

25th November 2013

Dark City (15)

Director: **Alex Proyas**
Australia/USA 1998

Running time : 111 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Rufus Sewell** (John Murdoch), **William Hurt** (Police Inspector), **Kiefer Sutherland** (Dr. Schreiber), **Jennifer Connelly** (Emma Murdoch), **Richard O'Brien** (Mr. Hand), **Ian Richardson** (Mr. Book).

SCRIPT: **Alex Proyas, Lem Dobbs & David S. Goyer, from a story by Alex Proyas.** PHOTOGRAPHY: **Dariusz Wolski.** EDITING: **Dov Hoenig.** MUSIC: **Trevor Jones.**

Dark City, appropriately also the title of a *film noir* made in 1950 with Charlton Heston and Lizabeth Scott, is actually a hybrid, a science-fiction *noir*, barely noticed on its release because, as with *Blade Runner*, the distributor did not know how to market it and audiences weren't sure how to take it.

If I said that *Dark City* was a film about a man who has trouble remembering who he is, is unsure whom to trust, and has issues of guilt surrounding his wife, and if I told you that it was a paranoid thriller in which no one can be sure whether what they remember is true, or what around them is real, and in which mankind is manipulated by a superior alien intelligence for its own ends, then you would say, 'That's *Memento* with a bit of *The Matrix* thrown in.' And you would be right, except that this was made before either of those films.

If you see, or have already seen, the original release version, a voiceover by Kiefer Sutherland sets the context of the action in decidedly science-fiction terms, whereupon the 'city by night' locale revealed to us soon afterwards plunges us into *noir* territory, with a touch of *Metropolis* discernible in the décor. However, in tonight's director's cut you will find this spoiler of an introduction relegated to a point later in the film, and be flung straight into *noir*.

Before long, though, you will be forming the impression that everything is not quite as it should be, for even though we have our fall guy, John Murdoch, suspected of doing in a number of young females but unable to remember a thing, and our *femme fatale*, actually Mrs Murdoch, but introduced singing a schmaltzy number in a nightclub; and even though we have our hard-nosed police inspector, the restless energy of the *mise en scène* is all the while telling us that things

are not what they seem. And just in case you don't pick up these signals, there are some bald guys in long black coats and broad-brimmed fedoras who look just too weird to be Sidney Greenstreet types.

Here we have Rufus Sewell in his prime (what an underused actor!) and the great William Hurt (yes, he was mannered, but he could do more with a well-placed smile than most actors with lines of dialogue), and a deformed Kiefer Sutherland, limping around like a cross between Victor Frankenstein and Igor. And then there are the unmistakable tones of Ian Richardson, who always seemed to be channelling Gielgud playing a Bond villain!

Yes, the music's not all that great, Trevor Jones shamelessly riffing the *Glorification of the Chosen One* section of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* whenever the action starts, but the boldness of the idea by which the city ritually transforms itself every twelve hours so that the Strangers can shuffle around their guinea pigs' memories and identities is just one example of the richness of imagination at work in Proyas's conceit.

In the end *Dark City* makes sense as the nightmare of an unhinged mind but little else. Unfortunately it is not sold to us in quite those terms, and you could be forgiven for not finding its roseate climax reassuring, and wondering about what these people feed on (a question *The Matrix* had its own queasily plausible way of answering). Nevertheless, it deserves marks for sheer energy, vision and lashings of style.

David Clare