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FILM REVIEW; Traveling in Cyberspace Can Get a Guy Cyberkilled

By LAWRENCE VAN GELDER

Some doors are best left unopened, and one of them leads to movies with the kind of denouement that resembles one of those boxes of salt with a picture of a woman holding a box of salt with a picture of a woman holding a box of salt with a picture of . . . The possibilities extend ad infinitum and, in the case of "The 13th Floor," ad nauseam.

Repackaged as cyberthriller, the old time-travel adventure returns in this stylish but overplotted and ultimately illogical combination of science fiction, mystery and romance.

The science fiction seems up to date with its computer images and parallel worlds, including 1937 Los Angeles. The solution to the mystery turns out to be a yawner that doesn't bear much scrutiny. And the romance, with ever-so-faint echoes of Hitchcock's "Vertigo," needs a better chemistry set.

But "The 13th Floor," directed by Josef Rusnak from a screenplay he wrote with Ravel Centeno-Rodriguez, can be appreciated for its re-creation of a Los Angeles of empty lots on Wilshire Boulevard, a skyline of oil wells and visions of white-tied swells riding in Packard town cars or dancing the night away to "Caravan" in Art Deco supper clubs while the less fortunate sweat out the Depression.

The plot, based on the novel "Simulacron 3" by Daniel Galouye, positions its main characters in parallel worlds where they lead different lives. In the world of the 1990's the principals are employees of the visionary magnate Hannon Fuller (Armin Mueller-Stahl), whose projects include an experimental computer-chip simulation of old Los Angeles.

After a journey to this virtually real world, where he leaves an important letter with Ashton (Vincent D'Onofrio), an untrustworthy bartender in the

elegant supper club Hannon frequents for its young female companionship, he returns, makes a hurried telephone call from a seedy bar and is promptly and brutally knifed to death.

Next morning Hannon's favorite executive and heir apparent, Douglas Hall (Craig Bierko), wakes to find a blood-drenched shirt in his apartment and to find himself the prime suspect in events on a night he cannot remember.

To complicate matters Larry McBain (Dennis Haysbert), a police detective, promptly singles out Douglas as the probable killer, and an alluring young woman (Gretchen Mol) turns up and announces herself to be Jane Fuller, Hannon's previously unknown daughter. With the help of clumsy dialogue, Douglas and Jane are soon, as Yogi Berra might observe, experiencing a lot of d'eja vu all over again.

These being the complications, there is but one thing for Douglas to do: travel to 1937 Los Angeles with the help of his colleague Whitney (Mr. D'Onofrio again) and, in the persona of a bank teller named John Ferguson, try to sort things out.

With strong performances by Mr. D'Onofrio and Mr. Mueller-Stahl and with the help of the costumes of Joseph Porro and the production design of Kirk Petruccelli "The 13th Floor" begins promisingly with the murder that straddles two worlds. But it strikes no sparks with its romance, and as the mystery unravels, so does the film. By its end a return to genuine reality is welcome.

"The 13th Floor" is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). It includes a bloody murder, shootings and other violence, as well as coarse language and suggestions of sexual activity.

THE 13TH FLOOR

Directed by Josef Rusnak; written by Mr. Rusnak and Ravel Centeno-Rodriguez, based on the book "Simulacron 3" by Daniel Galouye; director of photography, Wedigo von Schultendorff; edited by Henry Richardson; music by Harald Kloser; production designer, Kirk M. Petruccelli; costumes by Joseph Porro; produced by Roland Emmerich, Ute Emmerich and Marco Weber; released by Columbia Pictures. Running time: 120 minutes. This film is rated R.

WITH: Craig Bierko (Douglas Hall), Armin Mueller-Stahl (Hannon Fuller), Gretchen Mol (Jane Fuller), Vincent D'Onofrio (Whitney/ Ashton), Dennis

Haysbert (Detective Larry McBain) and Steven Schub (Zev Bernstein).

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