

# Glancing blows: *A Scanner Darkly* and *Strangers with Candy*

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*A Scanner Darkly*, directed by Richard Linklater, based on the novel by Philip K. Dick; *Strangers With Candy*, directed by Paul Dinello, written by Dinello, Amy Sedaris and Stephen Colbert

In director Richard Linklater's *A Scanner Darkly*, based on the 1977 science fiction novel by Philip K. Dick, a powerful drug—Substance D (as in Death)—has taken hold in the US “seven years from now.” Twenty percent of the population is addicted. The authorities are using the drug epidemic as an excuse to step up surveillance and control of the population. A giant corporation, New Path, seems to be manipulating the situation for profit.

Robert Arctor (Keanu Reeves) lives in a household of drug users, including James Barris (Robert Downey Jr.) and Ernie Luckman (Woody Harrelson). Another cohort is Charles Freck (Rory Cochrane), whose addiction has led to psychosis; Arctor's dealer and “girl-friend,” Donna Hawthorne (Winona Ryder), has reached the point in her unraveling where she doesn't like to be touched.

Arctor has another, competing identity, as an undercover policeman, “Officer Fred,” dressed in a “scramble suit” that conceals his identity, who gets assigned to spy on his own household in hope of finding the source of the drugs.

As “Fred,” Arctor watches himself on some sort of recorder (the “scanner” of the title) at police headquarters. Addicted to Substance D himself, Arctor's personalities begin to separate, the one less and less aware of the other. Tests conducted by police psychologists suggest that he has lost his identity. The various housemates betray one another. Freck commits suicide. Arctor's health begins to deteriorate seriously. He enters a rehabilitation clinic operated by New Path, and seems on the verge of discovering a startling truth.

*A Scanner Darkly* is an animated film. Linklater, as he did in *Waking Life* (2001), has used “interpolated rotoscoping.” With this technique, film is shot of the actors and settings and then animators paint over the images.

The film has two central preoccupations, recreating the atmosphere of a certain type of drug-dominated community (Philip Dick, according to one commentator, lived “semi-communally with a rotating group of mostly teenaged drug users at his home in Marin County” in the early 1970s, during

which time he became entirely dependent on amphetamines) and commenting on the growth of police powers and abilities to monitor people's lives and thoughts.

In regard to the first concern, Linklater told an interviewer for *Filmmaker* magazine, “When I read *Scanner*, I intuitively felt that it was probably his [Dick's] most personal work. It felt like he had lived this world, [the characters] felt like every roommate he had and half the roommates I had at a certain time in my life. It felt very familiar, the way you just sort of ‘end up’ around people. You can see how that house became a kind of crash pad. One group moved out—his family—and another group, these ne'er-do-wells, move in. It's fun for a while, but then it spins out of control.”

The question is, 20 or 30 years after the fact, why should this circumstance be of any great interest to anyone? The drug “counterculture,” despite its pretensions, never produced anything of insight or lasting value. It merely generated its own specific set of delusions and diversions. It was disturbing, and tedious, to observe in the 1970s and remains so some decades later. Why does Linklater insist on returning to this worn-out subject? Presumably, in some fashion, he remains a bit nostalgic for that earlier epoch. Even if the “scene” is treated in a critical, even unflattering fashion here, it remains a central theme.

As I noted several years ago about Linklater's *Waking Life*, “These people simply do not impress in any shape or fashion. It all feels like something that might have been fresh and even daring in the latter days of the Reagan administration.” A good deal of water has flowed over the dam since then.

As for the filmmaker's treatment of a vaguely authoritarian regime in power “in the near future,” he makes clear in interviews that this refers to the present situation in the US under Bush and company. Linklater told the same interviewer: “Dick wrote this paranoid future, and my premise with the movie was that we are living in science fiction now. This is the paranoid future.... There's always a time to be a little paranoid about your government, but I think that's hit another peak today. If you put a peak in a chart during the Nixon era, I think we're at another little peak in the graph, a spike up, today in the Bush administration. What he was writing about, which we would term paranoia, well, you just wait a generation and

paranoia becomes reality quite often.”

The hostility toward the Bush administration and its police-state ambitions is legitimate and no doubt deeply felt, but it is not particularly well developed in *A Scanner Darkly*. Dick’s concern with drugs, personality and paranoia feels dated; how does its inclusion help clarify our present reality? The drug question merely confuses the issue. Frankly, the activities of Arctor’s circle, their general disorientation and often downright nastiness, blunt the criticism of police spying. The film hardly rises to the level of a serious warning about the dangers of a police-state.

In any event, the notion that gigantic, sinister corporations or government agencies hold unfettered sway over an atomized and defenseless population is neither helpful nor accurate. How does that help anyone come to terms with the enormously complex reality of contemporary American life? The population is not defenseless and the powers that be not omnipotent. This is all too easy, in a typical “radical” manner. Why not try something more difficult, actually making sense of the state of social life in the US?

In the current manner, critics write admiringly of Dick’s, and Linklater’s, blurring of hallucination and “reality.” (If the word reality were not placed in inverted commas in certain publications, an internal investigation would most likely be launched.) Arctor’s dilemma, that he is both spy and spied upon, drug addict and policeman, traitor and betrayed, two selves and “no self,” is this a compelling problem? For whom? Those attracted to this question should perhaps tell us more.

Animation, in my view, should be preserved for the genuinely outlandish and fantastic. Here it simply distracts and detracts. I would much prefer to see not the wavy outlines of the actors’ faces, but the faces themselves.

Linklater is a sincere and humane individual, but he continues to tread water, and not the most fascinating or freshest water at that. He needs to recognize: the radicalism and counterculture of the 1970s exhausted itself a good many years ago. It cannot be revived. Something different is needed today, something far more deep-going and complicated. In the first place, if the filmmaker turned his attention to a serious study of history and politics, in my opinion, it would help his art.

*Strangers With Candy* is an odd, absurdist, occasionally quite funny film, based on the television series on the Comedy Channel. Amy Sedaris stars as Jerri Blank, back in town after several decades in prison. Finding her father in a coma, Jerri decides to take up her life where she left it, at 15, in the hope that some newfound success in life will bring her father back to consciousness. She promises to be “the good girl I never was and never had any desire to be.” Overweight, cross-eyed and bucktoothed, Jerri makes a memorable impression.

She enrolls in high school and becomes involved in a competition between rival factions at her school to carry off a trophy at the science fair. The principal, Onyx Blackman (wonderfully played by Greg Hollimon), a thoroughly corrupt,

fast-talking individual, has embezzled a serious amount of cash, and the prize money will make up for the missing money.

Jerri comes on to classmates of both sexes, has no shyness about anyone’s body parts and generally offends every sensibility.

Unfortunately, only about 30 percent of the film hits the mark. Stephen Colbert (now deservedly best known for his satirical assault on George Bush at this year’s White House press correspondents’ dinner) is amusing as a born-again, married and gay science teacher, involved with the art instructor (Paul Dinello). Colbert is wonderfully self-involved, telling his boy-friend as he breaks off their relationship, “I need more out of this relationship than I’m willing to put in. I think I deserve better. Don’t you?” and “I wasn’t pushing you away. I was pushing me toward myself.”

The film, with hints of John Waters’s pointed tastelessness, has a number of nice touches including a grief counselor at the school (Sarah Jessica Parker) who keeps a tip jar on her desk. Matthew Broderick, Allison Janney, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Kristen Johnston, Ian Holm, Dan Hedaya and Deborah Rush make appearances.

Sedaris, sister of the writer David Sedaris, apparently created the character and television show with Colbert and Dinello at Chicago’s Second City. The original series ran on cable television in 1999-2000, and the film was shot two years ago—distribution problems held up its release until now. The material feels a little stale and, in any event, too much like an overextended television skit. Moreover, its amusing stretches are easily matched by moments that are simply peculiar.

Like a great deal of humor today, *Strangers With Candy*, by and large, lacks ferociousness in regard to the truly deserving targets and wastes too much time on trivial matters. Sedaris’s character is over the top, often without direction or purpose. Nonetheless, she is obviously a gifted and inventive performer, with a great deal of audacity.



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