

Encapsulated Noir: Hybrid Genres and Social Mobility in Alex Proyas' *Dark City*

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At first glance, Alex Proyas' neo-noir *Dark City* (1998) seems all pastiche. It begins with John Murdoch, the protagonist, waking up from a state of amnesia. He has been framed for a murder he does not remember committing. Apart from dodging the police, he must also escape from a group of mysterious strangers pursuing him for reasons unknown. In the Hitchcockian nightmare of having to clear himself from the unjustified murder charge, Murdoch discovers that his entire world, which consists exclusively of a vast and labyrinthine city, is in fact a large behavioral experiment. It was constructed and is now controlled by the Strangers, an incorporeal race of alien beings, borrowing dead human bodies, in pursuit of the secret of human consciousness in order to save themselves from biological and spiritual extinction. Every night, the strangers put the human inhabitants of the city to sleep, rearrange the urban map by shifting and twisting buildings into new configurations, and implant selected individuals with new memories in order to observe their behavior. In his quest for his identity, Murdoch uncovers the secret of the Strangers' existence and transforms himself into a messianic savior, delivering humankind in a climactic battle into authenticity and self-determination.

This brief plot summary alone places *Dark City* into a broader discursive field within contemporary culture in which *film noir* has not only made a comeback as neo-noir pastiche, but in which genre boundaries have become so permeable that *noir* tropes have infiltrated adjacent popular genres. The dead bodies of the Strangers are borrowed from horror film, the concept of alien beings from science fiction. The urban machine is a construct reminiscent of cyberpunk's historicizing variants -- a steampunk version of America in the 1930s, complete with clanking low-tech machinery, vintage cars, and automats. One might either see a complex interweaving of genre lines, or one might agree with Rob Latham who notes that postmodern genericity tends to move toward an implosion of conventionally separate genres, creating multiple hybrids. Just as Latham sees cyberpunk as "a postmodern variation on the Gothic," *Dark City* appears as a postmodern variation on *film noir*. (Latham, 2002: 229)

Despite the considerable star power Proyas assembled to bring the characters to life who populate the city, the true star of the film is the city itself. Following the cinematic tradition, it is a grim and desolate place that echoes all the titles of classical *film noir* which announce the significance of its favorite setting. It is, in equal parts, *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), *[In] a Lonely Place* (1950), *City of Chance* (1940), and *The Naked City* (1948). As a ghostly *noir* shadow, there is also William Dieterle's *Dark City* (1950), with which Proyas' film shares nothing more than the title. Critical discourse on *film noir* reflects the significance of the city in the choice of its titles as well -- Eddie Muller's *Dark City: The Lost World of Film Noir* (1998), Nicholas Christopher's *Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City* (1998), Spencer Selby's *Dark City: The Film Noir* (1997), William Hare's *L.A. Noir: Nine Dark Visions of the City of Angels* (2004), as well as, more broadly, David Clarke's *The Cinematic City* (1997) and Mike Davis' *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (1992). The frequency with which especially the term "Dark City" occurs is a sure sign that

Proyas comes to his subject with a discursive tradition that cuts across fiction and criticism already in place.

Crucial to this discursive tradition, and paradoxically subversive in its effects on it, is the omnipresence and over familiarity of its tropes. Examining the foundational historical narrative that traces *noir* back to German Expressionism, Thomas Elsaesser concludes that "*film noir* has no essence," but is "an imaginary entity whose meaning resides in a set of shifting signifiers." (Elsaesser, 2000: 420) To the degree that it is "a loose, evolving system of arguments and readings that helps to shape commercial strategies and aesthetic ideologies," it has not only "become useful to the movie industry," but also to academics and film historians. (Naremore, 1998: 11 and 38) *Film noir* "belongs to the history of ideas as much as to the history of cinema; in other words, it has less to do with a group of artifacts than with a discourse." (Naremore, 1998: 11) *Film noir*, Marc Vernet agrees, "is a collector's idea that, for the moment, can only be found in books." (Vernet, 1993: 26) This transfer of an ideological construct from critical discourse into "a worldwide mass memory" entails a process of fetishization, which, in turn, "represses as much history as it recalls, usually in the service of cinephilia and commodification." (Naremore, 1998: 39)

Hence, the eponymous Dark City is not a place modeled upon history, despite one of the Strangers' explanation that they "fashioned this city on stolen memories, different eras, different pasts, all rolled into one." Though there are historical inconsistencies among some of the props in the setting (between cars from the 1950s and an automat from the 1940s, for example), they are negligible. In fact, most of us would hardly notice these ill-fitting details because we respond to the city more as a *noir* set than a historical location. The entire film is shot on sets, with extensive use of mattes and miniatures; not even when Proyas finally takes us outside of the city in the film's closing scene does he shoot on location. Consequently, we recognize Dark City immediately as the neon wilderness, the asphalt jungle, of classical *film noir*, most of which was, after all, shot by directors with a strong preference for studio over location shoots. As viewers accustomed to this look, we respond to *Dark City's* consistency with other *noir* settings, which is as much an effect of George Liddel's and Patrick Tatopoulos' production design as it is of Dariusz Wolski's cinematography. The "different eras" of the past have no existence other than in the unreliable memories of those, whether they are viewers or inhabitants of Dark City, for whom cinematic conventions already mingle freely with reality anyway. In this sense, Proyas and his collaborators make explicit Fredric Jameson's contention that postmodernism embraces a "pseudohistorical depth, in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces 'real' history," a contention that Jameson arrives at, significantly enough, through a discussion of Lawrence Kasdan's neo-*noir* *Body Heat* (1981). (Jameson, 1991: 20)

Framed as the maze of a behavioral experiment, the Dark City is a set in more than one sense. Reminiscent of David Mamet's neo-*noir* *House of Games* (1987), the central conceit of *Dark City* follows the logic of the con game. Murdoch is not only being framed for a murder he did not commit, but everybody else is being conned by the Strangers about the ontological bottom line of their existence. The Dark City is, of course, nothing more than a set, constructed in miniatures, to fool us into believing that Rufus Sewell, Kiefer Sutherland, and Jennifer Connelly are really moving through a coherent urban environment. Proyas has opted for the use of models and matte paintings over expensive CGI, with the result that the city itself looks less than convincing as a *real* place. But this is a deliberate effect. Proyas is in the fortunate situation that his sets are actually *supposed* to look phony or fake, emblematic of the role the industrial city plays as the "archetype of the artificial environment" (Bukatman,

2003: 105). Not having to worry about visual perfection means that he can save money on set designs, and the end result is a complex construction of space whose ontological ambiguities extend from the world of the film to the world of the film's makers and viewers. As the topography of *Dark City* ontologically splits into a diegetic space and its metatextual deconstruction, the city itself functions simultaneously as a film set and as the space this film set represents. Whether authenticity can be attached to this space always depends on the perceiving subject. By way of these ambiguities, we are subtly unmoored from the world of *noir* as an authentic setting, whose referent is located somewhere in history or the material world. Instead, the film nudges us toward a different kind of authenticity -- that of the world of *film noir* as a cinematic genre, a construct that only makes sense as long as we perceive it in regard to the concrete circumstances of its production.

The genre conventions of classical *noir* demand that there must be what I would call a "spatial other," an object of retrogressive desire (nostalgia) or progressive desire (utopia), always defined by its absence, deferral, or unattainability. For the most part, it is associated with proximity to origins, beginnings, and hence authenticity, in sharp contrast to the industrial city, the "archetype of the artificial environment" (Bukatman, 2003: 105). Plenty of characters are trying to blow town and make a run for it, from Walter Neff's plea to Barton Keyes to give him a chance to reach the Mexican border in Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), to Joe Gillis' listless contemplation of leaving Hollywood and returning to his native Ohio in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), to Sterling Hayden's gangsters in both Kubrick's *The Killing* (1956) and Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle*. In all of these cases, the escape fails. Escapees die upon arrival, return to the city, or never make it out in the first place. The fatal reach of the *noir* city extends to this space, which is construed as an other but revealed as an extension, a margin belonging to essentially the same space. The *noir* universe is revealed as homogeneous after all, an inescapable totality to which there is no outside.

In accord with these conventions, a trace of this spatial other is also written into *Dark City*. Proyas and his collaborators call this spatial McGuffin "Shell Beach," a location so overloaded with significance that it verges on the mythical. It is one of Murdoch's childhood memories, poised between opposing natural forces and rife with an "almost Freudian attachment to water" (Schrader, 1996: 57). Within the Strangers' behavioral experiment, Shell Beach serves as a compensatory mechanism for the grimness of everyday life. Its non-existence conforms to a logic of sublimation in which the promise or memory of a spatial other -- that is, the utopia of the future or the nostalgia for the past -- is powerful enough to make the object of desire itself redundant. Shell Beach exists as advertising posters, faked photographs in an album, a signifier without concrete signified, a phantom limb attached to the periphery of the urban body. The fact that Proyas and his collaborators insert Shell Beach into their story, as a compensatory mechanism with psychological, social, and political impact, indicates that the film is interested in the formation of the self whenever it finds itself lacking a firm ontological foothold. I will return to this theme toward the end of the essay.

Murdoch's search for his true identity is a literal journey, the moment of recognition a literal breaking-through. At the end of the long journey to the outer reaches of the city, in search of the elusive Shell Beach, he and a small band of fellow travelers find a wall. On the wall, there is a faded poster advertising Shell Beach, Proyas' nod to the commodification of nostalgic and utopian desires. When they tear the poster off and attack the wall behind it the bricks start crumbling away to the outside, which is revealed to be the void of outer space. One character is sucked out through the hole in the wall and begins to tumble through the darkness, away from the city. As the camera tracks the trajectory of his body, it also moves away from the

city. Only then does it reverse its gaze. For the first time, we are granted the panoramic view from the outside -- the position from beyond death from which Joe Gillis speaks his voiceover in *Sunset Boulevard*, having been shot by Norma Desmond before he even begins to speak from somewhere outside the frame, and from which David Mamet plots the elaborate cons of *House of Games*. We see the city in its entirety, floating through space on a vast platform, a construct, a set or stage designed to ensure the compliance of an audience that is comprised of both the characters inhabiting the city, and of the audience in the theater.

Roger Ebert, in describing the "astonishing shot from the other side of the city in space," admits that he was "absolutely stunned; in a sense my heart leapt." (*Dark City* DVD commentary track) For the viewer who is harder to astonish, one of the Strangers articulates this sense of the sublime by saying, "And now you know the truth." Right after the shot that made Roger Ebert's heart leap, Proyas cuts to a close-up of Murdoch's awed, amazed face. Retaining the prior reverse-angle, the shot models the audience's intended response. Other than that, though, it makes little sense because, looking out through the hole in the wall, Murdoch is never actually privy to the sight the audience has just seen. This point of view belongs exclusively to one of his fellow travelers, Bumstead (William Hurt), whose dead body floats away from the city through the void. The similarities between Joe Gillis speaking from beyond death in his voiceover in *Sunset Boulevard* and this POV shot are striking -- we are placed in the same impossible position.

Though some may see this editing discontinuity as a minor glitch, it is possible to read it as a significant facet of the symbolism in the scene. The establishing shot of the city in its entirety does, in fact, put the audience into the position of Bumstead, just as Joe Gillis' voiceover invites us to join him on the other side of death. Bumstead's cognitive privilege is encoded visually, while Gillis' is encoded auditorily, yet both must be paid for with their lives. Seeing what they see requires being outside, which is an untenable position for human beings. To occupy the privileged cognitive position also means to be powerless to affect the object of one's scrutiny; superior knowledge comes at the price of impotence. In this regard, *Dark City* posits *noir* as an inescapable totality, which can only be understood for those cut off from the life-sustaining collective cultural environment it provides, however grim and lugubrious this environment may be on the inside. Could this be a gloss on the comforts and perils of genre, on a formula that generates community among its audiences but suffocates creative individualists among its makers?

It is no less surprising to hear Roger Ebert say that he was "absolutely stunned" seeing the reverse angle master shot from outer space in *Dark City*, than it is to hear Ed Sikov admit, on the commentary track to the DVD of *Sunset Boulevard*, that he "was shocked when he saw the film for the first time" because he did not expect Joe Gillis to end up as the corpse floating in Norma Desmond's pool. While Sikov concedes that perhaps he should not have been that surprised ("Maybe there were audience members who knew all along"), Ebert is unapologetic. Didn't he pay attention to the voiceover after the opening credits, spoken by Dr. Schreber (Kiefer Sutherland), which explains the basic facts about the Strangers and their experiment? The voiceover is even superimposed upon an image of outer space. Though we do not see the *noir* city drifting through space at this point, as we will in the climactic scene, it should give away enough to spoil genuine surprise later on.

Though Schreber, like all other characters, is tragically trapped within the city, his voiceover maps out an alternative to Murdoch's early, not-yet-corrected perception. This alternative is associated with the panoramic view from the outside, which, Proyas suggests, is encoded in

the text from the very beginning. While Murdoch must follow the convoluted twists and turns of both the city and the plot like a first-time viewer, Schreber's perspective is that of re-reading, being able to see the text in its entirety in one single moment. To put it differently, Schreber is like a structuralist critic, reading the text synchronically, while Murdoch is the reader of reader-response theory, for whom the text unfolds diachronically. We see Schreber in his own laboratory, in a moment of *mise-en-abyme*, hovering over a labyrinth and watching a rat make its way (significantly, the rat is not heading toward the exit but deeper into the maze, toward the center). Despite his panoramic viewpoint, however, Schreber does not know the final outcome of the narrative; that outcome depends entirely on Murdoch and his arrival at the truth. Schreber is omniscient, yet impotent. We have seen this combination of omniscience and impotence before. Its recurrence marks the moment when *film noir* tries to imagine stepping outside of itself.

Though *Dark City* still operates within the generic totality we see in classical *film noir*, it does perform one unique move. This move is all the more striking because it falls outside the conventions many neo-*noir* films follow when they screen out all references to contemporary reality, a universe incompatible with that of *film noir*. Postmodern nostalgia in neo-*noir* cinema, Jameson concludes, arises from the purity, the suffocating totality of "some eternal thirties, beyond real historical time" (Jameson, 1991: 21). *Dark City* splits this totality wide open when Murdoch's party glimpses the void of outer space. Jameson's "real historical time" still does not enter the picture because the outside of one genre is merely another genre. The wall reifies generic boundaries, so that, in the moment of breakthrough, the characters move from an embedded narrative that is coded in terms of a genre commonly associated with the past into a frame coded in terms of a genre commonly associated with the future. This larger frame, in which the *noir* universe is contained, is of course defined by the conventions of science fiction. Strictly speaking, the film as a whole has been science fiction all along, but the protagonist did not know it until now. His slow realization, for example, that he possesses supernatural powers rises to the level of certainty. Accepting these powers as literal is only possible within science fiction; within the encapsulated world of *noir* he would have to dismiss his abilities as a manifestation of psychosis, a side effect perhaps of the pervasive sense of paranoia. Together with Murdoch, we now have to make room for the possibilities that are available within the generic rules of science fiction, possibilities that were precluded by the rules of *noir*.

Unlike Murdoch, however, we have had the benefit of Schreber's introductory voiceover all along. But even those of us whose breath is not as easily taken away as Roger Ebert's would be unable to construct a precise relationship between the information in the voiceover and the seemingly closed environment of the city. From this uncertainty stems the strong sense of paranoia that pervades the film up to this point; we know that something is wrong, we just don't know what it is quite yet. The coexistence of clues to two genres codes this paranoia retroactively as a kind genre unease or uncertainty. Only when the film disambiguates its generic status does it open the path to the final battle between Murdoch and the Strangers -- an F/X and action extravaganza atypical of *film noir* but all too familiar from science fiction. Paul Schrader is the one who points out that *film noir* tends to prefer "compositional tension" to physical action. "A typical *film noir*," Schrader notes, "would rather move the scene cinematographically around the actor than have the actor control the scene by physical action." (Schrader, 1996: 57) The space of one genre -- science fiction's outer space -- allows us to view the space of the other, *noir*'s urban enclosure.

The closing scene of *Dark City* constructs the space of the second genre as adjacent rather than separate to that of *film noir*. As Murdoch ends the rule of the Strangers, the city "grows" an ocean on its perimeter. The line of the horizon, though obviously still illusory, moves outward, and for the first time in the entire film, the sun comes out. On a pier extending from the outer wall into the water, the final encounter between Murdoch and his wife takes place. As the camera cuts from one angle to another, we see the ocean on one side and the outer wall of the city on the other, carving out a position of marginality, not alterity, in regard to the *noir* space. Depending on how one looks at this scene, it either explodes the generic totality of *noir*, opening up an entirely new direction for the self-reflexive discussion and critique *noir* can conduct about its own status as a genre. Or the film reaffirms, albeit obliquely, that no such spatial other can be imagined as long as *noir* remains a self-contained genre.

The question raised by this encapsulation of *noir* by means of another genre is whether something essential is at stake here. Why does it matter whether *noir* is capable of reflecting upon itself in a manner that is essentially inconsistent with its own generic and ideological agenda, i.e. launching a critique that can only be formulated from outside its generic strictures? Critical readers of other texts that, together with *Dark City*, also encapsulate a *noir* universe inside a larger science fiction frame, have explored specifically the role of genre in the processes of production and consumption. Rob Latham, for example, finds that Kim Newman, in his neo-*noir* novel *The Night Mayor*, fuses the "allegorical and the autobiographical dimensions of the text" in order to reflect upon his own double status as a hack writer of horror pulps and as a serious critic of genre cinema. (Latham, 2001: 107) The encapsulated *noir* universe in *The Night Mayor* -- a cyber-technological simulation into which characters can insert themselves -- posits the literary cliché, "the worn-out rituals of a moribund genre," which are perpetuated without an infusion of genuine creativity, as a "prison of the stereotype." (Latham, 2001: 102) Not unlike Stephen King's *Misery*, in which historical romance is encapsulated within a horror narrative, *The Night Mayor* launches a critique of commercial publishing and of the narrow genre boundaries it imposes on authors who have traded commercial success for artistic integrity. Along the same thematic lines, one of Alex Proyas' creative collaborators suggests that the Strangers -- ugly creatures who control others with their minds and whose most prominent feature is a large toothy mouth -- were actually dreamed up by Proyas to confront his own situation as an auteur within contemporary Hollywood. "In terms of the auteur theory and what this film represents to its director," *Dark City*'s screenwriter Lem Dobbs muses, "I think it's more autobiographical than what people would suppose. What the strangers represent to Alex would be studio executives." (*Dark City* DVD commentary track)

Critical self-exploration is at the heart of Proyas' film. Just as *Double Indemnity* shows us the Dictaphone into which Walter Neff speaks his confession, and *Sunset Boulevard* features the journalists' cameras that greet Norma Desmond's final descent down the staircase, *Dark City* puts the technologies on display that have constructed and are now maintaining the city as a coherent and convincing *noir* setting. The film is endlessly fascinated with tropes of image production, which are, strictly speaking, tropes of generic *re*-production. At first glance, the production we witness suggests novelty and development, but transformation is looped into recursive patterns. As much as the citizens and their city are being made over every night, they still remain recognizable within the visual tradition of *noir*. The totality of the *noir* universe remains intact. But the long shot from outer space reveals not only the city resting on a flat platform, but also an appendix of alien technology underneath, feeding into it like a root into a plant. The spatial division between the stage set up above and the technology

down below reifies, with tongue-in-cheek humor, Marxist notions of *Ueberbau* and *Unterbau* --superstructure and base. The base of Dark City rests, after all, on nothing; the entire structure simulates solidity but is floating freely, unsupported, or rather, paradoxically self-supporting.

Eventually, Proyas takes us downstairs. In a later scene, he shows us an assembly line underground. Here the Strangers fabricate objects like books, watches, and letters, which are without exchange value until their owners invest them with sentimental value. As these props are placed with people in order to complete their newly constructed identities, the city itself is rearranging itself in violent contortions. Vast machines underground start up laboriously and drive the transformation. Proyas' imaginary technology is deliberately industrial, whether on the small scale of the assembly line or the large scale of the urban machinery. In the context of contemporary miniaturized and "soft" technology, these machines appear grotesque and anachronistic. Assembly lines move unevenly, the factory floor is full of smoke, and the machines themselves, reminiscent in their primitive anthropomorphization of the Baal sequence in Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), are sticky with grease and shining with condensation. To operate the central machine, collective effort is necessary, which is organized into Taylorized movements and separated by strict divisions of labor. What drives these machines, according to the internal logic of *Dark City's* science fiction universe, is the mental energy of the Strangers. Nested parasitically inside their bodies, which they merely borrow from the dead, they are creatures of sheer will -- light, inexorable, immaterial, and physically impalpable.

Unlike *Metropolis*, *Dark City* does not make a plea for a revolution in which class differences are overcome through the mediation of an interpolated social group. For Proyas, the oppressed attain self-determination by seizing the means of production. Lang and his co-author Thea von Harbou may be able to imagine a heart to mediate between the hand and the head of industrial capitalism, but the categoric otherness of the Strangers, their vampiric greed and *literal* inhumanity, precludes this possibility in *Dark City*. More importantly, mediation is also not a factor for Proyas because the citizens of Dark City do not know that they are oppressed, and thus do not act out of fear. They do not affect the willing ignorance that is essential for survival within a fascist or totalitarian system. Their compliance is that of total ignorance, which means that liberation is not primarily a problem of the collective but of the individual. A cognitive breakthrough must precede the political one. The discipline imposed upon them is not that of an industrial economy, like that of *Metropolis*, in which discipline is enforced from outside and maintained through brutal oppression, but of a postindustrial economy, in which conformity and cooperation are guaranteed because individuals have fully internalized the discipline. Shell Beach is one of the products of such an economy, a commodity that simultaneously confirms the fiction of an alternative while actively foreclosing it. The purpose of the complex machinery underground is to produce such commodities, which, by means of their familiarity to the consumer, reproduce a need that is inauthentic but nonetheless persistent and predictable. Reproducing the conditions of their own manipulation, the consumers are sleepwalkers, unaware of the fact that their responses are monitored, their identities prefabricated, and their memories fake. They act out of false consciousness.

Proyas' allegory is hardly subtle. If the production of images is the main purpose of a commercial film industry, then this comes across as a devastating portrait of Hollywood, complete with a grotesque parody of market research and the star system. It brings to mind terms like "repressive desublimation," and the associated critical discourse of the Frankfurt

School at its most critical of the culture industry. To the degree that the film's imagery is self-reflexive, it stands for the mechanisms of production of *film noir*, then of commercial cinema itself, and, in the broadest sense, of postindustrial capitalism. It is important to remember, however, that Proyas' critique is tempered by the postmodern sensibility that ultimately accepts the inevitability of this mechanism. Unlike the harsher modernism of Adorno and Horkheimer, Proyas suggests that prefabricated identities and inauthentic experience can be appropriated and turned to useful ends. Perhaps this affirmative response to the condition of what Fredric Jameson has referred to as the completed project of modernity reflects exactly, within Jameson's terms, the absence of a proper "outside" or Other that I have been detecting in *film noir* all along.

The images with which *Dark City* illustrates the insidiousness of the manipulation come with strong overtones of social class. During one of the midnight sessions in which the Strangers "implant" new identities and rearrange the urban landscape, a working-class couple is elevated to upper middle-class rank. Their squalid living-room morphs into a palatial manor, wife-beaters and bathrobes are replaced with dinner jackets and evening gowns. And the conversation, which ends on a note of working-class discontent about the husband's rotten job, resumes with a confirmation of the employer's moral right to lay off a discontented worker. The humor of the scene satirizes the visual and behavioral stereotypes belonging to each of the two social classes. It is also eerie and uncanny, since the upward social move of the couple and its children, which could, in reality, be accomplished over a long period of time, happens in the course of half an hour. It is perhaps the speed, as well as the seamlessness with which one social identity blends into another, that exposes a social viciousness underneath the harmless wish fulfillment. Neither rags nor riches look very appealing here.

Underneath this fantasy of social mobility, the liberation from the burdens of the social self, we find several free-floating anxieties. The couple's swift upward move, random and certainly undeserved, conjures up the unsettling possibility of a complementary downward move. For these people's good fortune, there must surely be someone else out there whose life has just taken a turn for the worse. Once this randomness is acknowledged, social mobility in general reveals itself to be -- no pun intended -- unsettling. It implies a lack of proper social place, of having no right to claim any social position as one's own. In a society like that of the United States, which is predicated strongly on the ideal of social mobility, everyone's social place is always only transitory, preliminary, or tentative. It is merely a place to pass through on the way to, hopefully, greener pastures. This inspires the lower classes to be hopeful, inviting them to bank on the potential of their lives more than its material reality, while the upper classes would have reason to be vaguely yet permanently nervous. While one class overvalues the unrealized potential of its situation, the other must strictly repress it. And yet, the specter of a downward slide always seems one step ahead of the mechanisms of repression.

While the film cleverly exploits anxieties on the collective and social level, it is strangely conciliatory when it comes to the individual. John Murdoch is catapulted out of the social order by the murder he allegedly committed. He also loses his place in the world because commodities fail him. A photo album, mass-produced by the Strangers, becomes his final clue that Shell Beach never existed. But while his rebellion, his act of ontological disambiguation, opens up the possibility of future self-determination for everybody, it does not restore anyone's true identity. His fellow citizens are merely stuck with the identity arbitrarily assigned to them at the moment of Murdoch's coup. As the film closes off the

possibility of recovering an authentic original identity, it never seems to agonize over this loss. Since the fluidity of identities used to be controlled from the outside, the loss of this fluidity is a welcome exchange for a world in which identity is limited and cut off from authentic origins but self-determined.

That *Dark City* embraces this version of identity politics with considerable enthusiasm puts it a step ahead of classical *film noir*. J.P. Telotte points out that classical *noir* already marks "a stress point in American film narrative." (Telotte, 2001: 178) In its use of documentary techniques as a stylistic counterpoint to German Expressionist interiority and subjectivity, "it sought to accommodate or function within an increasingly elusive, if not quite illusive, 'real,' even as it often sought, through a variety of strategies, to attest to its own more realistic vantage on our world." (Telotte, 2001: 178) Since even the films of the classical cycle increasingly engage that notion of a constructed world, the question for neo-*noir* directors becomes how to position themselves toward this ambivalence. One option is to follow the modernist tradition, in which the loss of authenticity is experienced as trauma and accompanied by a degree of existential unease. The alternative would be to recognize the loss of authenticity, embrace it, and explore its potential as a source of pragmatic rather than essentialist politics.

While *Dark City* seems to opt for a more postmodernist, or at least constructionist, approach to its central conceit, the film's plea for an identity politics based on *bricolage* falls curiously short of more radical models that consider "'psychology' as implant." (Seltzer, 1998: 112) Celia Lury, for example, envisions under the aegis of what she calls "prosthetic culture." The vanguards of experimental individualism, Lury argues, abolish the more conventional models of personal identity, which are still characterized by "a unique body," "continuity of consciousness and memory," and by being "fixed through the attribution of a set origin in time and space." (Lury, 1998: 7) Instead, Lury imagines an "experimental individual," endowed with

a flexible body, [and the] ability to be [...] disembedded from specific social relations, to be deracinated, without gender, class, sexuality or age, and then to display a combination of such natural and social characteristics as required through an assertion of a claim to the significance of their effects. (Lury, 1998: 7)

Whereas Murdoch might be the only character in *Dark City* who possesses a "flexible body," thanks to the inventory of science fiction imagery every single citizen by the end of the film becomes "the proprietor of a technologically mediated or *prosthetic auto/biography*." (Lury, 1998: 24) Proyas' suggestion that Murdoch is likely to form a genuine personal bond with the woman who is or isn't his wife follows Lury's idea that the characters' newly minted prosthetic biographies are relevant only insofar as they enable social agency as it arises from, and pertains to, specific circumstances. The "direct socialization of the unconscious, the replacement of the psychical by the social ego, amounts to the formation of the subject from the outside in." (Seltzer, 1998: 112) In the application of this model to *Dark City*, outside and inside are aligned with the generic and cognitive boundary between the science fiction frame and the embedded *noir* space; the city, as in classical *noir*, is not just social and historical, but always also psychic space.

Offering prosthetic biography as a remedy for the ills of alienation, *Dark City* is nonetheless hampered in its attempt to translate its identity politics into a viable social model. Its anxiety about social mobility leads to an acknowledgement that social differences have no

transcendent moral, political, or historical legitimacy, which, in turn, is translated into a conservative nostalgia for a grounding in essentials. Murdoch's coup appeases this nostalgia because it returns social class from the status of arbitrary imposition to that of self-determined individualism. Social class appears as the product of a culture industry that operates against the vital interests of its consumers, a conspiracy run by a power elite that institutes, distributes, and enforces social differences as a way of ensuring the docility of the population. Social class appears as an extension of the ideological machinery that divides to conquer, an arbitrary system of differences the consumer/citizen needs to recognize and overcome in order to attain self-determination. The paradigm shift Murdoch brings about would be truly revolutionary in Lang's *Metropolis*, but it fails to affect a substantial change in a society like that of the United States, in which the dominant paradigm is one of self-reliance and self-determination. *Dark City* does offer a solution, unfortunately it is the solution to the problems of *Metropolis*, not to *Dark City*. At the end of Proyas' film, the viewer is left with a pervasive sense of fatigue about *jouissance* and *bricolage*, and a yearning to escape from the pressures and responsibilities of self-determination and autonomy. If one were cynical one might see an urge here to keep the dictatorship only to replace the dictator.

It seems to me that the nostalgia for a more essentialist identity politics in the film stems from an uncertainty how to respond to contemporary economic and social structures often summarized under the umbrella term "neoliberalism." To cite Celia Lury again, "The person creates (or is created by) a self-identity that is no longer defined by the edict 'I think, therefore I am'; rather, he or she is constituted in the relation 'I can, therefore I am.'" (Lury, 1998: 3) Under neoliberal policies, the edict "I can, therefore I am" quickly changes to "I can, therefore I must." What Lury sees as the utopian privileges of the "experimental individual" have already become essential survival skills in a postindustrial economy that demands flexibility, fluidity, deracination, and substitutability. *Dark City*, though obviously aware of these tendencies, seems stuck with an older model that still conceptualizes late capitalism as rigid, confining, and authoritarian.

What *Dark City* has to offer is a form of genre-savvy media critique that also runs through similar films released during the same time period -- Josef Rusnak's *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999), David Cronenberg's *eXistenZ* (1999), and the Wachowskis' *The Matrix* (1999). Preceding these films by a year, Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998) and Gary Ross' *Pleasantville* (1998) initiated the theme of this cycle. Though the emancipatory narratives in the latter two films resemble that of *Dark City*, they are primarily interested in a critique of the medium of television and only secondarily in a critique of popular genres (in these two cases, respectively, reality TV and the family sitcom). The final irony about all of these films is that they are products of the same sophisticated technology they indict as the engine of alienation. They mass-produce the imagery and ideology that helps to generate social differences and thus personal identity.

Of all possible genres, the burden to represent the essence of this social and ideological machinery falls to *film noir*. I find this a useful and suitable choice, and not just because of the pessimism inherent in *film noir* from its inception. As a self-consciously constructed genre that has already entered "a worldwide mass memory," *film noir* at this stage of its development embraces its inauthenticity, making it easier "to love the American cinema," as Marc Vernet puts it, "even in its middling production." (Naremore, 1998: 39; Vernet, 1993: 26). Deploying it within a hybridized text does not seem to weaken its "ghostly existence as too many discourses" at all. (Elsaesser, 2000: 423) Ultimately, the generic encapsulation in *Dark City* and films like it fulfill, on the level of cinematic production, what Thomas

Elsaesser has noted on the level of critical discourse -- "instead of canceling each other out, [they] merely [seem] to amplify the term's resonance and suggestiveness." (Elsaesser, 2000: 423)

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Filmography

Dark City, 1998. Dir. Alex Proyas. New Line Cinema.

Double Indemnity, 1944. Dir. Billy Wilder. Paramount Pictures.

House of Games, 1987. Dir. David Mamet. Orion/HBO.

Metropolis, 1927. Dir. Fritz Lang. UFA.

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