

MOVIE REVIEW

The Thirteenth Floor

Despite Visual Impact, 'Floor's' World Is Cloudy

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If looks were everything, "The Thirteenth Floor," a sleek time-travel mystery that offers a rich and accurate re-creation of 1937 L.A., would have it made. But for all the soaring visual splendor of its past, present and future, it's hobbled by a murky plot that proves to be not all that original once it starts unraveling.

What's more, its stars, Craig Bierko and Gretchen Mol, do not possess strong enough personalities to overcome their colorless roles and keep us engaged in their fates as the film relentlessly switches between past and present.

Bierko's Douglas Hall is second-in-command at a \$2-billion computer software enterprise headquartered in a downtown L.A. skyscraper. His boss, Hannon Fuller (Armin Mueller-Stahl), the firm's owner and a father figure to Hall, has been found murdered in an alley off Skid Row. Hall swiftly becomes the prime suspect of smart LAPD detective Larry McBain (Dennis Haysbert), while Hall becomes convinced that Fuller's shocking fate is connected to an ambitious and risky virtual-reality program he is developing. What to do but jack into the system, with the help of company employee Whitney (Vincent D'Onofrio), and see what gives?

Suddenly Hall is thrust into the virtual-reality world of 1937. There he becomes John Ferguson, a bank teller curious about the proprietor (Mueller-Stahl) of a high-end Pasadena bookstore with an eye for pretty girls, who are readily supplied to him by an insinuating bartender (D'Onofrio) at a lavish Deco nightclub the bookseller frequents.

The gist of myriad plot complications is to speculate that a simulated universe may be able to spawn a simulated universe itself--i.e., the film's present therefore may be no more real than its past; and to posit that certain individuals (Fuller and Hall) might somehow possess souls, even though

they may not be actual human beings. Such speculations are hardly new, but they're treated here with awe-struck reverence. Mol is the movie's mystery lady, identifying herself as the daughter of Fuller that nobody knew he had.

Certainly, director Josef Rusnak, in adapting Daniel Galouye's "Simulacron 3" with co-writer Ravel Centeno-Rodriguez, is aiming for quality and seriousness--too much seriousness, it turns out, because the film could use a dose of relieving humor. Mueller-Stahl, D'Onofrio and Haysbert fare better than Bierko and Mol because they are actors of wit and presence and have more sharply defined roles.

But far and away the strongest element of the film is its imaginative production design by Kirk M. Petruccelli, augmented by wondrous special effects and Wedigo von Schultendorff's gleaming camera work. "The Thirteenth Floor" is hardly the first--or the last--movie to look better than it really is.

The Thirteenth Floor, 1999. R, for violence and language. A Columbia Pictures presentation of a Centropolis Entertainment production. Director Josef Rusnak. Producers Roland Emmerich, Ute Emmerich and Marco Weber. Executive producers Michael Ballhaus and Helga Ballhaus. Screenplay by Rusnak and Ravel Centeno-Rodriguez; based upon the book "Simulacron 3" by Daniel Galouye. Cinematographer Wedigo von Schultendorff. Editor Henry Richardson. Costumes Joseph Porro. Music Harald Kloser. Production designer Kirk. M. Petruccelli. Art director Frank Bollinger. Set decorator Victor J. Zolfo. Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes. Craig Bierko as Douglas Hall. Armin Mueller-Stahl as Hannon Fuller. Gretchen Mol as Jane Fuller. Vincent D'Onofrio as Whitney/Ashton. Dennis Haysbert as Det. Larry McBain.

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