

# CONSPIRACY GOTHIC

**B**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 three-hour German television miniseries directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder in the early 1970s.

## Simulacron-3 Time Out of Joint

**T**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, with the help of a woman, 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.

### 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. 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 "deceit of the real," he does consider briefly, but then gathers himself and is more or less OK.

### WHAT IT MAY MEAN

**What about all the times infinity, fractals, recursion, and synecdochic worlds-nested-within-nested-in these stories? How do those mathematical and physical concepts relate to the Conspiracy Gothic myth and to creating artificial worlds, being lonely, and going mad?**

**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 of East Asia, India, Africa, the Middle East, or the Americas?**

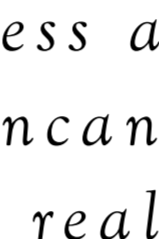
**When will someone film or write a Conspiracy Gothic story with a female protagonist?**

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

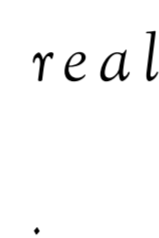
### THE FILMS



### 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 pursued by the agents.
4. The hero tries to reach the real world but cannot cross the boundaries of his prison and is repelled. He suffers a crisis.
5. The hero has to rouse himself to try once again to escape.
6. The hero breaks free, reaches the woman he loves, and begins fighting against the forces that had oppressed him.

#### The Matrix

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#### 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 escape until the very final scene. The Truman Show has nothing to do with what happens to Neo 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 illusion and conspiracy, and having a day-to-day existence that is so comfortable and so convenient.

#### Dark City

For as impressive and beautiful as the imagery and the world of The Matrix and The Truman Show are, Dark City outdoes them. The look of Dark City is like something out of Edward Hopper mixed with Metropolis mixed with The Thing. If there were ever a city in which to wander around feeling morosely alienated and spiritually adrift, it would be that of Dark City (as well as the Los Angeles of Blade Runner).

#### Time Out of Joint

Time Out of Joint, like The Truman Show, gives a nice portrait of a deadening suburban state, and how in that state a man's world begins to disintegrate and feel scripted and inauthentic.

#### Simulacron-3

Simulacron-3 begins with a more innocent premise than The Truman Show. The artificial world in the novel is a virtual reality computer program created for the sake of market research.

#### The Thirteenth Floor

The Thirteenth Floor is a novel about a man who is trapped in a simulated world. The novel (which also happens in The Matrix, for that matter) is about a man who is trapped in a simulated world.

#### World on a Wire

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### Dark City

### The Matrix

### The Thirteenth Floor

### The Truman Show

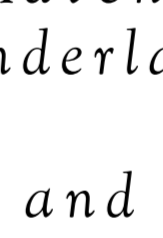
### World on a Wire

### CURIOUS COUSINS



- Blade Runner
- The Bothersome Man
- The Cell
- Conspiracy Theory
- eXistenZ
- The Game
- 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



- 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
- Simulacra and Simulations
- 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



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