

Babeldom

United Kingdom 2011
Director: Paul Bush

Reviewed by Isabel Stevens

Cinema was born into the age of the skyscraper – the Lumières' visions of terra firma's trains and factories arrived only eight years after the term was first coined. Ever since, filmmakers have had a certain fixation with the dizzying peaks of the skyline, from the vertiginous clock face in Harold Lloyd's *Safety Last!* to the 34th floor of *Die Hard*'s Nakatomi Plaza – not to forget the soaring, malevolent towers of science-fiction films such as *Metropolis*, *Blade Runner* and more recently *Dredd*.

A cautionary tale about a futuristic megalopolis burying itself as it expands forever skywards, British animator and experimental collagist Paul Bush's *Babeldom* is nonetheless intoxicated with the view from the clouds. His beguiling, shape-shifting travelogue starts there, looking down over Pieter Bruegel's 16th-century painting of Babel (its streets and denizens lovingly animated) before plunging into the cavernous, light-starved depths of the titular imaginary city. His camera then glides majestically through crumbling underground tunnels, up empty staircases, into anodyne office atria and over misty, steel monoliths, the quest for the summit cheered on by pounding drums and a soaring choral accompaniment.

In a similar vein to science-vault raiders Semiconductor, Bush inventively crafts his urban labyrinth not only from fragments of filmed footage of subterranean ruins and sparkling metropolises, but also from cutting-edge graphics and moving-image research culled from various scientific and mathematical institutions. And so the climb from the arcology's base to its pinnacle becomes not only a journey from the past into the future, but also from the real into the unreal.

The dystopic flipside to Le Corbusier's dream of a vertical city, it's a complex architectural vision equal parts awesome and terrifying. Two nameless, faceless narrators-cum-lovers – one an archaeologist in our present, the other an explorer and Babeldom citizen – vividly reflect on the city, a place with a "crown of cranes",

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by

Paul Bush

Written by

Paul Bush

Camera

Paul Bush

Edited by

Lawrence Huck

Soundtrack

Composed by

Andy Cowton

Choral Music

Composed by

Stuart Earl

Sound Recorded,

Edited and Mixed by

Zhe Wu

Digital Animation

Paul Bush

Gergeley Barta

Adrian Flury

Mina Mileva

Catia Peres

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Productions

Production

Company

Ancient Mariner

Productions

Cast

Mark Caven

man

Youla Boudali

woman

Ian Gouldstone

computer man

Masako Tomiya

computer woman

Dolby Digital

In Colour

[1.85:1]

Distributor

Independent

Cinema Office

A science-fiction travelogue around the future city of Babeldom, made up of filmed footage of urban centres and virtual moving images and graphics from scientific and mathematical institutions.

A female archaeologist in our present recalls conversations she once had with a male explorer from Babeldom. Meanwhile he traverses an overcrowded high-rise dystopia searching for her and reflecting on the vertical maze of the city.



City symphony: Youla Boudali

where "the living outnumber the dead". It is itself a palimpsest of history. Cathedrals and other such architectural glories are endlessly preserved far below, but ultimately forgotten. J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* springs to mind (the hazy footage even has an underwater feel to it).

Just as in Ballard's *High Rise*, in *Babeldom* vertical living and social stratification go hand in hand. The claustrophobic nature of life buried under the haphazard bricolage is forcefully evoked not by images of the citizens themselves, but rather the male explorer's ruminations and shots of eerie and dim passageways. Meanwhile, out of microscopic dancing matter and glimpses into vast, globular, 3D virtual models, Bush seamlessly conjures the city's menacing, gargantuan stratosphere. The mystery of what these spectral creations actually are and where they come from is no small part of their allure (the list of companies and laboratories referenced in the credits is as impressive as it is idiosyncratic, ranging in subject from cybernetics and nanotechnology to fluid mechanics and pipe inspection).

Delivered via a computerised voice accompanying a hypnotic medley of graphs and diagrams, Bush's explanation of the genesis of his city (sudden and comprehensive advances in mathematics and technology), the evolution of its language and its time warp (in *Babeldom*, our narrator confides, you could meet yourself at birth and death) are intriguing but not as intricately imagined as the architectural spectacle of the city itself. Yet even when some familiar sci-fi tropes creep in (a population under the spell of a controlling, voyeuristic government), the manner in which they are envisaged enlivens them: in one instance, the screen splinters into a multitude of mini computer-simulated clones animated in poses recalling Muybdrige's early cinematic experiments.

Babeldom, with its creative geography and searching voiceover, not to mention its *Vertigo*-esque love of spirals, is clearly indebted to Chris Marker and his epistolary travelogues. Bush's musings on memory, chaos and time don't, however, quite reach the poetic tenor of Marker's narration, occasionally drifting into a strained melancholy. However, Bush's parting impression – of two narrators (the details of their relationship kept vague) searching endlessly for each other in worlds that may or may not overlap as their memory of one another fades – is a potent one. This is a film – and a city – to get lost in. 📺

The Bay

United Kingdom/USA/Canada 2012
Director: Barry Levinson
Certificate 15 84m 29s

Reviewed by Anton Bitel

There must be something in the water. Although the horror genre has imagined all manner of flora and fauna, typically in monstrous or mutated form, rising up the food chain in response to the hubris of humanity's environmental incursions and irresponsible experiments, nonetheless our screens have largely been kept free of microorganisms, viruses and parasites, perhaps in part because it is in their nature not to be seen. The odd exception – most notably David Cronenberg's *Shivers* (1975) – proves the rule. This changed in the noughties, when a run of icky features – *Cabin Fever*, *Splinter*, *Contagion* – revelled in the havoc that microbiology can wreak on the human body. Then, just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water, 2012 delivered *two* films featuring mass outbreaks of aquatic parasites: first, Park Jeongwoo's wormy schlockodrama *Deranged*, and now *The Bay*, the first foray into horror by genre-hopper Barry Levinson (*Diner*, *Rain Man*, *Sphere*, *Bandits* etc).

Set in the fictional town of Claridge, Maryland, on Chesapeake Bay, *The Bay* borrows familiar tropes from Steven Spielberg's 1975 classic *Jaws* (corpses discovered in the water with wounds expressly suggestive of a shark attack, a mayor determined to quell any panic during the town's peak summer season) and more broadly from the nature's-revenge subgenre (environmental pollution engendering a new species of deadly organisms) to create a mash-up of well-worn horror motifs – except that they are all filtered through an elaborate found-footage framework which, without quite refreshing the clichés, certainly muddies the waters. Oren Peli, writer/director of the now canonical found-footage frightener *Paranormal Activity* (2007), may be one of the producers here, but *The Bay*'s deft mix of multiple media (television footage, radio broadcasts, Skype conferences, CCTV, home movies, text messages, emergency service recordings, video diaries and so on) makes for an altogether more sophisticated fragmentation of the film's story into a mosaic of (not always reliable) evidence. As in George A. Romero's *Diary of the Dead* (2007), the 'found footage' comes edited and with a commentary – in this case from reporter-on-the-scene Donna Thompson (Kether Donohue), desperate after the event to expose the hushed-up truth of what has happened.

The killer here turns out to be *Cymothoa exigua*, a louse-like sea creature that devours the tongues of fish – only the Chesapeake variant, literally 'on steroids' and possibly irradiated, grows at an extraordinary rate, eating its human hosts from the inside. While this affords the occasional short, sharp jolt of formication-inducing body horror, Thompson (and Levinson along with her) is also documenting how information, misinformation and disinformation can spread no less virulently than flesh-eating parasites in an age of diversified mass media. For even if some kind of truth emerges from Thompson's bombardment of sources, we also see and/or hear the evolving situation variously mischaracterised as a shark attack, a domestic murder, a bacteriological outbreak, a satanic rite, a mass drugging, a terrorist plot and a joke. "Let's not go around scaring