

Question 4:

Choose TWO of the science fiction videos/DVDs now held in the library (or in your own collection) and compare them in terms of ONE of the following questions:

(b) Is the time and place of its making recognisable in each film? Discuss any similarities and differences that you discern.

Two movies from my own collection:

Dark City (Alex Proyas, 1998)

Mad Max (George Miller, 1979)

Mad Max and Dark City are two science-fiction movies, which are highly opposite to each other in many aspects, involving their makings. One of them is a low-budget, 25-year-old classic, which initiated a genre, and the other one is a rather new and great visionary achievement with a great philosophy behind. The reason I chose to discuss particularly these movies is that they are both truly unique in their own style and taste. And with different approaches -in terms of both concept and making the movie- they both create a very powerful setting in the future. In order to analyse the making of these movies, we have to take a closer look at their concepts, storylines and settings.

While both of these movies are set in the future, each of them has its own characteristic way of describing the future. Actually in the beginning of Dark City, you have no idea about the time and place. The impression you get is, that this is a mid-size city somewhere in USA and the time can be anything from 50s to 70s. The movie opens up into a complete mystery. We meet John Murdoch, awakening to alone in a strange hotel to find that he has lost his memory and wanted for a series of brutal and bizarre murders. Not only the hotel, the murders and the "Strangers" (which look like "Guildsmen" of Lynch's Dune) are strange but as the movie goes on you find yourself in a huge puzzle. The element of mystery is vital in Dark City and is very well reflected in its time and setting as well. As I said it's really hard to tell but you get the feeling that this is a very similar atmosphere to Gotham City or a very dark Dick Tracy. Actually when you see the ending, it can be claimed that the setting is timeless but I believe it's rather set in a very distant future. This is mainly because of the comic book like atmosphere of the city. No coincidence it reminds us of Gotham City, Dick Tracy or even The Crow. The fact is the city is very fake in a very disturbing manner. You feel there's certainly something terribly wrong here. But the question is -which is directly related to my point- "Is it the making that's disturbing or is it the aim of the making?". Here is a viewer comment from imdb.com which further explains about it; *"Did anyone notice how fake the city looked? It was obvious they used miniatures. But this is good. I think they did this to give you the feeling that the city was all fake. I thought it was very very creative. They couldn't film in a real city because it would give away the feeling of the fake city, and well, how do get a city to stop to make a movie? I thought this was very creative of the makers of this film to do"*. Another comment goes; *"I agree. The city was, in the film, supposed to be an amalgamation of the past and the present in the minds of the citizens - and since the movie shows just how fickle and fragile memory can be, the city reflects that"*. The making of the city astonishes both viewers here. Not very expensive, yet so successful. As these two viewers say, the fake look of the city really improves the atmosphere of the movie, giving it a creepy, strange, unique and comic book characteristic. And the amalgamation of the past and the present, again enables

producers to create a totally unique form of architecture for the Dark City. But sadly, lots of other viewers seem to be annoyed by this ambiguity and vagueness in the setting, which led the movie to go very, very underrated. Many do simply not understand the movie and a lot of reviews and comments about the movie through out the net prove this.

‘The comic-book like setting’, ‘highly sophisticated philosophy of questioning reality’ and ‘the detective element’ are beautifully combined in this sci-fi. And this successful combination is what gives the movie its originality and its unique taste. And this is where the importance of its making steps in. The city which was created by miniatures and visual effects is a real success. They used more than 50 sets to create the city and some of them were set inside basketball arenas. (You can’t see such an element in Mad Max due to its budget and concept). The city is like a huge collage of different architecture styles and timelines and definitely gives us the taste of a comic-book city. Actually the settings were so successful that they used the same sets in the making of Matrix, which was mainly based on a very similar philosophy.

At the very end of the movie you as the viewer and John Murdoch as the Jesus figure protagonist realise the absolute truth at the same point. Throughout the movie Murdoch tries to leave, escape from the city. He finally breaks down the wall, which is actually the outer limit of the city, and he realises that he’s staring into the space. The puzzle gets solved when the camera gives us an exterior view of the city; it’s like a huge island floating in space. A completely artificial (fake) environment created by the min-powers of the psychic “Strangers”. So this Dark City, in fact up to be a vessel, an aquarium of the “Strangers” which enable them to examine the human way of living to find a cure and prevent their own extinction. Actually Roger Ebert uses the phrase “a post-modern un-reality genre” when he describes the movie. This is a pretty accurate remark because the plot of the movie requires a post-modern un-real making (which should be something that’s never tried before). And to sum up, that is the main reason what made both the movie itself and the making so unique and successful.

The making of Dark City needs so much money and complex new ideas. Mad Max reaches the same quality of uniqueness, however they use a totally different approach (with a totally different plot of course). Mad Max is set in a not so distant, post apocalyptic Australia. Considering the very-low-budget of the movie, it sounds a little difficult or does it? Let’s analyse the elements we have in the setting. “A post-world-war-III Australia”, “a vicious biker gang”, “cops” and a few “car chases and explosions”. It’s not so expensive is it? A post-world-war-III Australia... how would it be? A vast empty area with some poor towns and long, lonesome highways. Why not? Is it expensive to create that setting in Australia? Well, I don’t think so. So George Miller actually shoots an interstate road rash movie. And he makes it one of the most remarkable sci-fi movies ever! A lousy viewer comment is in fact very relevant to what I want to say here. He says, “...*What bothers me is how it is described as a sci-fi which is totally ridiculous. There is nothing in the movie that you can't see today and nothing that you couldn't see 25 years ago.*” Well that’s the magic! After world war III what are you expecting to see that you can’t see today or 25 years ago. In fact, thinking of the misery, decaying order and poorness a global war can cause, you should expect to see so very less. This is the trick, which enabled the making crew to pull up a great classic with a low budget. A biker gang, leather cop jackets, modified cars, violent highways and a few strange gadgets. And here we have our post-apocalyptic setting! And, you don’t need to see something you can’t see today to make a sci-fi movie. (How wrong the sci-fi culture is interpreted!) During the

making of Mad Max the “modified cars” was a vital element. To go along with the oldschool atmosphere of the movie the making crew actually used cars like “XB Ford Falcon sedan”, “General Motors Holden (GMH) HQ Monaro Coupe” and “Holden Panel Van”. And with a few modifications “the Interceptor” of Mad Max became so popular that even today there companies in Australia, which sell the exact replicas of “the Interceptor”.

While Dark City uses a timeless comic book setting to present us its topic, Mad Max chooses the elements of “interstate atmosphere”, “leather costumes, old school cars” and “road rash”. This description of the future by using “past elements” created a whole new genre and became so very successful. Many other projects were influenced by the setting of this movie (e.g. “Full Throttle” of Lucas Arts which is considered one of the best computer games ever on any console) Moreover it still is one of the best ways to make a setting in a post-apocalyptic future.

Dark City and Mad Max; both set in the future, both don’t look like the future and both are among the best movies that were set in the future. And both these movies owe it to their unique and recognisable making approaches.

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