

Dark City, Noir, and the Space Between: Or is it Our Nature to Live in the Dark?

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Alex Proyas's 1998 film, *Dark City*, opens in darkness, in a space lit only by stars and patches of blue that seem to represent the blue world Dr. Schreber claims the "Strangers" invaded to save their race. This long shot of outer space cranes downward from that blue patch of light to an artificially lit night time *film noir* cityscape crowded with cars from the 1940s and 1950s and a cinema neon sign announcing film titles that serve a prescient role: *The Evil and Bo_k of Dreams*. Movement from the hollow emptiness of space, a pristine natural cosmos, to a cacophonous city devoid of non-human nature startles us both visually and aurally with its clashes – both of space and of genres. Between the pristine and the decadent constructed spaces, outer space of science fiction meets the *noir* of the dark city, and the organic galaxies traced in white and blue natural lighting meet a luminescent, shadowed urban world devoid of nature other than that created and inhabited by the Strangers.

In homage to Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), the opening to Proyas' film, then, like many openings to science fiction and *noir* films, introduces us to its settings and chief themes through visual effects and, as a parallel to *Metropolis*'s epigram and inter-titles, voice-over, this time through the narration of Dr. Schreber. But it also highlights the most important element in the film, its representation of ecology, literally "the study of homes." The shift from a traditional science fiction setting to one indicative of a carefully laid out 1940s or 1950s *noir* world coincides with a swing from the pristine to the decayed and, it would seem, from a natural to a constructed environment. With a few changes, the film seems to agree with Alexander Wilson's claim that "the culture of nature – the ways we think, teach, talk about, and construct the natural world – is as important as the world itself." To paraphrase, the culture of the world of *Dark City*, the way this *noir* world is thought about, talked about, and constructed, becomes more important than the world, if it is a world, itself.

The way we think, talk about, and construct the natural world serves as the central tenet of ecocriticism, a field of study still being defined. In the Western Literature Association meeting answering the question, "What is Ecocriticism?", Harry Crockett's definition broaches an issue over which ecocritics, ecologists, and other naturalists informed by the "hard sciences" continue to argue: the impact postmodernist thought has on both ecocriticism and the environment. Crockett contends that ecocritics "reject the prevailing critical assumption that reality is socially constructed" because, as liberal feminists suggest, looking at the world through such a postmodern lens encourages a relativism that makes the activism that promotes real change difficult if not impossible (Crockett, 1994). As Crockett argues, "ultimately, [ecocritics] will be failures in [their] own eyes if [their] labors don't help green our society." (Crockett, 1994)

This issue has prompted anthologies like Michael Soule and Gary Lease's *Reinventing Nature? Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction* where ecocritics sometimes argue for a

vision other than a modern view that bifurcates humans from nature but usually aver that postmodern thought, especially one informed by deconstruction, "would not only threaten the privileged role of science as a source of truth about reality. It would also destroy environmentalism, since the environment is just a 'social construction.'" (Hayles, 1995: viii)

At the same time, however, the scholars discussing ecocriticism would also agree with Ralph W. Black and Cheryl Glotfelty, who see nature and culture as interacting rather than separate from one another. Black cites William Cronon, who suggests that "human acts occur within a network of relationships, processes and systems that are as ecological as they are cultural" as a way to justify ecocritics' investment in both the natural world and its literary representations (Black, 1994). And Cheryl Glotfelty claims that "despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it." (Glotfelty, 1994) According to Glotfelty, "Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts language and literature." (Glotfelty, 1994)

Black and Glotfelty demonstrate that the old dualism between nature and culture that liberal (and Modernist) thought encourages breaks down under scrutiny since neither nature or culture transcends the other, leaving room for what Dana Phillips describes as a movement from modernist dualistic thought to a postmodern world of representation (Phillips, 1996: 205-6) and for Patrick Murphy's contention in a 1999 *PMLA* Forum that environments "are seen instead as a fundamental feature of the ideological horizons of literary works." (Murphy, 1999: 1099) Dana Phillips' view of postmodernism, unlike that espoused in either the Western Literary Association discussion or the *Reinventing Nature?* anthology, does not lead to a lack of agency or inability to take an activist stance toward the environment. Instead, Phillips concludes, in his "Is Nature Necessary?", that postmodern thought offers a way to "green our society" from a local level (Phillips, 1996: 221).

Like Dana Phillips' article, "Is Nature Necessary?", *Dark City* offers a space where whether or not nature is necessary can be explored: the film allows us to examine at least three constructed settings – ecosystems – as possible homes for humans (and, perhaps, alien) survival, but the film demonstrates that only one of these three provides any promise for humans, as natural beings, to thrive – the constructed setting in which "nature is necessary." According to Phillips:

Unmaking history seems to me to be the sober prospect postmodernism offers us, and is more difficult than making it. The special difficulty of unmaking what used to be called natural history is compounded by our ignorance of human complicity in it, and revising it is going to take more than just good writing or vigorous demonstration. But thinking and working our way through the past, and the perhaps unthinkable, impossible future of nature, may be our last best hope for building dwelling thinking here and now. (Phillips, 1996: 222)

Dark City offers a space in which Phillips' assertion about agency – building dwelling thinking – in relation to a postmodernist worldview can be examined, since within a science fiction futuristic context, the film delves into the past – in this case that of a 1940s *noir* city – as a way to examine the future of nature, of both human and non-human natures and their environments.

The film, *Dark City*, is about a dying race of aliens, the Strangers, coming to a blue planet, presumably earth, and capturing some humans in order to examine what makes them able to survive as individuals. The Strangers share a collective mind that is in terminal decay. To study these captured humans, the Strangers construct a 1940s-style city and, in a way, construct their humans by implanting different memories into their brains. To see how these humans react in different situations and with different memories, the Strangers change both the city and its inhabitants' memories each night at midnight, with the help of Dr. Schreber – a human forced to serve them – all while the humans are put to sleep by the Strangers.

Because these Strangers have an aversion to light, however, the city and its inhabitants never experience day. Within this context one of the humans, John Murdoch, evolves into a super-human who can resist the Strangers' will, stay awake and even change the shape of his surroundings in Dark City, just like the Strangers. When John Murdoch first resists the Strangers' will and stays awake, he also resists the implantation of memories, so without memories, Murdoch must search for an identity. While Murdoch searches, however, the Strangers attempt to capture him and use him as their sole source of life. In the end, Murdoch claims his name, "saves" Dark City and its human inhabitants, and defeats the Strangers because they make a series of mistakes. Ultimately Mr. Book, the Strangers' leader, fails to notice that Dr. Schreber has switched syringes and implants memories other than the collective memories of the Strangers into Murdoch's mind. This seemingly "simple" story, though, occurs in a mixture of settings that serve as more than mere backdrop – especially the *noir* city that seems to pop out of the cosmos and the Shell Beach setting John Murdoch creates to replace the dark unnatural world of the Strangers.

Filmic visuals are reinforced by Dr. Schreber's voiceover narration, which was added to the film after its initial production without Proyas's approval. Without listening to Schreber's voice, however, we can see that the cityscape onscreen into which audience members are plummeted was constructed. We learn later, through Schreber's discussion with John Murdoch, that the "Strangers" built this city as a way to study humans in a variable-free environment, an environment the Strangers change nightly through a process they call tuning. While the humans sleep the Strangers tune, but when they awaken, changes in the environment go unnoticed because they too have been changed – this time through imprinting, a process in which new memories are injected into their brains with a gothically decorated syringe. All of these plot elements coincide with other science fiction films in which aliens (or strangers) study and cohabit humans and their bodies as a means for survival – think of *The Hidden* (1987) or the three versions of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956; 1978; 1993).

But *Dark City* shifts our focus from the aliens (the characters) and the film's narrative to its setting – all because the Strangers' study occurs in a 1940s *noir* city rather than a site contemporary to the film's date of production. This *noir* setting is meticulously staged, from the interior and exterior *mise-en-scène* with its low-key lighting and stereotypical *noir* figures like the detective, the femme fatale and the hero/victim to the low angle, deep focus camera shots so prevalent in *film noir* since *Citizen Kane* (1941). All these *noir* elements of the *mise-en-scène* are contrasted with the Strangers themselves and their habitat – shot, lit and staged in horror style – and with the Shell Beach scene Murdoch creates, complicating views of constructed versus natural space, as well as genre. As in *film noir*, the most prominent characters in *Dark City* reflect a nearly hopeless world: the displaced hero/victim, the femme fatale, the detective.

It is style, however, that sets *film noir* apart from earlier detective films. *Noirs* are shot mostly at night in a decaying – and wet – urban milieu. Low key lighting that enhances attached shadows dominates the scenes and repeated elements of set design, like arches and stairwells, emphasize the shadowy world such lighting creates. Many scenes are shot from low angle camera positions to further set the mood with wide-angle lenses that increase depth of field. Many of these techniques are drawn from German Expressionism, emphasizing the chaotic world in which trapped characters seek meaning. *Dark City's* city setting fulfills all aspects of this description of *film noir*. The city duplicates the 1940s urban *noir* atmosphere with its dank, dark and decrepit streets and buildings, sleazy interior hotel rooms and night clubs. *Noir* figures abound in this dark city, beginning with John Murdoch, the mentally displaced hero/victim in search of salvation and self-realization. Women figures, too, take on the *noir* roles of either torch singing femme fatales like Emma and prostitutes like May or virtuous Madonnas like Anna, even though the female roles are so flattened in this constructed space that they seem almost sexless. As in many *noir* films, a police inspector (William Hurt's character Inspector Bumstead), serves first as Murdoch's (the hero's) pursuer, and then as a source of his salvation. And even Dr. Schreber's character aligns with the corrupt doctors of *noir* who drug heroes like Phillip Marlowe in *Murder, My Sweet* (1944).

Stylistically, too, the film acts as homage to *noir*. Shooting styles draw on those perfected in *Citizen Kane*, which Andrew Sarris sees as one of the first and most influential *noirs*, calling it one of the "two-pronged *noir* breakthrough[s]." (Sarris, 1998: 104) *Dark City's* low-key lighting, extreme camera angles, deep focus, wide angle lenses, and depth of field are all drawn from *Kane* and the later *noir* films it inspired. The arched rooms and hallways shot from low angle camera positions recalls Greg Toland's cinematography in *Citizen Kane's* varied locations. And the figures, buildings and interior props – all precisely replicating a 1940s milieu – are dramatically illuminated to maximize cast and attached shadows, including those figures shot in silhouette. Sound, too, in this cityscape, brings to mind early *noirs* like *Kiss of Death* (1947), *Fury* (1936), *They Live By Night* (1948), *Gun Crazy* (1949), and *Out of the Past* (1947). Characters' speech patterns follow those of *noir* figures, with their almost emotionless reactions to horrific events, while nightclub music harks back to 1940s and early 1950s jazz. Background effects sound hollow and muted, as if penetrating thick fogs and continuous rains.

Dark City's cityscape and the narrative surrounding it most resembles that of films like *On Dangerous Ground* (1952), a Nicholas Ray film in which Jim Wilson, played by Robert Ryan, finds solace in the rural hills, away from the decaying *noir* urban setting he escapes. Because Ryan's character Wilson, a hardboiled police detective, has become embittered by his dealings with the heartless criminals of the urban underworld, he begins beating his suspects and is sent away from the city to the "country" to pursue a young girl's killer. In this idyllic pastoral setting, Wilson gains self-awareness, with the help of Ida Lupino's character, Mary, who is blind, and frees himself of his own rage. Urban shots in the film maintain Wilson's cynicism and desperation, but gradually, as his view of the world changes, rural shots brighten, suggesting that Wilson's own blindness about himself has lifted.

The earliest views of John Murdoch in *Dark City* set him up as a lost *noir* hero/victim in search of himself, similar to Wilson. His awakening in the seedy hotel room parallels *noir* openings in which heroes awaken from drunken stupors and wonder, what happened to me? The interior landscape he views reinforces this *noir mise-en-scène*, with *noir* costuming like the 1940s overcoat and the beat up interior of his hotel room. An arch dominates the scene, another *noir* motif repeated in the film, especially in the many low angle shots of hallways lit

from the side as in films like *Crossfire* (1947) and *T-Men* (1947). Camera shots of Dr. Schreber in the phone booth, too, highlight the *noir* style with its depth and shadow detail and lights going on and off for dramatic effect. And in Schreber's office lighting and camera angles enforce strong silhouettes. The police station where the Inspector and Emma discuss Murdoch's case also draws on the *noir* style because hot lights are always in full view, never blocked by the figures, for a forced perspective of frames within frames shot from extreme low angles. This meticulous set design continues even in throwaway shots of the prostitute May's seedy apartment – note the beaded curtain and the earlier shots of May's lined stockings. All these scenes, even though shot in color, simulate the black and white of *noir* by finding patterns of color that amplify the *noir* mood.

But like Jim Wilson, John Murdoch – and the other characters, for that matter – seeks to escape the decay of Dark City and the empty seediness of his role there. Like many characters in *film noir*, Murdoch feels trapped by forces beyond his control, in this case literally trapped by the city the strangers have constructed to study him and the other captured humans. And like Jim Wilson, Murdoch seeks solace in a non-urban setting, the Shell Beach depicted on the post card he finds in his suitcase. Devoid of memories and, it seems, a sense of self, Murdoch, like Wilson, frantically battles the city and its makers while searching for salvation outside the city and its underworld. Like Wilson, a virtuous woman contributes to this salvation he eventually gains, but unlike Wilson, Murdoch must create the "natural" ecosystem that eventually saves him and the rest of Dark City's inhabitants.

The battle Murdoch does eventually win, however, forces him into another ecosystem that proves unsuccessful, the underworld of the strangers that draws on the visual motifs of the horror genre. In this realm, faces are lit from below and the colors of the lighting change from browns and yellows to ghastly blues and greens and other darker tones, exaggerating the whiteness of the all-male Strangers' faces. This underworld, with its assembly lines and baroque torture chamber wheels out of a Frankenstein lab draws on both German Expressionist films like *Nosferatu* (1922) and *Metropolis* and Hollywood's *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). The underworld realm of the Strangers also supports a narrative speculation and style straight from horror films like *Frankenstein* (1931) – where the goal is to construct a human – and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* where the goal is to inhabit them.

Science fiction and fantasy play a role in this realm, as well, since the Strangers act like the parasites, depicted in films like *The Hidden*, and control humans through the technology of their machines and their memory-filled syringes, but the underworld still looks like a horror film, perhaps as a way to highlight the Strangers' alien presence. Yet both the *noir* and horror settings prove to be ecological nightmares for the Strangers seeking rejuvenation through their human studies. Shifts from outer space to the constructed spaces of Dark City and the underworld controlling it demonstrate that these Strangers are dying, and this death state is emphasized by the Strangers' choice to inhabit only male human corpses, seemingly avoiding female bodies with life-giving reproductive capabilities.

The shift in the film from the natural but inscrutable emptiness of outer space to the constructed space of the dark city and its underworld underlines perhaps the most important role conflicting settings play in the film – a marker of humanity's relationship with the natural world. The film opens with a wide view of dark space lit only by stars, all presumably created naturally for no particular purpose. Life may exist in this void, but none is perceivable at this distance. When the camera moves downward, the first tangible evidence of life emerges – blue light shimmering in the midst of the stars, a blue that signifies the presence of water,

which, for life as we know it, is necessary for survival. But the closer the camera cranes toward Dark City, the less natural the environment becomes.

Viewed from above the city's architecture serves as landscape, with skyscrapers peaking out of concrete unbroken by green space. A closer view reveals lines of moving cars from the late 1940s through the early 1960s, headlights shining their forward march toward some unknown destination. When these cars stop their march, human life is shown, but these humans are sleeping, in their cars, in a diner, and on a subway – all artificially lit and surrounded by concrete and steel. Sounds, too, reflect this halt, with city sounds evolving into orchestral music that ends in silence. The unnatural exterior world of Dark City seems devoid of the organic, and the dark *noir* atmosphere emphasizes its lack of uncontrolled life. The carefully staged exteriors and interiors of Dark City, then, not only signify the film's *noir* themes but also the lifelessness of constructed space.

This lifelessness is drawn from the *noir*, science fiction and horror genre elements evident in the film. The urban *noir* setting the Strangers have constructed to study humans provides them with a world nearly devoid of non-human nature. This nearly lifeless cityscape looks staged and inorganic because it is a constructed urban space instead of a thriving ecosystem. This *noir* setting also provides the backdrop for the stereotypical characters in the film, especially the flat bifurcated roles represented by the few women present in the film: women either serve as pure virgins or whores, extreme binaries usually signifying women's inferior and, consequently, more natural state, according to ecofeminists like Annette Kolodny and Gretchen Legler.

But science fiction elements also contribute to the constructed lifeless state of the film, since the Strangers (as aliens) survive in Dark City only as inhabitants of human corpses. The dead serve as homes for the parasitic Strangers, a sign that these aliens lack the individuality and agency that a human life presumes. These Strangers, too, enact a theme common in science fiction films: if they can construct a world and the memories they believe make humans who they are, then they can duplicate both humanity and their living world – a premise proven false by the end of the film.

Even though these Strangers have created a *noir*-influenced world in which to study their human specimens, their own world, an underground lair, is even more lifeless. It is the stuff of horror, a Hades where the undead – Strangers housed in human corpses – construct and reconstruct Dark City and interchange the city's captured humans' memories as a way to save themselves and their own race. This underworld realm of the Strangers looks like another nightmare, with Strangers only able to think with one collective mind and able to live only as parasites housed in the bodies of the dead. Although the Strangers seem oblivious to their failure until the very end of the film – and of their race – Murdoch recognizes (as do we) that the Strangers were looking for their own salvation, for what makes someone human and thus able to survive as an individual, in the wrong place – the dead *noir* world rather than a more natural irrational ecosystem that houses the soul.

This distinction between what is completely controlled, artificial, and "dead" and what is natural and alive springs from Empirical philosophy of the eighteenth century's "Great Awakening," a view which, according to Gary Lease, "led inevitably to an opposition between reason and nature, a position which Kant in his idealism effectively exploited." (Soule and Lease, 1995: 8) In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this struggle between a culture controlled by reason and an irrational nature became further complicated by a focus

on scientific pursuit that seemed to eliminate Spinoza's identification of nature with God. But, as Lease suggests, "after wrestling with the notion of nature for well over two thousand years, Western tradition had come up dry: neither an identification of the human species with nature nor a strict dichotomy between the two proved ultimately successful." (Soule and Lease, 1995: 8-9) *Dark City* and its many settings demonstrate not only that such a strict dichotomy proves unsuccessful, but also how a constructed space, this time one that agrees that nature is necessary, can serve as a successful site in which human and non-human nature can coexist in a web of interconnected relationships.

The first interior view shown in the film demonstrates, as Michael Bennett and David W. Teague's anthology exploring *The Nature of Cities* would agree, that life exists even in a constructed *noir* cityscape. The hero, John Murdoch, unlike the anonymous sleeping people outside, awakens like a newborn in a milky water-filled bathtub, which Proyas compares to a womb on the DVD Commentary, rises and looks at his reflection in a mirror as if searching for himself there. Blood on his forehead proves Murdoch lives, and Murdoch's pan of the room proves his awareness of himself and his environment. In other words, unlike others in this world, John interacts with his physical environment, with his (ecological) "home" or "household," enough that he shudders when he notices a bloody mutilated female corpse he knows nothing about. He lives, but he has no memories to explain his surroundings – disproving the Strangers' claim that humans are a product of their memories and showing us Murdoch's more natural uncontrolled state.

Murdoch's interaction with non-human nature, too, reveals much about his difference from the rest of the inhabitants of *Dark City*. When by accident he shatters a goldfish bowl because of a ringing phone, Murdoch quickly places the fish in his bath water, a sign of his ability to interact with other species, to nurture non-human nature. Even more telling, though, is the change Murdoch makes to the bath water, so that the fish will be more likely to survive. Our first view from above shows us Murdoch is in a bathtub full of white, soapy water, but when he places the goldfish in the same bath, the water has completely cleared.

From the beginning, then, Murdoch is aligned with the natural world with which he seems instinctively to know how to interact. He seems out of place in the controlled environment of *Dark City*. In fact, the first image he views, other than his own reflection, is that of Shell Beach, another emblem of nature, embossed on a postcard. At Shell Beach, according to this card, a summer sun shines brightly on blue water and white sands signifying the possibility of life, just as Murdoch's awakening demonstrates the presence of his own life force. Three repeated motifs aligned with nature emerge in this early interior scene: water and its sustaining ability revealed by the goldfish in the bathtub (and, perhaps Murdoch's control over the water's clarity), Murdoch's blood and waking life, and Shell Beach – a place of life and hope for Murdoch and even other humans still controlled by the Strangers.

Water seems to be everywhere in *Dark City*, even though the Strangers claim to fear and avoid it in the same way they do daylight. Streets lined with dimly lit decaying buildings are filled with it; the seedy Turkish bath where Dr. Schreber hides from the Strangers steams with water vapor, and the canal leading to "Shell Beach" and the edge of *Dark City* streams with water. The exterior air seems heavy with rain, not only dark but dank and thick, so much so that sometimes fog emanates from the ground, and Neptune's Kingdom, to which John Murdoch escapes, houses numerous salt water tanks full of exotic fish. Ultimately, it is water that destroys Mr. Book, John Murdoch's chief enemy and leader of the Strangers, and it is water that helps to transform *Dark City* into a light-filled world surrounded by sea. The fish

tanks and goldfish bowl clearly function as life-giving homes to the fish within, but it is an unnatural life. The people and their memories are trapped in Dark City like goldfish in a bowl, but the Strangers have denied them any real contact with a non-human natural world. But it is only water, in this case the rain and swimming pool, that serves to ward off the Strangers who seek to literally suck the life out of the humans they have captured. Water acts as a source of life and as a sign of both nature and of an undirected life.

Water serves as the source of life as we know it. According to David Burne, it is the "medium of life" (Burne, 1999: 18). Burne claims that:

at some point, all biogeochemical cycles involve water, because water forms the fluid environment inside all living things [to our knowledge]. But water also moves in a cycle of its own. [On earth] every year, half a billion cubic kilometers of sea water evaporate into the air, creating the rain that allows land-based life to survive. (Burne, 1999: 18)

Water, then, both sustains and is contained by life – and, of course, it contains life forms of its own, as an ecosystem – a biogeochemical cycle – in which plant and animal life thrives. The Strangers' aversion to water, which we see as necessary to life, signifies their own difference. In spite of their aversion, however, the Strangers create a cityscape streaked with water, perhaps because they are so wedded to this world's construction that they cannot avoid the contradiction. As proof of the Strangers' recognition that humans thrive on water, they include an ominous indoor swimming pool that serves as Dr. Schreber's haven. Proyas recreates this *noir* motif just as precisely as any of the other *noir* sets, with careful attention paid to both cinematography and set design.

But water not only literally but also figuratively and thematically signifies life and, consequently, irrational nature. Except for the rat maze in Dr. Schreber's office, water – in fish bowls and tanks – provides a home for the only non-human life evident in Dark City, that of the tropical fish and the plants of their natural habitat. These fish tanks serve as symbols of hope for an escape from the controlled environment of Dark City, since they illustrate the possibility of a light-filled life free of concrete and urban decay. Murdoch's search for self and his journey from the Dark City streets first to Neptune's Kingdom, to the Strangers' underworld realm, and then, finally, to his ultimate destination, the sea he creates, springs from the realization that water means life. John Murdoch recreates the scene depicted in the fish tanks at Neptune's Kingdom, creating a sea now surrounding the city, with life-giving water lit from above by a bright sun.

Water symbolizes life and hope, but it also serves as a repeated motif signifying both an uncontrollable and a cyclical nature. Water wards off the Strangers who constructed a city full of it, so these Strangers may have less control over the cityscape and its inhabitants than it originally seems. Even John Murdoch, who defeats the Strangers, only follows the watery trail to Shell Beach (and to the Strangers' lair) rather than controlling it. Even when he creates Shell Beach and the sea it lines, Murdoch cannot completely control the ecosystem he has put into place. Even though humans impact both positively and negatively on water and its ecosystem, water, according to Burne, "isn't destroyed by being used" (Burne, 1999: 119) – water signifies an ecosystem in which even Murdoch must take chances rather than take charge.

Shell Beach and the sea it lines, then, serve as symbols of the life-sustaining power of water and, ultimately, of irrational nature, the only successful ecosystem presented in *Dark City*. The *noir* cityscape fails both the aliens and the captured humans. The underworld and its machinery fails the Strangers, since they cannot control the one life force that might save them with their technology – John Murdoch. Only Shell Beach brings hope to the captured humans as a source for their own survival as a species with free will and agency. Shell Beach is the only memory all of the captured humans share – an archetype if you will – everyone remembers being there but cannot remember how to get there; yet the hope of Shell Beach sustains them. The film's director, Alex Proyas, suggests on the DVD commentary that Shell Beach is "hope implanted in the humans." Once Murdoch creates a real rather than post card Shell Beach, lighting there demonstrates a change from a constructed shadowy space where machines are hidden below to a more natural one that is so well lit nothing can hide. Only at Shell Beach do we see a brightly lit day with intense colors that illuminate the shimmering waves of the new sea, the sparkling grain of the boardwalk, and the crystal sands that surround it.

Shell Beach sustains life and signifies hope, but without John Murdoch, who has climbed the evolutionary ladder and become more powerful than the Strangers, Shell Beach, and the ecosystem it houses, could not exist. Murdoch, with his powers to both create life and destroy the Strangers who would eradicate it, is the primary symbol of irrational nature and of a life unfettered by alien power. Murdoch's search for identity and, consequently, salvation, proves the salvation of all human and non-human life in *Dark City*. Murdoch's role becomes evident when viewed in contrast with that of Mr. Hand, the stranger who is implanted with Murdoch's memories. Mr. Hand believes these memories will lead him to Murdoch, so the Strangers can use him as their source of life. According to Mr. Hand, Murdoch "follows clues" in the same way Mr. Hand "follows memories." Yet Mr. Hand admits from the start that the path he leads his fellow Strangers on towards Murdoch is based in instinct rather than fact and "instincts are irrational," and hence uncontrollable.

Mr. Hand seems to operate as Murdoch's foil, as an evil double also searching for identity. Only Murdoch and Mr. Hand see themselves in a mirror, highlighting this doubling. After Mr. Hand takes in the memories Murdoch was supposed to have, we first see Murdoch morph into Mr. Hand in the mirror that reflects a hotel room in which a prostitute has been murdered. Mr. Hand proclaims, "I have John Murdoch...in mind," and believes until the end that holding his memories is enough to possess him and his life force. The Strangers state it even more blatantly: "We need to be like you." The Strangers believe that if they duplicate John Murdoch's memories, they duplicate him and, consequently, possess him as a life force that can sustain them, as a young and powerful mind off of which they can feed: they wish to "share [his] soul." To accomplish this, the Strangers want to implant their collective memories into Murdoch in order to survive. Mr. Hand follows Murdoch's memories first to Neptune's Kingdom, where Murdoch escapes with help from Emma and the Inspector, and finally to what Murdoch thinks is Shell Beach. Murdoch relies on Dr. Schreber's help; Mr. Hand follows Murdoch's implanted memories.

Yet the journey to "Shell Beach," the end of the city's limits, indicates an important difference between Murdoch and Mr. Hand. Murdoch, the inspector and Dr. Schreber – who has been kidnapped from the water-filled pool – boat to "Shell Beach" on a canal that resembles the River Styx. Mr. Hand and his allies fly there above the water in a ghostly parade of trench-coated animated corpses. (Mr. Hand, in spite of housing Murdoch's memories, is still a Stranger who cannot abide water and its damp life-giving properties.)

Their journey to what should be Shell Beach, though, leads them literally to a brick wall – covered with a poster duplicate of Murdoch's Shell Beach post card. Murdoch and the Inspector break down the wall revealing what Mr. Hand calls "the truth," that Dark City is actually a floating space station. According to Roger Ebert, this is "the first space station since *Star Wars* that is newly conceived – not a clone of that looming mechanical vision." (Ebert, 2001: 127)

When the Inspector falls through the hole they have created into the space beyond, another truth is revealed: Even though Dark City is a constructed experimental space, it too is an ecosystem, with a life-sustaining atmosphere, one we watch the inspector shoot through to his death. Dark City floats in a natural, uncontrolled space lit by white and blue – signs of life. Here nature and the constructed city are literally contrasted. And Murdoch and Mr. Hand, are also contrasted. Unlike Mr. Hand, who killed women who were implanted with the memories of prostitutes and would gladly kill Emma, Murdoch demonstrates his humanity by allowing himself to be controlled so Emma's life will be saved. Murdoch's self-sacrifice conflicts with Mr. Hand's self-centered brutality, just as the mechanized Dark City contrasts with the natural space in which it floats.

Realization of the life-giving properties of self-sacrifice, choosing to help others, prepares us, and, perhaps, John Murdoch, for the battle that ensues in the underworld after Dr. Schreber implants Murdoch's rather than the Strangers' collective memories in John. John Murdoch becomes both natural and god-like in the underworld because he defeats the Strangers without destroying the world. In fact, the squid-like strangers housed in the human corpses are ultimately defeated by the very force that sustains other life – water. Murdoch defeats the Stranger's leader, Mr. Book, by creating a water tower and then thrusting him through it. Once the Strangers' leader escapes his human house and dies, Murdoch chooses then "to fix things," to, in this case, make them more natural.

After Murdoch, god-like, completes his creation, Dark City is no longer dark; it is a city that has evolved and literally turned over, with a sun-lit sky full of maze-like clouds all surrounded by water, the sea Shell Beach lines. The second to last scene of the film restates its message: "You wanted to know what it is about us that makes us human... You're not going to find it in here," Murdoch explains to Mr. Hand, the last Stranger, as he points to his mind: "You went looking in the wrong place." Because humans are individuals with souls who thrive best in an interactive natural ecosystem Mr. Hand's conclusion comes as no surprise: "Your imprint is not agreeable with our kind." At least in the worlds of *Dark City* the most successful ecosystem is the most natural one – the one uncontrolled by the Strangers.

And this new ecosystem, although also constructed, is one in which nature can thrive because it is not completely controlled. When Murdoch creates a door to the sunlit boardwalk overlooking Shell Beach, he tells Mr. Hand: "I'm just making a few changes around here." Mr. Hand who, with the Strangers' collective mind, has controlled every change in Dark City seems appalled and asks, "Are you sure that's what you want?" But Murdoch, a human connected more with the irrational soul of nature than with the rational realm of the mind, is "prepared to take [his] chances," to create the possibility for nature, knowing such a possibility is beyond his control. The success of this new ecosystem over those lifeless settings constructed by the Strangers, then, aligns with Dana Phillips' suggestion that we must "unmask history" in order to revise it and create the possibility of a future of nature and of ourselves. Phillips reliance on Wendell Berry's claim that "Nature is necessary" provides the

grounding for this suggestion. According to Berry, "Nature is necessary... in that it is necessity itself." (Phillips, 1996: 220)

Berry's later suggestion, however, may explain why the world John Murdoch creates is so much more successful than that of the Strangers. Berry argues that:

the use of nature as measure proposes an atonement between ourselves and our world, between economy and ecology, between the domestic and the wild...a conscious and careful recognition of the interdependence between ourselves and nature that in fact has always existed and, if we are to live, must always exist. (quoted in Phillips, 1996: 221)

Murdoch chooses to sacrifice himself to save Emma, an example of human nature, and chooses to create a world in which both human and non-human nature can thrive. In *Dark City*, then, history produced by the Strangers has been unmasked in order to revise it. Most importantly, Murdoch's choices demonstrate that he has not only thought through the past but has thought towards a future where, with hope, a dwelling – a home – can be shared. This sacrifice lines up with Dana Phillips' plea in "Is Nature Necessary?"

If to imagine nature as something real, treat it accordingly, and understand why it is important to do so, is something new, then the revolutionary slogans for the future must abandon older formulas: if in smashing the multinational corporate state [read the strangers], you have nothing to lose but your chainsaws [read implanted memories], the loss is nonetheless real and possibly quite painful, however necessary. (Phillips, 1996: 219)

John Murdoch has taken the tools of two genres – science fiction and horror – and rebuilt a third – *noir* – to reclaim life for humans imprisoned in the (no longer) Dark City. With the life-giving elements of water and light, new life can emerge, just as John Murdoch rose from his bathtub like a newborn. Science fiction provides this new eco-system with a constructed space – a literal space ship on which to build. Horror brings the dark tools of the Strangers (the tuning clock and (perhaps) Murdoch's will to live that is provided by struggling against the Strangers' parasitic nature). Science fiction and horror also combine to turn our *noir* hero – John Murdoch – into a super-hero that can defeat the Strangers and choose to build a bright home for his fellow humans, complete with the hope of Shell Beach. The *noir* world constructed by the Strangers is a world without light and without hope. John Murdoch transforms that darkness into light.

In the end, Murdoch's last conversation with Mr. Hand and his first with Anna clarify the differences between the two races, within the conflicting genres, and between a dead and a living ecosystem. Murdoch decides to "fix things" on Dark City, even though, as Mr. Hand argues, he may not be making the right choices. Murdoch, unlike Mr. Hand, is willing to "take chances," to correct the past and work toward a more organic, interconnected and therefore, less controllable, future – one in which nature, signified by the sun and sea, takes a predominant role.

And that willingness to take risks, to provide the possibility of a more interconnected future, applies to connections between human nature as well, even if those risks are not completely controllable. In this new world, ecology, and home, John Murdoch is willing to take a chance with Anna – who had been his wife Emma before her memories were changed. Murdoch

joins Anna on a pier overlooking the newly-created Shell Beach and becomes himself, by naming himself in connection with another: "What's your name?" Anna asks him, and he finally knows. "John. John Murdoch."

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