

2013

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Recommended Citation

Ortega, Rebecca (2013) "Dark City: Memories All Alone in the Moonlight," *Occam's Razor*: Vol. 3 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/orwwu/vol3/iss1/3>

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DARK CITY

MEMORIES ALL ALONE IN THE MOONLIGHT

REBECCA ORTEGA

Let us envision a world in which an individual can be one person one day and a complete other the next. The term “self-identity” is but a farce, designed to pacify individuals into carrying on with their lives harmoniously with the inhabitants of the city that surrounds them. In this world, an individual’s short-term memory is limited to 12 hours per day, and his/her long-term memory is but a fabrication, a stereotype modified ever so slightly as to give the rest of the population unique enough childhood and adolescent recollections so that it will not suspect its experiences are formulaic and shared by all. This sort of world is what director and writer Alex Proyas proposes in his 1998 film, *Dark City*.

The metropolis in the film thrives in continual night, but each time the clock strikes 12, the entire city falls into a deep, paralytic sleep. Next, members of an alien race known as “The Strangers” move people from one location to another, and set up their lives like a movie set,



injecting synthesized memories into each individual's frontal lobe. These citizens are but the subjects of an experiment designed by The Strangers, who have the power to "alter physical reality by will alone" in a process called "Tuning". Near extinction, the aliens hope to determine the nature of the human soul by shuffling identities and memories between people in an infinite number of trials. The film's protagonist John Murdoch, who unknowingly resisted this process, grapples with piecing together a lost self-identity after waking up at a murder scene, which he is evidently "responsible" for. John's only savior is Dr. Daniel P. Schreber, the one

human The Strangers ever allowed to participate in Tuning; he is hell-bent on taking back the city. All the while, The Strangers desperately hunt Murdoch, wanting to know why he rejected treatment, and more importantly why he suddenly developed the ability to Tune. *Dark City* proposes a world in which memories are what define us as a species, yet the doctor's clandestine uprising and John Murdoch's reaction to Tuning serve as reminders that any alteration of our physical environment is destined to yield adaptation over time. *Dark City* explores the circularity of time and experience to exemplify how "normalcy" follows us on this loop, only shortly behind and destined

to catch up with us if we are ever to advance too far ahead.

Within the opening scene, one becomes acutely aware of the under-lit sets, abundance of night shots, and sepia color treatments, all reminiscent of classic film noir. These key elements function as a means to bridge the 4th wall and envelope the viewer within the city and its standards. With the stars always in the sky, an audience has no concept of the amount of time that passes during the course of the film's action. By achieving this effect, Proyas assimilates the audience into a world in which one lives an oxymoronically "eternal" 12 hours that are unconsciously reset like a

stopwatch. Moreover, the stereotypical film noir themes set up expectations for the plot of the film, down to the murder, which seamlessly flow into a heavy-handed sci-fi. In doing so, every anticipation an audience has for the plot is unraveled and warped, leaving the audience as disoriented and as distant from the norm as Murdoch is when he awakens from his failed Turing treatment. Why doesn't an audience resist this deviation from the assumed path the plot should take? Why, especially in regard to the unknown passage of time, do these go virtually unnoticed until the credits roll?

Throughout the film, the image of a spiral is employed as a symbolic representation of why this is so. This swirl first appears carved into a prostitute's torso at Murdoch's murder

scene as the mark of a serial killer, to which the overseeing inspector reacts with the line, "Round and round she goes. Where she stops? Nobody knows." In one light, this line portrays the multiplicity of identity in a serial killer case, how each victim fits in a very specific trope. However, in another, the inspector has commented on the tendency of an individual to seek familiarity, to repeat actions. This would explain why an audience so willingly expects a classic noir film and delays its awareness of the passing of time with the assumption that the sun will eventually rise. However, familiarity with comfort is not what has driven us as a species; innovation is what has ensured our survival. The second most prevalent spiral lives on Murdoch's fingers in a tight circular clockwise turn. Being that Murdoch

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is quite literally the odd man out, one sees that while man naturally seeks what he is experienced in, it is also ingrained in his identity to push the boundaries of his repetitions, to toe the line of normalcy in favor of novelty. A viewer delays disbelief or discomfort in regards to time and genre because the deviations from the two are eased into so subtly, appealing to his/her very nature. In a broader sense, a change in our physical or technological environment is much more likely to be accepted if there is a solid foundation of relatability that an individual or group can identify.

The motive for this tendency to seek the new and interesting is of course a question to consider. The Strangers seek to know what makes up the human soul, what drives man to thrive where they continue to perish. It is

my opinion that the answer to this question is a quest for self-realization, an ongoing endeavor to fully grasp the root of identity. For example, John Murdoch's one ambition after he realizes that his memory is but a fabrication is to find the illusory Shell Beach that The Strangers have chosen to represent childhood and adolescent nostalgia. In addition, his first place of refuge is with his uncle in a building known as "Neptune's Kingdom". These two instances seem unrelated, but when one learns that "Murdoch" means "the sea", one realizes that he is searching for himself at the most basal level. Unfortunately, try as he might to navigate the city's transit system, there is seemingly no feasible way to reach Shell Beach. It is merely an entity that he and everyone else shares, but can never physically realize, just as the very essence of being may not be

graspable in itself. Dark City portrays the Strangers, who use human corpses as vessels, as the extreme exemplar for where humanity is headed should obsession with the soul continue. Man shall innovate in the hopes of reaching higher understanding of the self, but in doing so distance himself further from the primitive spark that gives his species its name.

In Dark City, Dr. Schreber has seemingly come to this aforementioned conclusion, which is why he is determined to save the metropolis. At the film's end, Schreber says that "the only place home exists is in your head", meaning that an individual's assumed identity and an individual's unique approach to life are what make him/her quintessentially human. Because of these differences, mankind is able to seek variety within itself, in a vessel

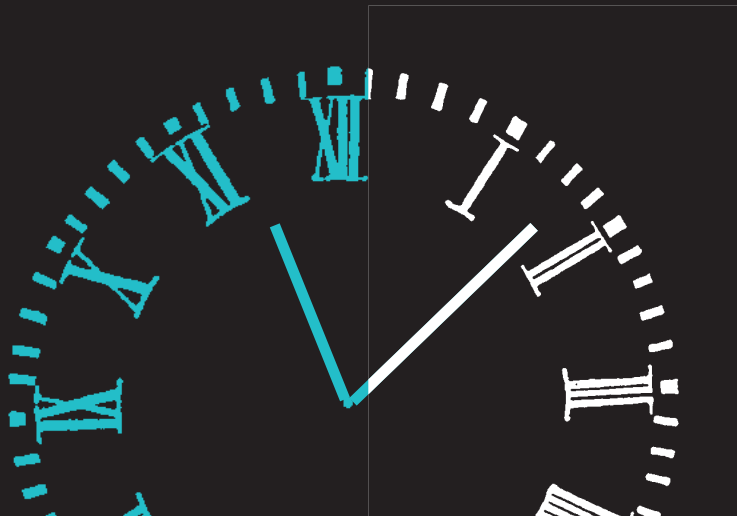
that is more than familiar enough to accept. In doing so, each individual finds strength within by forming unconscious bonds with those around them. The Strangers are incapable of such things, as they share a hive mind: they are essentially one being. Thus, it's logical that the doctor fears the nightly Tunings, for they prohibit such bonds from forming by cutting the human experience down to but a few hours, shuffling identities constantly. The doctor worries, just as stirring many distinct colors together for long enough creates a single sickly hue, that continual Tuning will make the city's people no better than The Strangers themselves, thus condemning them to the same fate of extinction. Murdoch,

representing all members of the City, overcomes The Strangers by using their own Tuning powers against them. When faced with adversity, as a species mankind will utilize whatever is available to it to prevail against all odds.

However, could this victory simultaneously belong to an individual who is not Murdoch, the archetype for humanity? Could this victory possibly belong to the doctor, who is a secondary character? After all, Dr. Schreber injects memories into Murdoch that reflect his presence throughout Murdoch's life, implying that the doctor is quite literally a part of him. Interestingly enough, by simply searching "Daniel P. Schreber"

in a search engine, one discovers that outside the context of the movie, David Paul Schreber was a renowned German judge in the 1800s before suffering a major psychotic break and being admitted to a mental institution, in which he eventually died. The incidence that sparked the break was when he woke up, wanting to "succumb" as a woman would. He was so taken aback that he was convinced the thought had originated from an external source planted telepathically by divine or medical power, and that he was destined to come back as a woman to conquer the intruders and liberate his psyche (Schreber 2000). The judge's plight was quite obviously inspiration for the film, but now one

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must question the very scale of the film itself. As a viewer, one assumes the treatment applies to a metropolis full of thousands of people. But what if the city itself was a symbol for a single mind, with streets that twist and turn through the convoluted surfaces of the frontal cortex? The city is trapped in the skull, inescapable without the penalty of death, just as the inspector suffered when he breached the city walls. Each experience can influence oneself, but it is the sum of these parts, just as the inhabitants together make the city, that establish one's identity as a whole. Seen in this light, Murdoch may be but the doctor's own personification of the still logical portion of his fractured psyche triumphing over this great mental deviation from the norm. Murdoch does not leave the city, but uses his own Tuning powers to make Shell Beach, to create daylight for the rest of the metropolis' people. While heavy-handed, this speaks to the fact that the ability of one individual to adapt is the key for an entire species' survival.

Dark City preaches the fate that awaits mankind if it should continue to strive for meaning within universal networks of thought. The film warns against ignoring the experiences that shape an individual, for it is these memories that instill within him/her the drive to go on. While the concepts of full identity loss and eventual extinction serve to stiffen audiences in dystopic terror, Proyas proposes that perhaps what makes us human isn't as contemporary as the soul, but as primitive and basal as the will to prevail over all circumstances and the innate ability to find community in the identities and memories that we claim as our own. ●

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