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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://www.aglitchinthematrixfilm.com/>

FINAL PRESS NOTES

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SHORT 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.

LONG SYNOPSIS

How do we know the world is real? There's the evidence of our five senses—sight, taste, touch, smell and hearing—but can't those responses be hijacked or simulated? Such questions have preoccupied thinkers for millennia, from the speculations of ancient religious texts and philosophers like René Descartes, to paranoid science fiction novels, television and blockbuster films. Given our online infoscape peopled by digital avatars and hobbled by conspiracy theories, is it a surprise that existential doubt is gaining traction?

A kaleidoscopic deep dive down the rabbit hole of “simulation theory,” **A GLITCH IN THE MATRIX** is the mind-bending, exhilarating and definitive introduction to a subject that, subscribe to it or not, involves us all. Directed by Rodney Ascher (*Room 237*, *The Nightmare*), the preeminent documentarian of today's obsessional thinking, **A GLITCH IN THE MATRIX** introduces us to a handful of real-world testifiers who are certain that their bodies and minds are being operated by some external game-player.

Ascher, as ever an inviting, curious questioner (never one who mocks), brings a wealth of cultural and intellectual context to his latest exploration, from the videotaped musings of paranoid sci-fi giant Philip K. Dick to clips of Keanu Reeves in *The Matrix* and a host of bespoke animated re-creations that give eerie credence to the most outré of notions. Ultimately venturing into serious concepts of identity, legal culpability and the mechanics of social responsibility, **A GLITCH IN THE MATRIX** is the year's most audacious documentary.

Look under the hood of existence—but only if you dare.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

If director Rodney Ascher is interviewing you, chances are you're obsessed with something. Maybe you have a pet theory about Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (*Room 237*), one that drives you into a mental hedge maze of your own devising. Perhaps you're plagued by sleep paralysis (*The Nightmare*) or by ventriloquist dummies (*The Wooden Boy*) or by the inexplicably menacing animated logo of a movie production company (*The S from Hell*).

"Rodney is a true visionary, a true auteur," says producer **Ross M. Dinerstein, a collaborator since 2015's *The Nightmare***. "He has created his own genre. I don't know of any other filmmakers who are like him, to be honest. He pushes the boundaries as far as anyone can. I've been lucky to produce these films with him. But I really do sit back and let him do his thing, and it's pretty remarkable to watch."

Ascher, for his part, can't precisely say where his ideas come from, only that they start with a pull that's more immediate than anything analytical.

"It doesn't begin with an intellectual idea for me," **Ascher** says. "It's an emotional feeling, a nostalgia that's activated with a little bit of horror and wonder. Maybe a little bit of comedy in there, too, something self-deprecating. It's the same uncanny, eerie reaction that you get from the best creepypastas."

For Ascher, *creepypastas* rolls off the tongue comfortably, as if everybody knew about the spooky internet legends—viral stories of supernatural "slendermen" and the like—that have come to claim their own tasty menu heading.

But if creepypastas didn't already exist, Ascher would have no doubt invented them, or, more aptly, invented the people who savor them. There's a daisy-chain word-of-mouth aspect to Ascher's work. Both he and producer Dinerstein see their latest film, **A GLITCH IN THE MATRIX**, as the continuation of a cycle that began with *Room 237* and continued with *The Nightmare*. The new documentary explores so-called "simulation theory," the belief that what we perceive as reality may merely be a well-designed cover for something else.

"I don't think I was aware that simulation theory was something taken seriously by scientists and philosophers," Ascher admits, casting back on the genesis of the project. "I didn't think it was more than just a science-fiction idea."

But while conducting interviews for *The Nightmare*, Ascher spoke with someone who suspected their memories of half-woken imagery were, in fact, cracks in the simulation.

It was the beginning of a long span of research, one that resulted in a blueprint that justified a feature-length documentary, while also hinting at a wider resonance.

“Rodney’s always coming up with thought-provoking, next-level ideas,” says Dinerstein. “But this is the one that really stood out to me as something that I personally was interested in, plus I felt like there would be an audience for it and a desire to see it. That’s what’s so great about Rodney—he has an idea and you watch the genius unfold.”

If you’ve ever seen *The Matrix*, *eXistenZ*, *The Truman Show* or even *Groundhog Day*, you understand the concept of simulation theory, of another world behind the real one (or so we think). Popular movies have already laid the groundwork. What’s new is the way these fictional anxieties of self-authenticity have taken root in modern-day psychology. As a way of showing his producers what he was going for, Ascher assembled clips of salient films.

“He likes to do these mood reels,” Dinerstein says. “Rodney cut together two hours of movie clips and screened it for my staff at Campfire so that everyone could get an understanding of the tone and feel and look of what he was trying to do.”

Marinating his inspirations in a rich broth of cinematic references is an Ascher signature, starting with *Room 237*’s panoply of Kubrickisms, nods that went well beyond *The Shining*. The director makes no bones about his love of meta-films. “Certainly I take a special interest in movies about movies,” he says, “whether it’s something like *Mank* or *Wes Craven’s New Nightmare*, which is like his *Adaptation*.”

But has Ascher himself ever suspected that his world might be a carefully designed sham?

“From time to time, people have said a little something that’s felt like a clue,” Ascher says. “Certainly since *Room 237*, I’ve been surrounded by some bizarre synchronicities. Sometimes those patterns are coincidental. Sometimes they’re not. And it’s often hard to tell the difference.”

“They happen more often than not,” Dinerstein agrees, laughing. “I have a lot of texts and emails that I’ve sent to Rodney over the last few years in which I’ve said, ‘I think you’re onto something.’ Maybe I recognize it more, having been a part of this production.”

Their next step was to widen out their frame of reference, announcing the project publicly and opening it up to submissions, a process that worked out well for *The Nightmare*. Both a Facebook group and a Google Form were established. “Usually half of our people find us,” says Ascher. “They’re always the most fascinating ones.”

“People sent us their stories and we vetted them and found the best ones,” Dinerstein says. “And we tried to be diverse with the experiences.”

A *GLITCH IN THE MATRIX* features the sincere confessions of a handful of articulate “eyewitnesses” (as identified by Ascher), all of them convinced they’d seen a fleeting seam in the manufactured fabric of existence. Their stories are fascinating: **Paul Gude**, the son of a pastor, suffered a crisis of faith in his youth, leading to a more suspicious outlook on the nature of reality itself. **Alex LeVine**, a Harvard-educated engineer, came to believe in simulation theory after a sequence of serendipitous events made it impossible for him not to.

Brother Læo Mystwood devised a unique mathematical calendar to help him measure the increasingly common synchronicities occurring in his life. Later, he sought answers in a sensory-deprivation tank (familiar to anyone who’s seen *Altered States*). After some personal downturns, artist and teacher **Jesse Orion** found simulation theory to be the only rational worldview that worked for him.

We hear their voices but don’t see their faces: True to Ascher’s respectful interviewing methods and the film’s deeper theme of constructed identities in flux, the documentary supplants faces and upper bodies with 3-D motion-captured animation.

“We knew we wanted to tell the story visually and in an unusual way,” recalls Dinerstein, “but the people on the other side wanted to have a level of anonymity as well. I knew Rodney would be able to execute it.”

Ascher remembers finding his solution in an unlikely place.

“My son, who plays a lot of Fortnite, will spend a decent amount of time not fighting but hanging out with his friends or interacting with strangers,” says the filmmaker. “And he’s talking about fairly mundane fifth-grade stuff, but meanwhile, his voice is coming out of a cybernetic warrior.”

After considering different styles of animation including 2-D and Snapchat-style animojis, Ascher elected for something not far off from Fortnite. Key to making these custom-crafted avatars was accomplished comic-book artist **Chris Burnham**, famous for his work on Grant Morrison's *Batman Incorporated*, as well as Robert Kirkman's *Die!Die!Die!*

“Chris designed these characters and they all looked to me like they could all be a part of long-running science-fiction-fantasy narratives,” says Ascher. “But they’ve been custom-designed for us. In some way they reflect who a person is, what their thoughts are.”

Their collaboration was free-wheeling and creative. After viewing an early cut of the film, Burnham would spitball with Ascher as to which traits they wanted emphasized. Out of those conversations came half a dozen character sketches and ultimately a selection. Then the interview footage was sent out to digital animators at Mindbomb Films (*Jodorowsky's Dune*), whose founders, **Syd Garon** and **Chris Kirk**, working with animator **Lorenzo Fonda**, converted Burnham's perfected avatars into motion-capture performances.

“Lorenzo wore one of those Gollum-type rubber suits,” says Ascher, still impressed. “He did the hand gestures and the body language. You can finally do that at the indie-documentary budget level. The 1.0 version of the software was released while we were in production. We took advantage of the cutting-edge technology that was available.”

The result is intriguingly sympathetic: heartfelt confessions coming from the mouths of futuristic Roman-style barbarians on a coffee break from *Masters of the Universe*. (All of these interviews were shot on Skype, lending an additional layer of banal living-room intimacy that unintentionally links Ascher's film to our current Zoom-fatigued moment). Never once does the technique seem glib or impersonal—or worse, insensitive.

“Rodney in a million years would never make fun,” says Dinerstein. “The treatment is really well-done. Other filmmakers might have poked fun at the subculture of gamers, but I don't think we do that in any shape or form.”

Other subjects in the film were not altered visually. Such experts included **Nick Bostrom**, the Oxford philosophy professor whose [2001 article](#) “Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?” kicked off the current popularity of the idea, as well as the legendary science-fiction author **Philip K. Dick**, captured on video delivering a paranoid 1977 address.

“When Philip K. Dick was talking about this stuff, it sounded like madness,” Ascher says. “He was the only public person talking this way. And now it’s something that thousands of people are writing and talking about. He might have been patient zero of this particular, contemporary existential crisis.”

Famously, Dick is the mind behind the stories that led to *Blade Runner*, *Total Recall* and *Minority Report*. Less famously, he suffered from debilitating bouts of what may have been early simulation anxiety. As seen in *A GLITCH IN THE MATRIX*, Dick mystifies a French audience (one that probably wanted to hear more about *The Man in the High Castle*) as he describes his hallucinations while on sodium pentothal for a wisdom-tooth extraction. The experience tore a hole in his reality. He would spend the rest of his life writing about it, resulting in a dense, semi-theological tome called *The Exegesis*.

Ascher, for his part, enjoys chasing down these tangents. His film is hardly a platform for kooks, but rather, a clearheaded examination that scrapes the far edge of metaphysics while also straying into oddly familiar territory, that of faith. “In many religious traditions, this world is not the only world—or even the most important one,” he says. “This world is the demo mode. In Christianity, if you spend an eternity in heaven or hell, the amount of time you spend on Earth becomes increasingly trivial and insignificant.”

Adding his aural signature to Ascher’s work—as he has since *Room 237*—is Jonathan Snipes, composer, sound designer, mixer and member of the experimental hip-hop band *clipping* with Daveed Diggs. “Jonathan’s been an indispensable part of everything I’ve done,” Ascher says. “His sounds come together in a way that is totally immersive and hypnotic. Ultimately his soundtracks tune the audience into each of our speakers’ headspaces.” For *A GLITCH IN THE MATRIX*, Snipes went so far as to create multiple synthetic singing voices for an animated church’s congregation.

The documentary’s most troubling interview, sure to be a flashpoint, is Ascher’s inclusion of an audio-only confession by **Joshua Cooke**, the convicted murderer of his adoptive parents in a premeditated shotgun rampage. (Then 19 years old, Cooke is currently serving a 40-year sentence.) Cooke’s lawyers strongly considered using the so-called “Matrix defense,” a variant of an insanity plea that suggests the defendant was convinced of a parallel universe. Speaking from prison, Cooke speaks of his all-consuming obsession with *The Matrix*, which extended to wearing a leather trench coat and “being Neo” in malls.

“That moment in the film is as shocking and groundbreaking as any I’ve ever seen,” says producer Dinerstein of the introduction of Cooke’s voice and the telling of his story (accompanied by a virtual walk-through of his house and basement, rendered with ghostly animated photogrammetry). “That third act, that moment, it’s unbelievable.”

Ascher says he spoke with Cooke three or four times, detailing the entirety of the crime. Their last conversation—via payphone—was from the prison’s common area, where a fight can be heard to break out midcall, shouts reverberating off metal walls.

“It sounds like souls in hell,” says the director. “Josh was very clear that the reason he wanted to participate is to try to reach out to troubled kids so they don’t make the same mistakes that he did.” (Cooke’s self-published autobiography is entitled *Don’t Shoot: Confessions from the Matrix Murderer*.)

Ascher’s inclusion of the Cooke narrative offers a sobering dose of real-world consequence to *A GLITCH IN THE MATRIX*. There may be a danger in indulging the freedoms dangled by simulation theory, especially when they run up against legal culpability. As documentary filmmakers, there were ethical dimensions to consider as well.

“We’re not turning Joshua into a hero,” Dinerstein says. “He obviously suffers from emotional and physical abuse, and I’m not trying to justify what he did in any way. But there is a level of sadness in his voice, a level of remorse. He’s not saying he’s innocent. That never came up. At no point was he not taking responsibility for his actions.”

“I was especially struck by how introspective and thoughtful Josh was,” Ascher adds. “People don’t fit into these boxes as cleanly as you might think. They don’t fit in neatly.”

Made with an investigatory commitment that signals a major documentary event, *A GLITCH IN THE MATRIX* represents the first thorough onscreen examination of simulation theory. It arrives at a moment when, unavoidably, the film will be seen through the prism of the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside our own doubts concerning the fragility of existence.

“At no point in the history of humankind have people stared at their own faces as much as we have, as we try to live through this Zoom reality,” says Dinerstein, reflecting on his film’s unwitting timeliness. “Obviously I wish the pandemic never happened. But my wife and I have joked for the last few months, ‘Can someone please go and reset the router?’ It still doesn’t seem real. I find myself walking the dog, wearing a mask and seeing all these other people wearing masks with their dogs, and I feel like I’m in a simulation.”

Ascher thinks the pandemic has only sharpened the questions his film is trying to raise.

“Whether we’re living in a simulation or not, we still have an obligation to look out for other people and to treat this life quite seriously,” he says. “Whether we think about alternate realities, this is still the one that we’re all sharing. That’s where my head is at.”

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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