Dark City

Dir: Alex Proyas, US,1998

A review by Will Brooker, Richmond, the American International University in London, UK

"In the decades around 1900 the city rose new from the ground, a city on such a scale and of such diversity that its history and its past were almost completely obliterated." Momme Brodersen, *Walter Benjamin: Leben und Werk* (1990)

"You could see those towers growing, at night...look at a map. A map from before? A lot of it's not even where it used to be." William Gibson, *Idoru* (1996)

There is another *Dark City* at the foundations of this one; made in 1950 and starring Charlton Heston, the earlier movie was *noir* to the core. While the 1998 model is no remake, it looks initially as though it's set on the same familiar streets. The guy who's hunting the murderer of six streetwalkers wears a hat, for a start, a satisfyingly wide-brim fedora; and the starlet singing torch songs in a bar is built satisfyingly wide too, with just a tad more around the hips than you're used to seeing on-screen: truly a broad. Cops drive fat black automobiles and the tenements are criss-crossed with walkways. Sidewalks are scuffed, the buildings are steeped in shades of brown, and there's always steam rising up from somewhere. The city is elegant in its grubby way, a worn-out trophy of modernism. You know where you are, more or less.

Yet even if it wasn't spelled out for you within the film's first minutes, you'd still guess there was something wrong about this world, something skewed. You'd feel it like a deja vu or a nagging continuity glitch. Maybe when you could have sworn the hotel receptionist has become the newspaper salesman. Maybe in the moment when the black man crops up on the subway wearing a hoodie and is treated with respect by the white protagonist. This isn't 1940s America. It's not even a murder story. It's not the dark city of noir, but the unreal city of postmodernism.

At the stroke of midnight, this city falls instantly into sleep - citizens passing out where they stand, cars easing to a halt - and is shaped by a group of pale beings called the Strangers, who "tune" its geography and inhabitants. "We fashioned this city on stolen memories", one of them confides, "different eras, different pasts, all rolled into one." It's an aesthetic of pastiche, of flatness and style over content, of the "real" ripped away and subsumed behind meaningless surface. A couple on the breadline are dressed up, injected with new memories and become rich overnight. Buildings are, almost literally, floating signifiers, blossoming and collapsing as the city's geography warps. An innocent man is implanted with the identity of a killer, and the Strangers watch to see if his new past will drive him into further murders.

This man is John Murdoch, who bucks the system. He wakes up during the city's sleeping hours and wanders the slumbering streets, piecing together his identity from stray photos, documents and clues. He finds a wife he doesn't remember, and a postcard from a seaside idyll called Shell Beach which he seems to recall from childhood. He finds the Strangers,

hunting him, and discovers he has powers to "tune", much like theirs. What he wants most, though - more than the girl, more than clearing his name of murder - is to find that beach, and the sea beyond. But while everyone has heard of Shell Beach, when you ask them the way there their brains seize up. "You just, ah...you go to the...just give me a second." Subway trains announce it as a destination, but the lines just seem to run in circles, or spirals; you can find it on a map, but the city is an optical illusion, a maze feeding in on itself.

Stylistically, *Dark City* could be assessed, and perhaps dismissed, as just another take on the postmodern urban environment, with all the usual nods and name-checks. The architecture is, as usual, something out of Fritz Lang with a touch of H.R. Giger and Anton Furst; the steam and half-light is very *Blade Runner* or *Se7en*, the cod-1940s suits and cars are familiar from *Batman* or *Dick Tracy*. The whole "That's What I Call A Dystopia" schtick has been wheeled out many times before. Yet even in its look, *Dark City* displays originality, or at least draws on some less obvious visual sources.

Alex Proyas previously directed *The Crow*, based on an independent comic book, and you get the sense he's well-read in the graphic medium: the bleakly elegant city itself and the Strangers in particular - bald, spindly Scissormen in Black - strongly recall the *Mister X* comic by Jaime Hernandez and Dean Motter. The modernist cinematic influences extend beyond just *Metropolis* to F.W. Murnau's Expressionist adaptation of Faust (1926); there's a weird charm in the fact that the creakily morphing buildings look more like the elaborate models of Murnau's film than slick computer generation. And while no dark city in contemporary cinema can escape the shadow of Anton Furst and Tim Burton's Gotham, Proyas also looks to the more striking gothic of *Edward Scissorhands* for the pallor, leather bondage and snicking blades of his Strangers.

It's for the intelligence and ambition of its central themes, though, that Dark City deserves attention; far more than it received during the year of its release, when it was criminally overlooked. True, *Blade Runner* has admirably explored the questions of what it means to be human, and *Dark City* articulates them in much the same way, through fake diaries, slides and photographs which the citizens cling to as props to their identity and history. There's a scene where the chief villain throws the protagonist's "memories" back at him, exposing them as fiction, and it's directly followed by the two of them grappling on a rooftop, Rick Deckard and Roy Batty-style. More intriguing, perhaps, is not the way *Dark City* reworks the themes of *Blade Runner*, but the ways in which it foreshadows and preempts both *The Truman Show* and *The Matrix* in particular in its narrative of an entirely simulatory world.

The three movies, despite the ostensibly different styling of their city-settings - pseudo-1940s metropolis, mock-1950s smallville, fake-1990s urban center - follow essentially the same template. Truman, too, discovers his life is a fiction controlled from above, and seeks to find the reality beyond his constructed environment; his freedom, like Murdoch's, is symbolised by the ocean, and like Murdoch he has to physically break through a barrier wall to escape. Neo from *The Matrix* is a cyberpunk equivalent of Murdoch, taking on the controlling agents through his appropriation of their power and again freeing his fellow citizens from a world of simulation and false memory. Remarkably similar narratives, all released within the same year - and yet while *The Truman Show* and *The Matrix* were acclaimed for injecting much-needed intelligence into the mainstream, *Dark City* seems to have been critically and commercially overlooked.

Finally, one more parallel between the three movies strikes a curious note; all three rely on a romantic faith in heterosexual love as a force to transcend oppression and illusion. Neo returns from the dead when Trinity kisses him and confesses her love, bringing the sleeping beauty back to save mankind; Truman Burbank's heroic quest for escape will be rewarded by the love of the woman who cheered him on from the other side of the screen. Meanwhile John Murdoch is in prison for suspected murder. "I love you, John", says his wife. "You can't fake something like that." And even though her name is Anna now, not Emma, and they've both accepted that they never truly met, John Murdoch mumbles "No, you can't"; and the glass partition which separates them shatters as he reaches out for her. It's a strangely naive message to find at the core of these questioning, sophisticated narratives: under all the layers of simulacra and doubt, the same moral as *Titanic*, *Blast From the Past*, *Notting Hill*, *She's All That* and the current wave of cutely innocent teen movies. In even the darkest of cities, apparently, *Amor vincit omnia*.

Duel To The Death

Dir: Ching Siu-tung, Hong Kong, 1983

A review by Andrew Willis, University of Salford, UK

Duel to the Death is a recent video release by the well-established distribution company "Made in Hong Kong". The film, originally from 1983, marked the directorial debut of renowned action choreographer Ching Siu-tung, who went on to direct *A Chinese Ghost Story*. Whilst the film itself may be relatively unknown, this fact makes it a mouth watering prospect for anyone who enjoys Hong Kong action cinema.

A period drama, *Duel to the Death* tells the story of a Japanese plan to steal the secrets of Chinese martial arts. A Japanese general sends a master swordsman to challenge the greatest Chinese sword masters to a duel, yet this is revealed to be simply a cover for a much more sinister plot. Tradition demands that the twelve greatest Chinese martial arts masters gather to witness the duel and see that honour is done between the swordsmen. The Japanese challenger, however, is merely an elaborate smokescreen; whilst the twelve Chinese masters make their way to the venue of the contest they are kidnapped one by one by Ninja warriors. These warriors, who have been dispatched by the Japanese general, have orders to take the Chinese masters to Japan where he will study their martial arts techniques and steal their secrets. The Japanese champion, who is initially ignorant of the plot, is an honourable man who when he discovers what is afoot wants no part of it, seeing victory in the duel as his primary objective. The film shows various attempts, some successful, others not, by the Ninja to capture the martial artists and the build up to the climactic duel between the two champions.

Due to their close collaboration on a number of projects, most notably *A Chinese Ghost Story*, Ching Siu-tang has become firmly associated with Hong Kong director/ producer Tsui Hark. *A Chinese Ghost Story* is often discussed in terms of Tsui Hark's contribution, and its links with his authorial concerns and interests. *Duel to the Death*, therefore, offers a rare chance to consider the input of Ching to the later collaborative projects. With this purpose, I wish to focus upon the film's visual style and action choreography, and its presentation of nationalistic themes and the mythologising of history.

Ching Siu-tung continued to work as a top Hong Kong action choreographer, alongside his directing career. In this capacity he worked with some success for, amongst others, Tsui Hark, *Peking Opera Blues* (1986), John Woo, *A Better Tomorrow* (1987), and Sammo Hung, *Moon Warriors* (1992). However, some of his most visually striking work can be found in his own film, *A Chinese Ghost Story*, and its sequels. Within these works the fantasy setting and traditional ghost story narrative allow for a clear break with the conventions of social realism. In these films, with the aid of special effects and wires, characters can fly and move through the air with tremendous energy and grace.

A strongly non-naturalistic visual style is also present in *Duel to the Death*. Whilst not strictly a ghost story or fantasy film, *Duel to the Death*'s plot, particularly the inclusion of the

mythical and mysterious Ninja, allows for some arresting visuals and action choreography. Bodily transformations, flying and the ability to disappear in clouds of smoke, all form part of the legendary skills of the Ninja and Ching incorporates all of these elements into the choreography of *Duel to the Death*. The ways in which he is able to include these elements into the film in a consistent way are due to the non-naturalistic traditions of the Hong Kong popular cinema within which he works. Certainly, they add to the pace of the film and create a real sense of excitement and amazement for the viewer.

In many sources the credit for the visual magnificence of *A Chinese Ghost Story* has been attributed to the producer Tsui Hark. However, when one considers the look of *Duel to the Death* and its fantastic storyline, the input of Ching begins to take on a greater significance. Alongside this, thematically, the earlier film has some of the hallmarks of the latter, landmark, film with its interest in Chinese nationalism and its creation of a mythical China.

Chinese nationalism is something that has been strongly identified with the films of Tsui Hark. As Stephen Teo notes in his book *Hong Kong Cinema: the extra dimensions* (1997) Chinese nationalism and martial arts come together in Tsui Hark's films,

> Tsui depicts the mythic world of the martial arts as a time when China's sciences and inventions were at their peak. This notion of Chinese science and military prowess, combined with popular mythologising of the martial arts, form the substance of Tsui's nationalist theme. (163)

Certainly this may explain the ease with which some have credited Tsui Hark for the mythology and nationalism within *A Chinese Ghost Story*. However, nationalism was not exclusive to Tsui. Again, as Teo argues, "Nationalism is a potent theme in the work of old and new Hong Kong directors, from social-realist Cantonese melodrama to Mandarin historical epics, and from martial arts films to new wave works" (110). So it is therefore possible to see the nationalist theme as something one might expect in certain Hong Kong martial arts films. It is most definitely present in *Duel to the Death*, and suggests its appearance in *A Chinese Ghost Story* has more to do with just the presence of Tsui Hark as producer.

In *Duel to the Death* the Japanese general covets Chinese martial arts techniques. Through the use of wires and special effects the film creates a mythical world where the abilities of the Chinese martial artists, through their dedication to traditional values, are clearly ahead of all others. In opposition to this the Ninja assassins are shown to be mercenaries, ones who, in comparison to the Chinese, have no moral values. The Chinese way of life and beliefs are presented as far superior, spiritually and well as physically, to their opponents. Even the swordsman sent by the Japanese general, who is shown to have some positive attributes, fails to understand fully the true nature of honour when he murders the Shaolin Sifu in order force the Chinese champion to engage him in combat. The Chinese warrior is left as the epitome of all that should be seen as positive. He has excellent martial arts skills, respects his teachers, possesses a strong sense of honour and an almost natural sense of what is right and wrong. The Japanese swordsman may be skilful but lacks an all-important "balance", even though he finally defeats the Chinese champion. This negative portrayal of Japanese fighters is not isolated. Earlier, cruder versions of the barbaric Japanese warrior can be found in films such as Wang Yu's *One Armed Boxer* (1971), and in the persona of Bruce Lee, who as Stephen Teo argues appealed to Chinese audiences due to the highly nationalistic sub-texts which may be found in his films.

It may be argued that *Duel to the Death* is, due to its nationalistic sentiment, a very typical Hong Kong martial arts film, the myth of a heroic China operating as a structuring element to its narrative. It also stands as an excellent example of the kinetic action choreography that was to become dominant in Hong Kong action cinema in the 1980s and 1990s. The video release of *Duel to the Death* also highlights the importance of looking beyond the well-known figures and films of recent Hong Kong cinema, in order to discover more deep-seated themes and trends. Wider availability of titles such as this and others released by "Made in Hong Kong" allow this to take place and needs to be applauded.

Human Traffic

Dir: Justin Kerrigan, UK, 1999

A review by Kate Egan, University of Nottingham, UK

Despite the fact that the director of *Human Traffic*, 25-year old Justin Kerrigan, has fervently denied any link between his first feature film and Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting*; it appears to be an obvious reference point - it's about the young, it's set in a particular British city, and, most prominently, it's about drugs.

However, as many critics have already pointed out, this film, in many ways, could be seen to be far more progressive in its attitude to drug taking. These characters take drugs, they have a good time, and then life pretty much returns to normal: no deaths, no overdoses - just the odd bout of paranoia and a few painful come-downs. In its portrayal of a culture that has existed for over ten years now, but has been criminally underrepresented in the cinema, *Human Traffic* displays an impressive amount of authenticity. The world these characters exist in seems attractive, hedonistic, friendly and, I would suggest, familiar to anyone that has ever been to a rave and enjoyed it.

Yet, the question remains, does this make for a compelling piece of cinema? In many ways, *Human Traffic* is to be highly commended. Within a country whose cinematic doctrine still appears to favour social realism over the fantastic and the script over the image, here is a film that thrives on the self-indulgent spectacle of the rave scene and, like *Trainspotting*, has a hard-hitting and distinctive style.

Surreal fantasy sequences abound in this film - Nina's mundane shift at the cinema popcorn stand is turned into a robotic display of workers on a factory conveyor belt, cultural icon Howard Marks appears as if from no where to advise viewers on the finer points of "spliff politics", and, in a number of sequences, the film's protagonist, Jip, presents us with his alternative view on the world he exists in (including, the rather grotesque, image of Jip's boss literally "screwing" him).

Throughout the film, there appears to be an attempt to re-create, and to let the viewers experience, a world that is brasher, faster, vivid and more surreal than 1990's Britain would appear to be. Kerrigan films his characters in eye-popping close ups and through wide-angle lenses, or, in one scene, through a glass table top on which a line of coke is being prepared.

However, despite its distinctiveness, this disarming visual style creates a narrative that is piecemeal in the extreme. Kerrigan introduces us to drug-culture through a particular set of characters and a particular night-out in Cardiff, and then buries any potential for character development under a sea of visual gimmicks and in-jokes. So, we're introduced, in a pre-credit sequence, to Nina, who tried to study philosophy and failed, and Lulu, who has a particular hatred for the male species, and then never hear mention of these character traits again. Admittedly, the male characters (particularly Jip and Moff) fare far better, but this

appears to be mainly down to the excellent acting of both John Simm and Danny Dyer, rather than any merit of Kerrigan's script.

At some points, it does appear as if Kerrigan is far more concerned with filling his film with hip cultural reference points (the ubiquitous Howard Marks, Carl Cox, *Mixmag* and, of course, *Trainspotting*) than in presenting a coherent vision of a particular time and a particular place. It seems very apparent at the close of the film, that *Human Traffic* could really have been set anywhere. The potential to create a piece of cinema that dealt with youth cultures outside London (and that could successfully depict the thriving Welsh capital of Cardiff and, perhaps, something of what it is to be young and Welsh) seems very much lost. Admittedly, the fact that Kerrigan had to settle for financial assistance from independent American sources and Irish Screen, could go some way to explain why only one of the five main characters happens to be Welsh and the need to dot the film with young English actors, such as Simm and *This Life*'s Andrew Lincoln. Yet, any political or cultural message that Kerrigan may have been striving to get across, seems totally benign amidst the quips, the gimmicks and the all-empowering need to be hip and clever.

All this appears ironic considering Kerrigan's citing of Woody Allen, as a particular hero of his, in the film's press pack. As he puts it, "what I learned from him was not to try and be like other directors. That's what I want to. Break rules and invent". And yet this film never really seems Kerrigan's own. Any potential to create unique characters in a unique environment appears to fail and, despite his often successful attempts to visually express the sights, the sounds and the sensations of a distinctive British drug-culture, the techniques he employs often seem highly derivative. In fact, a number of sequences do appear to be wholly lifted from Woody Allen, with the regular asides to camera, the comic layering or replaying of scenes to disclose what characters are "really thinking" and in particular, a moment where Jip watches (and comments on himself) having sex, all appear reminiscent of *Annie Hall*. Further, in the film's use of freeze-frames, voice-overs and moments of surrealism, the memory of *Trainspotting* (and its doppelganger inferior, *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*) does appear to come flooding ominously back. It could be the case that Kerrigan makes no apology for these influences, yet his publicised desire to "not to try and be like other directors" seems to suggest otherwise.

Despite all this, the film is to be treasured for its attempt to portray an authentic, late 1990s Britain, and, hopefully, to let the world know that this country has more to offer than bashful young Englishmen of the Hugh Grant ilk, or frilly heritage adaptations of Forster and Austen, or even, perish the thought, grim working-class depictions of life on the dole in the industrial North. In its attempt to be different, it only partially succeeds, but in its desire to be both fast, flashy and funny and at least to try something new, it provides a much-needed antidote to cinematic Britain as we (and the world) know it.

The Lost Son

Dir: Chris Menges, United Kingdom/France, 1998

A review by Rosie White, University of Northumbria at Newcastle, UK

Why are there so many films currently being made about child abuse? One might say this is the ultimate crime at the end of the twentieth century; that, having become tired of psychopaths and serial killers, and long ago jaded by "issue" films about rape and prostitution, the latest "shock" to grace movie screens is the face of a small child who has been robbed of innocence - and often in that process, of identity.

In news reports the fate of children - in Kosovo, in Turkey, in Timor - is the target of every camera. Who can forget the emaciated children in the appeals for aid for African nations? Well, clearly, we can. Yet it appears we are still shocked, repelled and fascinated by the horrific fate of children closer to home - by implication, children in our home. In England, the media's reports of The Cleveland story, the Bulger case, and the more recent murder of a small girl in a Durham village, are all iconic, and emotionally charged. Yes, these cases are shocking and horrifying, but why is that horror being translated into cinematic fiction?

Chris Menges is simply one of a crop of British directors who have turned to child abuse as the subject of attention. Gary Oldman's *Nil by Mouth* (1997) and the recent art-house hype surrounding Tim Roth's *The War Zone* (1998) both focus on abusive families and, I have to say, the kind of "serious" kudos this entails is a little strange. It is hard not to be cynical about first-time-actor-turned-directors choosing to deal with a subject so guaranteed to carry weight as "hard", "deep" and "difficult". Interviews with Ray Winstone and Tim Roth about the emotional process of making such a film carry a media-tag, and that tag is "art". This is clearly not "just entertainment", not a film you'll watch for fun. It is a film that has had an effect on the people involved in its making, and which, by implication, will have an effect on the people watching it. Exactly what kind of effect, and what purpose that effect serves, is not clear.

The Lost Son is a noirish thriller with a chainsmoking French detective at its centre. Daniel Auteil plays Lombard, a tarnished hero adrift in London, making an indifferent living as a small time private eye with a lucrative line in blackmail; he watches unfaithful wives for their husbands and then blackmails the wives. It seems a nice little earner, but then Lombard's old friend from Paris, Carlos, appears with a more orthodox deal. Carlos's wife is a member of a wealthy family and her brother, Leon, has disappeared. Leon is an ex-junkie and it soon becomes clear that he is dead, his demise the result of attempting to expose a booming business in child prostitution. At this point the plot, and Lombard, veers off the rails into a revenge fantasy. Lombard poses as a paedophile and rescues a small boy whom he has "bought" time with. Killing one of the men involved in the ring, he extracts the information that the children are "sourced" in Mexico. Suddenly we are crossing the Mexican border and are party to a bizarre attack on Friedman, the alleged leader of the gang, by Lombard, who seems to have cast himself as hitman and avenging angel.

Unsurprisingly this individual vendetta fails - but wait, Lombard finds a way to escape imprisonment, kill Friedman and his accomplice and take the gathered "lost" children to a nearby village and deposit them with the local *padre*. Back in England again, Lombard sets himself up as a target for the remains of the gang and the final scenario is played out at an isolated house inhabited by Leon's ex-lover, Emily, and Shiva, another "lost" boy, with whom Lombard left the mute and unnamed boy he rescued in London. The predictable *denouement* sees Carlos, Lombard's ex-colleague, emerging as the "mastermind" of the trade in child slaves and a paedophile himself, only to be killed by the child he abused. Biblical justice is served.

Considering Chris Menges' redoubtable reputation as a director of quality, hard-hitting films such as *A World Apart* (1987) and *Second Best* (1994), one can only presume that something at the post-production end of *The Lost Son* went horribly wrong. Lombard (Daniel Auteuil) is a depthless cipher, whose main preoccupation seems to be smoking himself to death. We are afforded innumerable shots of Lombard isolated, travelling through the dark city, enlivened only by some actorly "business" with cigarettes. His psychological motivation seems to be the trauma of seeing his wife and child die in a car bomb presumably meant for him. This implicitly "explains" his departure from Paris and his half-life in London, but is utterly unconvincing. There is an inexplicable shift from the characterization of the seedy hard-boiled private dick to the manic and unstoppable force of natural justice that Lombard becomes. The children rescued by him, or whom he encounters in Mexico, seem unimportant. Their role in the plot is to be the victims who, finally, and most unconvincingly, act out their revenge. As I grew less and less engaged with the film, and more and more horrified by its appalling treatment of its alleged subject, I kept hoping that some twist in the plot would redeem it, questioning Lombard's motivation, his "heroic" imperative. But it never came. Lombard rights the wrongs and then goes back to his seedy London flat where he spies on his neighbours in a fond and nostalgic manner. All's well with the world when you have a rightous peeping tom like Lombard on hand, it would seem.

The configuration of the paedophile, and indeed the abused child, appears to be offered here as a means of shoring up the modern male hero as a healthy and "normal" subject. It could be argued that the seedier aspects of his life raise questions about Lombard's status as normative protagonist but the casting of Daniel Auteuil does not threaten the sympathetic trajectory of the disassociated drifter turned avenging angel. Auteuil's performances in Claude Berri's epic *Jean de Florette* (1986) and *Manon des Sources* (1986), and in Claude Sautet's *Un Coeur en Hiver* (1991), have endorsed his screen persona as the tarnished yet always *sympatico* underdog. This is a shame as certain aspects of the film - such as Lombard masquerading as a paedophile in order to save the children - could have raised all sorts of complexities about the construction of the paedophile as so totally "other" to normative white male (hetero)sexuality. Similarly, the collapsing of time and space in the film (one minute London and the next minute Mexico) could have provided some postmodern gloss, detailing psychological fragmentation and dislocation, but instead remains a plot device which enables the "evil" of a paedophile ring to be all too easily resolvable through the intervention of a unique modernist hero; a James Bond with arthouse credentials.

The Matrix

Dir: Andy and Larry Wachowski, US, 1999

A review by Peter Hutchings, University of Northumbria at Newcastle, UK

The Matrix - the Wachowski brothers' wild SF tale of machines taking over human consciousness - contains one moment of almost sublime beauty. In the midst of a spectacular gun battle, Trinity, our female lead - played by Carrie-Ann Moss - runs up a wall and then, in one assured movement, spins off it, guns blazing all the while. (Within the same sequence, Neo, our male lead - played by Keanu Reeves - also gets to do a one-handed cartwheel, shooting all the way round. But for some reason this is not as satisfying; it lacks the elegance and the sheer excess of that female spin.) Yet even as we are fascinated by this image of Trinity's body perfectly in control of itself, its poise such that the laws of gravity no longer apply to it, we (or at least some of us in the audience) are also, inescapably, thinking "Rip off", for the whole sequence is, if nothing else, a prolonged pastiche of a shoot-out from a John Woo film. Woo, the Hong Kong action film-maker turned Hollywood "A" list director with films such as *Face/Off* and the forthcoming Tom Cruise vehicle *Mission: Impossible 2*, perfected the gunplay scenario in which the hero has an apparently inexhaustible supply of weapons (presumably to save on reloading), the villains unleash a veritable barrage of automatic gunfire without doing much damage to the hero, and various acts of violence are endowed via skilful staging and camerawork with an acrobatic, even balletic grace. *The Matrix* does all this, but then *The Matrix* goes further, replacing what in Woo is possible if unlikely with what is completely impossible. Even by the established standards of cinematic excess, this is excessive.

The combination here of a pleasurable gaze at bodily perfection with an elaborate re-staging of the work of another film-maker suggests a certain knowingness, but it's worth considering for whom this knowingness is meant. How many people in the actual audience for *The Matrix* would know or care about the films of John Woo to the extent that they would recognise and enjoy these cinematic references. Quite a few, I suspect, for Woo has a significant following; but certainly not all and probably not even a majority. Does this render the Woo references essentially private, a message from the film-makers directed at those aficionados in the audience able to receive and understand the information being sent while the rest of the audience simply gets on with enjoying the action? I'm not sure it's as simple as this, and in any event the dichotomy apparent here between the "clever" audience and the "dumb" audience is more than a little troubling. Given that *The Matrix* is probably one of the most spectacularly allusive films to emerge from Hollywood in recent years - with most of the allusions directed at other films - some sense is surely required of what sort of audience, or audiences, it is addressing.

One thing is for certain. *The Matrix* brings out the nerd in critics (and I don't exclude myself). Reviews invariably list some of the allusions and references to a whole range of SF films and martial arts movies, thereby claiming for themselves a certain cultural competence and knowledgeability (although, with a post-modern twist, this is knowledge not of the high

cultural forms previously associated with the acquisition of cultural capital but instead of less reputable, more "modish" cult genre films.) I don't propose to offer my own list here (although, God help me, I probably could) but instead want to consider the status of these references to other films and the part they might play in *The Matrix* itself.

Every one seems to agree that *The Matrix* is something special, something more than the usual blockbuster. But how is it special? Certainly not in its plot - machines take over the world and control humans through trapping them in a virtual reality simulation which is engaging enough but hardly original. (The SF writer Philip K. Dick, for one, made a career out of generating such scenarios.) Nor is there anything special about the characterisations. Neo is, initially at least, an unusually passive hero but he is eventually transformed into a mystical "Superman" in a manner comparable with the treatment of the hero elsewhere in SF fantasy (notably in the *Star Wars* films); while Trinity is simply the latest in a long series of "action women" to be found in contemporary Hollywood cinema.

The distinctiveness of *The Matrix*, then, seems to reside precisely in its allusions and its up-front derivations and borrowings. Post-modern notions of bricolage and recycling, of pastiche and hyper-reality immediately spring to mind, but somehow such concepts and the way of reading they imply seem inappropriate for thinking about *The Matrix*. Comparing it, say, with Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (it's an obvious comparison, I know, but bear with me), one notes the "flatness" of *The Matrix* in relation to Scott's 1982 film. By this, I mean that one gets a sense in *Blade Runner* of there being a meaning to be found somewhere beneath the film's surface, a meaning which informs and moulds the film's own set of cultural and cinematic allusions. Scott's anguished humanism and his anxieties about the erosion of "human-ness" motivate and give energy to *Blade Runner*; they also imply and even invoke a spectator who, if she or he cares enough, will work to uncover the significance locked into the film's narrative and visual style.

By way of a contrast, there does not appear to be anything to be uncovered in *The Matrix*. It seems to me to be a film that is supremely indifferent to meaning and, in a different way, supremely indifferent to any notion of the audience. Nothing is hidden here; there is nothing to be uncovered. The film is not about anything at all. The references to other films have no function, narrative or ideological, and they do not require critical explication; all one can do is merely list them. These references might well impact upon an audience's reception of *The Matrix*, but *The Matrix* itself is indifferent to that fact. In a sense, *The Matrix* is little more than a multi-million dollar Rorschach or ink-blot test. The patient's interpretation of the ink blots shown him or her by the psychiatrist might reveal something about the patient's inner self; they reveal nothing at all about the ink blots which remain as inscrutable and two-dimensional as they were before the analysis began.

I suppose that this has been a somewhat unconventional review inasmuch as I have not yet said whether I actually liked the film. For the record, I found it a hugely entertaining and exhilarating experience. At the same time, I have the feeling that, unlike other blockbuster films that seek to ingratiate themselves with audiences (notably the new *Star Wars* film which ingratiates itself until it just becomes sickening), *The Matrix* tolerates the attentions of the audience rather than welcoming them. I think again of Trinity spinning elegantly through the air. Most of her circular movement is actually filmed from behind so that in one of the film's most dramatically expressive moments the character involved has her back to us, indifferent to our presence. This is not really for you, *The Matrix* seems to be saying in a statement that can stand for the whole film, but you are permitted to watch.