films, 106 • Science-Fiction Thrillers and Monster Movies, 109 • Hitchcock's Golden Period, 113	

x • CONTENTS

5 Modern Period	119
European Influences, American Censorship, and Heist Films. 119 • The French New Wave, 124 • James Bond in the 1960s. 127 • Muck-Bond and Anti-Bond, 132 • Supercops, 137 • Black Action Films, 144 • Revisionist Thrillers, 146 • Conspiracies and Other Disasters, 148 • Splatter, 150 • Stalkers, 161 • Neo- Nur, 170	
PART III. FILM ANALYSES	
6 The Detective Thriller: <i>The Kennel Murder Case</i> (1933), <i>The Big Sleep</i> (1946)	181
7 The Psychological Crime Thriller: <i>Strangers on a Train</i> (1951)	203
8 The Spy Thriller: <i>Man Hunt</i> (1941)	220
9 The Police Thriller: <i>The French Connection</i> (1971)	242
10 Conclusion	259
Categorization, 260 • Hybridization, 262 • Emotionalization, 264 • Contextualization, 265	
<i>Notes</i>	269
<i>Selected Bibliography</i>	279
<i>Filmography/Videography</i>	287
<i>Index</i>	301

Illustrations

1. <i>Strangers on a Train</i> : End of the ride on a berserk merry-go-round.	page 7
2. <i>Raiders of the Lost Ark</i> : The already exotic environment of the adventure film . . .	17
3. . . . versus the thrilleresque transformation of an ordinary environment: Harold Lloyd in <i>Safety Last!</i>	19
4. <i>The Big Sleep</i> : Los Angeles sleuths (Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall) amid exotic decor.	23
5. <i>North by Northwest</i> : Accidental spy (Cary Grant) caught in "an unlimited prison."	27
6. <i>The Lady from Shanghai</i> : Ill-fated lovers (Orson Welles, Rita Hayworth) in the labyrinth.	28
7. <i>The Big Sleep</i> : Labyrinths within labyrinths.	29
8. <i>Strangers on a Train</i> : Flight of the villain (Robert Walker) causes us to desire an immoral result.	35
9. <i>The Old and the New</i> : Thieves give dissatisfied heroine (Dorothy Bernard) the ride of her life.	40
10. <i>Trail of the Octopus</i> (1919–20): Serial heroine (Neva Gerber) under constraint in exotic setting.	55
11. <i>Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler</i> : Twisting back alleys of the thriller metropolis.	59
12. <i>Spies</i> : Master criminal (Rudolf Klein-Rogge) spinning the web.	61
13. <i>Girl Spy</i> : Modern-day swashbuckler (Harold Lloyd) and damsel in distress (Jobyna Ralston).	60
14. <i>Frankenstein</i> : The Gothic environment.	73
15. <i>Scarface</i> : The gangster (Paul Muni) as monster.	75
16. <i>M</i> : Cornered killer (Peter Lorre) hears doom approaching.	77
17. <i>The Man Who Knew Too Much</i> : Low key villain (Peter Lorre) and allstraight father (Leslie Banks).	81
18. <i>The Lady Vanishes</i> : Embattled train passengers discover the thrilling side of tourism.	97
19. <i>Murder, Mr. Sweet</i> : Battered and drugged detective (Dick Powell) confronts sinister doctor (Ralf Harolde).	90
20. <i>The Maltese Falcon</i> : The hard-boiled detective (Humphrey Bogart) in control . . .	92
21. . . . and the film noir detective (Robert Mitchum) entrapped: <i>Out of the Past</i>	93

xi: ♦ ILLUSTRATIONS

22. <i>The Naked City</i> : Exhausted killer (Ted de Corsia): stop the Williamsburg Bridge	99
23. <i>The Street with No Name</i> : FBI agents (Mark Stevens, John McEline, Lloyd Nolan) approach crime scientifically.	100
24. <i>When the Sidewalk Ends</i> : "Half-cop and half-killer" (Tana Andrews).	100
25. <i>The Phenix City Story</i> : The Mob comes to Main Street	109
26. <i>Invaders from Mars</i> : Storybook expressionism.	112
27. <i>The Incredible Shrinking Man</i> : Sword and dragon.	113
28. Self-conscious identification: Inquisitive spectator (James Stewart) in <i>Rear Window</i> .	115
29. Oppressive identification: Mystery woman (Kim Novak) and obsessed detective (James Stewart) in <i>Vertigo</i> .	117
30. <i>The Asphalt Jungle</i> : Professional thieves (Sterling Hayden, Anthony Caruso, Sam Jaffe) practice their craft.	128
31. <i>Breathless</i> : Wanted murderer (Jean-Paul Belmondo) and fickle girlfriend (Jean Seberg) dally in the midst of a manhunt.	128
32. <i>Dr. No</i> : Nature girl (Ursula Andress) and cool spy (Sean Connery) warm up the cold-war espionage thriller.	129
33. <i>On Her Majesty's Secret Service</i> : Vulnerable Bond (George Lazenby) rescues suicidal jet-setter (Ulana Pagg).	132
34. <i>The Ipcress File</i> : Deglamorized spy (Michael Caine) goes through his wake-up routine.	136
35. <i>Bullitt</i> : The supercop (Steve McQueen) as stylesetter.	139
36. <i>Cannon's Run</i> : straightforward cowboy (Clint Eastwood) encounters devious urban environment.	141
37. <i>Dirty Harry</i> : Religious icons in a fallen world.	143
38. <i>Shaft</i> : The unaffiliated supercool black action hero (Richard Roundtree).	145
39. <i>Chinatown</i> : Revisionist detective hero (Jack Nicholson) after getting too nosy.	147
40. <i>The Poseidon Adventure</i> : Capsized luxury liner transformed into adventurous new world.	151
41. <i>Pat and the Pendergats</i> : In the Guller tradition.	152
42. <i>Rosemary's Baby</i> : Filmed in the manner of a sophisticated romantic comedy.	153
43. <i>Martin</i> : Rust Belt vampire (John Amos); uses razor blades and hypodermics rather than fangs and hypnotic gazes.	158
44. <i>Day of the Devil</i> : "They're us, that's all."	159
45. <i>Friday the 13th</i> : Unhappy camper (Kevin Bacon) after splatterific skewering.	163
46. <i>Friday the 13th (Part 5) – A New Beginning</i> (1985): Faceless cipher "Jason Voorhees."	165
47. <i>A Nightmare on Elm Street</i> : Dream figure "Freddy Krueger" surfaces into the material world.	169
48. <i>Blade Runner</i> : Noir look, different genre.	172
49. <i>The Postman Always Rings Twice</i> (1946): Bui my and romantic ...	173
50. ... and <i>The Postman Always Rings Twice</i> (1981): Somber and carnal.	173

51. <i>Blax: Felch</i> : Small-town kid (Kyle MacLachlan) discovers the dark side.	175
52. <i>The Kennel Murder Case</i> : The happier classical detective (William Powell).	187
53. <i>The Kennel Murder Case</i> : Godlike detachment of the classical detective (William Powell).	189
54. <i>The Big Sleep</i> : Hard-boiled dick (Humphrey Bogart) softens up sultry bookstore clerk (Dorothy Malone).	195
55. <i>The Big Sleep</i> : As much a love story as a detective story.	197
56. <i>Strangers on a Train</i> : Bruno's dark, crazy world closing in upon Guy's bright, rational one.	213
57. <i>Strangers on a Train</i> : Spider (Robert Walker) poised in web.	217
58. <i>Strangers on a Train</i> : Bruno (Robert Walker) wears out his welcome at a society party.	223
59. <i>Strangers on a Train</i> : Stupid Guy Haines (Farley Granger) comes perilously alive on a runaway merry-go-round.	224
60. <i>Man Hunt</i> : British fugitive (Walter Pidgeon) nearly nabbed by spectral Nazi agent (John Carradine).	235
61. Arrows: In <i>Man Hunt</i> , Thorndike (Walter Pidgeon) presents a lotus gift to Jerry (Joan Bennett) . . .	237
62. . . and a Gestapo glower (George Sanders, left) interrogates Thorndike in Iron. of Saint Sebastian, in <i>Man Hunt</i> .	239
63. <i>Man Hunt</i> : "I forgot that fingers came before forks!"	240
64. <i>Man Hunt</i> : The cave and the grave.	241
65. <i>The French Connection</i> : Marseilles drug lord (Fernando Rey) fleeing from police on decrepit Ward's Island.	249
66. <i>The French Connection</i> : Doyle (Gene Hackman) and Russo (Roy Scheider) carry out routine police procedures.	251
67. <i>The French Connection</i> : Hit man Pierre Nicoli (Marcel Bozzuffi) cornered. Irratic, losing his head.	253
68. Heart: from on high: Doyle (Gene Hackman) dodging a sniper's bullet in <i>The French Connection</i> .	258
69. <i>The Croc</i> : Ghost-syllante hybrid.	263
70. <i>The Texas Chain Saw Massacre</i> : Leatherface tops my Thrill Parade.	265

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PART ONE

Approaches

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

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 *Seren* (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, "thriller-esque" common denominators that link them. This thriller-esque 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-

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

the superspy James Bond, stated that his books were aimed "somewhere between the solar plexus and, well, the upper thigh."²⁰ 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.



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.

8 ♦ APPROACHES

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.

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 who-dunit – 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. The present

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 Loker'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 Fabner'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 Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Jaspers, and of major novelists frequently associated with existentialism, such as Pyodor Dostoyevsky and Franz Kafka.

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

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