

# [The Pinocchio Theory](#)

“If you fake the funk, your nose will grow.” — Bootsy Collins

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## A Scanner Darkly

I've been having trouble writing about Richard Linklater's [A Scanner Darkly](#). It's a great film, as well as being surprisingly faithful to the [Philip K. Dick novel](#) on which it is based, and from which much of its dialogue is taken verbatim. But it's a subtle film, and it kind of sneaks up on you, even if you are familiar with the novel (as I am) and know in advance everything that is going to happen. (So there will be MAJOR SPOILERS in the following discussion, stuff that I already knew to expect from reading the novel; I have no idea what sort of effect they might have on someone who comes to the film without knowing the novel).


A lot of the film is just hilariously addled druggie talk (though hilarious in a dry and deadpan sort of way); and it's only gradually, and as if by inadvertence, that its genuinely tragic elements become apparent. This is in full accordance with Dick's novel, surely the least moralistic “anti-drug” tract ever written — something that is only compounded by the fact that Linklater uses some of Hollywood's most notorious druggies (Winona Rider, Woody Harrelson, and the always wonderful Robert Downey Jr) for his supporting cast.

The protagonist, on the other hand, is played by Keanu Reeves, who here (more than in almost anything else he's ever been in) turns his congenital inexpressiveness into a virtue, as his character slips (without quite realizing it) into an ever-more-befuddled state of paranoia, cognitive dysfunction, and split personality (as a result of Substance D, the illicit drug that is the focus of the narrative, his two brain hemispheres become separate and competing entities). Keanu plays a narc who has gone underground: he's taken on the identity of a drug-using social dropout, Bob Arctor, and gets addicted himself to Substance D in the course of trying to track the source of the drug. To his police colleagues and superiors, this narc is only known by the pseudonym “Fred”, a double-blind precaution taken to keep his true identity hidden. This identity confusion is only compounded when Fred is ordered to run surveillance upon Arctor. His time is divided between sitting around his house, getting stoned and hanging out with his junkie friends, and sitting in front of multiple monitors, watching surveillance tapes of himself thus sitting around and consuming Substance D. Since the drug itself is personality-disingetrating, no wonder he has increasing difficulty keeping track of his own identity.

These convolutions all come straight out of the novel, which is fairly unique among Dick's writings for the way in which the usually Dickian theme of ontological (and not merely epistemological) slipperiness and instability collapses back upon the self, becomes a structure of subjectivity as well — so that the protagonist is not simply (justifiably) paranoid or adrift or trapped, but himself becomes a kind of black hole into which all substance, and all contradiction, implodes and disappears. What Linklater adds to Dick's depiction is a more externalized and political sense of how the downward and inward personal spiral of addiction is formally identical to, and seamlessly connected with, the ascending, and always more-widely-encompassing spiral of surveillance and “war on terror.” In both the novel and the film, Arctor wonders whether a scanner (surveillance camera) sees as “darkly” and confusingly as Arctor sees into himself, or whether it provides a greater clarity. In the novel, Dick is of course echoing the Bible

(“for now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face”), and foregrounding the irony that, for the damaged Arctor at least, self-examination or introspection is the *least* reliable way of knowing himself, in contrast to the more objective insight that the scanner might be hoped to provide. In the film, the nuance is slightly different, because of the way there is more emphasis on the scanner — the surveillance apparatus — itself, as a manifestation of the [society of control](#) of which drug addiction is just another facet. Here there is no sense of the scanner’s possible, or hoped-for, objectivity, since it is part of the mechanism for producing the hallucinatory breakdowns which it then proceeds to record.

The main formal innovation of the film is the rotoscoping technique that Linklater previously used for [Waking Life](#). The scenes of the film were first shot, with live actors, in digital video; then the footage was converted to animation, by being drawn over frame by frame. In the first place, this animation allows for the film’s most memorable “special effect” (which is also the most science-fictional aspect of the original novel): the “scramble suits” worn by narcotics agents to conceal their identity. This is a device that, when worn, projects outward (to quote the novel) “every conceivable eye color, hair color, shape and type of nose, formation of teeth, configuration of facial bone structure,” all of these changing many times a second, so that the wearer is “Everyman and in every combination... during the course of each hour.” Protected by the suit, you have no distinct personality — to everyone looking at you, you are just a “vague blur.” Linklater’s animation realizes this vision (multiculturalism pushed to its absolute point of absurdity?); often he cuts back and forth between full-body shots of the suit, and close-up head shots of Reeves/Arctor inside, his gaunt and tired face, suspended somewhere between angst and blankness, standing out against a field of gray. The “scramble suit” works throughout the film as a metaphor of the breakdown of personal identity as a result of both the chemical shocks of Substance D and the relentless process of surveillance. (I also see it as an image of the infinite *modulation* that Deleuze sees as characteristic of the society of control: “like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point”).

In general, and aside from its use in this special effect (and several other special effects that specifically depict drug-induced hallucinations), the rotoscope animation of *A Scanner Darkly* helps to define the look and feel of a world of (again, both) addiction and surveillance. There was a certain exuberance to the look of *Waking Life* that is entirely lacking here. The animation here is grim and depressing in terms of its generally washed out color scheme, whether it is depicting the run-down, filled-with-junk quality of Arctor’s druggie house, or the whitewashed anonymity of police headquarters and of the offices of New Path, the creepy corporation that rehabilitates victims of the drug. At the same time, facial features and other important visual details are sharpened, with the exaggerated iconic simplification that cartooning in general so frequently provides. This gives an eerie sense of identity as merely a mask or a performance (I couldn’t help being reminded, a little, of the mask Hugo Weaving as V. wears through the entirety of the otherwise live-action, although comics-derived, [V for Vendetta](#)). We think of schizophrenic hallucinations as being disturbingly mutated or mutable, and [video surveillance](#)  as being grainy and low-resolution; the animation here suggested both of these at once. These images are rooted in the indexical reality of actors and objects before the camera, in a way that purely computer-generated imagery is not. Yet at the same time, Linklater’s images are not photorealistic or hyperrealistic in the ways that state-of-the-art CGI, whether in animation (Pixar) or summer blockbuster special effects (as in, I presume, the latest *Pirates of the Caribbean*, though I haven’t seen it yet) strives to be. Rotoscoping, at least in Linklater’s use of it, is rooted in the real, but the real has been somehow displaced or distorted — with the implication that this displacement and distortion is itself, in a deeper sense, the bedrock Real of the society of addiction and control. (This could well be a Lacanian or Zizekian formulation, of course).

In this way, the “look and feel” of the rotoscope technique is itself the real meaning of the film. We get immersed in the world of the film thanks to this look and feel; gradually, it “naturalizes” itself in our perceptions. The first scene of the film (as of the book) shows a man hallucinating bugs crawling rapidly over his skin. We “see” the hallucination, but the blatantly cartoony look of the bugs helps to clue us in to


the fact that it *is* just (just?) a hallucination. But eventually this sort of distinction becomes as uncertain, and difficult for us to make, as it is for the characters themselves. There's a quietly terrifying scene (again, taken directly from the novel) where Reeves/Arctor wakes up, and finds himself next to a woman whom he had enticed into his bed with the offer of drugs; as she sleeps, her body metamorphoses into that of Donna (Winona Ryder) — the unattainable woman (she won't let him touch her) Arctor really desires — and then back again. Arctor goes to the surveillance room, and (as Fred, in a scramble suit) watches the incident on video replay — and the momentary metamorphosis takes place on the tape as well. The hallucination has been objectified: it plays out for the scanner, as well as for Arctor. This is kind of what happens for the spectator, over the course of the entire film. [Angela](#) was right to suggest (on the basis of seeing the trailer) to say, "I see grim hyper-realism. Not crayon drawings."

The work done by the rotoscoping is what allows Linklater to make the film itself (in terms of narrative unfolding) so low-key, and (in terms especially of Reeves' performance) so low-affect. Arctor doesn't understand what's happening to him, as it happens; and neither do we, except more or less subliminally through the effect of the animation. The downward spiral (which also turns out to be a kind of solipsistic circling in a void) only becomes apparent towards the end, when Arctor is checked into the New Path rehabilitation center. It's as if we could only really notice it retrospectively. And by that time — since there is no Outside to this self-enclosed world of addiction/surveillance, which is also the world for which rotoscoping is the proper expression — it is too late, and we're trapped. In this sense, the film's (and the novel's) final revelation that New Path itself grows and produces Substance D, the very drug whose victims they treat, is entirely logical. Consumerist hedonism and repressive surveillance join hands; chaotic self-destruction and therapeutic rehabilitation are parts of the same process; rigid social control, and the incitement to expend oneself heedlessly (the superego command of enjoyment, as Zizek might say) are facets of the same strategy of capital accumulation.


(I should add: the only aspect of the novel that I felt was missing from the film was the final portion, in which Dick goes into great detail — which Linklater entirely omits — about the procedures and ideology of New Path, their devotion to a religiously-mandated death of the spirit. This adds another dimension to the analysis of the society of control, one that I wish Linklater had paid a bit more attention to).

This entry was posted on Sunday, July 16th, 2006 at 3:10 pm and is filed under [Film](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can [leave a response](#), or [trackback](#) from your own site.


## 17 Responses to "A Scanner Darkly"

1.  [Blameless Caterpillar](#) says:  
[July 17, 2006 at 3:33 am](#)


I read this book during two months I spent on Tarawa Atoll in the Pacific, close to both the dateline and the equator. As the capital of Kiribati, the island has an interesting library next to the New Zealand High Commission. I also read *Man In The High Castle* while I was there, which, along with Mailer's *Naked and the Dead*, *Tough Guys Don't Dance* and Mishima's *Temple of the Golden Pavillion*, all made much more of a distinct impression on me. I have not read *Minority Report*, but did see the movie and it seems to me that what I remember of *A Scanner Darkly* essentially meshed for me with the world of *Minority Report*. Was *Minority Report* a short story that Dick eventually expanded into a novel? The storylines do seem to have some strong commonalities.

2.  [s0metim3s](#) says:  
[July 18, 2006 at 2:56 am](#)


btw, I recall reading someplace where Linklater mentions that around 500 hrs of labour went into every 5 minutes of film time.

3.  [Steven Shaviro](#) says:  
[July 18, 2006 at 9:44 am](#)


Actually, it is 500 hours of labor for each *single* minute of screen time, as mentioned [here](#).

4.  [s0metim3s](#) says:  
[July 18, 2006 at 3:39 pm](#)

The horror.

5.  [s0metim3s](#) says:  
[July 19, 2006 at 1:07 am](#)


And then there's [this](#).

6.  [Nick](#) says:  
[July 19, 2006 at 7:45 pm](#)


I very much appreciate your comment about how the rotoscope technique is, deep down, the real meaning of the film. And yet there is a sadness about all this that I can't shake, try as I might. There was a real human-ness to Dick's characters on the page, as silly as this might sound. Yes, they were simply representations as much as the rotoscopes are. And yet...the a "animation" dimension of the Linklater version—well, it's sort of like Scooby Doo. There, I've said it. Scooby Doo, more tricked out. The old-fashioned part of me wants to look at the human flesh of faces. The sadness of human eyes. Without that, nothing else—nothing—follows.

7. [archive : s0metim3s : Blogs in space : July : 2006](#) says:  
[July 20, 2006 at 1:41 am](#)


[...] The Second Carnival of Feminist Science Fiction and Fantasy Fans, kindly hosted at Pretty, Fizzy Paradise. The affective registers of Linklater's A Scanner Darkly at Pinocchio Theory. And, below the fold, the season 3 preview of Battlestar Galactica, with season 3 footage. [...]

8.  [Steven Shaviro](#) says:  
[July 20, 2006 at 10:04 am](#)

Nick, I see your point re: Scooby Doo and "want[ing] to look at the human flesh of faces." But I am inclined to think that that is a big part of the point of the film. Standard mainstream narrative films offer us the hope, or promise, of human intimacy — communion with the stars, via their presence on the screen (often conveyed especially through closeups). But here, that presence is undermined by the transformation of the actors' images into animations, as if they had become doubles of themselves, empty shells. So the sadness you mention is appropriate to what happens to everyone in the film, to what the characters become.


9.  [Blameless Caterpillar](#) says:  
[July 20, 2006 at 11:32 am](#)

Based on the screenshot from the review at Cannes, the technique seems reminiscent of one used by Ralph Bakshi when he followed his success in *Fritz the Cat* and *Heavy Traffic* with a disappointing, if not disturbing, feature length animation of *Lord of the Rings*. He was going to do middle earth in two parts, but the first part fared so badly at the box office that I don't think he ever made part two and I don't think he got subsequent opportunities to develop the form. The audience for *Fritz the Cat* had some overlap but represented a smaller portion of the audience for *Lord of the Rings* than Bakshi had anticipated and many middle earthers took offense at his animation techniques as destructive of Tolkien's efforts. I'm also reminded of the first few chapters of Alex Garland's *The Beach*, particularly the way in which the narrator presents the character whose map led him to his island adventure.


10.  [Nick](#) says:  
[July 21, 2006 at 8:29 pm](#)

Thanks Steven, I appreciate that, and I see what you mean about the animation being central to the point of the film. And yet all actors are doubles of themselves. Always. They are on the screen as their characters, but also as themselves. There are always two characters (at least) on the screen in narrative-fiction film: the actor and the character she is playing. Live action cinema is, already, animation.

Great post, by the way.

11.  [Erik](#) says:  
[July 24, 2006 at 2:26 pm](#)

Nice post. I just finally posted about the movie before reading yours, and it looks like we have come to some similar conclusions. About the doubling (in response to Nick), I agree that the actors/character phenomenon is a split, but one that we have so come to expect that it seems natural. The rotoscoping provides a further split, a distancing that resonates with the subject matter of the film, as the characters progressively detach not only from the reality around them, but also from each other in a spiral of paranoia. As "Donna" is averse to touch, the characters have given up any connection with other humans, and, eventually with themselves.

12.  [May](#) says:  
[August 9, 2006 at 11:49 am](#)

Again, I found and read an article about this movie that I wouldn't have read of I had not seen your post.

This journal is making me a little more aware of what is happening in the outer world. I know, it does not sound like a highly intellectual activity.

13.  [s0metim3s](#) says:  
[August 19, 2006 at 1:36 pm](#)

In case you haven't seen this: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Ewep6Nm-rQ>

14. [A Scanner Darkly \(2006\) « rjbuck72](#) says:  
[June 28, 2012 at 9:44 am](#)

[...] b. <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=507> [...]

15. [Blog Writing Assignment-A Scanner Darkly | mmc nab](#) says:  
[July 10, 2012 at 2:14 am](#)

[...] 4. <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=507> [...]

16. [A Scanner Darkly « Robert's Blog](#) says:  
[January 16, 2013 at 8:05 pm](#)

[...] <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=507> [...]

17. [Paranoia in Modern America: An Examination of "A Scanner Darkly." | A Brief Analysis of Film and Literature](#) says:  
[January 17, 2013 at 10:01 pm](#)

[...] <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=507>: One blogger praises Keanu Reeves, stating that “more than in almost everything else he’s ever been in, (Reeves) turns his congenital inexpressiveness into a virtue, as his character slips (without quite realizing it) into an ever-more-befuddled state of paranoia, cognitive dysfunction, and split personality...” McKenzie Wark, the author, thinks that the rotoscoping helps to define the look and feel of both surveillance as well as addiction. [...]

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