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Science Fiction Cinema and the Crime of Social-Spatial Reality

Prior to his death in 1984, Michel Foucault, in his essay “Of Other Spaces,” made the announcement that the “present epoch will perhaps be above all else the epoch of space” (22). Fredric Jameson has similarly suggested that, following a “spatial turn,” postmodern culture is now “dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time, as in the preceding period of modernism” (16). Such assessments indicate that an analysis of postmodern culture, if it is to be complete, must include an analysis of postmodern space, which, as Henri Lefebvre contends, is itself socially produced (26). According to Lefebvre, the production and reproduction of a given social space occurs within a relational triad comprised of “spatial practices” (space as perceived), “representations of space” (space as conceived through knowledge, signs, and codes), and “representational spaces” (“space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols”) (38-39; emphasis in original)—all intersecting, overlapping, and at times conflicting to form a given social space. This means that one can understand the production of contemporary space only within the larger context of the modes of production and the spatial practices and representations of space at work within our present cultural moment.

As Vivian Sobchack has noted, contemporary sf cinema, in its attempt “to map the new world space we inhabit” (Screening 301), offers arguably the most fitting vehicle through which to perform an analysis of the production of contemporary social space. The dominance of spatial categories within the late twentieth century is nowhere more apparent than in sf film, a genre that from its inception has displayed a high-level preoccupation with the production, operation, and imagination of social space, particularly within urban environments. That is to say, in its various representations of other-world spaces (through which sf cinema both reflects and participates in conceiving this-world spaces), sf cinema provides a uniquely qualified medium through which we can explore the representations and practices that jointly produce postmodern space.

To extend the analysis of contemporary space via sf cinema, I wish to concentrate on two recent sf films that exhibit a number of interesting parallels: Alex Proyas’s Dark City and Josef Rusnak’s The Thirteenth Floor (both 1998). These films are particularly relevant to a discussion of spatial production for two key reasons. First, both are self-consciously as much about the spaces inside which the plot or action takes place as they are about the drama itself. Drawing upon the social ideologies and representational codes of film noir, the city space of these films attracts a great deal of the viewer’s attention. The primary dilemma in both narratives, in fact, surrounds the question of the exact nature of that space, suggesting that both films fit into a long tradition of sf stories in which the protagonist discovers that the world is not what it appears to be. In
Dark City a fugitive from the law discovers that the city space he inhabits is actually an island adrift in outer space, and in The Thirteenth Floor a computer company executive finds that the world he thought to be his “real” urban environment is actually a computer simulation. Secondly, again in the noir tradition, both films are at heart detective stories. In parallel plots, both begin with a mysterious murder for which the protagonist, who is transformed into an amateur detective, is the primary suspect. This inclusion of the detective figure is relevant to a discussion of space because detective fiction, much like sf, is inherently preoccupied with the space(s) inside and around which its characters live and move. The detective, roaming and observing, dramatizes the quintessential (thinking) subject who both participates in the production of space(s) at the cultural moment in which he lives and is in turn produced by those spaces. His function is to delineate his own position (space) within the state as well as the position (space) of all subjects since his primary task is to restore order, to put everything and everyone back in his, her, or its ideologically designated space. The detective is, in effect, the spatial subject par excellence.

The world confronted by the respective detectives of Dark City and The Thirteenth Floor is not, however, the rationally ordered world that produces the classic detective and that he in turn strictly maintains in the process of solving crimes. Within their sf modalities, neither functions very well as a stock detective story; with these worlds disintegrating before our eyes, it is difficult, for viewer and detective alike, to remain engaged with questions of whodunit. The films can be more accurately defined as variations on a recent subgenre more commonly associated with postmodern fiction—that is, the metaphysical detective story. While the conventional detective always solves the crime, restoring “rational” order by piecing together a trail of clues, the metaphysical detective fails to arrive at the moment of resolution. Despite its inclusion of all the necessary ingredients for a work of classic detection, “the new metaphysical detective story,” according to Michael Holquist, “is non-teleological, is not concerned to have a neat ending in which all the questions are answered, and which can therefore be forgotten” (153). The questions remain at the end; clues lead not to solutions but rather to other disseminating clues, and finally the “end” fails to achieve closure.

Admittedly, neither Dark City nor The Thirteenth Floor sustains the kind of full-fledged assault on the ideology of detection to which Holquist refers. In fact, both films conclude with fairly stock Hollywood endings: the mystery is solved, the good guy wins out over the forces of evil and, of course, gets the girl. Still, despite their attempts to tidy things up at the end, both films along the way offer considerable challenges to the detective’s ability to explain away the mystery through science or reason. But the power of the metaphysical detective story does not lie simply in its refusal to solve a crime that emerges within its pages; rather, its impact is felt in its suggestion that the real crime is “contingent existence” (Spanos 167), leaving the metaphysical detective as well as the reader (viewer) to grapple with a variety of existential questions. I characterize Dark City and The Thirteenth Floor as variations on the metaphysical detective story precisely because they implicate “contingent existence” as the culprit—in both
plots the solving of "murders" seems of little consequence in the face of the broader epistemological and ontological concerns raised by these sf mysteries.

More significantly for my purposes, in both films the detective's discovery of the nature of his "contingent existence" manifests itself most clearly through his discovery of his contingent spatial existence; the moment of "truth," so to speak, for these two detectives arrives when they become aware that the space they imagined themselves to inhabit is not at all what they had presumed it to be. In both cases questions regarding the nature of "reality" center on explorations into the nature of social space—a space that, in the sf tradition, has been radically impacted, or even produced, by "technological progress." The sf detective narratives of Dark City and The Thirteenth Floor suggest, then, a link between the production of social space and the construction of our lived reality while revealing, more specifically, the role of "advanced technologies" in the representation or production of social space under the present cultural logic—i.e., late capitalism. According to Lefebvre, late capitalism has conceived or socially produced an increasingly "abstract space," "founded on the vast network of banks, business centres and major productive entities, as also on motorways, airports and information lattices" (53). As we will see, it is the lived reality of this increasingly abstract space, and the representations of space that subtend it, that our sf detectives must confront.

The City at Night. In the opening scene of Dark City, John Murdoch (Rufus Sewell) awakens in a strange hotel room to discover the lifeless body of a murdered prostitute; uncannily, he has no memory either of who she is or how he came to be in this place. Suffering from complete amnesia, Murdoch cannot even recall his own name, which he "knows" only from the identification cards in his wallet, and while his wallet includes a picture of his "wife" Emma (Jennifer Connelly), Murdoch does not even recognize her. Uncertain of his identity and his involvement in the prostitute's demise, Murdoch turns amateur sleuth, roaming a metropolis that is literally always dark, and truly creepy, in an attempt to discover if he is indeed the murderer. Or as another character, the psychiatrist Dr. Schreber (Keifer Sutherland), suggests, Murdoch begins "searching for himself." Also searching for the murderer is a professional police detective, Inspector Daniel Bumstead (William Hurt)—a classic detective figure "consumed by details"—from whom we learn that the city has experienced a series of call-girl murders for which John Murdoch is now the primary suspect. But this is no ordinary case, nor is the city in which these two detectives search an ordinary urban space. As Dr. Schreber informs us during the opening credits, the city is actually controlled by a group of aliens, known as "The Strangers," who possess the "ultimate technology"; they can "alter physical reality by will alone." We later learn that these aliens are facing extinction, for some unspecified reason, and have come to believe that the human mind or consciousness holds the key to their future survival. Taking human bodies as their vessels will not suffice; The Strangers "must learn what it means to be human."

To this end, with the help of Dr. Schreber, The Strangers conduct experiments with the city's population by "imprinting" each individual with a template
of new memories. Using what The Strangers call "Tuning," every "night" at 12:00 they cause the humans to "sleep," at which time The Strangers alter the city—buildings and other structures literally change shape—while Schreber injects specific subjects with a new set of memories. When the humans wake, they do not notice the changes nor do they seem to have any memory of the past beyond the memories with which they have been imprinted. For example, in one of the most striking scenes, we watch as The Strangers transform a working-class couple into a wealthy, upperclass one and their tenement building into a mansion.

As with any valid experiment, The Strangers' inquiry into the nature of humankind requires a controlled environment, and, unbeknownst to the humans, their city is just that. As Murdoch ultimately discovers, there is no (inhabitable) outside to the metropolis. Rather, the city is a technologically-produced "planet" unto itself, afloat in outer space. As one of The Strangers explains, "The city is ours. We made it.... Each night we revise it. Refine it." During one of these revisions, Murdoch was to be given the memories of a serial killer—The Strangers being the actual killers—but Murdoch inexplicably resisted imprinting. According to Schreber, Murdoch somehow awoke too soon, before his new memories were fully formed, and as a result became immune to The Strangers' command to sleep. But what makes Murdoch of such interest to The Strangers is that he has himself acquired the ability to tune—this also appears connected to waking too soon—which leads them to believe that if they gain access to Murdoch's mind or "soul" they might ensure their own survival. Thus, while Murdoch searches for clues to the murder mystery as well as his identity, The Strangers search for Murdoch, as does Detective Burnstead, who continues to believe that he is investigating a routine murder for which a single human being is responsible.

Burnstead has actually taken over the case from a Detective Walenski who has apparently been driven insane by his involvement in the investigation. As it turns out, however, Walenski has, in fact, discovered the truth concerning The Strangers and their city, from which he recognizes that there is "no way out." Walenski, consequently, explains to Burnstead, "There is no case. There never was." It's all a ruse, or at least the killer cannot be found among the human population. As a result, the initial "case" soon fades into the background as the investigation turns instead to questions involving the nature of identity and reality. Eventually, even Burnstead, who holds out for an "explanation" for the city's oddities, is forced to face the "truth." In what is the beginning of the end, the two detectives, Burnstead and Murdoch, together break through the walls of the city to find themselves standing on the edge of space. Notably, while Murdoch literally retains his grip on the world, Burnstead, the classic detective, falls off the edge of the city and is sucked out into space, as if to suggest that the classic detective, with his reliance on "facts," can no longer survive in such an environment; rational explanations simply do not hold here. If there is such a thing as a resolution in this world, it will have to come from a new breed of superhuman detective—i.e., Murdoch.
Still, despite its questioning of "reality," *Dark City* does not end with the horrifying discovery that, as Walenski puts it, these humans are "just dreaming this life." Rather, the film climaxes in what can only be described as a tuning showdown between Murdoch and The Strangers, which of course Murdoch wins (though he requires help from Schreber, who imprints Murdoch with inside knowledge of The Strangers and the machinery they use to control the city). And after defeating The Strangers? In a gesture of pure platonic idealism, Murdoch simply "imagines a new world"—that is, he "tunes" into being a world of light that extends outward from the dreary urban center.

The Future is Now. The question remains, then, as to what exactly *Dark City*—and the same will be asked of *The Thirteenth Floor*—has to say to us about our present cultural moment. More precisely, how do these films portray the production of social space under late capitalism?

One way to answer this question is to argue that, at least prior to uncovering the city’s secret, Murdoch’s physical and psychological disorientation within the city as well as the structure of the city itself reflect the “mutations in space” that Jameson, famously, suggests have resulted in “postmodern hyperspace,” a space that has “finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world” (44). Like the subject caught within the “great global multinational and decentered communicational network” (44) that characterizes late capitalism, neither Murdoch nor his fellow urbanites can map the city or their position within the city; rather, as Sobchack notes, they find themselves “increasingly dislocated in space” (“Cities” 140). While they imagine an outside, or extra-urban position, they cannot seemingly locate such a place, at least not without the equivalent of supernatural intervention. In this respect, we might view *Dark City* as a surrealistic allegory of the postmodern urban space in which the subject struggles to locate his or her position within an overwhelming and increasingly abstract techno-capitalist network. In *Dark City* this sense of being lost within the techno-spatial matrices is further complicated by the collective amnesia of the city’s inhabitants, who remain unaware of their predicament; experiencing a truly “false consciousness,” they continue to act as if there is an outside to the city, as if they are not at all entangled within the ongoing technological modifications made by The Strangers. This loss of memory is maintained in part through The Strangers’ construction of the city, which they have “fashioned ... on stolen memories. Different eras. Different pasts all rolled into one.” The city combines a 1940s cultural backdrop with futuristic objects, as well as objects from the more distant past: syringes that appear to be Victorian, an art-deco clock, and an underground world that combines the medieval with sf. The overall effect of this eclectic mix of objects and images is not only dizzying but also forestalls any temporal, and consequently spatial, point of reference.

Eerily enough, The Strangers’ fashioning of a city out of a hodgepodge of past forms is not merely the stuff of sf; rather, such appropriation has become the model for the postmodern city, which is characterized by postmodern
architecture's penchant for "citing" or combining forms identified with different historical periods in a single object. In this way, the postmodern city has created "a 'palimpsest' of past forms superimposed upon each other, and a 'collage' of current uses, many of which may be ephemeral" (Harvey 66). As Jameson observes, this interweaving of historical forms not only acts as "a symbol and analogon" of the subject's inability to navigate "the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects" (44), but also aggravates the subject's disorientation, which results in part from a loss of historicity, of the historical referent, which has been replaced by "simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach" (25). Thus, in the "collage city," in place of the "historical referent," we are confronted by copies, citations that offer us a "series of pure and unrelated presents in time" that now make up the city (27). Dark City offers, then, a heightened form of the late-twentieth-century urban condition. While the subjects in the film literally have only fabricated memories of a "real" past, Jameson's remarks suggest that something similar may be said of the postmodern subject, who also experiences history as simulacrum, as a copy for which the original has gone missing.\\

They Know Not What They Do. But while Dark City reflects certain aspects of postmodern hyperspace as well as its effect on the subject, its commentary reaches back into the past, also providing an urban history lesson of sorts that connects the state of the postmodern city to the dreams of its predecessors, modernist or even Enlightenment thinkers who viewed "the conquest and rational ordering of space" as an "integral part of the modernizing project" (Harvey 249). Although I have noted ways in which The Strangers' urban creation reflects a postmodern aesthetic, they themselves are actually more representative of a modernist vision or a modernist desire to control space and unify power around the logic of the city, with its representation of space as rationally ordered. By turning the city into a literal machine (that runs on clockwork no less) and sealing that machine/space off from the rest of the universe, The Strangers create a clearly alien and alienating world—a place no viewer would ever want to experience. Yet modernist urban designers envisioned just such a city; in their "machine architecture" they themselves imagined buildings as symbols of technological modernity or cogs in a rationally designed urban machine whose logic was to penetrate and govern all space. As Lefebvre explains, the call for urban logic "to be total"—that is, the centrality of the urban to the production of space—comes with a cost in that to preserve the modernist fantasy, urban rationality must either absorb or expel that which appears to operate according to a different logic, mandating an element of violence that he suggests is "inherent in space itself" (332)—or is inherent in the production of space. But while the production of space demands violence, that "violence is cloaked in rationality and a rationality of unification is used to justify violence" (282). That is to say, the very spatial logic—a rationally organized space—that produces violence also hides or justifies that violence. This uncanny mixture of violence and rationality is represented in the person of
the hard-boiled detective, who in many respects is the quintessential subject of the modernist city. While the classic detective acts as a symbol of pure rationality, the antithesis of or antidote to violence—he comes in contact with violence, but only to eradicate it from an otherwise ordered environment—the hard-boiled detective (Philip Marlowe, Sam Spade, Mike Hammer), although still attempting to achieve a rational conclusion to his respective cases, regularly and unapologetically employs violence; the rational conclusion, in fact, justifies the violence he employs just as the violence inherent in the production of space is justified by the representation of a rationally ordered space. One might argue that our fascination with as well as our dis-ease with the hard-boiled figure can be explained by his ability to unmask for us the very violence that is inherent in the production of the modernist city. In similar fashion, Murdoch’s investigation uncovers the violence hidden beneath the “rationality” that unifies and justifies a city that is the only spatial logic its subjects know. But in the case of Dark City, this violence manifests itself more overtly in the production of the city space itself, which is repeatedly, violently re-fashioned. While the city’s inhabitants are oblivious to the inner workings of the city’s power structure, they are daily, or rather nightly, subjected to extreme forms of colonization that invade even the deepest recesses of their minds in order to absorb them into a totalizing urban design.

Of course, while The Strangers may control space, the city they have built is not exactly that which the modernists imagined. Under modernism, the logic of the city was to become total in large part because of its equation with progressive or enhanced forms of production (hence the envisioning of the city as a machine). The city in the film, on the other hand, is a clearly dystopic zone (not unlike Gibson’s “Night City” in Neuromancer or the waste-ridden future L.A. of Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner [1982]) that would hardly be equated with production. As we know, this has been exactly the fate of numerous real-world cities that, in the wake of modernism, have had to deal with unsightly postindustrial wastelands. Why have dreams of endless production turned into dystopic nightmares? Precisely because of the drive toward more efficient or accelerated production, which leads to overaccumulation, which brings circulation to a standstill. The Strangers’ city, bearing all the earmarks of this problem, is inundated with the signs of accelerated production and its aftermath (in the form of commodities and advertisements for them): nothing, and no one, is going anywhere, but all have become locked inside increasingly abstract networks that continue circulation for the sake of circulation. Bumstead’s investigation itself, which according to the tenets of classic detection ought to be going somewhere, ought to result in an end product, reflects this stagnation of production. While he goes through the motions, circulating among the city population asking all the right questions, The Strangers’ plan has him merely traveling in circles, investigating a case that in effect does not exist and, therefore, has no rational conclusion. He epitomizes the aftermath of a rationalized city that once imagined it was getting somewhere, yet now must face the nightmarish possibility of being “nowhere.” In short, there is no
production here, only reproduction. The Strangers have not produced anything new, but rather have simulated and recombined that which they gathered elsewhere.

As David Harvey points out, once such techno-economic problems cast their shadow over the city, urban space requires a “spatial fix” that “entails the production of new spaces within which capitalist production can proceed” (183). This means, ironically, that the “solution” to the problem of overaccumulation demands a search beyond the very spatial logic, that of the city, that still aspires to be total. This is one of the contradictions inherent in the totalizing impulse of the city—which under late capitalism is now imagined as a multinational entity—namely, that it can never in fact be total, because of both the potential for overaccumulation and the need for an “other” space or “extra-urban” space relative to which the rationalized city establishes its psycho-social dominance. Dark City reveals an imagined city that, as Sobchack notes, is both “hermetic” and “boundless” simultaneously (“Cities” 141); even when there is no outside, there is an outside. The success of a totalizing urban logic and its alignment with production actually depends on the idea of an outside; this is a point not lost on The Strangers, who are careful to build into the city the signs of an exterior space. The representation of a peripheral or qualitatively other space in this instance takes the form of Shell Beach, a sunny resort town that haunts the urban darkness, producing a nostalgia for a space that has ostensibly been lost. In fact, the crucial clue that leads Murdoch to a discovery of his supposed “identity,” or rather his imprinted identity, is a postcard he finds among his effects that shows a picture of Shell Beach, the place where Murdoch supposedly spent his childhood. Later, he encounters a billboard advertising this Shell Beach, complete with an eroticized woman waving as if to beckon all to come visit this sunny utopia. When Murdoch attempts to locate this place, however, he finds that no one in the city knows how to get there. Even a cab driver who claims to have spent his honeymoon at Shell Beach, and carries a souvenir from his trip on his dashboard, finds while trying to give Murdoch directions that he cannot in fact remember the way. And while the subway map indicates that it has a stop in Shell Beach, Murdoch cannot board the right train because, of course, Shell Beach does not exist, at least not in this world. As Murdoch eventually discovers, there is no outside to the city, at least not an outside occupying the same planetary space. The subway merely goes in circles, never venturing beyond the urban walls. Thus, Murdoch’s clue leads him to a destination that is no destination at all; signs lead only to other signs, leaving him to wander an indecipherable city with no end to the case in sight.

Yet, despite the fact that Shell Beach is purely fictional (a representation of space), the city’s inhabitants, with the exception of Walenski, assume that Shell Beach does exist and conduct their lives (that is, live space) accordingly. Their lives are in fact built around the illusion that such a place is out there awaiting them. In this respect, they exhibit what Slavoj Žižek terms the “ideological fantasy.” According to Žižek, “The fundamental level of ideology ... is not an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy.
Structuring our social reality itself (33), the same “social reality” that the detective serves to protect. Žižek argues that what subjects overlook, what they misrecognize, is not the reality, but the illusion that is structuring their reality, their real social activity. They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know. The illusion, therefore, is double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality. And this overlooked unconscious illusion is what may be called the ideological fantasy. (33; emphasis in original)

While the cab driver cannot give directions to Shell Beach, suggesting that he recognizes at least for the moment the reality of his inability to reach such a place, he continues to act as if the illusion, Shell Beach, were a reality, even fastening a souvenir or reminder to his dashboard. To give another example, when Murdoch asks Bumstead if he can remember the last time it was day, Bumstead answers that in fact he cannot, as if he recognized this all along; yet Bumstead insists that there “has to be an explanation,” meaning he continues to act as if day exists even though he “knows very well” that it does not.

The crucial point here, following Žižek, is that this not knowing does not simply act as a smokescreen for the “real” but is rather formative in the production of social reality, “which is possible only on condition that the individuals partaking in it are not aware of its proper logic” (21; emphasis in original). That is to say, the success of The Strangers’ experimental social reality is predicated on the lack of awareness on the part of its subjects, who must continue to overlook the illusion regardless of the reality it structures. As Žižek insists, social reality’s “very ontological consistency implies a certain non-knowledge of its participants—if we come to ‘know too much,’ to pierce the true functioning of social reality, this reality would dissolve itself” (21; emphasis in original). This might explain Walenski’s “insanity,” for in uncovering the “truth” regarding his memories and the structure of the city, Walenski does not so much locate “reality” as dissolve it. Unable to locate a hard and fast “real” beneath the false consciousness to which he and the others have been subjected, Walenski is left to conclude that he must be “just dreaming this life.” The horror Walenski, and later Murdoch, uneartths is that there is no “real Walenski” underneath the ideological illusion. His very identity is a simulacrum; the original is nowhere to be found. Or as Žižek puts it, ‘Ideological is not the false consciousness of a (social) being but this being itself in so far as it is supported by false consciousness’” (21; emphasis in original). But once this “false consciousness” is exposed or known, the “social being” dissolves, which might explain why Walenski chooses to throw himself in front of a train rather than continue as a non-reality. Walenski’s fate points to a crucial difference between classic detective fiction and its postmodern, metaphysical counterpart. In the former, the detective continues to act as if there is a rational solution even in the face of a mystery—e.g., the locked room—that seems to indicate just the opposite; that is to say, the classic detective acts—as does the reader—as if the case can be solved until this “fantasy” becomes a social reality, which in classic detective fiction it inevitably does. In believing that the inexplicable will be
explained, Bumstead, then, merely stays in character, so to speak. In the metaphysical detective story, on the other hand, the detective, despite any initial belief in rationality, finds himself, like Walenski and eventually Bumstead, confronting the possibility that there is no “solution” or “real” that exists outside the ideological fantasy. The metaphysical detective does not so much discover the “real” beneath the illusion, beneath the misleading mysterious clues, as he discovers that the fiction is his reality, which when exposed as such dissipates before his eyes.

The particular relevance of *Dark City* on this point is not only that it dramatizes the inner workings of the “ideological fantasy,” but also that it highlights the role that the production of space plays within the ideological. In a more traditional notion of ideology, space might be equated with the “concrete reality” or “real state of things” that lies beneath the miasma that blocks our ability to see reality for what it is—this view would present space as essentially empty and stagnant and equate it with pre-socialized nature or pure use value. The problem with this view is not only that such a space does not, in fact, exist, being rather “merely a representation of space” (Lefebvre 190; emphasis in original), but also, as Shell Beach exemplifies, that social space can be very much part of the “social reality itself” while ultimately not existing at all, or existing as only a representation of space. Furthermore, while Murdoch strips away the facade, uncovering a “spatial reality” beneath the false consciousness, this “spatial reality” is in fact a copy of some other reality—where presumably Murdoch’s “real place” and “real identity” exist—that remains forever out of reach. What Murdoch finds beneath the surface is not the “concrete reality” he desires, which as with a space of “pure nature” is always already irretrievably missing, but rather an ever-changing reproduction of some other space. Using Žižek’s notion of the “ideological fantasy,” we might alternatively view space as part of the “social reality itself” which is structured by the “(unconscious) fantasy.” As we have seen, while not a “real” place, Shell Beach is very much a part of the city’s lived experience or social reality (a site at which the perceived, conceived, and lived moments of Lefebvre’s triad intersect to produce a social space). At the same time, however, space can also be thought of as a *structuring element* within the “fantasy” that in turn structures that social reality, meaning that social space then is split, at one and the same time part of the “social reality itself” (space as lived) structured by the “(unconscious) fantasy” and a structuring element (space as conceived and perceived) of that “fantasy.” While on the one hand “social reality itself” is in part a spatial reality, structured by the ideological fantasy, on the other hand, as Lefebvre suggests, the “abstract space” of late capitalism is also “the locus and medium of the generation (or production) of false consciousness” (310). Shell Beach, then, provides the medium for the production of the fantasy that structures the reality of the urban experience; it is the form taken by the dream of an extra-urban space—a dream shattered at the moment Murdoch breaks through the wall to find, not a sunny utopia, but only more darkness.
The End of Enlightenment. Again, however, *Dark City* is not content to leave its viewers to grapple with ontological or epistemological uncertainties, nor with the horrors of dissolving social reality that we experience when Murdoch knocks down the walls of the city, opening the way for Detective Bumstead, our last hope for a rational explanation, to fall off the face of the "planet." Rather, the film provides a means by which Murdoch can accomplish the "impossible," can reach a space, Shell Beach, that never was, and in so doing seemingly offers the kind of resolution that the metaphysical detective story eviscerates. Having defeated The Strangers and claimed the city, Murdoch, using his superhuman powers, simply "imagines a new world" of sun, sea, and sand extending out from the city walls. In the final scene, Murdoch stands squinting in this sunlight next to his "wife"—who no longer remembers him because she has undergone another imprinting—gazing at the Shell Beach resort town that now lies at a distance. But despite the film's suggestion that the solution, at least the spatial solution, is at hand, this Hollywood resolution is in fact no resolution at all, but rather merely returns to the Enlightenment-based desire to master space through what Lefebvre terms the "logic of visualization." That is to say, Murdoch does not so much locate a new position of knowledge of or power over space as he returns to the Enlightenment dream of a distanced position outside or above, from which is constructed an imagined transparency; here, space is literally brought from the darkness into the light. While Murdoch's final position imagines total knowledge and control, as Michel de Certeau argues, such a viewpoint provides only "the fiction of knowledge" (92), for the "whole" of social space remains unreadable and unknowable (space as transparent is yet another representation of space). Furthermore, it is no coincidence that Murdoch employs the same power or technology that The Strangers use to repress and control through spatial production, for he is not enacting a solution but rather reenacting an old perception of space and spatial production that has been instrumental only in producing more repression and violence. This sunny ending offers an old modernist dream in a new sf form.

One might argue that Murdoch does not merely return us to the Enlightenment or Cartesian subject (the classic detective) but rather has become some kind of cyborg subject who, to use Jameson's terms, has mastered postmodern hyperspace by growing "new organs" and expanding his "sensorium" and "body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions" (39). This would mean that Murdoch, now a super-detector, has attained some kind of "real knowledge," rather than the "fiction of knowledge" of which de Certeau speaks. In a subtle, or perhaps unconscious, move, the film, however, indicates that Murdoch's knowledge of and power over space may not be as complete as it would appear on the surface. Tellingly, Murdoch never does get to Shell Beach. At the end of the film, he is actually standing on a pier that leads from the city to nothing, still imagining the resort from afar. Yes, Shell Beach now "exists"—that is, there now exists a geographical or material space to support the fantasy in which the city's inhabitants have collectively believed; however, Murdoch remains at a distance, and while he and his "wife" act as if...
they are on their way to Shell Beach, it is not quite clear how they are to get there, short of flying. From what the viewer can tell, they would have to reenter the city and exit at some other, unidentified point. As Sobchack notes, Shell Beach remains a "postcard construction of the protagonist's wish and will—as unstable and hermetic as the city he escapes" ("Cities" 141). In the end Murdoch reaches the space of his dreams, standing in the sunshine outside the darkened city, and yet that space continues to remain just beyond his reach.

It would seem, then, that even the "ultimate technology" does not erase all ideological and spatial contradictions. It is worth noting Žižek's argument that "contradiction" is in fact "contained in its [capitalism's] very concept" (Žižek 52; emphasis in original). Žižek explains that "The 'normal' state of capitalism is the permanent revolutionizing of its own conditions of existence: from the very beginning capitalism 'putrifies', it is branded by a crippling contradiction, discord, by an immanent want of balance: this is exactly why it changes, develops incessantly—incessant development is the only way for it to resolve again and again ... its own fundamental constitutive imbalance, 'contradiction'" (52). Technology aids the growth of capitalism, then, not by resolving its internal contradictions once and for all, but rather by offering a means by which capitalism can repeatedly respond to its "constitutive imbalance," spatial and otherwise—can demonstrate, often in dramatic fashion, efforts toward resolution without ever realizing that resolution in full. Like all technology, the "ultimate technology" is merely another in a long line of necessarily temporary resolutions to an ongoing socio-spatial dilemma (a list to which classic detective fiction as well as utopian sf both belong).

*The Thirteenth Floor, A (Cyber) Mystery.* Rusnak's *The Thirteenth Floor*, based on Daniel F. Galouye's 1964 sf novel *Simulacron-3* (also known as *Counterfeit World*), has much in common with *Dark City* both visually and in terms of content. As I mentioned earlier, it too incorporates sf and detective motifs, and it also begins with a mysterious murder for which the protagonist, Douglas Hall (Craig Beirko), is the primary suspect, causing Hall to turn amateur detective. Interestingly enough, as with Murdoch, doubts surrounding Hall's innocence stem directly from a loss of memory, though in this case the amnesia is only temporary. Furthermore, like *Dark City*, *The Thirteenth Floor* promises to make us "question reality." In this case, however, the epistemological and ontological uncertainties do not result from the presence of alien life forms but rather from the introduction of computer-generated virtual realities.

Unquestionably, cyberspace (including its portrayal in such VR movies as *The Matrix*) has come to play a significant, if not the leading, role in how we imagine and produce space at the onset of the twenty-first century. Much of the rhetoric surrounding the development of cyberspace has in fact suggested that in virtual reality we have discovered a new space that transcends the problems of this-world space. Scholars speaking from a variety of backgrounds and vantage points have promoted cyberspace as the ultimate "spatial fix" to a variety of problems, suggesting that cyberspace operates outside the constraints
of our repressive modernist past or, as preposterous as it may now seem, even outside the realm of multinational capitalism—a notion that became much harder to maintain with the introduction of seemingly endless advertisements on the Web. The portrayal of cyberspace that *The Thirteenth Floor* offers, however, indicates that virtual reality does not so much break with a former regime as it allows that regime to survive and flourish as never before. David Brande, in his reading of William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (to which I am much indebted), goes so far as to suggest that cyberspace “is a dream of late-capitalist ideology,” meaning it has itself come to “constitute, in Žižek’s terms, an ideological fantasy of crucial importance to advanced capitalism” (81). My intention in analyzing *The Thirteenth Floor* is to show not only that cyberspace does indeed stage an “ideological fantasy” through which techno-capitalism retains or even increases its power, but also that this “ideological fantasy” is not grounded upon a fundamentally new space or even a new representation of space. As Robert Markley contends, cyberspace is the product of “repackaged philosophies of space, subjectivity, and culture” (56). As we will see, like Shell Beach, cyberspace offers not so much a break from as an extension of the Enlightenment or modernist dream—the same ideological dream that produced the detective figure—of a world that could be both known (solved) and controlled.

As *The Thirteenth Floor* opens, a wealthy-looking gentleman named Hannon Fuller (Armin Mueller-Stahl) finishes off an evening at the Wilshire Grande Hotel in 1937 Los Angeles, or what appears to be 1937 Los Angeles, by handing a letter to the bartender with the instructions that it be given to Douglas Hall. The catch is that Hall is in 1999 Los Angeles, where Fuller is a computer visionary who has designed a computer-generated replica of the city of his youth that he now visits via a simulator. On this night, after exiting the system, Fuller telephones Hall, his right-hand man, saying only that he has “stumbled onto something incredible that changes everything.” But before Fuller can explain, a mysterious person seduces him into an alley where Fuller is later found murdered. When Hall awakens the next morning, he discovers blood on his clothing just prior to learning the news of his boss’s demise, yet Hall, uncannily, has no memory of the past night’s events. Meanwhile, the lead detective on the case, McBain (Dennis Haysbert) has already identified Hall as a suspect, largely because Hall is named the sole beneficiary of Fuller’s two-billion-dollar enterprise. After enduring some initial questioning from McBain, Hall returns home to find his only clue to the “truth,” a message from Fuller on his answering machine explaining that Fuller has left Hall a letter in the system, the same letter Fuller gave to the bartender. To solve the mystery, Hall must enter the system, something he has never done before, and become a virtual detective engaged in a classic search for a missing text that holds the key.

As Hall and the resident tech-expert Whitney (Vincent D’Onofrio) on the thirteenth-floor project explain to Detective McBain, Fuller’s simulation of 1937 Los Angeles is essentially self-sustaining—as long as no one pulls the plug—meaning this virtual world functions with or without a user; the simulated characters, or units, carry on with their lives even when Fuller is not inside the system. Fuller, Hall, Whitney, or any other user is assigned one of these units,
virtual replicas, to “enter” when jacked into the system. Hall’s remaining search involves virtual trips back and forth between the Los Angeles of 1999 and 1937, where he meets Fuller’s unit, who has been suffering from bouts of amnesia that correspond to Fuller’s visits. After a bit of detective work, Hall does cross paths with the bartender Ashton (Whitney’s unit), who has opened Fuller’s letter and discovered the truth that had so alarmed Fuller in the first place. While, in classic detective story fashion, Hall never does see the letter, during a physical confrontation with an infuriated Ashton, who attempts to kill him, Ashton relays its basic contents. According to Ashton, the letter instructed the reader simply to keep driving. As Ashton explains, heeding this message, he drove out of the city and into the desert, only to find that at the point where he should have reached the next city, he had shockingly come to the end of the world—in fact the end of the simulation, beyond which lies only a computerized grid.

The contents of Fuller’s letter remain puzzling, however, because it makes no sense for him to leave Hall, the intended addressee, such a message since Hall already knows that Ashton’s world is a simulation. While Hall ponders the reasoning behind the letter, another character enters the scene in the 1999 world. She claims to be Jane Fuller (Gretchen Mol), Hannon Fuller’s daughter, and she quickly becomes Hall’s love interest. Despite the fact that no one else knew that Fuller even had a daughter, she claims both that she is the rightful owner of her father’s company and that her father’s wishes were that the project be shut down. Later, McBain, who tells Hall, discovers that there is no such person as Jane Fuller, which leaves them both with a new mystery whose solution may hold the answer to who killed Fuller. Through a bit of detective work, Hall tracks down the woman who claimed to be Jane Fuller, a Natasha Millinano who works in a supermarket and claims to have no memory of Hall, but who does admit to suffering from recent amnesia attacks, much like Fuller’s unit, a fact that gives Hall the clue he needs to decipher Fuller’s message. The letter did not mean for Hall to “keep driving” inside the 1937 simulation, but rather in the world of Los Angeles in 1999. Hall, then, takes the same drive as did Ashton and, in a moment not unlike that in which Murdoch breaks through the walls of his world, discovers that his own world is a simulation as well (though, ever the strong, silent type, Hall does not appear as unnerved by this as we might expect). His world is what Scott Bukatman calls a “terminal space.” Thus, while the detective is successful in following the trail of clues, doing so does not restore the world but rather leads to the dissolution of its very foundation.

Of course, there is still the question of who killed Fuller, the answer to which is eventually provided by Jane Fuller, who explains that while Hall did commit the murder, Hall is not actually responsible since he himself is merely a unit inside a simulation. The “real killer” is, in fact, Jane Fuller’s husband, who has resorted to using the simulation to act on his murderous desires. Jane Fuller, who has presumably jacked in from the “real world,” explains further that there are actually thousands of simulations, but that this is the only case in which the units have produced a simulation within a simulation, which she has been sent to shut down. As we might expect, Jane Fuller has in the process fallen in love with Hall, who reminds her of what her husband used to be. The
problem, of course, is that they belong to two different worlds and while she can cross into his world he cannot, one would expect, make the ontological leap into the “real world.” The film, however, does not leave Hall to deal with the horrors of discovering that he is merely a simulation, at least not for long. Rather, Jane Fuller discovers that if a unit is killed in the virtual world while being inhabited by its user, an ontological breach occurs such that the unit, not the user, returns to the “real world.” Suspecting that her husband may now want to kill her, she calls McBain just before she knows her husband will be jacking in to the system, setting up a series of events that ends with McBain, who has himself discovered the “truth,” shooting Hall—or Jane Fuller’s husband—which allows the virtual Hall to be transported to Jane Fuller’s world. The film ends, not unlike Dark City, with Jane and Douglas united in the “real world,” looking over the ocean of a futuristic 2024 Los Angeles.

Like Dark City, then, The Thirteenth Floor questions reality only to offer yet another Hollywood answer. But, as with Dark City, we sense that the film questions more than it resolves, for along the way toward closure, The Thirteenth Floor exposes the underlying assumptions, or representations of space, upon which virtual realities have been constructed and, by extension, reveals certain spatial contradictions or dilemmas that even after the introduction of virtual reality continue to haunt capitalism.

In light of The Thirteenth Floor, it strikes me that cyberspace offers possibly the most fitting spatial representation for the very existential quandaries that the metaphysical detective story evokes. If metaphysical detective fiction implicates “contingent existence” as the real crime/criminal, then we might read cyberspace, as portrayed in this film, as a “material,” allegorical figure, representing the kinds of ontological dilemmas to which the metaphysical detective story is designed to draw our attention, for what form of existence is more “contingent” than that of a cyber-existence? The moment at which Hall discovers the edge of the grid stands in, then, for that moment when the metaphysical detective faces the fact that he can neither fully know nor rationally control the inner workings of the universe as he had presumed. Cyberspace works particularly well as a symbol of the kinds of ontological uncertainties that have come to the forefront in the postmodern moment because it has such a clear, metonymic relationship to late capitalism, which, as Jameson observes, is characterized by the consumption of images. While cyberspace, obviously, is all image, a purely abstract representation of space, in the film Hall finds that the image has passed itself off as a material reality; the bewildering moment for the detective arrives when, gazing into an uninhabitable grid (a figure of the unrepresentable, or the postmodern sublime), he must come to terms with the fact that his social reality is comprised entirely of images, of a surface lacking depth, leaving him, or the postmodern subject, unable to map his present position within either history or space.

Writing before the mass proliferation of cyberspace, Jameson offered John Portman’s Westin Bonaventure Hotel in downtown Los Angeles as a symbol of postmodern hyperspace. In his extended analysis of this building, Jameson remarks primarily on his “bewildering” experience within the space of the hotel,
which he finds difficult to navigate for a variety of reasons. One of the design characteristics that leads to this bewilderment is the building’s “curiously unmarked” exits/entrances, whose seeming absence creates a sense of inescapability. In light of this design peculiarity, Jameson concludes that “the Bonaventure aspires to being a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city” (40). Yet, the exits/entrances do exist, meaning the Bonaventure is at one and the same time insulated from while remaining a part of the larger city-space, a trait Jameson reads as a reflection of the multinational communicational networks of late capitalism, within which we find ourselves both cut off from (isolated) and fully networked (integrated) into the system. I would suggest that cyberspace exemplifies this dilemma even more strikingly. Clearly, the virtual world Hall inhabits “aspires to be total.” Exiting this space is much trickier than exiting the Bonaventure, but, of course, like all of cyberspace, it is simultaneously networked to different worlds, both real and simulated. The catch for Hall here is that it is not clear how one is to move beyond the grid, which it turns out is possible only through “unimaginable” modes of travel. Thus, in a more concentrated and recognizable fashion even than postmodern architecture, cyberspace in The Thirteenth Floor acts as a “symbol and analogon” of even the detective’s inability to navigate the overwhelming networks that comprise late capitalism.24

The Production of Cyberspace. While cyberspace certainly reflects or offers a metonymic vision of the larger cultural logic of late capitalism, its dramatization in The Thirteenth Floor suggests that cyberspace also acts as a formative agent within late capitalism, returning us to Brande’s suggestion that cyberspace is, in fact, one form taken by the “ideological fantasy” that constitutes advanced capitalism. If this is so, it is primarily because cyberspace allows us to imagine the kind of limitless space that capitalism ultimately demands. Tellingly, when questioned by McBain about Fuller’s cyber project, Hall suggests that “Fuller was onto a whole new frontier.” Hall’s choice of words suggests a link between the virtual space produced by Fuller’s simulator and the formerly open space of the western frontier that has played such a crucial role in America’s collective consciousness as well as in the spatial fantasy through which capitalism is perpetuated. As Harvey notes, “If continual geographical expansion were a real possibility, there would be a relatively permanent solution to the overaccumulation problem,” or a true “spatial fix” (183). Conversely, the survival of capitalism is guaranteed only so long as there remains the possibility of more space(s) that might be dominated, cultivated, or appropriated. This explains the need for an always-as-yet-uncharted territory, represented as “raw nature,” to exist outside the urban industrial or techno-economic center. While at one time the “old frontier” appeared as if it could fulfill this role indefinitely, could underpin the ideological fantasy that capitalism would advance without limitation, the realities of finite geographical and ecological resources have seriously jeopardized the capitalist dream of limitless “natural environments” that would support endless expansion. Fuller offers a “new frontier,” then, because the old frontier has gone missing, causing a spatial dilemma that The
Thirteenth Floor dramatizes most strikingly in its representation of the “real" (future) world in 2024 Los Angeles. In the final scene, we catch one of the few glimpses in the film of a space that extends beyond the city when Hall and Jane Fuller gaze out to sea from the California coast. What is striking about this futuristic world is that there are now high-rise buildings jutting up out of the ocean, suggesting that the formerly “natural” or “extra-urban” space of the sea has been encroached upon by the expanding city-scape.

Given that this future culture (which is not all that futuristic) has found it necessary to seek new spaces ripe for appropriation, it makes perfect sense that it would also employ computer technology in the creation of thousands of virtual worlds—yet another spatial fix. In response to the spatial crisis that has already necessitated looking beyond conventional geographical limitations or beyond what the physical land can hold, along comes the “new frontier” in the form of thousands of virtual worlds that, represented as having no limit, appear as the ultimate spatial fix. In effect, cyberspace provides the stage upon which the subject can once again imagine that space will no longer present an economic or even a metaphysical deterrent. As Markley suggests,

The fiction of cyberspace is useful precisely to the extent that it allows its proponents to imagine an androcentric reality in which a threatening, messy, or recalcitrant (and invariably feminized) nature never intrudes. In this respect, cyberspace is consensual primarily in its insistence that technologically mediated experience can transcend the ecological and economic constraints that have shaped and continue to shape human culture. It offers the fantasy that the more technologically sophisticated our society becomes the less it has to worry about the distribution of wealth and resources. (4)

Just as new modes of transportation speed up the circulation of people and objects through the circuits of exchange, cyberspace expands these networks of exchange, but seemingly without doing further ecological damage or taking up more space. To extend this argument to The Thirteenth Floor, or L.A. 2024, there is little need to worry about the possible ecological damage done by extending the city into the ocean so long as another world that is supposedly free from such encroachments exists in cyberspace. Thus, while the increasing loss of real-world space supplies the impetus for the creation of thousands of simulated worlds, in turn those virtual spaces mask the ecological and geographical consequences of market expansion. Rather than feeling the pressures of the increasing scarcity of space, the inhabitants of this world are allowed to enter a cyber-fantasy, or reenter a re-circulated fantasy of an endless “frontier,” which in turn constructs for them a new “social reality” in which there are, in effect, no spatial dilemmas—or to put this in terms of the detective story, no crimes to solve.

Interestingly enough, the loss of beach front that we witness in 2024—or the loss of the “quality” space of which Murdoch dreams—suggests that cyberspace has in some sense taken the place of the resort town in that cyberspace, even more so than the resort, promises the subject the possibility of escaping his or her present spatial condition. Cyberspace promises more than just quantity; it
promises quality as well. Lefebvre suggests that "desire" ultimately seeks "a space where it has full play: a beach, a place of festivity, the space of the dream" (353)—or better yet a cyberspace, which offers the possibility of "full play" as never before. In fact, one of Hall's discoveries in his search for Fuller's message is that Fuller was using the simulator as a sexual playground, spending much of his time with showgirls or prostitutes. Furthermore, Jane Fuller's husband David uses the simulator as a playground for killing, a space in which the id can run wild without social consequence or constraint. While both uses of cyberspace are demonized or at least stigmatized in the film, it nonetheless recognizes that cyberspace provides the very space for which desire calls. This is, of course, what makes cyberspace so attractive to both the consumer and the marketer of products. As Markley notes, "Cyberspace is the ultimate capitalist fantasy because it promises to exploit our own desires as the inexhaustible material of consumption," transforming the self into a "thoroughly efficient desiring machine" (74). In cyberspace even the limitations of the body, or what William Gibson terms the "meat," can seemingly be transcended, freeing desire to consume without limit. Represented as an infinite space free from the geographical and ecological constraints of "real space" as well as a space inside which desire has full play, cyberspace offers the medium or "ideological fantasy" through which techno-capitalism can perpetuate its promise of endless market expansion.

One of the interesting aspects of the film, in fact, is its representation of cyberspace as intimately affiliated with the corporation. While cyberspace, particularly in its nascent stage, was imagined as a space outside the grasp of multinational capitalism, The Thirteenth Floor asserts a clear connection between virtual reality and the corporate world (Gibson's initial versions of cyberspace, interlaced with corporate fields of data, has also suggested this relation, as has the movie Tron [1982]). The simulated world created in 2024 produces or reproduces a world in which the urban fabric appears to revolve around the logic of the corporation, so much so that it has even taken the place of the conventional home. In what could be viewed as a variation on the detective figure whose office acts as his home, Hall lives in the same building that houses his corporate office; his home and office are literally the same space. The simulator designed by those in 2024 does not so much free cyberspace from the grasp of multinational capitalism as tighten its grip; inside this simulated reality, seemingly all spaces are colonized by capital. For those in 2024, cyberspace provides the medium through which the ideological fantasy can perpetuate itself in order to construct a social reality in which the transnational corporation continues to work toward the colonization of all space. But what if the locus—i.e., cyberspace—of that ideological fantasy were shattered, so that even the detective cannot put it back together? Ultimately, this is the question with which The Thirteenth Floor presents us.

New Fix Same as the Old Fix. Like other metaphysical detectives, Hall does not so much solve a crime—in fact, no crime has actually been committed since the murdered Fuller is not even a "real" person—as he discovers to his dismay
that neither he nor the world he inhabits is what it appears to be. The “truth,” or better yet the “crime,” is that there is an end to his world, to cyberspace, at least at the point at which Ashton and Hall confront the edge of the simulator. And while there remains the possibility of extending this simulated reality, expanding its limits to the point that no user/unit would ever experience such a horrifying moment, Hall’s confrontation with the end of his world, which he previously could not even imagine, reintroduces, even if only momentarily, the very spatial problem virtual reality is said to resolve, leaving capitalism to confront its greatest fears, that lacking a space inside which it might expand, it will wither and die. Here that fear is realized. Hall’s discovery not only reminds us of the geographical reality that cyberspace works to mask, but if cyberspace is indeed the form of the ideological fantasy through which we construct social reality in “our world,” then Hall’s discovery both dissolves his own social reality and has the potential to dissolve ours as well. Thus, in ending his own “non-knowledge,” a non-knowledge that is obviously required to sustain Hall’s social reality, he, in effect, exposes the point at which our own ideological fantasy remains vulnerable.

Like Dark City, however, The Thirteenth Floor muffles much of the impact of Hall’s terrifying insight. Providing its own spatial fix, the film does not leave Hall to cope with the knowledge that his world has limitations; rather, the film transports Hall, and the viewer, to another world, L.A. 2024, which, we assume, has the distinct advantage of not terminating at the edge of our field of view. As a bonus, from his new home space Hall can visit thousands of virtual worlds, and Hall is now at last “real.” In this respect, the film restores the very fiction it calls into question, for the detective is not only provided a way out of the case he cannot solve, but is also afforded the opportunity to act as if the existential dilemmas with which he once grappled had little or no impact on the “real” world he now inhabits. Yet, while on one hand the final scene appears to repair any damage done to the spatial fantasy of late capitalism, on the other hand the same scene simultaneously points to another crack in the fiction that is perpetuated by cyberspace. I am referring here to the notion that the production of virtual reality comes at little or no ecological cost. As I pointed out previously, the film’s depiction of L.A. 2024 indicates not that cyberspace has solved the problem of a scarcity of space but rather that the problem not only still exists but has also been further aggravated, as evidenced by the expansion of the city out over the ocean. We might even argue that the development of thousands of simulated worlds not only does not stop the progressive exhaustion of natural resources, but that it also ultimately demands such activity. As Markley argues, “access to the presumptive world behind the screen carries with it an effaced history of labor, of people building machines to design and to build even more sophisticated hardware and software. The imaginary realm of cyberspace—of the reproduction and satisfaction of endless desire—is a fantasy based on the denial of ecology and labor” (77). The increasing scarcity of resources or spaces for expansion and the development of virtual realities have entered into a vicious cycle whereby simulated spaces require computers that
require industry and labor that have an ecological impact, which in turn is masked by the development of infinitely expandable simulated spaces. Still, as the final scene of the film suggests, the problem that cyberspace promises to erase remains in plain view.

This Is Not My World (Is It?). As we well know, one of the appeals of cyberspace is that its world, as well as the experiences of the user inside that world, appears of little consequence in the "real" world. If a given virtual world is unsatisfactory, we can choose either to shut it down—Jane Fuller's solution—or we can simply not jack in. Hall, for instance, is far from disturbed by Ashton's confrontation with the ends of space in the 1937 virtual world because Hall already knows that the simulation has limits and he sees those limits as belonging exclusively to that world. So while Hall empathizes with Ashton's disillusionment, he does not experience that same disillusionment regarding his own world. However, when Hall discovers that his world is no different from Ashton's, he can no longer ignore the implications and is forced to question the ideological fantasy that has structured his life. The key here is that he begins to rethink the self and his world only after the "dream" that structures his "real" social experience is dissolved. In this respect, Hall's experience with Ashton and Ashton's cyber-world mirrors the audience's experience of Hall and Hall's world; his discovery may cause us to empathize, but we can easily remind ourselves that he is not "real" (twice over) nor does his world function according to the same logic as our "real" world. This might, in fact, explain why the film fails at times to generate in its audience with the kind of existential dread one might expect as a result of discovering that the world is merely a simulation. But just as Ashton's world tells Hall more about his own world than he initially realizes, we should not miss the ways in which Hall and his simulated world mirror the postmodern subject and our "real-world" social space.

While Hall's discovery that he and the space he inhabits are merely computer-generated abstractions dramatizes an extreme scenario, Lefebvre suggests that even prior to the onslaught of cyberspace, late capitalism was gravitating toward abstraction and the production of "abstract space." Operating according to the "logic of visualization," within abstract space "all of social life becomes the mere decipherment of messages by the eyes, the mere reading of texts" (286). The abstract space of late capitalism is not simply the space inside which the sign reigns, where the image is the object of consumption; it is itself all sign (again, here the representation of space is the lived reality). Lefebvre argues that within this space an "extraordinary—indeed unthinkable, impossible—confusion gradually arises between space and surface, with the latter determining a spatial abstraction which it endows with a half-imaginary, half-real physical existence. This abstract space eventually becomes the simulacrum of full space" (313). This "space offers itself like a mirror to the thinking 'subject', but, after the manner of Lewis Carroll, the 'subject' passes through the looking-glass and becomes a lived abstraction" (313-14). In light of Lefebvre's comments, our social "reality" (ideological fantasy) begins to look
strikingly like Hall's cyber-reality, in that cyberspace as well as Hall's condition, that of a "lived abstraction," do not represent so much a new reality as an extension of the ongoing production of space in accordance with the inner workings of advanced capitalism and its march toward abstraction. In this respect, cyberspace is merely the latest form taken by an ongoing process involving multiple socio-symbolic registers.²⁶

The film attempts to mitigate much of this by moving Hall up one level to the "real" world, ostensibly restoring him as a Cartesian subject, where it is assumed he may now begin experiencing a more "real" version of encounter with his world and other humans. In effect, Hall reemerges from the looking glass. The final scene is striking, however, in its pure visuality. In the scene, L.A. 2024 is actually framed by the glass doors that open onto a deck on which Hall now stands visualizing his new "social reality." It is as if we are looking through yet another screen, gazing upon a city that appears even more abstract than the city inside the simulated world that Hall has "escaped."²⁷ While the urban image Hall consumes allows him to sustain his fantasy—the fantasy of the detective—of having located the "real" beneath the ideological facade, the framing of this scene suggests a much more harrowing "truth" revealed by his cyber-investigation, that, again as Žižek suggests, the fantasy, or in terms of late capitalism the image, is the reality. In other words, abstract space does not cover for but is the spatial reality of late capitalism. Furthermore, while Hall's entrance into a new (real) space provides a source of optimism, it is important to note that, like Murdoch, Hall, although poised on the verge of entering a sunny new world, does not in fact enter it. The movie ends with Hall imagining the urban reality rather than experiencing it, as if the city remains a simulation, a "terminal space" even outside the "terminal." Hall has not stripped away the ideological fantasy (has not solved the crime) in order to experience the real, but has instead found a way to continue believing in the (spatial) fantasy that, despite what he knows, once again structures his social (spatial), lived reality.

In this respect, The Thirteenth Floor indicates that cyberspace does not in the end offer the advance in spatial production or logic with which it is often credited. Rather, it reproduces the space of which capitalism has always fantasized. The irony of Fuller's "new frontier" is that it is not new at all (either materially or symbolically) but merely a reproduction of the simulated world that, as a unit, he already unknowingly inhabits. While one of cyberspace's selling points is that it promises to deliver us into an entirely different space that transcends the problems and limitations of this world, as if it operated according to an entirely new logic, Fuller's new frontier is merely a copy of a copy, an abstract concept produced by an abstract concept. What this indicates, as Markley has argued, is that this representation of space as cyberspace does not so much supply a break from Western metaphysics as offer the latter a new medium in which it might flourish. The epigraph to The Thirteenth Floor is Descartes's famous "I think, therefore I am," suggesting that cyberspace merely extends the tradition of Western metaphysics, the same Western metaphysics that has produced both the detective figure and the rationalized space he inhabits and
protects. To return to Harvey, cyberspace arises from the same Enlightenment/modernist thinking that prioritized "the conquest and rational ordering of space" as "an integral part of the modernizing project" (249). This does not mean that cyberspace corresponds to the same modes of production that characterized earlier historical periods, or that those of us living in the present moment experience space in the same way as those living during earlier historical periods. Post-World War II culture has certainly seen a significant transition in both the form of capitalism and the production of space. The link between cyberspace and the tradition of Western metaphysics does suggest, however, a common thread that runs through and connects the history of space as perceived, conceived, and lived with the regeneration of capitalism in its various forms.

While cyberspace may present a more abstract form than, say, the Western plains, the dream of a space that can be mastered both physically and mentally remains the same. It is no coincidence that just when the perception of space as an object subject to rational control begins to appear less viable, cyberspace arrives on the scene to revive that dream— that is, until the detective, the thinking subject, discovers that cyberspace has its limitations as well. The Thirteenth Floor and Dark City indicate that, if anything, technology only exacerbates the problem by providing a vehicle through which the subject can once again imagine, possibly more vividly than ever, that space can be produced according to human desire, as if "advanced" technology will allow us all to circumvent or transcend the limitations of the now darkened city and enter the kind of utopian space of which the Enlightenment could only dream. What remains with us from these two films, however, is not so much the sunny utopias with which they end, but rather those "darker" moments when Hall and Murdoch reach the end of the world (or the metaphysical grid) to expose the crime that both science fiction and metaphysical detective fiction have been calling our attention to all along: the crime of contingent (spatial) existence.

NOTES

1. This would explain why so many of those who have attempted to theorize late-twentieth-century culture—including Jameson and Foucault, as well as David Harvey, Michel de Certeau, Edward Soja, and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari—have recognized the need to put space squarely on the critical agenda.

2. Along with Sobchack's work, Kuhn's collection Alien Zone II and Bukatman's Terminal Identity are examples of recent sf scholarship where social space is discussed.

3. Science fiction is also useful in that it acts as a vehicle by which one can gain critical distance, even if this distance remains tenuous, from the present moment. As Jameson contends, sf does not simply provide a "representation of the future (although its various forms use such representations)"; rather, sf allows the reader or viewer to grasp "the present as history: that is, as a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarizes it and allows us that distance from immediacy which is at length characterized as a historical perspective" (284). Sf is, then, doubly useful to my project, both drawing our attention to the production of social space and providing a means by which we might gain the distance necessary to analyze the social spaces produced by and within the postmodern moment.
4. As Kuhn points out in her editor’s introduction to the section “City Spaces” in *Alien Zone II*, such attention to spatial setting is not uncommon in sf film, where often “the place itself becomes the story” (75).

5. Other recent films in which the world does not accord with the characters’ or the viewer’s perception of it include *The Truman Show* (1998), *eXistenZ* (1999), and *The Matrix* (1999).

6. One of the fundamental rules of the classic detective story is that it must provide and adhere to strict spatial boundaries. The murder generally takes place within an isolated or sealed environment: a hotel, a train, or even a locked room. Furthermore, as Ralph Willet argues, the private eye has played a crucial role in the formation of our notions of twentieth-century urban space because of his unique construction as the (male) subject who “sees and deciphers the signifiers of that labyrinth of populated spaces and buildings which forms the modern metropolis” (3).

7. Lefebvre argues that subjects are not constructed through or in language alone; additionally, “all ‘subjects’ are situated in a space in which they must either recognize themselves or lose themselves” (35). Since becoming a subject involves accepting “a role and a function” that “implies a location, a place in society, a position” (182-83), subjectivity must be recognized as at least in part spatial in nature.

8. Speaking specifically of science fiction, Elana Gomel uses the term “ontological detective story.” She argues that “in the sf modality … it is the body of the world, so to speak, rather than the body in the library that soaks up all the mysterious and malevolent energies attributed to the corpse in detective fiction. The question to be answered is not ‘who done it?’ but rather ‘what is it?; the secret of death is supplanted by the secret of being” (345-46).

9. For further discussion of metaphysical detective fiction, see Merrivale and Sweeney’s collection *Detecting Texts* and my own essay “Approaching the Threshold(s) in Postmodern Detective Fiction.”

10. Novels in which one finds such an assault on the ideology of detection include Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* (1983), Paul Auster’s *THE NEW YORK TRILOGY* (1985-87), and Peter Ackroyd’s *Hawksmoor* (1986).

11. As much as the metaphysical detective novels break ontological, spatial, and temporal barriers, for the most part the books that epitomize this subgenre predate cyberspace. These two films are useful, then, in that they allow us to talk about recent technological “advances” that purport to have fundamentally altered the perception of space.

12. I emphasize the second “moment” of Lefebvre’s triad here because, as he indicates, representations of space (which are necessarily abstract) are the “dominant space in any society” (39). This does not mean, however, that spatial practices are not involved in the production of abstract space; as Lefebvre explains, the three moments of the triad engage in an ongoing relationship that is “never either simple or stable” (46).

13. The Strangers might be viewed as physical manifestations of, or allegorical figures for, the generally unnameable forces explored in metaphysical detective fiction and its dramatization of the “global paranoia” Jameson associates with late capitalism.

14. In this respect, *Dark City* displays a number of parallels with Auster’s version of metaphysical-detective fiction in *THE NEW YORK TRILOGY*.

15. Jameson suggests that subjects who experience postmodern hyperspace cannot perform cognitive mapping because they “have not kept pace with that evolution [of space]” and, therefore, “do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace” (38). In this respect postmodern hyperspace “stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet
unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions” (39). Interestingly enough, Murdoch is able to cognitively map his position, if indeed he does learn to do this successfully, only after experiencing just such an evolution, only after expanding his sensorium to the point of being able to perform the unimaginable.

16. For further discussion of Jameson’s analysis of postmodernism in relation to contemporary sf film, see Sobchack’s Screening Space, whose final chapter is devoted to working through the implications of Jameson’s work.

17. For further discussion of the results of overaccumulation, see Harvey’s Condition of Postmodernity.

18. In her reading of dystopic sf urban environments, which highlights Blade Runner, Sobchack argues that they offer “irrefutable testimony to the success of material production. The omnipresence of waste serves as a sign that the digestive tract of advanced capital’s body politic must still be working, indeed working ‘overtime’ and at full capacity” (“Cities” 135). While generally her assessment seems correct, she overlooks the ways in which this “working overtime” leads to overaccumulation and, consequently, to stagnation in production, which explains why it is commonplace in dystopic sf zones to witness the recycling of the artifacts (products) produced by a former cultural logic.

19. There is an interesting connection here to Derrida’s discussion of the message that never arrives in The Postcard. While in Derrida’s case the postcard symbolizes the lack of destination of the message, here it represents the lack of destination of the subject himself—or, in other words, a more overtly spatial version of Derrida’s theories of writing.

20. This is the notion that the distanced critic (geographer, planner, cartographer), the roaming eye who views from a supposed non-space, can master and control all space in accord with the Enlightenment project, which, again, “took the domination of nature as a necessary condition of human emancipation” and because “space is a ‘fact’ of nature, this meant that the conquest and rational ordering of space became an integral part of the modernizing project” (Harvey 249). Thus, the Enlightenment created a “new organization of space dedicated to the techniques of social control, surveillance, and repression of the self and the world of desire” (Harvey 213), all centered around this “logic of visualization.”

21. Sobchack goes on to suggest that the fantasy of Shell Beach is connected to other recent filmic representations of spaces that attempt to escape the city. “In recent paranoid fantasies such as The Truman Show or Pleasantville (both 1998), the small town offers no satisfactory escape from science fiction’s urban nightmares. Indeed it offers merely a sunnier imagination of inhospitable space” (“Cities” 141-42).

22. Of course, The Thirteenth Floor is not alone in its use of VR to address epistemological and ontological questions: films such as The Matrix and eXistenZ (both 1999) take up the same issues and have actually garnered more critical and popular attention. Rob Latham’s essay “VR Noir” covers some of the same philosophical ground as do these films in an analysis of Kim Newman’s sf novel The Night Mayor (1989).

23. Bukatman defines terminal space as the “realm of virtual reality and real-time, interactive, computer-generated environments” (107), but it seems especially apt in Hall’s case both because Hall experiences his world virtually and because this space indeed has an end limit.

24. While Hall’s confrontation with the ends of his virtual world would appear to be pertinent only to those existing in the age of advanced technology, it is worth noting that his discovery actually has a good deal of relevance for a long line of urban detectives. One of the predominant features of such detectives as Chandler’s Marlowe is that they
are so completely integrated into the space of the city, which is represented as an almost hermetically sealed environment, as if the organizational logic of the modernist city had in fact become total. For all intents and purposes, Marlowe’s world is Los Angeles and Los Angeles only. In this sense, Hall’s discovery that his world is strictly limited to the (virtual) city makes material the urban detective’s spatial condition all along, that of being locked inside an urban environment that imagines itself to be total. By allowing Hall to confront the ends of his world, the film implies that the very figure who patrolled the rationalized modernist city always existed in something like a spatial impossibility that can no longer be sustained. The detective’s existence (space), as it turns out, was always contingent.

25. Here we witness another similarity to The Thirteenth Floor’s sf precursor, Blade Runner, in which the building that houses the Tyrrell corporation structurally dominates, in its overwhelming size, the futuristic urban landscape.

26. For further discussion of the historical progression toward abstraction under capitalism within the economic and subjective registers, see Goux’s Symbolic Economies.

27. Concluding in her reading of Jameson that “we no longer experience any realm of human existence as unmediated, immediate, ‘natural’,” Sobchack suggests a similar reading of the ending of Blade Runner. She explains, “This new sense we have that everything in our lives is mediated and cultural explains, perhaps, why Deckard and Rachel’s escape into the ‘natural’ landscape ... seems so implausible and artificial. The landscape seems completely imaginary—unnatural in its ‘naturalness’” (Screening 237).

28. Bukatman similarly connects the emergence of cyberspace with the disappearance of a former urban logic: “Cyberspace arises at precisely the moment when the topos of the traditional city has been superseded” (122).

WORKS CITED


This article analyzes the recent films *Dark City* and *The Thirteenth Floor* (both 1998) as metaphysical detective stories in which the detective protagonist’s investigation of a murder turns into a confrontation with the nature and limits of the spaces he inhabits. Using Henri Lefebvre’s notion that space is a social product, I suggest that both films contribute to an understanding of the production of social space in their exploration of the recent technological “advances” through which late capitalism has sought to extend its reign over space and of the role that virtual spaces have played within the “ideological fantasy” that constitutes our present social (spatial) reality. I conclude that these films ultimately reveal that while “advanced” technologies promise to produce new, liberated spaces, they in fact extend the Enlightenment/capitalist dream of a social space that can be rationally ordered and controlled.