

CONSPIRACY GOTHIC

Between 1998 and 1999, four Hollywood science fiction films came out that were all telling slight variations of the same story. This story is also told in at least two science fiction novels, one from 1959 and one from 1964, as well as a three-hour German television miniseries directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder in the early 1970s.

The essence of this story is that the hero - who is a lonesome man - discovers he is trapped in an entirely artificial prison-world and must try to escape into reality. The wardens of these virtual prisons are aliens, robots, or bureaucrats.

I think of these films and novels as forming a genre (or sub-genre, if you prefer), and what makes them so is how they all uniquely express the same story, the way the children of a family all uniquely express the same genes.

This is how the critic Stanley Cavell analyzed several screwball comedies from the 1930s and 1940s in his book *Pursuits of Happiness*.

He wrote, "Let us think of the common inheritance of the members of a genre as a story, call it a myth. The members of a genre will be interpretations of it, or to use Thoreau's word for it, revisions of it."

Cavell called his genre the Comedy of Remarriage. I call this genre Conspiracy Gothic because all the works involve a sense of conspiracy, in which the protagonist is a wanted man or feels like the whole world is against him.

Also, these stories seem to have a lot to do with 18th- and 19th-century Gothic horror, the tales of which often involved trapped protagonists, madness, the uncanny, and malevolent supernatural forces. Gothic literature was one of the origins of sci-fi, as well.

So, the work of the critic is to: extract, like a genetic code, the common myth from the members of the genre; to explain how each member makes variations on the myth; to identify other works related to the genre; and to think about what the myth and all its variations mean.

I don't intend this infographic to be a definitive study, but just a thorough introduction.

THE FILMS

THE NOVELS

THE MYTH

- Dark City
- The Matrix
- The Thirteenth Floor
- The Truman Show
- World on a Wire

CURIOUS COUSINS

- Blade Runner
- The Bothersome Man
- The Cell
- Conspiracy Theory
- The Game
- eXistenZ
- Groundhog Day
- Inception
- Inland Empire
- La Jetée
- Marwencol
- Open Your Eyes
- The Passenger
- Pleasantville
- The Purple Rose of Cairo
- The Shawshank Redemption
- Source Code
- Strange Days
- Stranger than Fiction
- Sunset Boulevard
- Synecdoche, New York
- Total Recall
- Zeitgeist

1. The hero, who suffers from loneliness and malaise, notices an uncanny rip in the fabric of his reality.

2. He investigates the rip and suspects that his world is an artificial construction and that he is trapped and/or a prisoner. He is pursued by antagonistic agents.

3. A female love interest passes through the hero's prison-world. She is from the real world and wants to help free him, but she too is resisted by the agents.

4. The hero tries to reach the woman and her real world, but is repelled by the agents and by the barriers of his prison. He suffers a crisis.

5. The hero has to rouse himself to try once again to escape.

6. The hero breaks free from his prison, reaches the woman he loves, and begins fighting against the forces that had oppressed him.

WHAT IT MAY MEAN

Time Out of Joint
Time Out of Joint, like The Truman Show, gives a nice portrait of a man who is trapped in a simulated reality and must try to escape into reality. The narrative arc of Time Out of Joint is very similar to The Truman Show, with the last dramatic scene being Ragle finally deciding to leave the simulated world and enter the real world.

Ragle, however, is much more philosophically self-aware and contemplative than Truman, going on to explore epistemology, metaphysics, and the Gospel of John.

The narrative arc of Time Out of Joint is very similar to The Truman Show, with the last dramatic scene being Ragle finally deciding to leave the simulated world and enter the real world.

Ragle, however, is much more philosophically self-aware and contemplative than Truman, going on to explore epistemology, metaphysics, and the Gospel of John.

Simulacron-3

The Thirteenth Floor

World on a Wire

The Matrix

The Truman Show

Dark City

Simulacron-3 begins with a more innocent premise than the novel in a virtual reality computer program created for the sake of market research. In the novel, the computer scientist Douglas Hall is already working with this artificial world, as one of its overseers (or wardens, if you will).

The drama comes when he begins to suspect that he no longer exists in a virtual reality and that his world is just a programmed simulation being run by some other computer scientist, in some other, higher, more powerful reality.

Like Ragle in Time Out of Joint, Douglas is philosophically aware of the possibility that nothing is real. How about the possibility of an infinite nesting of our VR world within another, up and down forever.

This kind of nesting recurs in a classic philosophical trope and comes up in Plato's *Phaedo* in a dialogue

COMMENTS

The Matrix very quickly has its hero realize he's in a simulated prison, escape from it with the help of a dark-haired love interest, and then begins fighting against the malevolent forces who control the prison, all more or less by the end of Act 1.

Now, even though he's unhappy with his urban existence, doesn't he go through much of a struggle in deciding to "follow the white rabbit" and accept that his reality was false. And upon learning of the truth of the "dearest of the real," he does consider briefly, but then gathers himself and is more or less OK.

If only everyone could so unhesitatingly react to having the veil pulled from their eyes and having to gaze upon the wasteland of reality in its all-unblinking desolate horror!

Now, does reality so accept his responsibility as a prophet/savior figure who is going to have to reform, civilize, reality, humanity, etc.

I find that struggle much more implausible and fantastic, and much less relevant than the more banal struggle to resist the inertia that keeps one in an inauthentic but comfortable day-to-day rut - a rut so deep it feels like a prison and makes one's world feel artificial.

I do appreciate that it does appreciate that it is going to have to reform, civilize, reality, humanity, etc.

The Matrix's notion and computer technology that is enacting humanity and extending one's utility for its erotically rational purposes.

Being addicted to small new ads, social networks, 24-hour news, video games, pornography, and other digital entertainment is certainly a means by which one flees from the harder things of life - and flies in a way that becomes vicious, excessive, and that weakens one's willpower.

As for more Terminator-esque Dystopian scenarios involving robots and computers, I'm less concerned with that. Such a scenario would probably be as morally tidy as World War II - everyone would know who the enemy was, everyone would have a reason to fight, no one, to be heroic.

As Roger Ebert complained about in his review of the film, The Matrix is just a kind of a cheap action film, and just shamelessly distracts itself from the serious philosophical and philosophical things that are going on in a story like this.

LITERARY LINKS

- 1984
- Against Nature
- Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
- Being and Time
- The Bell Jar
- Brave New World
- Carceri d'invenzione
- The Catcher in the Rye
- The Crying of Lot 49
- Discipline and Punish
- A Doll's House
- Ficciones
- The Grand Inquisitor
- Hamlet
- The Image
- Infinite Jest
- Meditations on First Philosophy
- The Moviegoer
- Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass
- Nausea
- Neuromancer
- Notes from the Underground
- The Paranoid Style in American Politics
- The Phenomenology of Spirit
- The Republic
- Simulacron-3
- The Stranger
- Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous
- Thus Spoke Zarathustra
- The Trial
- The Twilight Zone
- Welcome to the Desert of the Real
- What Is Enlightenment?
- The X Files

What about all the times infinity, fractals, recursion, and synecdochic worlds-being-nested-within-worlds up in these-nested? How do those mathematical and physical concepts relate to the Conspiracy Gothic myth and to creativity, madness, and loneliness?

Has the situation of a character being trapped in a simulated world shown up elsewhere in premodern literature? Like perhaps involving a pre-industrial sovereign of some sort constructing a world-of-images into which to entrap someone else or for himself to escape into? Or a deity imprisoning a character in a dream-world of some sort?

Has the Conspiracy Gothic myth or variations of it been told in folklore cultures? In the literature or folkore of East Asia, India, Africa, the Middle East, or the Americas?

When will someone film or write a Conspiracy Gothic story with a female protagonist?

I'm not trying to be paranoid, but why did the four Hollywood-produced Conspiracy Gothic films all get released between 1998 and 1999?

SOME QUESTIONS

Simulacron-3 begins with a more innocent premise than the novel in a virtual reality computer program created for the sake of market research. In the novel, the computer scientist Douglas Hall is already working with this artificial world, as one of its overseers (or wardens, if you will).

The drama comes when he begins to suspect that he no longer exists in a virtual reality and that his world is just a programmed simulation being run by some other computer scientist, in some other, higher, more powerful reality.

Like Ragle in Time Out of Joint, Douglas is philosophically aware of the possibility that nothing is real. How about the possibility of an infinite nesting of our VR world within another, up and down forever.

This kind of nesting recurs in a classic philosophical trope and comes up in Plato's *Phaedo* in a dialogue