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# VISIONARY TELEVISION: WORLD ON A WIRE AND ARTEMIS 81

MARK FISHER REVISITS TELEVISION DRAMAS FROM  
RAINER WERNER FASSBINDER AND DAVID RUDKIN

*World on a Wire* (*Welt am Dracht*) was a two-part production made for the Westdeutscher Rundfunk public service channel in 1973; *Artemis 81* was a three-hour television film broadcast by the BBC in 1981. Both were the work of auteurs: *World on a Wire* was an adaptation of Daniel F. Galouye's 1964 science-fiction novel *Simulacron-3* by none other than Rainer Werner Fassbinder, while *Artemis 81* was the work of lesser-known but equally visionary dramatist David Rudkin.

The two productions are genre works of an aberrant and deeply ambitious type. This was a time—before the arrival of blockbuster budgets and digital technology raised the wrong kind of expectations—when high-concept science fiction could be confidently produced by public service broadcasters. These shows made a virtue of the logistical and budgetary constraints they were under. Instead of the frictionless, massively labour-intensive non-places of CGI, *World on a Wire* and *Artemis 81* make extraordinary use of “found locations.” Fassbinder repeated the trick that Godard had pulled with *Alphaville*, constructing a future city by editing together Parisian modernist architecture, construction sites, and shopping malls. *Artemis 81*, meanwhile, concocted a dystopian landscape from such places as Harwich ferry terminal, an under-construction power station in North Wales, and the Anglican cathedral in Liverpool.

Both these productions are deeply concerned with problems of vision and spectatorship. Rudkin, whose BFI Film Classics book on Dreyer's *Vampyr* consummately establishes how finely tuned his cineaste's eye is, packed *Artemis 81* with cinematic references—to Dreyer himself, Bergman, Hammer horror, and Hitchcock. And the film is about learning how to see—a feat which the lead character, the pulp horror writer Gideon Harlax, only manages to achieve once he discards the outsized spectacles that he wears in the first part of the film, one of many glossy shields that he hides behind in the

initial phases of the drama. In *World on a Wire*, meanwhile, the background figures in crowd scenes have a curiously agog immobility, as if they are spectators at a stage play. One early scene is like an extrapolation from a Bryan Ferry album sleeve of the early 1970s: in an atmosphere of louche decadence, members of the business and cultural elite linger like models or gawp like voyeurs as they stand around a swimming pool, its reflected light playing on the then-futuristic interiors. There is barely a scene that doesn't feature a reflective surface, and some of the most memorable shots show reflections of reflections, infinite regresses of simulacra. One of the opening scenes centers on a mirror: a small hand-mirror that the obviously disturbed head of the *Simulacron* project, Professor Vollmer, frantically waves in the face of his colleagues, saying, “You are only the image that others have of you.” The project has created a computer-generated world, populated by “identity units” who believe themselves to be real people. Vollmer dies, and is replaced by the programmer Stiller, who soon becomes obsessed with the enigma that drove Vollmer into madness.

The concern with vision and reflection connects to the science-fiction idea that the world may not be what it seems. In his review of *World on a Wire* for *Slant* magazine ([www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/world-on-a-wire/4765](http://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/world-on-a-wire/4765)), however, Simon Abrams argues that we should resist the temptation to see Fassbinder's production as a “revolutionary, unsung sci-fi epic about virtual reality and/or megalomania.” *World on a Wire* might have been made twenty-six years before *The Matrix* (1999), as the text on the DVD box trumpets, but—as Abrams points out—it was broadcast several years after Philip K. Dick's groundbreaking explorations of simulation in stories such as “We Can Remember It for You Wholesale” (1966) and “The Electric Ant” (1969). This may be the case, but what makes *World on a Wire* interesting is the way that it very much belongs to its own time. Abrams complains of Fassbinder's diffidence in respect of science-fiction tropes, yet, rather like Tarkovsky's take on SF in *Solaris* (1972) and *Stalker*

(1979), it is Fassbinder's deviation from certain generic conventions that gives *World on a Wire* a particular charge—especially in the wake of *Star Wars* (1977) and *The Matrix*. While both those films are defined by their special effects, there are no visual effects to speak of in *World on a Wire*. The most conspicuous “effect” is the startling Radiophonic Workshop-like squiggles and spurts of electronic music, which break into Fassbinder's stylized naturalism like a crack in reality itself.

In his *Postmodernist Fiction* (Routledge, 1987), the literary theorist Brian McHale makes a distinction between fictions organized around epistemological problems—what can I know about this world?—and those oriented toward ontological problems—what status does this world have? McHale treats Dick's fiction, and that of Thomas Pynchon and Jorge Luis Borges, as typical of the ontological turn, and *World on a Wire* clearly belongs to this mode too. McHale draws upon Douglas Hofstadter's *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (1979), and its concept of a “strange loop.” A strange loop occurs when an ontological hierarchy is set up—worlds are nested within worlds—but then disrupted. What should be at an ontologically “inferior” level suddenly appears one level up (a fictional character interacts with its author, say); or what should be at an ontologically “superior” level appears one level down (an author finds himself in the fictional world he thought he was creating). Escher's images—not for nothing referenced in Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010)—exemplify the paradoxical spaces of the strange loop.

In *World on a Wire*, the strange loop is created by Einstein, the identity unit in Simulacron that those in the Institute for Cybernetics and Future Science use to communicate directly with in the simulated world. In order to perform this liaising function, Einstein naturally has to be aware that he is a simulation. But this knowledge inevitably produces the desire to climb up to the “real” world—a desire, it is implied, that can never be satisfied. One of the enigmas that Vollmer leaves behind is a sketch alluding to Zeno's paradoxes—and I couldn't help but be reminded here of Slavoj Žižek's remarks on Zeno in *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (MIT Press, 1992). For Žižek, the paradoxical idea that desired objects must remain at a constant distance away from the subject, never getting closer, is crucial in the psychoanalytic theory of the drive: “the drive's ultimate aim is simply to reproduce itself as drive, to return to its circular path . . . The real source of enjoyment is the repetitive nature of this closed circuit” (5).

The ontological terror on which *World on a Wire* turns—is our own world a simulation?—is now very familiar, via the many Dick adaptations and their imitators. But, despite not actually being an adaptation of a Dick fiction, *World on a*

*Wire* has more in common with the wry mordancy of Dick's work than many official Dick adaptations, not least in the way that it shows each of its three nested worlds as being equally drab. We actually see very little of the world “below” (the world inside the Simulacron) and almost nothing of the world “above” (the world one level up from what we first took to be reality). The world below we see only in snatched glimpses of hotel lobbies and inside a lorry driver's cab. But it is the revelation—or non-revelation—of the world above at the climax of the film that is most startling. Instead of some Gnostic transfiguration, we find ourselves in what looks like a meeting room in some ultra-banal office block. At first, the electronic blinds are down, momentarily holding open the possibility that there will be some marvelous—or at least strange—world to be seen once they are up. But when they do eventually rise, we see only the same grey skies and cityscape. Stiller—whose name now assumes a special significance—has attained his official goal (climbing up to the “world above”), but he has not “moved.” The Zenonian condition remains, in the form of an ontological anxiety that—in a pre-echo of the torment that destroys Mal in *Inception*—is as insatiable as drive: once Stiller's faith in his initial lifeworld is shattered, there is no possibility of fully believing in any reality. Like the object posited by the psychoanalytic drive, the “real world” forever remains tantalizingly out of reach.

The differences between the three worlds is not accessible at the level of experience (of either the characters or the audience), and it is as if Fassbinder, rather than being bored by science-fiction themes, produces in *World on a Wire* something that perfectly fits Darko Suvin's definition in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (Yale University Press, 1979) of the genre as the art of “cognitive estrangement.” Stiller's mounting awareness of the simulated nature of the world that everyone around him takes for reality forces a cognitive estrangement so intense that it constitutes a psychotic break. The content of his experience is the same in every respect; but, because everything he senses is now *cognitively* reclassified as a simulation, he is no longer able to live.

Platonism meets materialism here. At one point, Stiller berates his bemused colleagues with the Platonic concept that they are not drinking a cup of coffee, but “the idea of a cup of coffee.” As the ending of *World on a Wire* confirms, there's no difference—or at least no difference one can experience—between being, as Stiller puts it, “a few electronic circuits” and having a physical body. In both cases, consciousness—and all the supposed richness of what phenomenologically orientated philosophers call “qualia,” the texture of our sensual experience—turns out to be dependent upon hardware, whether biological or cybernetic.



A nest of worlds and images  
*World on a Wire*. © 1973 WDR/2010 Rainer Werner Fassbinder Foundation. DVD: Second Sight (U.K.).

*World on a Wire* exists in broadly the same moment as Jean Baudrillard's reflections on simulation in his 1976 book *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. There, Baudrillard distinguishes between three "orders of simulation"—the first, mechanical copies of objects in the world; the second, the artifacts of industrial mass production; the third, the feedback systems of cybernetics. For Baudrillard, the opinion poll constitutes a special example of this "third order of simulacra," since such polls do not neutrally reflect the world but actively intervene in it—or rather, they make the question of whether they affect the world or not unanswerable. They form a strange loop. It's therefore fitting that *World on a Wire*'s Simulacron is a market-research experiment of sorts; or, at least, that's what it partly becomes. Simulacron is officially a state initiative, and the endearingly quaint anxieties about the encroachment of corporate interests into the project that constitutes *World on a Wire*'s major subplot place it very much in the West Germany of the 1970s. In the documentary Fassbinder's "World on a Wire": *Looking Ahead to Today*, it is noted that one of the advantages of shooting in Paris was that the city already had shopping malls, a development that had not yet made its way to West Germany. Dick's fiction came out of an American context where it was assumed that commerce would absorb everything, and when simulation technology re-emerges in the Dick-influenced cyberpunk cinema of *Blade Runner* (1982), *Videodrome* (1983), and *Total Recall* (1990), it is as a commercial application, controlled and developed by corporations. Fredric Jameson argues in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Indiana University Press, 1992) that the corporate takeover of this technology is an important narrative in a film like *Videodrome*, one of whose preoccupations, he argues, is "the tendential international monopolization of the media and the various local culture industries" (26).

This naturally brings us to the question of the institutions which funded and broadcast *World on a Wire* and *Artemis 81*—Westdeutscher Rundfunk in West Germany and the BBC. Although it is still notionally a state-funded public service broadcaster, the BBC has long since succumbed to a populism which has acted in concert with business values and practices to create conditions in which the broadcast of a film like *Artemis 81* is now unimaginable. The three-hour film felt challenging at the time, but in retrospect its commissioning and broadcast is even more astonishing.

*Artemis 81* feels like it belongs to a Britain that was European in a way that the country never quite was. That's partly because the production was originally intended to be a co-production with Danish television, so that Rudkin built Danish themes and locations into the plot. These remained,

even after the collaboration with the Danes collapsed. But the Scandinavian motifs are more than a matter of logistics and instrumentality. They reflect something in Rudkin's sensibility—his passion for Dreyer and Bergman and for "the dark, cold, bleak legends of the North," as Michael Moorcock memorably described the Scandinavian myths in *The Final Programme* (1973). Rudkin's Scandinavia—positioned by *Artemis 81* as Britain's dark North European twin—was, unapologetically, a fantasmatic space: a Scandinavia of the mind, like Hamlet's Elsinore, one of the many intertextual references that Rudkin embeds into the script. But to say it is fantasmatic and mythic is not to say that it is false: Rudkin's intuition, deeply antithetical to the prevailing empiricist ideas in Britain, was that it is workaday mundanity, the world of idle chat and trivial curiosity, which is the most pernicious realm of delusion, trapping us in the worst versions of ourselves. This was the message of Rudkin's best-known work for television, *Penda's Fen*, originally broadcast in 1973 as part of the BBC's *Play for Today* series, and directed by Alan Clarke. "The vision of Albion in *Penda's Fen*," Rob Young writes in his *Electric Eden: Unearthing Britain's Visionary Music* (Faber and Faber, 2010), "ends far from the comfortable Middle England complacency of its beginning: the country is embraced, by its oldest pagan spirit as well as by its younger radicals, as a chaotic, revolutionary, mongrel nation. The pattern under the plough, the occult history of Albion—the British Dreamtime—lies waiting to be discovered by anyone with the right mental equipment" (416–17).

This idea that an alternative, oneiric national imaginary is accessible to "anyone with the right mental equipment" means that Rudkin cannot be positioned as the kind of elitist snob from which neoliberal populism has claimed to liberate us. Rudkin's work in *Artemis 81* was in fact the exact opposite of snobbery. It is the expensively educated agents of neoliberalism who have disdain for the mass audience, arguing that "ordinary people" do not want the kind of challenging drama that Rudkin wrote. Now, in the much-vaunted era of "choice," those "ordinary people" have no chance to experience this kind of challenging and visionary work on television. The potency of a production like *Artemis 81* was intensified by the fact that it was broadcast at a time when Britain only had three television channels. People found themselves entranced and baffled by something that they would not have "chosen" to watch but which absorbed them when they stumbled upon it.

Genuine experimentalism has to risk failure, and *Artemis 81*'s ambition was without doubt overreaching. Writing about *Artemis 81* on his own website ([www.davidrudkin.com/html/tv/artemis.html](http://www.davidrudkin.com/html/tv/artemis.html)), Rudkin is well aware of this: "I can see why



#### Allusion and nightmare

*Artemis 81*. © 1981 BBC/2007 BBC Worldwide Ltd. MCPS. DVD: BBC/2 Entertain Video (U.K.)

some disparage it now as a ‘pretensh-fest’ by a ‘hi-aim author’ (okay folks, let’s all be happy little epsilons and aim low . . .); but where people positively respond to it, it’s to its prodigality with images, and its mythic charge that flows into parts of us that meaner contemporary tv drama (and cinema for that matter) do not even know are there.” Rudkin goes on to “acknowledge that the piece is uneven—in the writing and in the realizing.” Yet the sprawling unevenness, the failure of all the pieces to properly add up, reinforce the genuinely oneiric quality of the film. It is a modern myth that has the consistency—and inconsistency—of a dream (and its dream sequences are, in my view, some of the most powerful on film).

Rudkin himself summarizes *Artemis 81* with a brisk economy: it was, he writes on his website, an “existential morality, told in terms of Gothic fable, with powerful organ music . . . and Hitchcockian allusions.” Harlax is drawn into an enigma concerning the famous Danish organist, Albrecht von Drachenfels (Dan O’Herlihy) and a statuette of the god-

dess Magog. Fragments of the statuette are somehow connected with a number of suicides. Harlax coldly pursues the mystery with an emotional detachment that seems almost autistic, openly treating the families of those who have died as research material. Rather than elucidating anything, Harlax’s research instead opens up a densely tangled myth-space: not so much a British Dreamtime as a Nordic Nightmare. Harlax’s detachment is shattered when he suddenly feels anxiety for his lover Gwen (Dinah Stabb) and a bomb destroys his motor home. By this point, it is not clear if the explosion “really” happens, or if it is a symbol of the cracking of Harlax’s solipsism. What is certain is that we are now definitively in an expressionist terrain, where the boundaries between the unconscious, myth, and the external world are no longer secure. Harlax is literally pulled out of his familiar life (or what is left of it) when he is rescued by the angel Helith (Sting), who is struggling against his brother Asrael (Roland Curram), the angel of death.

The existentialism that Rudkin refers to comes from Heidegger. In the extremely informative DVD commentary, Rudkin points out that, on set, the nightmare city into which Harlax is plunged after his lifeworld has fallen apart was given the name *Geworfenheit*, a reference to Heidegger's concept of "thrownness"—the idea that we are pitched into the midst of the world before we can reflect on it or make sense of it. *Geworfenheit* is a fogbound militarized zone where consumptives expectorate blood into their scarves. Announcements made in what sound like an Eastern European language are continually pumped into the acrid air from a public address system. Laughing children who might well have run off the set of Welles's *The Trial* (1962) caper around, seemingly with malignant intentions. This astonishing sequence anticipates both the polyglot city of *Blade Runner* and the authoritarian dystopia of *Children of Men* (2006). Just like Stephen in *Penda's Fen*, Harlax can only attain a visionary state after his identity has been (painfully) dismantled. Harlax's experience of thrownness is, of course, doubled by that of the audience. We, too, are perplexed, stripped of much of what we expect to find in television drama.

Rudkin says on his website that he thought "that some of the playing lacks inwardness—in a very tight shoot, technical and budget considerations predominated, thus the director had little time to do the deeper exploring with the actors that is necessary, so that they were working mainly on technique." But, again, this apparent deficiency only adds to *Artemis 81*'s weird power. The characters seem as remote and forbidding as the expressionistic landscapes through which they move. There is none of the emotional grammar which a viewer of today's television takes for granted. The characters don't cry out to be related to. They speak cryptically and elliptically, or else they declaim like Brechtian ciphers. The emotions may not be cheap or heavily telegraphed, but *Artemis 81* is very moving at points, nowhere more so than when Harlax is abandoned by Helith in the nightmare city. On the DVD commentary, Rudkin says that this incident was inspired by an occasion when, as a child, he became separated from his mother. Rudkin's method is exemplified in the way that he uses this incident: not reducing myth and symbol to their supposed "roots" in Oedipal familialism, but transforming a personal ordeal into a multivalent meditation on existential destitution.

*Artemis 81* is as far from high modernism as it is from postmodern populism. It is a work of pulp modernism, which uses the pulp form of science fiction for the highest artistic purposes. Hitchcock—who wed European surrealism and psychoanalysis to the American thriller form—was a precursor (a nod to the De Chirico-like ship at the end of a street in 1964's *Marnie* is one of many Hitchcock references). But



#### Looking-glass fiction

*Artemis 81*. © 1981 BBC/2007 BBC Worldwide Ltd. MCPS.  
DVD: BBC/2 Entertain Video (U.K.)

*Vertigo* (1958) is the main Hitchcock intertext in a film, one of whose repeated concepts is *learning to fall*. To fall is to lose one's footing (one's grounding in a familiar world) and one's standing (one's status). One particular harrowing scene, a very Hitchcockian combination of surrealism, sex, and sadism, sees Harlax clinging onto a hanging woman inside a swinging cathedral bell. "It's better to fall than to hang," Harlax tells her, a lesson that he has learned from being divested of his former certainties. Rudkin's message, in *Artemis 81* as in *Penda's Fen* before it, is that there is a vertiginous enjoyment to be had from allowing oneself to fall into the unknown.

*Artemis 81* now feels like a requiem for those lost cultural spaces where experimentalism could commingle with the popular, where high art could blend into public service functionalism (on the DVD commentary, Rudkin reminds us that Dreyer once made a public information film cautioning about the dangers of speeding). The question that both *Artemis 81* and *World on a Wire* raise is: can we imagine seeing drama this demanding, this strange on television ever again?

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DVD DATA *Artemis 81*. Director: Alastair Reid, 1981. Writer: David Rudkin. © 1981 BBC/2007 BBC Worldwide Ltd MCPS. Publisher: BBC/2 Entertain. £15.99, 1 disc.

*World on a Wire* [*Welt am Draht*]. Director: Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1973. © Rainer Werner Fassbinder Foundation. Publisher: Second Sight Films. £19.99, 2 discs.

ABSTRACT A review of two radical works of television science fiction: *World on a Wire* (1973), Rainer Werner Fassbinder's bleak exploration of reality and technological simulation, which is comparable to the fiction of Philip K. Dick; and *Artemis 81* (1981), dramatist David Rudkin's eerie, expressionist Heideggerian fantasy.

KEYWORDS Fassbinder, Rudkin, *World on a Wire*, *Artemis 81*, science fiction