



MIT 2189A ❖ Fall 2019

Through the Looking Glass: Alternate Realities in Pop Culture

❖ Tues 2:30-4:30 & Thurs 3:30-4:30, FNB 1240 ❖

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One of the most fascinating themes in popular culture is seen in fictions in which a heroic character goes through a portal or barrier into an alternate reality where the rules of the physical, social and moral game are fundamentally different. Much of the drama in these fictions comes from the hero's attempt to figure out these new rules, how reality works on the other side of the looking glass. While there, they typically encounter archetypes that allow us to see seemingly unlinked stories as part of a grander mythos. This course will examine a wide variety of such fictions in five media forms, including the *Alice in Wonderland*

and *Doom Patrol* graphic novels, the films *The Matrix*, *eXistenZ* and *Waking Life*, the TV shows *The Twilight Zone*, *Electric Dreams*, *Heroes*, *Black Mirror*, *Rick and Morty* and *Cowboy Bebop*, stories by PK Dick and HP Lovecraft, and a few Cthulhu games.

WORKLOAD

- Reports (one due before October 31, one after, topics posted on Owl): 15% x 2 = 30%
- Participation (can be replaced by an optional third report): 15%
- Warm-up Test (TBA in October): 15%
- Final Exam (2.5 hours): 40%

BOOKS TO BUY

- Lewis Carroll and Glenn Diddit. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland: Official 150th Anniversary Edition Unabridged Graphic Novel*. CreateSpace, 2015.
- Grant Morrison, Richard Case, etc. *The Doom Patrol Book One*. DC Comics, 2016.
- Through the Looking Glass Reader*. Ed. Doug Mann. UWO, 2019.

SYNOPSIS

*Each number is a topic. Their length varies. Most of the readings are in the courseware: I'll only post things on Owl if there's a copyright problem. It's up to you to watch the **main movies** and **full TV episodes** (most of which I can't legally post) – most can be easily found. I'll show a few clips in each case, so you can at least get a sense of what's going on in each. One or more of the last few topics **may be cut** for length – I'll discuss specifics in class.*

1. Alice in Wonderland. We'll start by reading Lewis Carroll's classic children's story *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in its graphic novel version, exploring the Jungian archetypes (hero, herald, mentor, trickster) and stages in the classical monomyth found in the story. We'll also watch the fascinating video "The Fantasy of Ultimate Purpose" by YouTuber *Stories of Old*. **Readings:** Alice graphic novel. Doug Mann, "The Hero with a Thousand Faces and *Star Wars*."

2. The Eye of the Beholder. Is beauty relative to culture? We'll see in the celebrated episode 2.6 of *The Twilight Zone*, "The Eye of the Beholder," after a brief intro to the Zone. **Video:** "Eye."

3. VR: Let's Party Like it's 1999. Throughout the 1990s, American film and TV creators were fascinated with virtual reality - witness *Lawnmower Man*, *Strange Days*, *Johnny Mnemonic*, *Virtuosity*, *Dark City* and *VR.5*. To cap off the decade, two key movies about virtual reality appeared in 1999: the Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix*, and David Cronenberg's *eXistenZ*. Both feature heroes entering new worlds; both question our sense of reality. Are you still in the game? **Readings:** David Lavery, "From Cinescape to Cyberspace: Zionists and Agents, Realists and Gamers in *The Matrix* and *eXistenZ*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 28.4 (2001): 150-157. Doug Mann & Heidi Hochenedel, "Evil Demons, Saviours, and Simulacra in *The Matrix*." **Films:** *The Matrix*, *eXistenZ*.

4. The Call of Cthulhu. An introduction to the cosmic horror of HP Lovecraft and the story of Cthulhu's rebirth. Neil Gaiman's marriage of Lovecraftian horror with the gaslit streets of Sherlock Holmes' London. We'll also look at a few board games with Lovecraftian themes. **Readings:** Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu", original story OR ARTC dramatic presentation. Neil Gaiman, "A Study in Emerald," original story or audiobook version.

5. Doctor Who? *Doctor Who* is the longest-running scifi show of all time. He's a time traveller whose looking glass is a blue police box. We'll focus on the standalone horror episode 3.10 "Blink" from the new series, starring (barely) David Tennant. **Reading:** Michelle Saint & Peter A. French. "The Horror of the Weeping Angels." *Doctor Who and Philosophy: Bigger on the Inside*. Eds. Courtland Lewis and Paula Smithka. Chicago: Open Court, 2010, 297-312. **Video:** "Blink."

6. Electric Dreams. Philip K. Dick was perhaps the most prolific explorer of alternate realities in fiction. We'll read his short story "Foster, You're Dead", then discuss the modernized version of this story seen in the episode "Safe and Sound" from the 2017 TV series *Philip K. Dick's Electric Dreams*. We'll also discuss the Amazon TV series adaptation of his seminal novel *The Man in the High Castle*. **Reading:** PK Dick, "Foster, You're Dead." **Video:** "Safe and Sound."

7. (Existential) Heroes [super-length super-unit]. What if superheros were real? This is the question that the excellent first season of Tim Kring's TV show *Heroes* (2006-2010) asks. I'll show a bunch of clips in class, but try to watch at least episodes **1.1, 1.9, 1.17, 1.20, 1.23**.

8. Rick and Morty. Mad scientist Rick drags his peevish grandson Morty down a wild series of rabbit holes in this cartoon that revels in dark humour and cosmicism. **Required episodes:** "Total Rickall" (hmmm, sounds familiar), "Rick Potion #9", "Get Schwifty." **Required video:** Wisecrack, "The Philosophy of Rick and Morty", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hWFDHynfl1E&t=458s>

9. Waking Life [we might skip this for time reasons]. Richard Linklater's rotoscoped 2001 film *Waking Life* features Wiley Wiggins journey through a dreamscape in search of the meaning of life (yeah, that old saw again). **Film:** *Waking Life*, 2001. **Reading:** Doug Mann, "Buddhists, Existentialists and Situationists: Waking up in *Waking Life*." *Journal of Film and Video* 62.4, 2001.

10. The Doom Patrol. Born in 1963 and christened by DC as "the world's strangest heroes," the Doom Patrol experienced their weirdest manifestation in during Grant Morrison's run on the comic from 1989-1993, when they went from stopping mundane super-villain plots to saving reality itself. We'll read two key arcs from Morrison's earlier issues: an intro (issue #19), the Brotherhood of Dada (#26-29), and the Decreator (#31-33). We'll also look at the 2019 TV adaptation, which is faithful to the spirit of Morrison's vision. **Readings:** *The Doom Patrol* #19, #26-29, #31-33 (comic). Noah Berlatsky, "Grant Morrison's *Doom Patrol*: The Craziest Superhero Story Ever Told." *The Atlantic*, April 17, 2014. **Video:** *The Doom Patrol* episodes 1, 5, 6, 15 (TV series), though I will also show clips.

11. Cowboy Bebop [time permitting]. Spike, Jet and Faye search the solar system for bounties and existential meaning. This anime mixes science-fiction, film noir and the western in an interesting mashup. **Required episode:** "E5 Ballad of the Fallen Angels", but also watch for background E1 "Asteroid Blues," and E11 "Toys in the Attic," E11-12 "Jupiter Jazz I & II" for fun. **Reading:** L. B. Jeffries, "The Film Noir Roots of Cowboy Bebop," *Pop Matters* Jan. 10, 2010.

12. Black Mirror/White Christmas [time permitting]. We'll finish by looking at the *Black Mirror* special from 2014 "White Christmas," which focuses on exploiting an AI to keep a smart house running and the use of a virtual prison to punish a wicked man.

REPORTS

Under normal circumstances, students will be expected to write **two reports**, each worth 15%, one before Halloween, and one after. Topics will vary in structure: they'll be posted on Owl. Most will be 4-5 pages long excluding the cover page and bibliography. Some will be screenplays or diaries. For screenplays, don't use Courier font: single-space speeches and scene descriptions, leaving spaces between these. I'll post an example of screenplay format. Each will have a definite due date, with a standard **5% per day late penalty** applying, no exceptions. If you run out of time on a topic, stop working on it and start on the next one!



They should be formatted as short essays with a proper bibliography and internal proper citations: I prefer MLA style. See my "how to write an essay" blog on Owl for details on formatting and handy tips like stating your thesis on page 1. Early topics in each half of the course will be graded more leniently; the last one more strictly. You absolutely must show you've read the course readings and/or watched the pertinent film or TV show or face losing at least a full grade level. Include at least one or two additional academic sources. Proofread and spell check please!

Third Report Option: You may, but don't have to, write a third report to replace your participation grade. You may pick any topic other than the ones you wrote regular reports on. Clearly indicate on the cover page that you want this report to replace your participation grade.

PARTICIPATION

I'll keep track of your participation each class on a 0-3 scale, add up the totals, rank order everyone, and then use the following schema to give you a specific grade out of 15:



- 0-1: You never participate OR I have no idea who you are OR you miss over half the classes OR you play video games, surf social media or text on your cell phone during class. In short, you're a Morty.
- 2-5: I know who you are AND you participated about 2-5 times OR missed 5+ classes but participated regularly.
- 6-8: You attend most classes AND participate about 6-8 times OR missed 4+ classes but participated regularly.
- 9-11: You attend most classes AND participate meaningfully in over half of them.
- 12-13: You say something meaningful in every class but one or two and know the texts.
- 14-15: You always participate meaningfully, skipped at most one class, show clear evidence that you know the readings, and aren't afraid to critique your classmates. Congrats, you're a Rick.

For mark ranges your actual grade will be based on the frequency and quality of your participation. A high premium will be placed on **knowledge of the texts and videos** and willingness to engage with key issues (even if your fellow students disagree with you!), while uninformed opinions will be lightly regarded. So knowledge of the course materials counts.