Monsters come in many forms. Some are created by the hand of twisted science, others are hatched in government laboratories for sinister military purposes. Some rise from beyond the grave, and a few arrive from beyond the stars. However, some monsters are of the human variety, with the very worst lurking in the reflection in one’s own mirror.

The sad tale of Brad Anderson’s 2004 film THE MACHINIST centers on factory worker and tortured soul Trevor Reznik, played to perfection by Christian Bale. Through a series of strange flashbacks and odd clues that infiltrate Trevor’s thoughts day and night, he begins to suspect that something terrible happened to him one year ago. Something so terrible, in fact, that we learn Trevor hasn’t slept a single night for the last year.

As we are introduced to the pitiful Trevor and his lonely existence, we witness his growing fear that others are tormenting him for some reason he cannot fathom. With every character he meets, all of Trevor’s relationships become plagued with an unreasonable distrust, as he constantly wonders who is out to get him and why. As Trevor’s paranoia grows, it is a taunting game of hangman that he plays with an unknown antagonist that furthers his downward spiral, ultimately resulting in a surprising and painful twist.

All of this makes Trevor all the more sympathetic, but also begs the viewer to wonder: What event could be so horrible as to give a person endless insomnia? As we ponder this intriguing question, we are drawn further into Trevor’s dark and queasy world, joining him in his discovery of each strange clue left by his mysterious adversary. These signs lead to a series of frightening visions, which Trevor fears may be memories. Increasingly doubtful of the people and the world around him, and exacerbated by his yearlong battle with insomnia, Trevor’s suspicions begin to turn inward, tormented by thoughts and fears of what he may have done. He is an island of pain and confusion, as secrecy and denial turn to all-consuming guilt, which

continue to rob him of both his sleep and his sanity.

Ultimately, THE MACHINIST both asks and answers the question, what would happen to your mind if you didn’t sleep for a year? Trevor’s long bout with sleeplessness not only weighs heavily on his soul, but utterly transforms his physical being to reflect his inner turmoil, caused by the stress of the guilt he’s both avoiding and hiding. Unlike most horror films that rely heavily on grisly makeup or CGI for scares, the single greatest special effect in THE MACHINIST is Bale’s disturbing appearance, the result of the most chilling physical transformation ever committed to film. The actor usually sports handsome good looks and a chiseled form, but fans who know Bale for his muscular physique in AMERICAN PSYCHO, REIGN OF FIRE and the rebooted Batman franchise will cringe at the sight of the skeletal Trevor, who more resembles a concentration camp survivor than a man who hasn’t slept in a year.

The unique visual style of THE MACHINIST comes complete with weird imagery, tilted camera angles and uncomfortable close-ups that often give the production a somewhat retro quality, akin to a classic TWILIGHT ZONE episode. The creepy violin strains of Roque Banos’ eerie music, the dark yet intimate cinematography by Xani Gimenez and the crisp writing by Scott Kosar combine to brilliantly convey Trevor’s bleak, lonely and nightmarish world.

In Trevor’s mind, it is the fear of discovering that he has committed a monstrous act that drives his pain—a pain that he wears like the clothes that hang so loosely from his emaciated form. The viewer ultimately learns that Trevor’s subconscious has unsuccessfully tried to hide a crime from everyone around him, including himself; his realization of the truth is the moment when Trevor knows he is indeed a monster, making him a tragic and pitiful figure—a reluctant monster at worst.

Throughout THE MACHINIST, two characters spout the same line to Trevor: “If you were any thinner, you wouldn’t exist…” After the film is over and the viewer begins to process the work completely, it’s interesting to realize how key this line really is to Trevor’s actual goal. When looking back on his dramatic weight loss, it appears that in an effort to pay for his crime, Trevor’s subconscious wish was to get thinner and thinner, so that he will no longer exist and have to face the nightmare of what he has done. THE MACHINIST is a superlative work that irresistibly draws you in, ultimately demonstrating the high price of guilt, and proving that sometimes not all monsters are monsters at all.