

Humanities Institute
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

World on a Wire 1973

Werner Fassbinder (1945-82)

STORY

Dystopia. Fassbinder is a master of dystopian analysis, and while carrying it out excavates touching portraits of social losers—a naïve gay guy who gets caught up in the gay mafia, and ends up a corpse; an ex con who walks out of jail into new trouble, concluding with a fatal supermarket heist; a would have been engineer, who has to join the Foreign Legion, then ends up as a fruit peddler, before he drinks himself to death. In such studies as these Fassbinder gives a unique read to the pitfalls and sufferings of twentieth century Western society, and does so with a sharp eye for individual traits.

Postmodernism. Fassbinder carries his dystopian analyses beyond individual portraiture, into those structural depredations inflicted on social man by the advent of the computer and internet cultures, dating from the last two decades of the twentieth century. In *World on a Wire*, Fassbinder adventures into the dystopian of cybernetics, in fact goes to the intersection of commerce (the central energy of society) and the uses of virtual reality, a topic central to the empowering of the cyber world. In the film before us we are introduced to a postmodern type of institute, the Institute fur Cybernetics and Research into the Future.

Reality levels. The Institute, led by a Professor Vollmer, the technical director of the program, has created a new supercomputer which provides access to more than 9,000 identity units, that is virtual people, people projected into virtual reality. (These people live the lives of human beings, but don't realize that their lives are only simulations; thus when 'real people' interact with them, they reflect back a familiar existential dimension, but at a remove, like existing only within themselves.)

Platonism. It becomes a matter of significance, in the development of the film, that there exists another level of virtual reality above that of the real people that we are—we being the kind of people that run the Institute for Cybernetics. It will be important that we too, the base level of 'real,' are under supervision from a higher reality level. This point is of particular punch because it opens the story line, of the entire film, to a philosophical dimension, Plato's theory of ideas, in which the transecting situations of daily existence, baseline human reality, are reflections of truth-ideas which are constitutive for reality.

Simulacron. The world created by Professor Vollmer is ostensibly part of a marketing program, to determine trends in tastes, among sample populations, at a time twenty years into the future. As it happens, though, the experiment plays out the conflicts and developments among the power structure of the Institute: Vollmer the original genius of simulation, who founded the 9000 identities, and who before his sudden death appears to have come upon a devastatingly important secret—with heavy implications for the construction of virtual reality; Fred Stiller, the successor to Vollmer, who is about to learn the great secret from Guenther Lause, the security director of *Simulacron*, and who is soon faced with a dangerous event, the implication full suicide of one of the 9000 identities.

Suicide. In order to abort a sequence of suicides, an epidemic of them, Stiller turns to Einstein, the only member of the identity unit who knows about the simulation. It is Einstein who gives Stiller the information that there is a more real world above the 'real world.' Suspected of criminal activity, in the effort to manipulate three worlds at a time, Stiller searches for a necessary contact with the 'world above,' and facing huge challenges reverts to an old girlfriend, Eva, who arranges to convert the mind of the simulated Stiller into the real world, thus saving him from ambush which is about to wipe him out in the simulated world.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

STILLER

Character Stiller is perhaps the only distinctively individual character in the film, who is of interest to us because he is a power figure in *Simulacron*, because he alone remains vital at film's end, and because he is the only player we meet who is saved by moving from one level of reality to another. It is of the nature of this film, which is about the fluid movement of levels of reality, that personal indistinctness should be the dominating trait of the actors' presences.

Illustrative moments

Executive. Fred Stiller is essentially the heir to Professor Vollmer, who founded the Cybernetics Institute. He knows, therefore, what the 9000 identity units do not know, namely that they are simulations of real world people, but not those people themselves. This bewildering state of affairs has to be the great secret, which Vollmer dies without disclosing—evidently victim of an inexplicable accident. Dr. Stiller is eager to penetrate this secret, which he pursues aggressively, reaching out to Guenther Lause, the Security Chief of the Cybernetics Institute, but doing so too late, just before the mysterious disappearance of Lause—the very memory of whom seems to have disappeared from the earth.

Investigative. It falls on Stiller, as top person remaining in the Institute, to investigate the nature of the suicide which has taken place among the identity units. He goes to the contact unit of the simulated world, the 9000 simulated identities, the unit named Einstein, who has previously declared that he would like to join the cohort of the real. Einstein comes forth as a kind of all knowing Sphinx, who can help Stiller in his detective work. Stiller learns from Einstein some of the mysteries which he has found, in his search to understand the virtual. Einstein helps Stiller realize how all memory of Lause vanished, and what happened to Lause himself. Einstein makes clear, to Stiller, that the real world itself is but a simulation of a 'more real' world over it.

Maddened. The information Einstein gives Stiller, about the existence and nature of the superior world, drives Stiller crazy. It is too much for him. He falls under the interrogatory power of the forces above, who threaten him with incarceration and death. The Institute psychologist, who has been in discussion with Stiller, is killed, and the murder pinned on Stiller himself, whose instinct is to flee.

Saved. Schiller sets out to find some benevolent contact who will help him to connect the real world to the world above him. It turns out that the contact is the daughter of Vollmer, with whom Stiller had once been in love. It is she who figures out how to save Stiller, from his 'superior world' oppression, by importing the simulated Stiller from the simulated into the real world, where he is invulnerable from the attacks of the superior world.

THEMES

Virtuality. Virtual reality is the underlying condition upon which the present reflections on consciousness depend. An artificial world, with identity units—people—populating it is taken for granted, in the tale playing out in this film. The power of this virtual condition, to support manifest ontological changes is apparent at the end of the film, when Eva, his old girlfriend, helps Stiller to recalibrate into the real world, where he will be exempt from the virtual world where he is immediately threatened by a lethal ambush.

Secrecy. Much of the plot narrative revolves around the big secret held by Vollmer, the founder and the technical adviser of the *Simulacron* Company, on which the events of the film depend. Given that the whole film devolves inside a virtual reality, which does not declare itself as such, on the surface, secrecy is essential to preserving the separate identities of the varying levels of reality. Thus is it only Einstein, of the elements inhabiting the world of 9000 identity units, that knows about the simulation at all, an awareness that is essential, in the first place, to running the program.

Power. Vollmer founded the Simulacron virtual reality project as an exercise in future-anticipant marketing. (Much of the filming was carried out in Paris, and simulated the new and at the time startling cityscape of downtown Paris, the same power-enforcing architecture we see in Godard's *Alphaville* (1965). He wanted to create a virtual real human level, to use as probes into future tastes—and yet the conflicts within the management structure of *Simulacron*—the disappearance of Lause, the prominent role of Stiller, in conducting affairs, the influence of Einstein, who longs to 'contact a superior reality'—these conflicts means that there is a perpetual power insecurity in the virtual reality zone.

Consciousness. The most vivid illustration of the consciousness level of the virtual identity cohort is on show in an 'identity unit' party. There, intermingling, are occupants of virtual reality, guys with huge pecs and jock straps, gals with bikinis strolling among them, stroking this and that; the whole montage oozing with unreality, or the virtual reality of stares which are empty, flesh tones which are perfected, streaming but indistinct behaviors. These are not inhabitants of our reality, but forms of consciousness we enable by being their 'real' progenitors.