# CONSPIRACY GOTHIC



etween 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 threehour German television miniseries directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder in the early 1970s.

Simulacron-3

Time Out of Joint



he 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 subgenre, 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 19thcentury 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.

COMMENTS





WHAT IT



wealthy that even its middle and lower classes can have at least a few hours (if not more) of quiet

I feel like this song can pen up some of what the Conspiracy Gothic myth means

In Thus Spoke Zarathustra
Nietzsche described the Last
Men as being those modern
souls who are frightened by th
world and tired of living (but
scared to die and watch their
health). These Last Men sust:

hemselves with, "their little leasures for the day, and their

odern and of the 20th

Republic, which is a book that's

omputers, the Internet, and so

over 2,000 years old and



worlds-being-nested-within-worlds show up in these stories? 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 litera-

→ What about all the times infin-

ity, fractals, recursion, and synecdochic

- ture? Like perhaps involving a preindustrial 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 other cultures? In the literature or folklore of East Asia, India, Africa, the Middle
- → When will someone film or write a Conspiracy Gothic story with a

East, or the Americas?

female protagonist? → I'm not trying to be paranoid, but why did the four Hollywoodproduced Conspiracy Gothic films all

get released between 1998 and 1999?

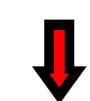
## THE FILMS



# THE NOVELS



# THE MYTH



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

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

### The Matrix

escape.

simulated prison, escape from it with the help of a darkhaired love interest, and then begin fighting against the malevolent forces who constructed the prison, all more or less by the end of Neo, even though he's unhappy with his urban existence, doesn't have to 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 "desert of the real," he does

The Matrix very quickly

has its hero realize he's in a

convulse briefly, but then gathers himself and is more or less OK. If only everyone could so un-neurotically react to having the veil pulled from their eyes and having to gaze upon the wasteland of reality in its all sublimely desolate Neo does struggle to accept his responsibility as a prophet/savior figure who is going to have to redeem

civilization, reality, human-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 in The Matrix it's robots and computer technology that is enslaving humanity and extracting our vitality for its grotesquely rational purposes. Being addicted to email, new gadgets, social networks, 24-hour news, video games, digital entertainment is certainly a means by which one flees from the harder

things of life - and flees in a way that becomes vicious, excessive, and that weakens one's willpower. As for more Terminatoresque Doomsday 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 great reason to fight, to care, to be heroic. As Roger Ebert complained about in his review of the film, The Matrix is just too much of a kung fu action film, and just shamefully distracts itself from the

how they latently criticize
First-World capitalism in his
book Welcome to the Desert of th

ciety, 'real social life' itsel

Moviegoer or The Stranger, you have protagonists who have most

nave protagonists who nave mode definitely gazed down into the maw of nothingness, but after having done so romance and desire and love become for them just sort of a very sad joke, a temporarily distracting painkiller for the

Joint Time Out of Joint, like The Truman Show, gives a nice

Time Out of

serious psychological and

philosophical things that are

going on in a story like this.

portrait of deadening suburban stasis, and how in that stasis a man's world begins to disintegrate and feel scripted and fake. Ragle Gumm's day job is to sit at home and complete a newspaper number game, which he manages somehow to win every week. By the end of the novel, it's revealed that this number game was in reality a means of predicting where nuclear bombs being launched from the moon by a secessionist rebel army were going to land on earth. Ragle's quiet suburban world was thus a way to trick him into doing important but morally repugnant work for the earth's military and government. (Ragle had originally defected to the side of the moor rebels, but then was kidnapped

and hooked into a simulated reality and forced to unwittingly assist the earth government which is similar to what happens to a war veteran in Source Code.) There's a dialectic here between your life and your job being totally anonymous and insignificant and dull (the suburbanite who is involved in no fight and no struggle), versus your life and

your job being of intensely stressful and world-historical importance (the military wonk who is involved in an interplanetary civil war). It's the child's or the psychopath's fantasy come true - those private little calculations you're tirelessly making are actually being observed by the government and are of absolutely global significance. You are a hero in disguise (as if secretly of royal blood, a prince or princess in humble costume) and everything you do really, truly matters. 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 monologues about semiotics, epistemology, metaphysics,

and the Gospel of John.

ate, given that the kind of

person who could begin

feeling like his reality is

dissolving is (unless suffering

from mental illness) also the

kind of person with enough

leisure time to read philoso-

phy and literature, or to at

ponder the basic rules by

each other in an empirical

least have the time to quietly

which humans exist alongside

Which seems appropri-

### Dark City The Truman Show The Truman Show is much

more about its hero becoming conscious of his status as a prisoner and his world as false. Whereas Neo leaves The Matrix early on, Truman doesn't step outside his prison until the very final The Truman Show has nothing to do with what happens to its hero once he's

reached the real world and reached his love interest. Instead it's only about Truman as he copes with being in a world of illusions and conspiracy, and having a day-to-day existence that is too comfortable and too convenient. The film also makes a real character out of the warden of the prison, and thus complicates why Truman is being confined to a simulated reality. The simpler situation

would be that a corporation has enslaved Truman and turned his entire existence into an amusing commodity. They are doing it just for money, and Truman is no more than a factor of input Christof, on the other hand, is an artist with a vision (just like the master computer programmer in Simulacron-3) and Truman and the studio are the materials he works with to create his masterpiece. However, using another person for the sake of a work

immoral and unethical and evil, however beautiful the results. This occurs in the Edgar Allen Poe story, "The Oval Portrait," which has a Christof-type character who kills his wife for the sake of painting an excellent portrait of her. It's funny that The Truman Show is set in California, and that California is the "real world" that Truman longs to escape into Would reaching 1990s California allow Truman to find a world that would actually feel less artificial, and that would give him more possibilities to, not just be an actor in a television show, but to be a real person existing in a serious world?

Realizing one is a prisoner and then having to escape the prison and resist the warden is a thrilling, meaningful challenge. But how many people ever in their lives actually have to face such a situation? These Conspiracy Gothic stories seem somewhat deceptive in that they do honestly portray how miserable and disconnected and dead a person can feel as a citizen/consumer of an affluent nation like the U.S. but then these stories bring in these fantastic conspiracies and magical evildoers, which of course rouse the unhappy protagonists to action. But life is never so simple. Most days never

involve any serious moral

minor choices regarding your pleasure and the pleasure of others. Will you be nice to yourself? Will you be nice to others? Will you be nice to others if it entails having to do something that you don't enjoy very much? Will you be mean to others if it makes vou feel better? These seem to me to be

the questions, for better or worse, that a person existing in an affluent civilization will face day in and day out. They are not very dramatic, but they are the substance of one's days and hours, and for that they are meaningful. Simulacron-3 The Thirteenth Floor

Wire Simulacron-3 begins with a more innocent premise than the other stories. The artificial world in the novel is a virtual reality computer program created for the sake of market research. In the novel, the hero

World on a

computer scientist Douglass Hall is already working with this artificial world, as one of its overseers (or wardens, if The drama comes when he begins to suspect that he too 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, Douglass is philosophically astute and thinks to himself while in the grip of conspiracy paranoia interesting things like: "I was nothing - - merely a package of vital simulectronic charges. Nevertheless 1 had to exist. Simple logic demanded no less. I think, therefore I am. But then I wasn't the first person to be troubled by the possibility that nothing is real. How about the solipsists, the Berkeleians, the transcendentalists?"

that his world is a VR

in The Matrix), i.e. the

possibility for an endless

nesting of one VR world

forever.

within another, up and down

This kind of nauseating

regress is a classic philosophi-

cal trope and comes up in

Plato's Phaedo in a dialogue

simulation, a recursive and

### For as impressive and beautiful as the imagery and the worlds of The Matrix and

The Truman Show are, Dark City outdoes them. The look of Dark City is like Nighthawks by Edward Hopper mixed with Metropolis mixed with The Third Man. If there were ever a city in which to wander around feeling mournfully alienated and spiritually adrift, it would be that of Dark City (as well as the Los Angeles of Blade Runner). It's interesting that the love interest of the hero is played by Jennifer Connelly and that several scenes are hopeful visions of her standing at the end of a pier, overlooking the ocean on a sunny day. That image of Jennifer Connelly recurs in Requiem for a Dream, which is most definitely also a film about being lost and trapped within

an oppressive city. (The image of Jennifer Connelly on a pier is also in House of Sand and Fog, but there she is the character who is depressed and adrift.) Dark City is similar to The Matrix in relying on fantastic, mostly martial arts violence - of a form that to me resembled something from Mortal Kombat (hurling balls of energy at one another) - as the means with which the characters resolve their problems and express their feelings. That's all well and good in the way of entertainment, but less so in the way of of art is generally considered psychological complexity and

emotional truth Dark City is more like the The Truman Show in that it is not until the end of the story that the hero is able to breach the walls of his Most of the film is about Murdoch trying to figure out what kind of world he's in. who he is, and where he comes from. The wardens of the prison in Dark City are space aliens, and thus a racial element separates them from the humans they are subjugating (as opposed to something more spiritual or intellectual that separates a bureaucrat or a robot from a regular human being). The conclusion of Dark City seems very similar to that of The Truman Show, but

schooner into the wall of the studio is, for my money, one of the most philosophicallyloaded and satisfyinglycinematic scenes I've ever watched in a film (as good as when Buster Keaton jumps through the movie screen in Sherlock, Ir.). The scene with Truman and the boat is funny, surprising, it's completely visual, and it forcefully expresses several ideas all at once about freedom and transcendence and when those things fail and you find vourself at a dead end. The last scene of Dark City is a more disturbing and much less comical variation

on the same theme.

The men discover that

there is nothing beyond the

then it pulls a nice reversal.

Truman crashing his

wall, nothing beyond the decisions, but instead a lot of world they want to flee from. Just the vacuum of outer space. That image is, to me, a nice (however grim) illustration of philosophical skepticism - in which you begin doubting everything in your world, even your own existence, with the hope of finding some solid ground and something really real on which everything rests. But then you ask and you doubt and you dig, and at the center is...nothing, a vortex, meaninglessness, the abyss. With Dark City, there is no real world to escape into, and all there is for a person to do is transform the world in which they already find themselves - however absurd

and false and prison-like they

And that scene of

Murdoch waking up in the

hotel bathtub at the start of

the film is like a nightmarish

exaggeration of the idea from

These kinds of paradoxes

rattlesnakes in the desert of

They only strike when

provoked, but their bite is

may know it to be.

Heidegger of "thrownness," of how your presence in a world is just -! - gasping, disorienting, you're just there and you just have to go, without a pause for reflection. about the Forms and the things that embody the

involving infinity and

regression are like the

the intellect.

venomous and can cause total mental paralysis. Its curious to think about that sort of intellectual corruption and then to think that in Simulacron-3 and its film adaptations, there's also a theme of moral corruption, as the architect of the VR world becomes undone by his power over a community of little VR humanoids that he can amuse himself with (this sort of decadence also occurs to characters in eXistenZ and Strange Days). The architect becomes violent and sexually indulgent and repulses his real-world girlfriend, who then rescues Douglass (who was a mini VR clone of the architect) in order to preserve the old, good version of the man she loved. The possibility for a person to be corrupted by images and simulacra is something Plato would readily agree to, and that's also a theme of Infinite Jest and its killer entertainment. Interestingly, the documentary Marwencol is about a man who plays with and photographs dolls - basically his own little world of When Douglass suspects simulacra - as a means of therapy and recuperation after a head injury. infinite series sprouts within As for the film adaptathe novel (which also happens tions of Simulacron-3, The Thirteenth Floor is cheesy but does have a nice scene of

Douglass in the desert beyond

World on a Wire is slow

and stately and cheesy at times

seriously the spiritual crisis of

having to accept that one's

L.A, gazing at the abyss.

too, but it takes more

world is a sham.

Dark City

The Thirteenth

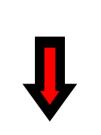
The Matrix

Floor

The Truman Show

World on a Wire

### CURIOUS COUSINS



Blade Runner

The Bothersome Man

Conspiracy Theory

The Cell

The Game

e Xisten Z

Groundhog Day

Inception Inland Empire

La Jetée

Marwencol

Open Your Eyes

The Passenger Pleasantville

The Purple Rose of Cairo

The Shawshank Redemption

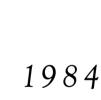
Source Code Strange Days

Stranger than Fiction

Sunset Boulevard Synecdoche, New York

Total Recall Zeitgeist

# LITERARY LINKS



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

A Doll's House

Discipline and Punish

The Grand Inquisitor

Hamlet

Ficciones

The Image

Infinite Jest Meditations on First Philosophy

The Moviegoer Narrative of the Life of

Frederick Douglass

Nauseau

Neuromancer

Notes from the Underground

The Paranoid Style in American Politics

The Republic

The Phenomenology of Spirit

Simulacra and Simulation 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

SOME QUESTIONS



Peters

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