Sith, Slayers, Stargates, + Cyborgs

Modern Mythology in the New Millennium

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"Small World": Alex Proyas' Dark City and Omnitopia

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A woman encounters a stranger at a dock on the river's edge. Looming over them, framing them, the city glows at night. The woman looks over the water; she is fearful that her husband is lost and may not return. The stranger knows this and much more. He possesses a secret knowledge that both the woman and her husband do not know each other at all. Bound up in faked photographs and implanted memories, their love is an experiment concocted for an alien purpose. The stranger understands the experiment because he is one of the researchers. To the woman, the city is a labyrinth that has caught her husband. To the stranger, the city is a laboratory in which people and places are warped, edited, and erased, a place where memory and identity constitute a mutable construct. The stranger visits the woman and toys with her, speaking the words implanted in her husband:

> Mr. Hand: There used to be a ferry when I was a boy. Biggest thing you ever saw, lit up like a floating birthday cake.
> Emma Murdoch: That's just what my husband once said to me, on this very spot.
> Mr. Hand: Where is your husband now?
> Emma Murdoch: I wish I knew. What brings you here?
> Mr. Hand: I met my wife at this place.
> Emma Murdoch: It's where I first met my husband.
> Mr. Hand: Small world.

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The world is smaller than he admits. Its limits and purposes stretch no further than the bounds of the city that encloses them both.

This is a scene from *Dark City*, a 1998 film by Alex Proyas that joins Fritz Lang's 1927 *Metropolis* and Ridley Scott's 1982 *Blade Runner* as an indispensable text for students of urbanity in popular culture.[1] With its potent visual iconography and illustration of contemporary trends, *Dark City* offers a cinematic critique of enclavic urbanity that demands closer attention than it has thus far received. Indeed, like its major characters, *Dark City* initially encountered a closed system, a small number of viewers who were drawn to its peculiar convergence of noir detective procedural, psychological thriller, and science fiction effects-fest. The film's plot focuses on an amnesiac accused of murder and his efforts to learn his identity. As he seeks clues about his past, the protagonist encounters a group of "strangers" who possess a startling secret. His struggle with the strangers reveals truths about his character and his world that inspire the audience to question the nature of reality itself. This presumes, of course, that an audience would sit through the film.

A box office flop in the United States, *Dark City* inspired unflattering comparisons to *The Matrix*, despite appearing on screens one year prior to that hit film.[2] However, mirroring the spiraled evolution of *Dark City*'s narrative, the film managed to grow into a cult favorite, aided by rentals, midnight screenings, and film critic Roger Ebert's personal evangelism.[3] Paralleling its popular growth, *Dark City* has also begun to attract international scholarly attention from researchers in American studies (Blackmore, 2004; Gerlach & Hamilton, 2004), cultural studies (Milner, 2004), and media studies (Hayles & Gessler, 2004; Higley 2001; Tripp, 2005), along with English and linguistics (Marsen, 2004). But more work remains to be done, particularly on the film's unique statement about the changing myth of the frontier.

In this chapter, I seek to contribute to this expanding conversation by focusing my attention on *Dark City*'s comment on the changing nature of urbanity. This analysis grows from a larger interest in the role of myth in cinema, the means through which broad ideas of how one should live become encapsulated in iconic figures, tropes, and types—in this case, the frontier and the city. Here, I argue that *Dark City* provides a lens to view contemporary urbanity with its illustration of an enclosure whose inhabitants reside in a kind of daze, manipulated by forces they cannot see. Initially, this analysis requires

a brief overview of the mythical frontier as a counterpoint to the urban maze portrayed by *Dark City*. Following this overview, I employ an omnitopian framework to map out the means though which the frontier has been banished by the cinematic city, leaving in its place an enclave from which one can scarcely hope to escape or even to imagine the possibility of departure. I conclude with remarks on how *Dark City*'s critique of omnitopia, while suggesting a return to the frontier, rests on a troubling implication for heroes who cannot be termed human.

Birth of the Mythical Frontier

Scholarship on the frontier myth almost invariably begins with the "frontier thesis" posited by Frederick Jackson Turner at a meeting of the American Historical Association held at Chicago's 1893 Columbian Exposition. Prior to Turner's presentation, the vast majority of historians seeking to uncover the development of the American mind focused their attentions to the nation's European roots. The prevailing wisdom held that America's national identity sprang from its association with the Old World and grew always in relation to that parentage. Turner, in contrast, proposed that the frontier rather than the homeland offers more insight into the New World.[4] Turner differentiated the European and American notions of frontier: the former referred to a heavily guarded boundary; the latter indicated the line demarcating freedom from convention. Rather than separating two established entities, the American frontier opened up possibilities beyond what had been established. Consequently, those who pursued the frontier did not seek to protect the conventional order but rather faced adversities and overcame challenges in a manner best illustrated by the persona of the frontiersman. While often quoted, this passage by Turner offers apt illustration:

> That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier. (p. 37)

Turner's thesis concludes by announcing the *closing* of the frontier due to the nation's rapid urbanization, further differentiating urban

and unsettled America.[5]

To Turner's nineteenth-century listeners and readers, the bright and open spaces of the frontier suggested an immediate contrast to the dominant myths of urbanity that they held. To the Victorian mind, the urban core was truly a "dark city," a container of dangers and terrors that threatened the souls of its inhabitants. Narrow streets, unlit alleys, violent crime, and anonymous "strangers" resulted in chaotic moments and social confusions. Whereas in the mythical countryside one knew one's neighbors and, by extension, one's "place," the city exploded all norms. Each footfall along its arcades and busy boulevards resulted in chance encounters with no guiding narrative or consistent patterns to follow. Brimming with immigrants and bursting with chock-a-block growth, the city was a maze, a labyrinth, a trap. As a physical and rhetorical site of contrast, the frontier revealed the possibility to escape the city and seek personal transformation.

Within the field of communication studies, Turner's students and advocates, along with historians of his legacy, eventually carved out their own place to explore the impact of the frontier myth upon American oratory and media. In his 1941 essay "The Speech of the Frontier," Edward Everett Dale announced the need for communication scholars to study the impact of the sometimes salty but frequently shrewd frontier discourse on contemporary speech.[6] A year later, Robert D. Clark (1942) offered a somewhat more sophisticated reminder of the impression of frontier talk on the great political speakers in American history.[7] But it was Ronald H. Carpenter who most convincingly and thoroughly explored the frontier myth from the standpoint of communication scholarship. Carpenter (1977) examines that rare phenomenon of a piece of scholarship by a seemingly unknown historian inspiring national discussion and altering the common conception of the American identity.[8] Inspired by his contribution while departing from Carpenter's historigraphic emphasis, Janice Hocker Rushing (1983, 1986, 1989) launched a mini-revival of communication scholarship on the frontier in the 1980s with articles that explored mediated manifestations of the frontier myth. Importantly, she inspired the transition of attention from the Old Frontier (the "West") to the New Frontier (space).

Of particular interest to this chapter, Rushing offers insight into efforts to transplant Western themes into urban settings, as epitomized by the 1980 film *Urban Cowboy*. She notes that this type of

film attempts to "modernize" frontier life for contemporary audiences, "[b]ut urban life lacks space and thrives on industry; both conditions are anathema to the wandering soul of the West, free of technology and at one with nature" (p. 266). Here, Rushing emphasizes that the frontier, whether old or new, rests on a dichotomy between desert and town (and, within the town, the brothel and the schoolhouse). In this manner, the frontier demands a counterpoint—the home, the city, the hometown—for its definition. Conversely, urbanity requires the frontier—the desert, the ocean, the outback—as its own mythical counterpoint. Yet, as I elaborate below, contemporary urbanity seems to have rid itself of the frontier. Rather than an external barrier (or even a permeable membrane), an emerging model of urban life relies on a perpetual "hereness" that eludes the possibility of a "there." I refer to that practice and perception as omnitopia, a term that requires further explication.

Omnitopia and the End of the Frontier Myth

Omnitopia enacts a structural and perceptual enclave whose apparently distinct locales convey inhabitants to a singular place. Etymologically, the term reflects a neologism of the Latin *omni* (all; "in all ways or places" or "of all things") and the Greek *topos* (place).[9] Omnitopia reflects a different kind of place than its cousins, utopia and heterotopia. Utopia refers to a fictional site coined in 1516 by Thomas More, an impossible place (not-place) conceived to critique the social conditions of its author. Heterotopia refers to Michel Foucault's (1986) formulation of a paradoxical place that encloses and relieves social tensions.[10] While utopia is strictly limited to the imagination of one who critiques social life, heterotopia refers to a complex site such as a theme park, graveyard, or motel that acts as a safety value to affirm social order, even while admitting multiple and contradictory narratives. While its lineage emerges from utopia and heterotopia, omnitopia differs from these two concepts in one essential way. Rather than evoking an imaginary locale or a distinct place, omnitopia reflects the practice and perception of multiple locations being accessed through a single site. Put another way, omnitopia posits the shrinking of human geography into a singularity in which any place becomes every place and every place is the same.

As a framework, omnitopia continues to evolve past its initial limitations. The term was introduced first in an essay on airport architecture (Wood, 2003a) before its application to *The Simpsons'* depiction of Springfield (Wood & Todd, 2005), early strategies employed by "Mom and Pop" motels to craft a sense of place along the highway (Wood, 2005a), and the construction of tourist enclaves in sites such as Las Vegas (Wood, 2005b). Through a process of development and delineation enabled by these latter three essays, omnitopia has revealed itself as being far more complex than the homogeneous and interchangeable gates of the international airport. Recalling his 1984 circumnavigation through various airport enclosures, essayist Clive James noted that "the world had grown smaller without necessarily becoming bland" (1989, p. 362). Cracks and fissures inevitably cut through the monolithic façade. A manifestation of late modern capitalism, omnitopia flows like mercury, a silvery liquid that transforms natural and artificial terrains into reflections of its presence. Though often toxic, the strategies of omnitopia manage to craft a paradoxical place that is local and universal, personal and alienating. Gazing beyond the mere reflection of omnitopian practices, we must excavate fundamental practices. To that end, this essay offers a rereading of *Dark City* as an exemplar of five omnitopian strategies: dislocation, mobility, conflation, fragmentation, and mutability.[11] As discussed later, these practices reflect the evolving relationship of the frontier and urban life.

Dislocation

Dislocation removes a site from its surrounding environment. In doing so, this strategy constructs a separate enclave that offers a synecdoche of the world marked by a limited range of experiences. Dislocation may be best illustrated by those iconic sites of late modern capitalism: the airport, the enclosed shopping mall, and the casino. For practical reasons, of course, each site must be separated from the external world. Airports require security fences; enclosed shopping malls protect their inhabitants from the elements, and casinos seek to focus their consumers' attentions on the gambling opportunities within. But in a larger sense, each of these attempts a kind of cocooning that reflects a new urban aesthetic: the power to isolate ourselves from others. By way of further illustration, consider the ubiquitous iPod (and other types of personal media devices), which allows its

users to create an even more snug enclosure, an aural enclave. With this device, people carry with them their "world" of media—images, songs, movies, data files—and are able to disassociate themselves from the world "outside." Offering a world within a world, dislocation removes the locale from its human and physical geography, constructing a shopping mall-like enclosure. In *Dark City*, we encounter a nearly perfect example of dislocation, given that city residents are literally separated from their world, with no view of the frontier that divides them.[12]

Dark City presents an American metropolis where the sun never shines. But the city is, in fact, a self-contained enclosure where aliens known as "the strangers" experiment upon abducted people in hopes of understanding the unique capabilities of human beings.[13] This truth is hidden from the human inhabitants. But one, a character named John Murdoch, begins to recognize the unreal nature of his urban habitat. He wakes up in a gloomy hotel room and discovers a murdered prostitute, a bloodstained knife, and an unknown face in the mirror. Murdoch cannot remember his name or recall what led him to this place. He does not think he killed the prostitute, but he cannot be sure. This opening scene launches the film's plot, in which Murdoch searches the city for answers while police detectives search for him. In their stumbles through the urban scene, characters discover the detached nature of their surroundings.

Throughout the film, characters are dislocated from their place of origin and confined in a seemingly impenetrable labyrinth marked by two types of imagery: spirals and aquarium enclosures. Spiral imagery includes the film's opening credit graphics, the twisting carve caused by the murder weapon, a doctor's circular maze, and several pertinent pieces of narrative. In one, the chief inspector speaks to a detective, Frank Bumstead: "This killer's been running circles around us." Later, Bumstead spots circular mazes in the home and office of a colleague, Eddie Walenski, who has gone mad in his efforts to understand the true nature of the city: "spending time in the subway, riding in circles, thinking in circles." Throughout the film, Murdoch, Bumstead, and Walenski struggle to make sense of their world. But continually they confront signs of the spiral—spinning clocks, turning chairs, the shape and layout of the city itself.

Along with spirals, the film employs aquariums to emphasize the role of surveillance in this alien habitat. In the movie's opening scenes, Murdoch accidentally breaks a small fish bowl but rescues the

fish. Later, a cop places the fish in a glass, peering at it as the strangers peer at them. At first, only Detective Walenski can see beyond the human aquarium: "They're watching us! There's no way out! God, can't you see?" When Murdoch searches for a way out of the city, he meets Walenski, who has finally abandoned any hope of freedom, choosing to leap into the path of an oncoming train. These signs of hopelessness, the spiral and the aquarium, suggest a place from which one may never escape—the impossibility of a frontier that one may pass. This place is dislocated from the larger world of choices perfectly, a floating prison with invisible walls. This is not to say we are frozen, however. Indeed, a second essential strategy of omnitopia concerns our mobility.

Mobility

Mobility orients a place around technologies of conveyance in such a manner that the environment becomes an interconnected series of passages. We find it almost unthinkable to critique these types of places because we endlessly move through them. In this "game without frontiers," one must move in order to play. The strategy of mobility reduces, even criminalizes in some sites, the possibility to reside in one omnitopian location for an unauthorized purpose or inordinate amount of time. Rather than moments of stasis, one encounters a perpetual experience of flow. To some extent, of course, mobility constitutes an inevitable component of any urban site, particularly as the populations of people and places expand beyond the pedestrian expanse where one may walk comfortably. Even in a small town, one must practice some degree of mobility, even to visit the central park for an afternoon picnic. Omnitopian mobility, however, differs from traditional urban mobility by transforming places of stasis into sites of despair. In *Dark City*, the ability to soar over the city is limited to the strangers: literally, overseers. In contrast, the city's human population is confined to more easily monitored forms of transportation.

Dark City presents a dichotomous site where powerful researchers may move throughout the site at will, while their hapless subjects are restricted to vehicles whose trajectories are confined to an urban maze. A quick glimpse at Murdoch's driver's license reveals that he lives in "East City." Later, he peers at a phone book whose listings are oriented around conspicuously generic sections North, South, East,

West, The Place, The Crescent, and similar locales. These place names suggest an urban geography oriented around a bird's-eye-view map that mirrors a laboratory maze shown early in the film. The city's primary modes of mobility, trains and subways, enable inhabitants to move from section to isolated section without ever glimpsing the complex whole. Even when Murdoch searches a subway map for direction, he finds only a jumble of crisscrossing lines that depict no discernable pattern. Certainly, some inhabitants possess automobiles that, presumably, afford the freedom to transform the city into a more coherent personal narrative. However, the strangers can stop all modes of transportation whenever they choose, rendering human movement subject to their will. Moreover, the strangers are not limited to the scripted and mapped transportation modes of the city's human inhabitants: roads and train lines. Instead, they fly above the city, surveying its passages from an unobstructed view. As a result, the strangers possess a perception of the city as an omnitopian whole while the humans see only parts. This is not to say that human beings are entirely isolated in cells, though. Indeed, while the inhabitants of *Dark City* (and most inhabitants of "real" urban environments) may never witness the structural coherence of distinct locales, they often spot the playful collaboration of façades that construct a surface-level cohesion to otherwise confounding narratives. This strategy may be labeled conflation.

Conflation

Conflation merges disparate settings into a singular whole. This strategy, therefore, arises both from the all-seeing gaze that peers over a landscape of overlapping narratives and from the pastiche design of architectural forms that disdain singular stories. Even so, this strategy should not be confused with the mere "bird's-eye-view" afforded from locations of great height such as touristic lookout towers. Instead, conflation works through the hyperspatial condensation of impossibly distinct places, peoples, and times.[14] Moreover, this strategy should not be seen as producing a genuinely coherent understanding of the structural "reality" of place. Conflation works only at the surface level in a manner similar to the experience of visiting an amusement park. There is no frontier in the conflated world because there is no "outside" referent. All becomes jumbled together. In a similar manner, *Dark City* offers soaring views over conflated urbanity whose

disparate forms and referents are both impossible and increasingly familiar.

In *Dark City*, architectural forms and historical periods blur in an urban simulacrum that intentionally mirrors previous films such as *Nosferatu*, *Metropolis*, and *Blade Runner*. Recalling Baudrillard's (1994) description of simulacrum as a measure of distance from the real we might find within these films a simulacrum of simulation in which:

> [T]his projection is totally reabsorbed in the implosive era of models. These models no longer constitute either transcendence or projection, they no longer constitute the imaginary in relation to the real, they are themselves an anticipation of the real, and thus leave no room for any sort of fictional anticipation—they are immanent...The field opened is that of simulation in the cybernetic sense, that is, of the manipulation of these models at every level. (p. 122)

Characters occupy the same kinds of bottom-dwelling locales, stalking each other beneath the same types of moving trains and nightmare buildings. Beyond these cinematic references, *Dark City* confounds its viewers with conflicting architectural styles and with intentional anachronisms: a steampunk conflation of gargoyles and automats.[15] Buildings range from heavy Gothic to streamlined moderne to post-war neo-brutalism, mixed with Greek columns and Roman arches; these amalgamations render the city "both familiar and strange at the same time" (Gerlach & Hamilton, 2004, p. 120). Thus, in one scene, Murdoch converses with a man wearing a nineties-era hooded sweatshirt in a forties-era subway. Elsewhere, we survey a broad chronology of automobiles, from thirties-era roadsters to fifties-era sharkfins to seventies-era behemoths. We spot sixties-era "mop top" haircuts advertised in a Depression-era barbershop. Even the alien technology confounds our temporal sensibility, illustrated by a high-tech syringe that resembles a piece of Victorian bric-a-brac. Milner (2004) explains, "If it looks quite literally fantastic, then this is because that is what it is: a phantasm, an impossible city" (p. 269). At one point, Murdoch confronts one of the strangers who explains why the city's lack of coherent narrative serves to affirm the power of the overseers:

> Mr. Hand: There's no escape. The city is ours. We made it.
> John Murdoch: What are you talking about?
> Mr. Hand: We fashioned this city on stolen memories. Different eras, different pasts, all rolled into one.

Initially, one may be inspired to label this city as postmodern, that playfully ambiguous mélange of winking references and knowing asides. However, the locale of *Dark City* is far more ominous. Slipping between the shadows and fluorescent lights, the omnitopian city invokes multiple narratives while affirming only one, that of the architects. Even so, the resulting place and personality of its people are not integrated but instead fragmented: a confusing hodgepodge of momentary experiences with no recognizable context.

Fragmentation

Fragmentation offers a complementary strategy to conflation. As the omnitopian environment gathers disparate surface-level images into the same perceptual experience, it simultaneously fractures itself into seemingly distinct constructions, often defined by internal rather than external order. This strategy eschews the utopian homogeneity of the airport, the planned community, and the office park.[16] As a practice of late modern capitalism, fragmentation perfects the lessons of designers and planners who have learned from Las Vegas by crafting abrupt spaces of apparent novelty and variation that remove the coherent narrative that risks critique. The frontier offers a battle line, but fragmentation removes the axis that one might attack. In this manner, fragmentation works to splinter the sweeping historical narrative, crafting incongruent shards of the present, everywhere complete and distinct. We find fragmentation in our visits to a fast food restaurant whose worker speaks to people at the counter and in their cars via a microphone and headset, rendering both interactions automated and alienating. In a similar manner, inhabitants of *Dark City* experience fragmentation of selves, relationships, and places.

In the film, the self is fragmented to such an extent that, in their natural states, all people are strangers even to themselves. By way of illustration, we might return to John Murdoch's awakening in the hotel. Unaware of his name or history, he exits and wanders down a dark alley (though all roads in this film resemble dark alleys). Staring at a store window, Murdoch finds his reflection imposed over two mannequins and "tries on" several potential selves:

> John Murdoch: What's your name? Justin? Jerry? No. My name's Jason Murdoch, John Murdoch, Jake Murdoch, How's it going? Hi. Jack Murdoch.

[He laughs in absurdity and frustration, before realizing that a street sweeper
    is staring at him]
John Murdoch: Hi. Gotta get a grip on myself.

When Murdoch encounters the strangers for the first time, he ques-
tions their identities even while they give him reason to question his:

John Murdoch: Who are you?
Mr. Hand: We might ask the same question, yes?

A self with no awareness of history becomes a malleable object when
manipulated by the strangers. Yet the strategy of fragmentation is
hardly limited to the individual.

Murdoch's visit to an automat provides an effective demonstration
of relational fragmentation, while mirroring this strategy on an
architectural level. The automat presents a series of discrete glass-
covered containers, each containing plates of food. Patrons enter a
singular environment but face an array of distinct choices. Blackmore
(2004) describes the automat in *Dark City* as "a crude memory bank"
for the city's ever-shifting realities (p. 25). Searching for his lost
wallet, Murdoch speaks to a fleeting image of a face as the automat
attendant places new food items in individual cells:

Attendant: You left your wallet here, buddy.
John Murdoch: When, when, when did I do that?
Attendant: When you was last here.
John Murdoch: When, when was that?
Attendant: When you left your wallet. You expect me to remember?

The attendant says nothing more but places the wallet inside one
of the cells, forcing Murdoch to make a purchase. Like our fast food
encounters with fragmented employees, Murdoch speaks to an
atomized object, not an integrated person.

Beyond relational fragmentation, the city itself is split between a
dark presence and a light absence. For reasons that inspire consider-
able debate among fans of *Dark City*, the inhabitants recall one place
where the sun shines and the labyrinth opens to an open shore with
no walls, where the fish are free from the aquarium: a place called
Shell Beach. This idyllic locale resides in fragments: dreams, distant
memories, and tantalizing souvenirs. Indeed, the film offers multiple
moments in which the dark city is fragmented with the introduction of
these souvenirs: postcards, photographs, scrapbooks, and billboards
depicting the sun over a beach. Yet none of these referents reflects the

physical reality of the city. While visiting his Uncle Carl, Murdoch discovers mementos from a "childhood": shells, marbles, photographs, and then a scrapbook: *Guide to Shell Beach*. He opens the book expectantly, in search of an answer to the mystery, but all the pages are blank. He searches the city for a passageway to Shell Beach, but finds only images, posters over a brick wall.[17] The pieces to the puzzle never fit. One primary reason for this phenomenon is that they perpetually change.

Mutability

Mutability allows for the transformation of a place for multiple purposes, which range from playful manipulation to coercive control. Mutability relates to mobility through its negation of fixed environments. However, we do not simply move through omnitopian locales that remain relatively constant. Instead, we encounter places, objects, and even people that move, change, and alter themselves in frequently unforeseen manners. All that is frontier melts into air. Expanding beyond this somewhat literal notion of mutability, we find environments throughout urban life that adapt themselves to changing needs. Thus, we recognize that an airport gate leads to one location in the morning, another in the afternoon, and yet another in the evening. Of course, *Dark City* presents an even more potent example of architectural transformation with its depictions of places and people that change according to the whims of the strangers.

At first, *Dark City* presents its viewers only tantalizing glimpses of the true nature of this place. Some of these images are strictly symbolic—an automat attendant replacing a banana with a bowl of green jello—while others are more literal: places that exist only as mutable constructs. Once more, let us consider Shell Beach, that beacon of half-remembered childhood and sunny days, a mystical place that recedes into a cloudy distance whenever anyone tries to determine its actual location. Throughout the film, Murdoch searches for Shell Beach. At one point, he enters a taxi and spies a souvenir, a snow globe from the beach, and he asks for directions:

> John Murdoch: Hey, you happen to know the way to Shell Beach?
> Taxi Driver: You're kidding! Me and the missus spent our honeymoon there. All you gotta do is take Main Street West to—or is it the Cross. You know, that's funny, I, I can't seem to remember if it's Main Street West or the Crosstown.

The driver cannot remember the location of Shell Beach because its location is not fixed. Rather, it constantly changes. Beyond fluid directions, *Dark City* confounds its characters (and viewers) with shifting locales and disconnected motives, such that detective Bumstead eventually despairs, "I have this jigsaw puzzle in front of my face, and every time I try to rearrange the pieces it still doesn't make any sense!" Bumstead demonstrates more insight than he can imagine, at first. The city is a giant puzzle whose pieces are not only mismatched but also altered perpetually.

In one of the most unique contributions made by *Dark City* to urban imagery, we learn that the strangers have not built a fixed habitat for their captives but rather have crafted a mutable place that grows and changes every night. Their power to alter the city is called "tuning," a nightly transformation in which buildings twist and contort themselves, adapting themselves to new narratives implanted by the strangers. Higley (2001) offers an apt description, noting how "the revisions that the aliens make to the urban cityscape come torquing up out of the ground like great architectural corkscrews; buildings collapse as others emerge and battle with one another at the end" (p. 10). During the "tuning," all residents are put to sleep, only to awaken in new settings with new memories. But John Murdoch has awakened in the middle of the tuning and slowly learns that he too has the power to alter the city and adapt to the changes wrought by the strangers. Thus, in a central scene of mutability when Murdoch flees his captors, he jumps onto a growing chimney that becomes, in effect, an elevator. He eventually learns to tune the city himself, and in doing so presents both a grave threat and long-awaited opportunity for the strangers.

As with physical architecture, the personalities who are the city's inhabitants endure changes every midnight when the clocks stop and the strangers go to work. As a result, the inhabitants of *Dark City* contain disparate histories and psychological profiles as the strangers experiment with their captives, literally crafting their personalities with the aid of a human collaborator, Dr. Daniel Schreber, used by the strangers because of his insights into human psychology. Thus, John Murdoch has been imprinted with the personality of a mass murderer, drawn from dozens, perhaps hundreds of human memories, in order to provide a test case for the strangers. Schreber explains, "This city, everyone in it, is their experiment. They mix and match our memories as they see fit, trying to divine what makes us unique. One day, a man might be an inspector. The next, someone entirely different." Indeed,

part of the film's pleasure is the chance to spot characters that have undergone revision, such as when a night desk clerk becomes transformed into a newspaper vendor. Like the city, people have become containers for strange combinations, the "killer" who rescues a dying fish, the "hard-boiled detective" who pines for his dead mother. Schreber later says to Murdoch, "Your entire history is an illusion, a fabrication, as it is with all of us." Aided by Dr. Schreber's chemical amalgamations, citizens of *Dark City* wake up to new personalities. This mutation of places and people reflects an omnitopian sensibility that contains a peculiar pleasure, a freedom from consequence. Yet, at the same time, we experience alienation from environments and other human beings. A hero like John Murdoch learns eventually to edit the city for his own purposes, but the rest of us appear merely to pass through its mutating regime, disoriented but entertained.

From Old Frontier to No Frontier to Artificial Frontier

These strategies—dislocation, mobility, conflation, fragmentation, and mutability—reveal practices of omnitopia. Dislocation detaches a place and its people from the larger world, constructing an enclosure whose membranes may be relatively permeable but are nonetheless difficult to transgress without authorization. Mobility enables, even requires, movement through distinct locales within the enclosure, representing a strategy that diminishes the potential for reflection and critique. Conflation works to collapse varied environments and narratives, even temporal ones, into a singular arcade: crafting an illusion of completeness. Fragmentation works simultaneously to craft abrupt moments of disjuncture, distinct sites of "now," such that each grand view and conflated vision becomes isolated and alienating. Mutation draws from each of these strategies to enact states and perceptions of constant change, removing the physical or temporal coherence necessary to mount a meaningful critique. Thus, while we imagine ourselves in the position of John Murdoch, the knowing hero who transforms the city into his personal playground by film's end, we risk adopting the altered guise of Emma Murdoch who resurfaces after the final "tuning" as a human stranger with a random identity and no clue how she got there. In this "small world," and in others

throughout the "real" world, Emma's fate seems more likely than John's.

What remains is for us to investigate whether such a fate is, indeed, inevitable. In this way, we exit the theater and enter the modern world once more. Modern urbanity envisions a world of grand narratives, order, and precise placement. As evidence, one might recall nineteenth-century Haussmannization of Paris[18] or twentieth-century "urban renewal" in the United States, perfectly illustrated by the transformation of New York's Times Square. Both illustrate the perfect and totalizing gaze of the strangers who present themselves to us as bureaucrats. In the midst of such vast enclosures and grand boulevards, individuals bump up against each other like billiard balls, alienated from one another. Objects of the modern world become abstract. As both a consequence of this condition and a reaction to it, omnitopia enacts the totalizing gaze and ubiquitous place of modernity, creating an enclave of order amidst a desert of disorder. Of course, we are not entirely enclosed in this arcade. In its conclusion, *Dark City* offers a tantalizing glimpse of how technology may be used to reconstruct the frontier through the heroic efforts of the individual who frees himself from the constraints of the city. Initially, this "new frontier" offers an affirming vision, an optimistic pinnacle of human will to power. However, as I explain, *Dark City*'s depiction of the new frontier rests on a troubling artificiality.

While I would prefer to withhold the film's conclusion from readers in hopes that some who have not yet seen *Dark City* might enjoy learning its secrets for themselves, I am compelled to explore the film's surprising resolution.[19] Although cast as opponents by the strangers' designs, John Murdoch and Inspector Bumstead eventually join Dr. Schreber, forcing him to reveal the purpose of their plans. For Murdoch, this quest ends at Shell Beach, that mythical frontier between city and nature that no one can seem to reach. Schreber warns that Murdoch can indeed visit Shell Beach but that he will not like what he finds. Refusing to take heed, Murdoch and Bumstead journey to the edge of the city in search of the strangers' secret. Surely at the water's edge they might escape their captors' grasp. But once they arrive, they find that Shell Beach is merely an advertisement stuck on a brick wall. There is no "outside" to the city. Nevertheless, Murdoch and Bumstead grasp hammers and begin to strike at the wall, unaware of what awaits them. With blow after blow they pummel at the façade, ripping off the advertisement and forging a crack in

the wall before discovering the film's secret at last. The city is, in fact, a vast spaceship turned always away from the sun. There is no end to the enclosure but that ultimate desert of space—a new frontier.

As the film reaches its climax, Schreber teaches Murdoch to harness his mental powers to control the machines built by the strangers, to control the "world" in which they are enclosed. This transformation is enhanced by the injection of a syringe loaded with artificial memories so that Murdoch believes that he has been preparing to control the city from birth. An elegant solution, yes, but a troubling one. As Murdoch uses his previously dormant psionic abilities to battle with the strangers, he literally ascends from the city. At this point the film resembles a comic book in its use of iconic imagery and depiction of the otherworldly struggle between Murdoch and the lead stranger. But soon enough Murdoch prevails and returns to the surface of a city that he and the stranger wrecked during their combat. The city is his to rebuild or to alter, as his imagination deems proper. In a manner suggestive of the power possessed by David Bowman as the Star Child in Arthur C. Clarke's novelization for *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Murdoch uses his mental powers to turn the spaceship-city toward the sun for the first time. Then he unleashes torrents of water from the city's edge to form an ocean bordered, at last, by a sandy frontier. Murdoch cannot find Shell Beach so he chooses to build one.[20]

At film's end, the city resembles the Earth that Murdoch recognizes, complete with sun, clouds, and water. Shell Beach promises that mythical frontier between city and nature that defines both in relation to each other. But, of course, the frontier is an illusion, as is Murdoch. Both are based on false memories, cobbled together in Schreber's lab. The city resembles Earth, but it continues to float as a fake in the vastness of space. Murdoch accepts his identity, but he knows it is an amalgam of choices he did not make. The freedom of choice offered by *Dark City* is an illusion, one that can only be altered by a new stranger. In this manner, the film presents "a definition of identity as self-invention" (Marsen, 2004, p. 145). We find a model in Daniel Schreber's advice to John Murdoch: "This is the machine the strangers use to amplify their thoughts, the machine that changes their world. You must take control of it. You must make the machine yours." Leaving the film, we find ourselves faced with a similar responsibility, to take the world back upon our shoulders. Such a challenge can be overwhelming, but it can be liberating too. We have no map and, thus, are forced to make our own way.

Conclusion

This chapter has offered a reading of *Dark City* as a means to trace the emergence, death, and renewal of the frontier in urban life. By exploring the historic (and historiographic) construction of the frontier as a counter-city, outlining how the omnitopian city rids itself of the frontier, and unpacking some implications on how individual "power" within the omnitopian confine contains the seeds of its own opposition, I have attempted to offer more than a summary of a largely unappreciated film. Rather, this chapter has promoted a vision of the mythical frontier that, like "real" boundaries, has managed to shift and mutate with changing exigencies. Like the mercury of modernity, the mythical frontier reflects us to ourselves, showing us what may be otherwise obscured by the shocks and pleasures of urban life. In the omnitopian frontier, we find the illusory space of agency that reminds us of a videogame whose "edges" are soft and sometimes impossible to discern.[21] We bump against pixelated borders in the softest of rebuke, for our choices that lie behind us seem limitless. So we turn back to the city (of bits, of dreams, of the dead) and play our roles with renewed vigor, forgetting that the world beyond our "small world" is larger than we can yet imagine.

Notes

1   *Dark City* shares a name (and some of the tone) with a 1950 film directed by William Dieterle and starring Charlton Heston.

2   While the film drew from decidedly American imagery, *Dark City* was helmed by an (Egyptian-born) Australian director and shot in Sydney.

3   Beyond his statement that *Dark City* was the best film of 1998, Ebert's enthusiasm for the film is best illustrated by the commentary track he contributed to the DVD, a contribution that serves as a master class in film analysis and criticism.

4   Readers now can be forgiven for being underwhelmed by this thesis; it seems so ordinary and so conventional. However, this response merely affirms the power of a new idea to seep into the academic milieu before infecting social, economic, and political sensibilities until it becomes the lens through which common sense may be judged. Turner's frontier thesis offered no less than a revolution in American thought, invoking the westward-bound frontiersman rather than the European ancestor as the defining mythical figure of the new nation.

5   This is not to say that Turner (1920) announced the end of the nation's expansionist narrative. Indeed, despite the closing of the frontier, he assured his

readers that "the American energy will *continually* demand a wider field for its exercise" (p. 37, emphasis added). America's grand and occasionally galling adventures in the century that followed would bear that thesis out. Indeed, Ronald H. Carpenter (1990) traces some of the implications of that expansionist ethic.

6   Dale (1941) wrote, "there is still a carry over of the frontier speech to a modern social order that never knew the life out of which this speech grew" (p. 362).

7   In his essay, Clark (1942) weaves a narrative that is typical of scholarship about the frontier, the unfolding American drama as seen through the westward march of trailblazing pioneers. Rather than attempt a similar survey, I repeat his: "the true *West*, the real *frontier* in American history, was a continually advancing line. At first it lay along the edge of the Atlantic sea coast, then it moved inward to the Piedmont, to the Alleghenies, to the Ohio country, and thence across the river to the plains and again to the mountains. But always it was the *West*, the *frontier*, and always it was distinguished by its disregard for established institutions and by its new and genuine democracy, both of which grew out of the exigencies of the environment" (p. 282).

8   As Carpenter (1977) explains, "A statement intended to alter the course of American historiography became instead the rhetorical source of a mythic, national self-conception" (p. 128).

9   The etymology of *omni* is quoted from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

10   See also Soja (1995, 1996, 1997) and Wood (2003b, 2004).

11   This analysis reflects a particular extension of a recent typology of omnitopian strategies (Wood & Todd, 2005). Most notably, the present work provides a more precise relationship between fragmentation and conflation. Also, this analysis removes commodification from the list of strategies. Certainly, one senses the role of commodification in *Dark City*, most notably when the hotel desk clerk announces, "Only thing that makes you a guest in this joint, pal, is cash on the barrelhead." However, on reflection, I propose that commodification (along with atomized interactions described in Wood, 2003b) resides as an effect of omnitopia—related to fragmentation—rather than a strategy of its design.

12   A reader of an earlier draft noted the presence of the river in the first scene of this chapter, potentially representing a frontier between the city and the non-city beyond. However, the scene is framed in such a way as to show only the city with no contrast, no outside. The river is a setting to this scene but not a divider to the city. Here I recall a scene from the movie *Pleasantville* that illustrates this paradox. In a classroom, a visitor to the city asks, "What's outside of Pleasantville?...What's at the end of Main Street?" Her question results in chuckles and confusion. Inhabitants in this city recognize the existence of a road, just as inhabitants of *Dark City* recognize the river. But in *Pleasantville*, "The end of Main Street is just the beginning again." Similarly, in *Dark City*, the river cannot lead to the "outside," until the film's climax.

13   Not too surprisingly, Gerlach and Hamilton (2004) note that *Dark City*'s depiction of urban "strangers" applies "as easily to Georg Simmel's work on the city as it does to Alex Proyas' 1998 film" (p. 115).

14   Along with our *Dark City* exemplar, we might consider other media examples of conflation, such as the fifties-themed restaurant, Jack Rabbit Slims, in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (a film whose car-tables were inspired by the 1968 Elvis Presley film *Speedway* and its Hangout Club). We can also recall George Miller's 1998 *Babe: Pig in the City,* whose convergence of architectural icons such as the Empire State Building, the Sydney Opera House, and the Golden Gate Bridge created a charmingly paradoxical metropolis. Along with these films, "tiny towns" provide another parallel to the synecdochic enclosures of urbanity found in omnitopia. Examples around the United States include Tiny Town U.S.A. in Hot Springs, Arkansas; Roadside America in Shartlesville, Pennsylvania; the Ave Maria Grotto in Cullman, Alabama; the Crossroads of America in Bethlehem, New Hampshire; and the DeLorme "Eartha" globe in Yarmouth, Maine. A delightful international example may be found at Cockington Green in Canberra, Australia.

15   Francis Mason offers a useful parallel with his essay on British "pop" sci-fi. Mason (1996) describes "the nostalgic citation of the past...a selective process where the 'better' (modern) things from twentieth-century history can be referenced and then transposed on to this future space, particularly style and fashion" (pp. 30–31).

16   A quintessential example of office park homogeneity may be found in the 1999 Mike Judge film *Office Space.* Even so, this film also manages to portray a kind of heterotopian locale in its depressing depiction of Chotchkie's, a satire of restaurants such as TGI Friday's (and its *former* slogan). While heterotopian in its "playful" overlap of referents, the theme restaurant becomes omnitopian when one experiences the sense of being "in the same place," whether entering "this" restaurant or "another" one. The rhetoric and perception of *ubiquity,* even more than its fake pastiche of elements, marks the omnitopian enclosure. Consider the Friday's slogan: "In here it's always Friday."

17   As a reviewer of an earlier draft of this manuscript suggests, Shell Beach demonstrates a kind of fragmentation on a deeper, almost existential level: a divide between where you "are" and where you can "not be."

18   Robert Fishman (1987) explains how the mid-nineteenth-century reconstruction of Paris sought to erect a modern capital city. With the approval of Louis Napoleon, Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann transformed the French capital by cutting "wide, straight boulevards through the maze of narrow streets, buying up and demolishing any buildings that stood in the way. These boulevards were to create the crucial means of communication that would finally unite Paris into a great city" (p. 112).

19   Many aficionados of the film warn first-time viewers to turn down the audio until they see Dr. Schreber looking at his watch. This low-tech solution rids the film of its heavy-handed exposition that was inserted, one may assume, to assuage the fears of studio producers who fretted that audiences would not tolerate the film's deliberate unraveling of mystery.

20   Murdoch-as-urban-planner resembles the "real" ones we see around the world who draw from media-fed fantasies to transform the undulations of natural topography into a container of our desires. Thus, middle-class backyards gain waterfalls and desert cities bloom with golf courses.

21 The nature of this illusion is illustrated by a commercial that, as much as *Dark City* (and perhaps inspired by it), illustrates the experience of omnitopia: the award-winning 2003 Volkswagen "Bubble Boy" commercial. In this spot, a corporate drone passes through a series of bland enclosures before spotting a car outside a plate glass window, a means of freedom. Walker (2003) writes, "The kid is likable, so we're sort of rooting for him, but he seems trapped, somebody stuck in a huge transparent cage, looking for signs of life out there to latch onto" (¶3). For the "bubble boy," the car represents freedom. But, given the totalizing enclosure shown in this commercial, it is hard to imagine where he could possibly go.

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