*Dark City* (1998 )Study Guide Genre: Science Fiction Steampunk

Name \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Alex Proyas’ *Dark City*, a revisionist film noir and a sci-fi film, opens with John Murdoch, a man who awakens in a hotel room with his memory wiped clean and under suspicion for a series of Jack the Ripper-type murders of some prostitutes in the city. While trying to reconnect with his wife, Murdoch attracts the attention of a bizarre genius doctor, Schreber, as well as a sympathetic detective, Frank Bumstead, who is assigned to solve the case of the murders. Observing and manipulating them for reasons that are only made clear as the movie continues are “the Strangers,” menacing, bald, and vampire-like individuals who feel that Murdoch’s gifts hold the secret to what they desire.

Thematically, the film addresses the topics of:

 the importance of memory,

 thought control and manipulation,

 fate and free will, and

 one’s ability to shape or alter reality.

Musically, *Dark City*’s score, especially its main theme, is one that is relentless and heart pounding.
Story-wise, the film features the aspects of a labyrinth and takes many twists and turns.
Most of all, the film is rich visually, especially in regards to its costume design and set design.

Define:

Film Noir

Steampunk

Voiceover

*Mis en scene*

German Expressionism

Motif

Surreal

Fibonacci Spiral

Characters

John Murdoch
Dr. Daniel Schreber
Emma Murdoch/Anna
Detective Frank Bumstead
Mr. Hand
Mr. Book

The Strangers

1. What information is provided in the voiceover at the beginning? Know that this voiceover was not intended to be included when the film was first made but was requested by the studio to clarify some of the film’s plot.
2. What do you notice in the opening shots of the film, particularly with the setting, that showcases characteristics of this film movement?
3. Note the spinning circle, which is known as the Fibonacci spiral. It’s a motif throughout the film. It is frequently associated with chaos theory. (The structure of the film is somewhat like the spiral; we get closer and closer to the truth.) What does it symbolize throughout the film?
4. How is the protagonist’s entrance into the film alluding to rebirth, or how is there a sense of rebirth?
5. What do the fish out of water and the broken fishbowl symbolize?
6. Why is it symbolic that the Strangers live or conduct their experiments from an underworld?
7. Notice the height of the ceiling in Walenski’s room. What does its height suggest about Walenski?
8. What is oddly sympathetic or parental about how the Strangers treat their human studies? Watch the massive Tuning scene and see how they handle their experiments.
9. What is the lesson that Walenski tells us through the action that he performs at the train station? What is the one area about humans that the Strangers cannot anticipate or prevent? Why?
10. What ultimately are the Strangers fighting for? They’re not traditional antagonists who are out to do evil for the sake of doing evil. What are their objectives or intentions?