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Sunday 9 July 2006

Taking a Different Red Pill:
A Review of **A Scanner Darkly**

by Gary Westfahl

Directed by **Richard Linklater**Screenplay by **Richard Linklater**, based on the novel by **Philip K. Dick**Starring (the voices and animated images of) **Keanu Reeves, Robert Downey, Jr., Woody Harrelson, Wynona Ryder, Rory Cochrane**

Because many Americans may have to wait a few weeks before **A Scanner Darkly** breaks out of limited release and reaches a nearby theatre, they should take advantage of the time to find and read the novel by Philip K. Dick before watching the film, which they will better appreciate if they are familiar with its source material. For the quick phrases one might use to describe the film — "animated movie," "science fiction movie," even "Philip K. Dick movie" — all bring to mind certain expectations that this film simply does not fulfill: it offers few laughs, little in the way of spectacular effects or thrilling action sequences, and a relative paucity of mind-blowing ideas. However, if they already know Dick's story — a subdued, gut-wrenching portrait of the ravages of drug addiction in the 1970s, thinly disguised as near-future science fiction — audiences will be delighted to observe what is both an imaginative and a remarkable faithful adaptation of this neglected novel.

The film's success is even more surprising because there were at least three good reasons to expect a dismal failure. In the first place, the entire concept of the movie struck me as bizarre: why on Earth would anyone take such a grim, realistic drama and employ the rotoscope technique to turn a film into a cartoon? In addition, the film's release had been delayed for a long time, and it starred Keanu Reeves — two traditional harbingers of cinematic disasters. And yet, everything turned out remarkably well.

Regarding the rotoscope animation: since this technique involves images that are exactly traced from films of living actors, the animation can retain an aura of gritty realism that both cell animation and computer animation generally cannot attain, making serious drama a plausible option. Furthermore, if the resulting scenes thus look both highly realistic and obviously unrealistic, that serves the purposes of this particular film as a precise portrayal of the way that drug addicts see the world: everything looks the same, and yet things also look unsettlingly different. In the

beginning, that is often one of the appealing features of taking drugs, especially psychedelic drugs: objects look more distinct and more colorful, an effect of "heightened reality" not unlike rotoscope animation. Yet after a while, when the novelty wears off, drug users may begin to feel detached from the world and dysfunctional, longing for a return to

normality that their addiction will no longer permit (just as some audience members may eventually start longing for film of real actors instead of cartoons). Further, rotoscope animation can effectively convey the daily perceptions of the habitual drug user, a seamless blend of reality and hallucinations. Consider the moment when an addled Bob Arctor (Keanu Reeves) looks over to see his friends Jim Barris (Robert Downey Jr.) and Ernie Luckman (Woody Harrelson) suddenly transformed into beings with human heads and insect bodies. In a live-action film, this would represent an extreme discontinuity, a gosh-wow special effect disrupting the flow of the scene. In this animated rendering of a live-action film, however, the shift from characters drawn as regular human beings to the characters drawn as half-insects is smooth and undisturbing, and even seems sort of natural — exactly as it would seem to a person on drugs. When David Cronenberg sees this film, he may realize with regret that rotoscope animation would have been the perfect technique for his film *Naked Lunch*, another surrealistic exploration of the effects of drug addiction.

The official explanation for the film's delayed release is that the painstaking process of rotoscope animation required much more time than was originally anticipated; yet deciding how to market this film undoubtedly inspired some extended discussions as well. Based on a quick synopsis of the plot — a drug addict in a downward spiral gradually loses control of his life and hits rock bottom — advisers might suggest a limited release around Christmas time in hopes of attracting critical raves for its performances and nominations for acting awards. Yet, as an animated film, the only Oscar *A Scanner Darkly* might plausibly hope for would be the one for Best Animated Feature — even though, as a R-rated movie, it could not employ a colorful advertising campaign like those for its potential competitors like *Ice Age: The Meltdown* or *Cars*. An usher at the upscale theatre where I saw the movie repeatedly told a customer that the film was a "futuristic drama," as if repeating a given phrase intended to placate discriminating customers who might be turned off by the term "science fiction," while the promotional materials that ultimately emerged were an odd mixture of mutually contradictory claims — It's funny! It's tragic! It's based on reality! It's a graphic novel come to life! — evidently designed to keep the movie afloat by luring in some viewers with lies while other viewers attracted by the truth gradually provide favorable word-of-mouth publicity.

As for the eternal liability of Keanu Reeves, this film reveals that acting skills can radiate even through rotoscope images, and it will be apparent to any viewer that Reeves's talents remain vastly inferior to those of colleagues Harrelson, Downey, Wynona Ryder, and Rory Cochrane (though some might cynically argue that the others had the advantage of previous experiences as drug users, both on and off the screen). But oddly, in this case, Reeve's ineptitude doesn't matter at all — because in this film, when Reeves, characteristically, isn't paying attention to what the other actors are doing or finds himself incapable of projecting the appropriate emotion in a certain situation, it only serves to enhance the image of a person gradually losing touch with reality. In undertaking to play a man whose brain is being completely destroyed by drugs, then, Reeves has finally found a role that falls within his range as an actor.

It also helps that, for much of the film, Reeves appears not as himself playing drug addict Bob Arctor but in his other identity as Fred, the narcotics agent assigned to watch Arctor and his friends, a man who is perpetually disguised by a "scramble suit." These suits, taking wonderful advantage of the rotoscope technique, strikingly conceal one's real appearance with a constantly shifting kaleidoscope of fragmentary images of innumerable different individuals, which are both visually interesting and occasionally thought-provoking (in the first scene, I would swear that Fred briefly looks exactly like Philip K. Dick, and during the scene in which Fred is exposed as Arctor and sent to rehab, his superior officer wearing a

scramble suit momentarily and fittingly looks like a skull-faced Death).

As in the novel, what is supposed to be the central theme of the story — the powerful irony of a narcotics agent whose superiors unknowingly assign him to spy on and entrap himself — turns out to be relatively unimportant. Dick does, half-heartedly, try to employ the setup to explore some of his characteristic concerns about the maddening uncertainties of human identity, and these explorations are half-heartedly replicated in the film, but the real focus of his story is the devastating impact of drug addiction, as Dick explains in the novel's afterword (which, condensed and edited, is reproduced at the end of the film): "This has been a novel about some people who were punished entirely too much for what they did." In sum, these characters may be living in a near-future world of high-tech surveillance, and they may be in the clutches of the invented drug Substance-D, but they are also, as Dick acknowledged, based on people he knew whose lives were destroyed by drugs in the 1970s. And Linklater's film is powerful in large part because he is content to retell Dick's harrowing story with few significant alterations, frequently relying upon dialogue and narration taken directly from the novel.

Still, there are some changes in the film that merit some attention. Due to length considerations, some subplots — like Arctor's favorite recreation, the damaged "cephalochromosome," and his encounter with a female friend trapped in a relationship with an abusive man — are necessarily removed. Some sequences from the novel are truncated: in one chapter, Barris buys a ten-speed bicycle and then is distressed to observe that it only has seven gears. A young boy later explains that the bicycle's ten gears are the ten possible combinations of the settings of the two gears and the settings of the five gears, a logical explanation that subtly conveys how these characters are losing their ability to reason. In the film, Barris buys an eighteen-speed bicycle and then is distressed to observe that it only has nine gears; but the film never provides the explanation that the eighteen gears are the eighteen possible combinations of the settings of the three gears and the settings of the six gears, making the whole scene hard to understand for people who do not recall the episode from the novel. The novel's characters of Jerry Fabin and Charles Freck are combined into Freck (Rory Cochrane), which tidies up the story but also weakens the impact of what was, in the novel, Fabin's horribly tragic fate. And, undoubtedly to avoid lawsuits from the real Lions Club and the real McDonald's, Fred now delivers his speech about the evils of drug addiction to the imaginary Brown Bear Lodge and eats at the imaginary General Burgers.

As for Linklater's additions to Dick's story, one interesting place to look is the walls of the house where Arctor, Luckman, and Barris reside. The American flag on the ceiling — displayed upside down — may symbolize the freedom that Arctor and his friends are abusing by constantly taking

drugs, and the irony of the advice on the poster "Just Keep On Keeping On" to a group of addicts destroying their lives is obvious enough. Another poster featuring "June of '44" is initially puzzling until one recalls that the most famous event of that month was D-Day, the bloody invasion of France that here seems designed to recall Substance D. Most intriguing of all is the reference to the long-discredited urban legend that Walt Disney had his body cryogenically preserved after his death in 1965 — the poster "Time to Thaw Walt Out." What might this mean? That it is time to return to the era of Disney's greatest prominence, the 1950s, our last period of childlike innocence before addictive drugs became central aspects of American life? That Dick's drug addicts, who have effectively reverted to childhood, are now in need of Disney's entertainment for children? That Disney should be cruelly brought back to life so he could observe with shock and horror what people were now doing with the once-wholesome genre he introduced. the animated feature film? Or. conversely. is this an

announcement that is time to eliminate Disney's frozen pattern of animated films as children's fare and instead loosen standards so as to allow for mature, thoughtful animated films like ***A Scanner Darkly***?

Some of Linklater's other embellishments also serve to enhance the novel's story. I don't think Dick would have objected, for example, to the decision to have Substance-D take the form of a red pill, recalling another red pill once consumed by Keanu Reeves that had the effect of altering his perception of reality. While driving to San Diego, Arctor and his friends pass an exit for "La Mancha Boulevard," probably to recall Miguel de Cervantes's deluded adventurer Don Quixote, the Man of La Mancha. In one scene, Fred is monitoring his own house and observes a speeded-up scene of himself having sex with a girl, a possible reference to a similar scene in another movie about a likable degenerate, Stanley Kubrick's ***A Clockwork Orange***. (Or was it speeded up for the same reason that Kubrick did it — to avoid an X rating?) The license plates on the cars have no numbers or letters, only bar codes, a plausible innovation for rapid scanning by law enforcement officials and an understated way to ratchet up the film's atmosphere of paranoia. At one point in the novel, when asked to describe how much Substance-D he was taking, Arctor inaccurately replies "Not too much"; the film makes that phrase a repeated refrain, emphasizing the delusional denial that often afflicts the drug addict. And when Arctor calls his girlfriend Donna Hawthorne (Wynona Ryder) to arrange a drug deal, the novel notes that the conversation was surely monitored by authorities but ignored as too minor a matter to follow up on; the film visualizes this point, showing a human monitor sitting at a computer who presses buttons to analyze the voices, identifies the speakers as Arctor and Hawthorne, and ultimately decides "NO" to the question of possible arrest. However, I was less pleased with a last-minute revelation about Donna's identity that served, in my view, to tie up one loose end of the plot much too neatly, whereas Dick's fragmented conclusion to the novel seemed designed, among other things, to convey the message that the messy realities of life sometimes do not allow for loose ends to be neatly tied up.

Indeed, any analysis of the often-enigmatic works of Philip K. Dick must inevitably conclude with some unanswered questions. For example, what is the significance of the number 709, which is both the number of the Brown Bear Lodge which Fred addresses and the address of Arctor's house? Extensive internet searches along a variety of vectors have uncovered no plausible connections. However, in keeping with the themes of conspiracies and paranoia that so often permeated Dick's works, I am

going to assume that the number represents the film's subliminal message that the very best day to produce and publish a review of this film would be 7/09; so, at the moment I am writing these words — the afternoon of July 9, 2006 — I will shortly send this review to Mark R. Kelly of *Locus Online*, in the hopes that he will be posting it on the same day, thus fulfilling the conspiracy.

Gary Westfahl's recent projects include the Hugo-nominated **Science Fiction Quotations: From the Inner Mind to the Outer Limits** and **The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy**; samples from these and his other works are available at his [World of Westfahl](#) website.

