

France, 1995. Rated R. 112 min. Cast: Ron Perlman, Daniel Emilfork, Judith Vittet, Dominique Pinon, Jean-Claude Dreyfus; Music: Angelo Badalamenti; Cinematography: Darius Khondji with Michel Amathieu; Written by: Gilles Adrien, Jean-Pierre Jeunet & Marc Caro; Directed by Marc Caro & Jean-Pierre Jeunet.

*The City of Lost Children (La Cité Des Enfants Perdus)* is one of those films that are few and far between: a science fiction/fantasy masterpiece as well crafted and intelligent as it is visually accomplished. The warmth and mad creativity of the film's sequences are infectious in their spirit of imagination and Rube Goldberg-like innovation. The heart and soul of the film juxtaposed by the dark, misty setting of an industrial fairy tale, creating an emotional masterpiece that manages to avoid the pitfalls of sappiness or over-sentimentality. Part of the way it does this is through its context of an industrial background rife with a sense the magical and technological grotesque.

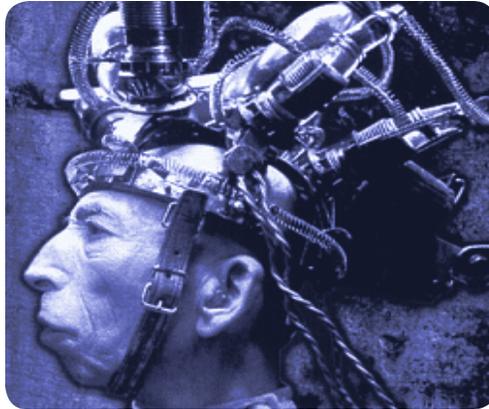
The film's setting, mechanical design, and visual effects contain elements of the cyberpunk fringe movement commonly called steampunk, which represents a kind of retroactive, renovative, techno-fetishistic look at the Industrial Revolution. Staples of the sub-genre include magnificently complex machines with clockwork or pipe work mechanism in the place of electrical ones; or to put it more simply they are mechanisms analogous to contemporary machinery but powered with steam engines or other antiquated processes. Other conventions include cities forever shrouded in mist and fog, and the integration of magic and technological elements working together to create fantastic magical devices.

However, unlike steampunk works, in which the conventions of the technological world are used as metaphor for the modern world, Jean Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro's film uses it to create an atmosphere, to reinforce the perception of a child's perspective on the terrifying, uncanny world of the adult. In this world uncertainty is about the only certainty.

In this sense it fits that *The City of Lost Children* has no real fixed era or time-frame. The locations are decidedly archaic in the age and weathering, so there's little in the way to tell when it is supposed to be set, except that it is technologically advanced enough for technology itself to be recognized as such. It places the film in the context of at

least a semi-modern world. A mythic version of our own, but twisted to the viewpoint of a child; where the world is a dangerous place and the help of adults unreliable.

There are no truly good "grown-ups" in the *City of Lost Children*. Adults are corrupt, twisted, evil, or weak—Krank, a heartless villain; The Professor, a madman; the Octopus, a malevolent pair of malevolent witches; Marcello, a drug addict motivated, if anything, by regret; the Cyclopes, seduced by a cult. Even Irvin, the good-intentioned brain, ultimately uses Miette for his own purpose of escape, and Mademoiselle Bismuth turns homicidal in her attempts to keep her family safe.



The few good characters that are adults in body have childlike natures or intellects, Dominique Pinon's Clones have an enforced lunacy ostensibly created from their sleeping sickness. Ron Perlman's strongman One has a simple nature, though he is clever and resourceful.

It is this theme that is at the center of Jeunet and Caro's fairy tale, a tale that is bleak and fanciful at the same time, in the tradition of many classic household tales or *märchen*—that there is something essential in childhood, essential in the clarity of point of view, of an open heart, and the power of imagination.

The steampunk elements in *The City of Lost Children* reinforce this theme in the sense that, in the world of children, magic and technology are synonymous—a strange series of processes or devices that yield strange, miraculous, or terrible results. As they relate to the world of adults in the film, they represent the attempt to control that which cannot be controlled, life itself. These attempts invariably end in failure. The Cyclopes reject their original eyes for the promise of a techno-mystical third eye that proves to be a poor grainy technological replacement. The Professor's attempts to create companions end up robbing him

of his sanity, and ultimately his life. Krank's dream machine only produces nightmares, even when used by one of the kind hearted Clones.

And like many great fairy tales, Jeunet and Caro's film brims with mythical beasts, magical spells, and strange locations. The beasts: the Cyclopes, an animal master, a two-headed woman with four hands and three legs, identical sextuplets, a living brain. The techno-spells; Irvin's escape plan hinges on a cloudy green nightmare that flows into people's sleeping heads through their nostrils created from the dream machine, the green murderous fluid Marcello's fleas inject are activated by a music box. The places: the city itself is a fascinating labyrinth that appears to be built entirely out of alleyways, canals, and catwalks; The professor's laboratory citadel rises out of the ocean like an oil rig, a grim and foreboding tower that waits, shrouded in mist above the waves.

The integration of these elements with the everyday, the world that is known, of city streets, of the docks, cars and motorcycles, of bars and clubs and electricians, help to introduce the idea of a fairy tale accurately presented for a modern audience, in a time that is both ours and archaic. It helps tell a story that tells us to listen to our hearts to solve our difficulties, not to seek out answers elsewhere. That it is this childlike adherence to one's heart that is important.

This message is reinforced directly when Miette is confronted by the other young thieves about her relationship to One:

"He's a grown-up, and you know it," a boy says.

She replies, "He may be big, but he's not a grown-up, and maybe you're not so little either."

The meaning here is clear, that it is not physical age that determines the age of the heart. Miette implies that by turning cold towards others, the boys are becoming far too adult already, perhaps even entering that cold world of madness, dementia and evil wherein adults of the city reside. Perhaps the message (as would later be restated in Jeunet's *Amélie*) is that it may be best simply not to grow up at all.

—Written by Blake Peterson

(Originally entitled "*TechnoMärchen: The City of Lost Children as a Modern Fairy Tale*")