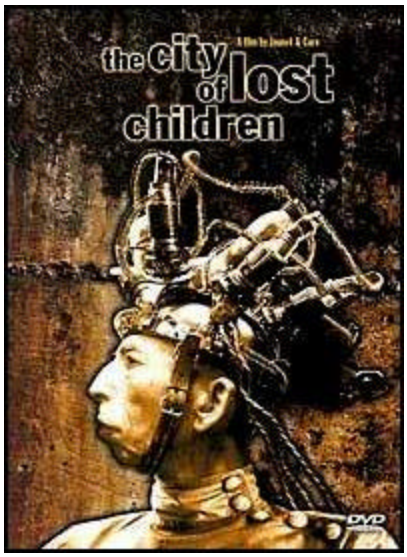
"Oliver Twist" Meets *Star Trek* in the Dream Room: *The City of Lost Children (La cité des enfants perdus)*



Krank (Daniel Emilfork) in his dream machine

My Rating: ***½ (1995) Running time: 112 minutes.
Rated R (for disturbing and grotesque images of violence and menace).

Credits

Director: Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro

Cinematographer: Darius Khondji

Set Design: Jean Rabasse

Music: Angelo Badalamenti

Costumes: Jean-Paul Gaultier

Producer: Claudie Ossard

Screenplay: Jeunet, Caro, Gilles Adrien, and Guillaume Laurent

Costumes: Jean-Paul Gaultier

Editing: Herve Schneid

Cast

One: Ron Perlman

Krank: Daniel Emilfork

Bearded Diver and Clones: Dominique Pinon

Leader of the Cyclops: Serge Merlin

La Pieuvre (Twin Sister): Genevieve Brunet

Miette: Judith Vittet

Denrée: Joseph Lucien

Miss Bismuth (Small Lady): Mireille Mosse

Marcello: Jean-Claude Dreyfus

La Pieuvre (Twin Sister): Odile Mallet

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by T. Larry Verburg

The City of Lost Children **is a film about a child's fantasy. Like a fairy tale about a beautiful princess threatened by a witch or an ogre, it's also about a child's dream that becomes a nightmare. Krank (Daniel Emilfork), an evil genius, sends his henchmen out to capture children and bring them back to his laboratory. He does this because he desires to steal their dreams. He hooks the children up to a strange contraption, a cross between a barber's chair and an electric chair, topped off with the very first electric hair curlers.**

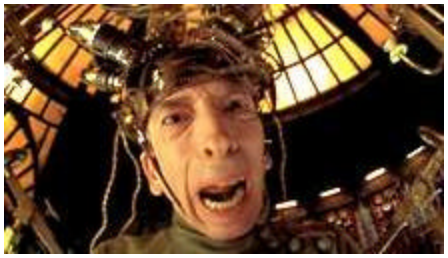
With this high-tech machine, he is able to capture the children's dreams. Then Krank hooks himself up to the same instrument and downloads the children's dreams. Krank does this because he, himself, has never been able to dream. What this means metaphorically is that Krank has no soul; what it means psychologically is that he is probably mad. His primary goal in life, then, is to be able to dream, and he has no scruples as to how he achieves his ends. He will do whatever must be done to achieve his goal. Krank is evil because, like a consummately selfish person, he panders to his perverted desires. In fact, he is in many ways a narcissist.

Krank and Miss Bismuth (Mireille Mosse)

What happens to the children whose dreams have been stolen is not clear, but it is certainly unpleasant. Children are brought to his secret laboratory out on the ocean and there they just disappear. In effect, they become prisoners, guinea pigs to be used in nefarious ways by the evil Krank.

The city, that is, the lost city where the action takes place, is visually like a German expressionistic painting. It reminds me of Robert Wiene's wonderful silent film, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919). The city's anonymity and shadowy seediness also

reminds me of the Depression-era German city in *M* (1931), Fritz Lang's chilling film about a serial child murderer. The "lost" city may also refer to the microcosmic world that Krank has created in his "city in the sea," to use the words of Edgar Allan Poe's famous poem: "Death has reared himself a throne / In a strange city lying alone / Far down within the dim West / Where the good and the bad and the worst and the best / Have gone to their eternal rest. / . . . / And when, amid no earthly moans, / Down, down, that town shall settle hence, / Hell, rising from a thousand thrones, / Shall do it reverence."



Krank with his nightcap on

To add to this odd, expressionistic aspect of the film, all of the children in the film appear to be orphans. We never see any of the children's parents, their mothers or fathers. In fact, the children appear to live in world of orphans and evil adults. Yet, at the beginning of the film, we do see a poster in a scene reminiscent of *M*, which expresses concern over the disappearance of many of the city's children. Yet, unlike *M*, we see no crowds of maddened city dwellers marching *en mass* to do violence to Krank and his henchmen. No, Krank is too smart to be found out by common folk, even the city dwellers of this anonymous and bleak urban sump.

***The City of Lost Children* abounds in marvelous, beautifully colored and textured, imagery. There is Freudian and Jungian symbolism galore. The film is also rich in literary and artistic symbols and symbolism. The most important symbols, however, are those archetypal symbols of the dream world.**

One of Jeunet and Caro's interesting symbols is a kind of hanging rope, like a rope used by the owner to call servants in a large mansion. This rope looks strangely like a strand of DNA. And the film touches on many issues of contemporary science, such as the ethics of cloning and the substitution of human body parts with robotic replacements. In a world where cloning and organ replacements by robotic parts becomes possible, when does the human become machine, or less than human? But the film takes its material more from science fiction that science. In this, it reminds me more of Poe's famous story, "The Man that Was Used Up" than James Watson's *The Double Helix*.

Sleep is consistently used throughout the film as a powerful metaphor. Sleep is a time of

metamorphosis, of dreams, of magic, and of a nightmare and wicked transformation. Like their captor, the children held in Krank's laboratory can't really dream, either. Once they arrive, they only have nightmares. Krank's island-like laboratory is disconnected from vital life and humanity, and the children, at least on a subconscious level, perceive this. It is significant that Krank's laboratory hovers over the ocean waters, which represent the subconscious mind and the world of sleep.

The Clones (Dominique Pinon)

Dreams figure predominantly in the film as well, and this is certainly in keeping with the fairy tale theme, where maidens and princesses, like Sleeping Beauty, are often placed under sleeping spells by evil witches or sorcerers. In sleep lie dreams, and yet the children's dreams—in fact, all dreams in this film—are oppressive. They are like the fever dreams of a sickroom that we remember from our childhood, strange, yet familiar, sometimes soothing, and then oddly menacing and over-sweet.

One (Ron Perlman) as the Circus Strongman)

Krank's laboratory is reminiscent of Frankenstein's laboratory. We know that nothing good can come from this hell of twisted wires, glass, and chemicals. Glass containers filled with ugly babies (probably clones) line the sides of the laboratory. Presumably, though this is never made crystal clear, Krank wishes to clone a new master race—shades of Nazism. Is this perhaps why the street hawker, a marginal person, is murdered at the beginning of the film? (But who kills him—Krank's henchmen or the "Cyclops"? The religious fanatic—leader [creator?] of the cyborgs—is also in the business of eugenics, creating a race of cyborgs.)

The laboratory comes with six clones (all played by Dominique Pinon) who suffer from narcolepsy, and a tank with a floating, electrode-implanted brain. The brain, affectionately called "Uncle" by the clones, floats in a tank of fluid, a brain without a body, gently undulating like a jellyfish. Strangely enough, the brain seems to be the nicest of all the denizens of Krank's world. Through various means—amplified sound and optical equipment—the brain communicates with the inhabitants of Krank's world. The disembodied voice of the brain is none other than that of Jean-Louis Trintignant, whom we remember from Constantin Costa-Gavras's extraordinary political thriller, *Z* (1969). The brain scorns Krank and the abominations he creates or attempts to create. Like the sibyl of Greek mythology, its fondest wish is to die.

One of the Clones Bakes the Brain a Birthday Cake

We are introduced to the three major characters who represent the good, the normal, the natural world of childhood. First, there is One (Ron Perlman), the circus strongman, who has befriended a young boy named Denrée (Joseph Lucien). At the beginning of the film, Krank's henchmen have kidnapped Denrée and taken him to the laboratory on the sea. One, aided by Miette (Judith Vittet), a young female companion, sets off to rescue his young friend whom he has come to love as the little brother he never had.

One is an adult, but in many ways he remains a child. He is whimsical, emotional, impulsive, and loyal, but totally good at heart. Although he has demonstrated great physical strength, he rarely uses it, even in situations of immense danger. He does not foresee the wickedness of the Twins, Krank, and the other evil adults who inhabit the film's dream world. Because of this, he is effectively as vulnerable as Denrée and Miette. But, since their journey is largely a symbolic one, sheer strength of body is useless anyway. What really counts is goodness and innocence of mind and spirit—that alone can help the warrior to prevail in his struggle against evil.

Denrée is the boy whom we see in the dream sequence that begins and ends the film. He never speaks or opens his mouth except to eat. And he is always hungry. Denrée thus represents the questing spirit in all of us that needs spiritual sustenance on which to grow—his hunger is the hunger for knowledge and truth.

One (Ron Perlman) and Denrée (Joseph Lucien) Before the Kidnapping

Miette is a beautiful child who reminds me of the real-life Alice Liddell, whom Lewis Carroll (Charles Dodgson) immortalized in the Alice books and in a series of photographs. She is precocious and wise, much wiser than One. When she meets One, in fact, she is the head of a juvenile gang, and this fact testifies as to her leadership abilities and innate common sense. Miette instantly perceives One's innate goodness and the gentle soul that abides within the muscled, lean, athletic body. Without hesitation, Miette binds herself to One, and together they embark upon their quest to save Denrée—and by implication all the lost children—from Krank.

One and Miette (Judith Vittet) in Mid-Quest

Together, One and Miette set off on a strange, wild adventure, which will take them into several worlds, none of which has any correspondence to our own reality. The two will risk their lives, have their lives almost taken more than once, and yet, they shall ultimately succeed in their quest, or so we hope.

On their adventure, the two encounter a gang of cutthroat villains who are part cyborg. The children in the film refer to them collectively as "Cyclops." A Bible-thumping religious fanatic (Serge Merlin), a true madman who desires an apocalyptic end of days, leads this gang of semi-cyborgs. They also encounter a set of twins, two middle-aged women who are, if possible, even more dastardly than Krank.

These two women, the La Pieuvre Sisters (Genevieve Brunet and Odile Mallet), also known less than affectionately as the "Octopus," are in many respects really one person. Together, however, their grotesqueness only grows more formidable and gives them an aspect of invincibility.

Their closeness compounds their villainy and creates a totally evil person. They think, act, and live like one person with one mind. When one sister itches, the other scratches her sister's arm. The two women are identical, like two peas in a pod. They are like Siamese twins, yet they are not really connected physically, only emotionally. And yet, the two women represent both sides of the same evil coin.

The Cyclops Are Up to No Good

The two women, like Krank, prey upon children. They operate a gang of pickpocket children, who are very like an updated version of Fagan's gang in *Oliver Twist*. Miette, the little girl who befriends One, is the leader of this gang. Throughout the film, the members of this gang appear and reappear to offer aid and assistance to the heroes when they are in difficult situations.

The Octopus (Genevieve Brunet and Odile Mallet) But Which Is Which?

To achieve their nefarious ends, the two women use and abuse Marcello (Jean-Claude Dreyfus), the down-and-out master of a defunct flea circus. This pathetic man, presumably a hopeless alcoholic, is somehow trapped by his weakness into doing what the women want. He is he is forced to commit the heinous acts through his weakness, and yet he does become a somewhat sympathetic character, at least in the end, when he manages to redeem himself.

At one point in the film, Miette must literally go into Denrée's dream to save him. This action sequence is similar to an episode from *Star Trek, The Next Generation*, where several members of the Voyager have to enter into a dream world to save the lives of several victims held captive by a computer gone mad. (Actually, now that I think about it, one of my creative writing professors in graduate school, Jon Manchip White, wrote a novel with this theme years ago, *Death by Dreaming*.)

Yet Jeunet and Caro handle both the theme and the sequence skillfully, creating a memorable episode of marvelous richness and color. In one scene, Miette grows older and older, while Krank regresses to a crying baby. In some respects, what we have is *A Midsummer Night's Dream* gone bad, and we have no optimism for its ultimate outcome.

The film begins and ends with the same marvelous children's dream. At the beginning of the film, the dream turns into a nightmare, but at the end of the film, the dream is transformed into a new, more hopeful, reality. Or is it?

I thoroughly enjoyed the film, even with its implied temptations, perversions, and illicit desires. The film is a delirious admixture of Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, the *Star Trek* television series, and Alex Proyas's brooding science-fiction adventure tale, *Dark City* (1998)—but directed by Tim Burton (director of such dark comedies as *Beetle Juice* [1988] and *Edward Scissorhands* [1990] and producer of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* [1993]).

One and Miette Row To Krank's Laboratory

Please send any comments or suggestions to:

E-mail **lverburg@mindspring.com**