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A GLITCH IN THE MATRIX

A Film by Rodney Ascher

108 minutes, 1.78, USA

Official Selection

2021 Sundance Film Festival – World Premiere

<https://campfire.us/glitch>

FINAL PRESS NOTES

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SYNOPSIS

What if we are living in a simulation, and the world as we know it is not real? To tackle this mind-bending idea, acclaimed filmmaker Rodney Asher (*ROOM 237*, *THE NIGHTMARE*) uses a noted speech from Philip K. Dick to dive down the rabbit hole of science, philosophy, and conspiracy theory. Leaving no stone unturned in exploring the unprovable, the film uses contemporary cultural touchstones like *THE MATRIX*, interviews with real people shrouded in digital avatars, and a wide array of voices, expert and amateur alike. If simulation theory is not science fiction but fact, and life is a video game being played by some unknowable entity, then who are we, really? **A GLITCH IN THE MATRIX** attempts to find out.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

After their successful collaboration on *The Nightmare*, “the scariest movie of the decade” according to Birth.movies.death, director Rodney Ascher and producer Ross Dinerstein were eager to find another project to work on together and Ascher saw the idea of “Simulation Theory” as the next logical progression from *Room 237* and *The Nightmare*. If the first film talked about the way people interpreted one specific film (or perhaps media or art in general) and the second explored the world of dreams and visions, *A Glitch In The Matrix* talks to people who have different ideas about the very nature of reality. Together, Ascher and Dinerstein set out to explore and portray startling first-hand, experiences that challenge basic assumptions about how the world we live in operates.

Diving into both smaller corners of the internet and surprisingly mainstream sources, the team found a myriad of people with their own unique and fascinating stories. As Ascher says, “the film is more about people who believe in simulation theory and how its affected them than the nuts and bolts of simulation theory itself.”

A Unique Approach to a Unique Story

Once the team had their subjects (a story in and of itself) the next step was in figuring out how to best tell their stories in a way that is appropriate to the subject matter. Conceptually, *A Glitch in The Matrix* had to be entirely digital and in a happy collision of economy and creativity, the answer became clear: they would do all the interviews online, and break the interviewees into two groups: “Eyewitnesses,” people whose lives have led them to believe that the world is a digital simulation, and “Expert Testifiers,” people who can talk about the idea from many different perspectives. More often than not, the line was blurry.

Their first “eyewitness” Paul Gude, has explored simulation theory since before he has a name for it. The son of a pastor, he always had an open mind to explore the link between what we perceive, what we believe, and what we know is actually real. Suffering from an existential crisis in his youth, he guides the audience through his journey in extraordinary detail and highly personal reflection.

Alex LeVine came to believe in simulation theory after a sequence of serendipitous events made it impossible *not* to believe. One of the most visually striking stories in the film, Alex’s account demonstrates how a Harvard educated electrical engineer came to believe that statistics are on the side of simulation theory.

“Brother Læo Mystwood” lives a seemingly straightforward life in New York City with an unusual organizing principal. After devising a unique, mathematical calendar to help measure the increasingly common synchronicities that were popping up in his life, he sought answers in a sensory deprivation chamber (familiar to anyone who’s seen *Altered States*.) While floating in complete silence and darkness he was hit by a life-changing revelation.

After some personal downturns, artist and teacher Jesse Orion found simulation theory to be the only the rational worldview that worked for him. Since then, he has put in some serious time considering the philosophical and ethical considerations that spring from the idea, seeing it as the possible seeds of a new religion.

Our final eyewitness is Joshua Cooke in Virginia, whose harrowing story illustrates some of the most visceral dangers of disconnecting from the real world as well as the loneliness that sometimes accompanies it.

The Experts included Nick Bostrom, the Oxford professor whose article “Are We Living in a Simulation” kicked off the current popularity of the idea as well as artists, writers, philosophers and a young Redditor who posted “I am a NPC (non-player character)”

Professor Bostrom's article is available to be read here:
<https://www.simulation-argument.com/simulation.pdf>

Enter the Animation Team

The look and feel of the interviews, done in Skype, will be instantly familiar to anyone who’s spent the better part of the last year on video-calls, but with an additional twist. Since they were planning on animating the re-enactments in a style that was influenced by video games — video games being one of the key metaphors they use when discussing the simulation — they created custom game-style avatars for each of the eyewitnesses (except Joshua whose story would be told another way) and used them not only for the cinematic sequences, but for the interviews as well. In the finished film we see these avatars speaking from the original interviewee’s own real-world environments.

Working with Mindbomb Films (*Jodorowsky’s Dune*, *Heaven’s Gate*) to create the extensive animation and graphics that would bring the film to life, part of the challenge was inventing workflows for techniques that were previously the domain of blockbusters and were only becoming accessible at the indie film level during the film’s production.

One of the first hurdles was finding the perfect design for each eyewitnesses’ avatar. This began with Ascher's collaboration with acclaimed comic book artist Chris Burnham (Grant Morrison’s *Batman Inc* and *Nameless*, Robert Kirkman’s *Die! Die! Die!*) Burnham created unique illustrations/designs for each subject (inspired by both their real-life features and their experiences and beliefs) and Maksim Solonovich digitally sculpted ready-to-animate 3D models based on them .

Next came the task of animating the characters and their stories. Lorenzo Fonda joined Mindbomb founders Syd Garon and Chris Kirk to create motion capture character performances and cinematic dramatizations. Finally, Davy Force, part of the team that created the surreal and hilarious, mind-altering Shining remix *The Chickening*, joined the team to animate photo-real sequences of possible ‘real-world’ scenarios outside our

presumed simulation. These ranged from a space-ship's suspended animation chamber to a movie theater screening *A Glitch in the Matrix* itself.

Meanwhile, the story grew in scope and the team had to rally to meet its needs. Additional animation was done in new mediums such as Google Earth Studio by Executive Producer Colin Frederick, and in Minecraft world by Rodney's son Anton and Syd's boys Enzo and Milo.

The Philosophy of Philip K Dick

It's impossible to talk about simulation theory without discussing the works of acclaimed science fiction author Philip K Dick who was one of the first to talk about it. Dick's works have left a huge impact on the zeitgeist and his takes on simulation theory itself are amongst the most vivid, perhaps most notably in "We Can Remember it for you Wholesale" (the basis of *Total Recall*). His two primary concerns, returned to again and again in his writing were famously "What is human?" & "What is real?"

A GLITCH IN THE MATRIX intercuts the film with a speech Dick delivered at a convention in Metz, France in 1977. His audience might have expected a talk on science fiction but he decided to open up and share his personal philosophical ideas, even if they sounded like madness by that day's standards. Strangely many of the topics he covered say as much about our own time and place as they do his. Alternate, private realities, the danger of America becoming a fascist police state, the disappearance of privacy, the rise of AIs... What might have been one man's private neuroses in 1977 may well prove to be collective fears of the 21st Century.

Another direct link between our eyewitnesses' stories and Philip K Dick's is that, like many of them, he had a sudden burst of revelation that would change his life. In his case, he experienced his own visions after receiving Sodium Pentothal for a wisdom teeth extraction. These visions, which he would write about for the rest of his life, contained ideas that read alternately like theology and science fiction, although frequently one bled into the other.

Likewise, ***A GLITCH IN THE MATRIX*** follows the links between simulation theory and spirituality, links that initially came as a surprise to the filmmakers. The nice thing about unscripted filmmaking, however, is that when the journey takes us to unexpected places there's no reason not to keep going.

Treasure In The Trashcan

As acclaimed as Philip K Dick (and the countless films based on his work) are now, he commonly talked of feeling like a literary outcast working in a lowly medium. In fact, he died before *Blade Runner*, the first movie based on his writings was released in 1981.

Dick wrote quite passionately about what he called 'THE TRASH STRATUM' the genres considered disposable and trivial by the mainstream but which contained a vast

richness of imagination and inspiration. Perhaps it meant so much to him since most of his work wound up there initially.

“The symbols of the divine show up in our world initially at the trash stratum.” - Valis

“There was a beauty in the trash of the alley I had never noticed before; my vision now seemed sharpened rather than impaired. As I walked along it seemed to me that the flattened beer cans and papers and weeds and junk mail had been arranged into patterns; these patterns, when I scrutinized them, lay distributed so as to compromise a visual language.” - Radio Free Ablemuth.

To that end, *A GLITCH IN THE MATRIX* illustrates some of the most other-worldly ideas spoken in the film from these sources.

Simulation Theory: An Idea That's Old and New

Perhaps one of the most surprising aspects of simulation theory is how much it resembles older ideas. Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* and Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* are both frequently name-checked as precursors. The idea has evolved time after time until being codified most persuasively by Nick Bostrom. His 2003 essay argues the case with logic and statistics so convincingly that it's been the basis for articles in the New York Times, the Guardian (UK) and Scientific American.

Being Neo

The Matrix is the film that introduced the idea of Simulation Theory to the mainstream and in fact, its title has become an almost generic way of discussing the concept. One of the most dramatic sequences in the film is Joshua Cooke's, a man who became obsessed with the film in high school.

Joshua was the only subject whose interview was recorded audio-only, and for good reason. Still serving time in prison, Joshua shared his incredibly sobering and disturbing account from a payphone in the common area. Josh's story follows his confession to crimes that happened in the aftermath of a perfect storm that included bullying, alleged abuse, limited employment options, deep loneliness, undiagnosed mental health issues, a violent fantasy life and lax gun laws. Obsessed as he was by *The Matrix*, at one point he described wandering around shopping malls wearing a black leather trench coat as 'Being Neo.'

20 years after the violence that landed him in prison (his lawyers considered using the controversial 'Matrix Defense') he is deeply remorseful, clear-eyed, and in fact, only participated in the film in hopes of reaching troubled young people and stopping them from repeating his mistakes. He recently wrote a book about his experience entitled 'Don't Shoot: Confessions from the Matrix Murderer')

A Virtual Walkthrough

To tell Joshua's story, the filmmakers eschewed the avatars and stylized grid-worlds of the other eyewitnesses stories. Collaborating with the photogrammetry artists at Blueplanet VR, the team recreated the floor plan of Joshua's house on location and made a digital model of every surface, texture and object in every single room.

As Joshua recounts the night that landed him in prison, Lorenzo Fonda floats a virtual camera through the rooms, down the hallways and stairwells into the basement, creating a terrifying first person journey following his footsteps.

Conclusions (Where Applicable)

After following the history of the theory, personal narratives of conversion experiences, fun science fiction metaphors and harrowing accounts of the worst possible scenarios, the film ends with a few big questions. Some are playful, others more serious.

- If we are living in a simulation, what is our obligation to other people? Is there a reason to live our lives any differently if the theory is true?
- Could simulation theory be a new religion or is it just an easy way to cop out from the complexities of the real world?
- Would it be a good idea to try to wake up out of it, in other words: 'the red pill or the blue one?'

INTERVIEW SUBJECT LIST:

Eyewitnesses:

Joshua Cooke

Paul Gude

Alex LeVine

Brother Læo Mystwood

Jesse Orion

Expert Testimony:

Nick Bostrom

Erik Davis

Emily Pothast

Chris Ware

Jeremy Felts

THE FILMMAKING TEAM

RODNEY ASCHER - Director, Editor, and Executive Producer

Rodney Ascher is a filmmaker known for creating documentaries that explore the subjective experience, freely appropriating the vocabularies of genre, experimental, and found-footage films along the way.

His first feature, 2012's *ROOM 237* looked at *The Shining* through the eyes of five very different people. He visualized their wildly different interpretations of Kubrick's classic by juxtaposing excerpts of the film with everything from Murnau's *Faust* to the cover of the January 1978 issue of *Playgirl* magazine creating a trip down the rabbit hole that Chuck Klosterman, writing in *Grantland*, said "Obliterated my cranium." It premiered at Sundance, went on to play Cannes and the NYFF before screening at over 30 festivals and being released theatrically all over the world. The film was largely made on his home computer at night and on weekends on a budget in the low three figures (before legal fees.)

His follow up, *THE NIGHTMARE* was called "The Scariest Movie of the decade" (Birth.movies.death) which might be overstating it, but looked great on the poster. Creatively, the film completely changed tactics from *Room 237*'s archival-driven montage. To visualize real people's seemingly supernatural experiences during bouts of 'sleep paralysis' his team filmed interviews at night in the subjects' own bedrooms and created stylized re-enactments inspired by the interviewees' drawings and his own personal memories of a visitation by a 'shadowman.' Like *Room 237*, it premiered at Sundance before traveling around the world including an Imax screening in Moscow.

Other Projects include an GIF-centric music video for the Hugo-nominated hip-hop band *CLIPPING* (featuring Hamilton's Daveed Diggs) and editing Andy Kaufman's posthumous (?) comedy album, *ANDY AND HIS GRANDMOTHER* (Drag City) from a newly unboxed archive of 80+ hours of cassette recordings the comedian made in the late 1970s. He also created *PRIMAL SCREEN* a documentary series for the Shudder network and directed a short comic horror film for Hulu about the creation of a Halloween sound effects record (starring *Knives Out*'s Noah Segan and *Barry Lyndon*/*Eyes Wide Shut*'s Leon Vitali.)

Last year he premiered *THE EL DUCE TAPES* (with co-directors David Lawrence and Ryan Sexton) at Hot Docs and the BFI/London Film festival. The film, focussed on the notorious lead singer of the 2nd most offensive rock band of the 1980s and 90s was made almost entirely from archival footage shot on a VHS camcorder. The project began as a time capsule and a character study but became strangely reflective of 21st Century socio-political controversies which became inescapable during the making of the film.

A **GLITCH IN THE MATRIX** is his most ambitious film yet, using multiple styles of 3D animation to illustrate the experiences and philosophies of people who suspect the world itself is not quite real.

Having grown up in Boston and Florida (where he graduated from the University of Miami) he now lives in the northeast edge of Los Angeles with his talented wife, a beautiful cat, and a ten year old with a special interest in the sinking of the Titanic.

ROSS DINERSTEIN & CAMPFIRE FILM & TV - Producer & Production Company

Ross Dinerstein is the founder and CEO of Campfire, a premium production company known for its broad bench of content across scripted and unscripted, for both feature film and TV/streaming platforms. Over the past 15 years, Dinerstein has produced or executive produced 40+ series and feature films, premiering projects at the most prestigious festivals in the world, including Sundance, SXSW, Tribeca and Toronto. Dinerstein and Campfire's current and most recent projects include HBO Max's upcoming *Heaven's Gate* docuseries; FX's *The Most Dangerous Animal of All*; Netflix's true-crime documentary series *John Grisham's The Innocent Man* (which contributed to a federal judge overturning in 2019 the wrongful conviction of subject Karl Fontenot, after 35 years behind bars); and Netflix's Emmy-nominated, scripted series *Special* (currently in production on Season 2), among others.

Dinerstein has also produced eight Netflix Original features, including *Rattlesnake*; thriller *1922*, based on the Steven King novella; and comedy *The Package*. His credits also include IFC's cult horror movie *The Pact* and feature documentaries *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*, *The Nightmare*, and *Silicon Cowboys*.

In 2020, Dinerstein and Campfire launched the company's first podcast, *Abuse of Power*, hosted by husband and wife criminal defense duo David Rudolf and Sonya Pfeiffer and spotlighting injustices in America.

Campfire is part of media, marketing and investment company Wheelhouse Group.

JONATHAN SNIPES – Sound + Music (including sound editing and mixing)

Jonathan Snipes is a composer and sound designer for Film and Theater living in Los Angeles. He occasionally teaches sound design in the theater department at UCLA, and is a member of the rap group clipping.

selected credits:

Film Composition (Feature Length):

A Glitch in the Matrix, dir. Rodney Ascher, 2020

Mope, dir. Lucas Heyne, 2020

Tresspassers, dir. Orson Oblowitz, 2019

The El Duce Tapes, dir. Rodney Ascher, 2020
Domain, dir. Nathaniel Atcheson, 2017
Rebirth, dir. Karl Mueller, 2016
Excess Flesh, dir. Patrick Kennelly, 2016
The Nightmare, dir. Rodney Ascher, 2015
Contracted: Phase II, dir. Josh Forbes, 2015
Starry Eyes, dir. Dennis Widmyer & Kevin Kolsch, 2014
Room 237, dir. Rodney Ascher, 2012

Television Composition:

The Mayor, ABC 2017
Primal Screen, Shudder 2017
Pixl Network ID & Logo stingers, 2010
Exposure, PBS/ITVS, 2010
Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles, Sony/Fox, 2008-2009, additional music
Battlestar Galactica, SciFi, 2004-2009, additional music (one episode)

Film Composition (Short Form):

Below the Trees, dir. Parker Brennon, 2018
Breath | Light | Stone, dir. Allen Hahn, Elizabeth Shea, 2017
Trial Run, dir. Lawrence Klein, 2015 (Fantastic Fest)
MTV Scream: Choose Your Own Murder (web), 2015
ABCs of Death 2: "Q" dir. Rodney Ascher, 2014
10 Minutes is 2 Hours, dir. Patrick Kennelly, 2013
TV/Film Song Placement:
Togetherness, HBO, 2016
The Office, NBC, 2005
Caprica, SyFy, 2009
Snakes on a Plane, New Line, 2006

Theater/Dance Composition and/or Sound Design:

Big Black October Surprise, Redcat (streaming), 2020
You Are Here, La Jolla Playhouse (streaming), 2020
Man of God, Geffen Playhouse, 2020
On the Other Side, Marike Splint – Skirball Cultural Center, 2020
The White Album, Lars Jan - Early Morning Opera/LA Performance Practice, 2018-2020
Mysterious Circumstances, Geffen Playhouse 2019
A Jordan Downs Illumination, Cornerstone Theater, 2019
moon&, Szalt Dance Company, 2019
Marshmallow Sea, Szalt Dance Company/LAX Festival, 2017
Bad Jews, Geffen Playhouse, 2015
DED, Matrix Theater, 2015
Wait Until Dark, Geffen Playhouse, 2013
Good People, Geffen Playhouse, 2012
Patty: The Revival, Highways Performance Space, 2012 (original musical)

Sole Mate, Mr. Bad's Revenge, Three Chairs Theater/Oregon Shakespeare Festival, 2010
Meditations on Virginity, National Theater, Warsaw, Poland, 2004
Crumble, Moving Arts, 2005
Black Dahlia Theater – Resident Sound Designer 2002-2006
Belfast Blues, Off-Broadway, 2004
Dementia, LATC, 2003

Albums:

clipping. - Visions of Bodies Being Burned, Sub Pop Records, 2020
clipping. - There Existed an Addiction to Blood, Sub Pop Records, 2019
clipping. - Splendor & Misery, Sub Pop Records, 2016
clipping. - CLPPNG, Sub Pop Records, 2014
Captain Ahab – The End of Irony, Deathbomb Arc, 2010

CREDITS

DIRECTED BY RODNEY ASCHER

PRODUCED BY ROSS M. DINERSTEIN, p.g.a

**EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: COLIN FREDERICK RODNEY ASCHER ROSS
GIRARD DAVID CARRICO ADAM PAULSEN**

**CO-EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: TIM KIRK REBECCA EVANS NEIL
TABATZNIK ROBIN SMITH**

CO-PRODUCER: TYLER GLODT

EDITOR: RODNEY ASCHER

ANIMATION: MINDBOMB FILMS and DAVY FORCE.

ANIMATION DIRECTORS: SYD GARON and LORENZO FONDA

SOUND AND MUSIC: JONATHAN SNIPES

CHARACTER DESIGN: CHRIS BURNHAM

CO-EDITOR: RACHEL TEJADA