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Authors	Laist, Randy
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Bullet-Time in Simulation City: Revisiting Baudrillard and *The Matrix* by way of the "Real 1999"

Randy Laist, Goodwin College

Abstract: *The writers and directors of The Matrix famously claimed Jean Baudrillard as a source of inspiration for their movie, going as far as to feature a copy of Baudrillard's signature book, Simulacra and Simulation, as a prominent prop in one of the movie's first scenes. Baudrillard, however, explicitly disowned The Matrix as a representation of his worldview. When we follow the story of The Matrix from the perspective of the protagonist Neo, as the story compels us to do, we encounter a dualistic, Platonic division between reality and illusion which, as Baudrillard rightly observes, annuls the implosive dynamic that is the heart of the hyperreal condition. On the other hand, when we consider The Matrix from the perspective of its audience, the citizens of the "real 1999" (as opposed to the simulacral 1999 generated by the Matrix), we find late-century American culture refracted back to us as the kind of world that lends itself to "neural-interactive simulation." By performing a reading of The Matrix that emphasizes its reference to its contemporary historical moment, we can identify a sense in which the film authentically captures a Baudrillardian variety of space-time.*

In one of the most interesting conversations to open up between philosophy and pop culture in recent decades, the Wachowski brothers, writers and directors of the popular science-fiction film *The Matrix* (1999), identified French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard as a primary source of inspiration for their story, even going so far as to feature a copy of Baudrillard's most famous book, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), as a prominent prop in one of the film's first scenes and quoting the now-famous expression "the desert of the real" from the first page of that publication. Baudrillard, however, explicitly disowned the film as a representation of his thinking, going so far as to indicate that *The Matrix* is the kind of film the evil Matrix programme would make about the Matrix. The basic disjuncture between the narrative of *The Matrix* and Baudrillard's philosophy in his seminal texts of the 1980s and 1990s concerns the manner in which reality is structured. The clear philosophical debt in the Wachowski brothers' film is to Plato and the condition he describes in the Allegory of the Cave, in which prisoners of a false reality are freed to discover that there is a true reality the existence of which they had not suspected. The foundational insight of Baudrillard's theory in *Simulacra and Simulations*, however, is that the Platonic duality between reality and representation has imploded in the modern world, resulting in a hyperreal condition to which criteria of truth or falsity no longer apply. As Baudrillard himself explains in an interview, "the real nuisance in this movie is that the brand-new problem of the simulation is mistaken with the very classic problem of the illusion, already mentioned by Plato. Here lies the mistake" (Lancelin).

When we follow the story of *The Matrix* from the perspective of the protagonist Neo (Keanu Reeves), as the film compels us to do, we encounter a dualistic, Platonic division between reality and illusion. In that film, the real world is the devastated hellscape of 2199. The world of illusion, however, is a simulated replica of 1999, the year in which *The Matrix* was released. As a result, the film also invites us to read it from the perspective of the inhabitants of 1999. Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving) explains that the machines selected this historical period to simulate because it represents the peak of human civilisation, and the inhabitants of the Matrix apparently live in an eternal 1999, literally living out Baudrillard's pataphysical claim that "the year 2000 will not perhaps take place" (*Illusion* 9), that time would distend to infinitely defer the millennial moment. But, even more strangely, when we consider *The Matrix* from the perspective of the citizens of the "real 1999", we find the millennial moment refracted back to us as the kind of world that lends itself to "neural-interactive simulation". The urban skyscraper-scapes, cubicle-scapes and media-scapes that constitute the Matrix manage to mimic contemporary American reality, while simultaneously suggesting that these are the kinds of environments an evil computer programme would design for human beings to inhabit. The Matrix world emphasises important technological innovations of the late 1990s—including cell phones, the World Wide Web, and CGI cinematography—all of which, it is implied, contribute to the derealisation of conventional models of space and time. An important difference, however, between the inhabitants of the Matrix and the citizens of the "real 1999" is that the inhabitants of the Matrix can wake up into reality, whereas the inhabitants of "real 1999" are stranded without hope of escape in a time and place that is immanently simulacral. In this sense, the fictional pod-people of 2199 are more real than we are. Reality is at least possible for them, whereas we are trapped in a kind of reality that is its own simulation. In Baudrillard's words, we can say of the ontology of the "real 1999" that "[i]llusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 19). By performing a reading of *The Matrix* that emphasises its roundabout reference to its own contemporary historical moment, we can identify a sense in which the film authentically captures a Baudrillardian variety of space-time.

How Do You Define "Real?": At Home in the Matrix

It is significant that Baudrillard's response to *The Matrix* refers both to the original 1999 film and its 2003 sequel, *Matrix: Reloaded*. Although they are obviously similar in many respects, *The Matrix* belongs to a different historical moment than its two sequels, and can almost be considered to belong to a different genre. The major historical turning point between 1999 and 2003 is, obviously, 9/11, which, conflated as it easily is with the advent of a new calendric millennium, acquires the status of a historical-cultural turning point in the popular imagination. Considered within the context of its original release, *The Matrix* is the crowning example of several interrelated trends in Hollywood movies of the 1990s. Most obviously, *The Matrix* is the most commercially successful of a wave of cyberpunk films, including *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992), *The Lawnmower Man* (Brett Leonard, 1992), *Johnny Mnemonic* (Robert Longo, 1995), *Strange Days* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995), *Ghost in the Shell* (Mamoru Oshii, 1995), *Cube* (Vincenzo Natali, 1997), *Dark City* (Alex Proyas, 1998), *The Thirteenth Floor* (Josef Rusnak, 1999), *eXistenZ* (David Cronenberg, 1999) and *Vanilla Sky* (Cameron Crowe, 2001). All of these films use the metaphor of a computer-generated world as a way of imagining the manner in which it is possible for human beings to exist in alternate ontological

registers. Even though each of these cyberpunk narratives establishes its own mythology of how reality is structured, taken as a whole, the proliferation of these films suggests an increasing cultural inquiry into the phenomenological issues associated with a new kind of mediated reality. Another cinematic trend within which we can position *The Matrix* is that of ironic meta-movies, movies that self-consciously incorporate their status as pop-cultural products into their own thematic and narrative structure, such as *The Brady Bunch Movie* (Betty Thomas, 1995) and its sequel, *A Very Brady Sequel* (Arlene Sanford, 1996), *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996) and its sequels (Wes Craven, 1997, 2000, 2011), the Pierce Brosnan instalments of the James Bond franchise—*GoldenEye* (Martin Campbell, 1995), *Tomorrow Never Dies* (Roger Spottiswoode, 1997), *The World Is Not Enough* (Michael Apted, 1999), *Die Another Day* (Lee Tamahori, 2002)—and *South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut* (Trey Parker, 1999). The defining feature of this subgenre is that the films' characters inhabit a reality that has the ontological status of a television show or film. These films reflect a situation similar to that depicted in *Pleasantville* (Gary Ross, 1998) and *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998), in which human reality has become "televisualised", depleted of the existential and humanist values associated with the classical understanding of reality and reorganised according to the values of mass-media culture. Encompassing both the cyberpunk films and the meta-movies is a wider cultural-cinematic trend of films that engage in one way or another with the Baudrillardian theme of the implosion of reality and representation. Seminal films of "the long 1990s", such as *JFK* (Oliver Stone, 1991), *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (James Cameron, 1991), *True Lies* (James Cameron, 1994), *The Player* (Robert Altman, 1992), *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993), *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994), *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994), *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), *Face/Off* (John Woo, 1997), *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), and *Being John Malkovich* (Spike Jonze, 1999), all engage with the problems and possibilities associated with the new style of reality that emerges following the collapse of the Cold War and the advent of simulacral technologies such as cloning, virtual reality and digitisation. Considered from within the context of these prevailing trends, *The Matrix* clearly holds a privileged place in the canon of 1990s hyperreality cinema.

The Matrix's two sequels, however, are distinctly post-9/11 movies. In accordance with the prevailing cinematic mood in the decade following 9/11, the sequels to *The Matrix* do in fact distance themselves from endorsing a hyperreal ontology. They are fraught with history and consequence in deference to the rebooting of reality that the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the subsequent War on Terror have come to represent. Baudrillard's response to the dramatic situation represented in *The Matrix* may have been influenced by his familiarity with the direction the franchise would take in its twenty-first century incarnation. When we consider the first *Matrix* film in isolation, however, the delineation between reality and hyperreality is much more ambiguous than it becomes in its post-9/11 instalments. Whereas the sequels shift their focus away from the computer world and toward the "real" world of the rebel city of Zion, almost all of the first film's plot and the vast majority of that film's memorable action sequences take place inside the Matrix or other computer-generated environments. By introducing the Matrix as a naturalistic environment and by impressing the audience with the vividness and persuasiveness of the virtual world, the first film evokes a sense that the virtual landscape is also a real dwelling place, whereas the supposedly "real" city of Zion is never anything more than a rumour. Throughout the first forty-five minutes of *The Matrix*, we accept Neo as an ordinary inhabitant of a world that, while highly stylised, consists of recognisable signposts of

contemporary urban existence. The acceptance of this world as the familiar world of the audience accounts for the uncanny effect of the later scenes in which we return to it with the awareness that it is a mass-induced simulation, prompting an experience of defamiliarisation that is rooted in the underlying recognisability of Neo's world as a version of our own. The Matrix is the heart of *The Matrix*; the "real world" scenes in the *Nebuchadnezzar* have a perfunctory mood and a flat visual style, whereas the Matrix scenes spill over with the innovative cinematographic effects and spectacular action sequences that reflect the film's true *raison d'être*. Even Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), the rebel leader who is committed to destroying the Matrix, seems more interested in the plasticity of human potential as it exists within a simulated environment than he is in pursuing Zen discipline in his real body in 2199. In his training scenes with Neo, Morpheus flows over with the jouissance of his intra-matrical athleticism, and all of his cryptic wisdom seems to apply solely to the condition of living in a neural-interactive simulation. Neo downloads a cerebral programme and reports that he "know[s] kung-fu", but, as far as we can tell from the first *Matrix* movie, he does not really know kung-fu in terms of being able to do it in reality, he only knows it in the videogame world or, rather, he only "knows" it mentally, not in the sense of the mind-body fusion that is the real perfection of martial arts training. In this sense, the rebels who are revolting against the artificial Matrix-world actually define their standards of knowledge and wisdom according to intra-matrical conditions.

The climax of the film, furthermore, puts the ontological status of the "real world" itself into question. Morpheus had told us definitively that death in *The Matrix* results in real-life death. This rule is supposed to be a rule of physiology—of "reality"—as opposed to a virtual rule that can just as easily be annulled by reprogramming. When Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss) and Neo's love proves potent enough to resurrect Neo back from the dead, this event bypasses the laws of physical reality rather than the virtual laws of the Matrix. Someone who had not seen the sequels would be justified in theorising that what Trinity and Neo think is the "real world" is actually only another computer programme. Slavoj Žižek, for one, found it likely that "[i]n the sequels to *The Matrix*, we shall probably learn that the very 'desert of the real' is generated by another matrix" (245). Immersing us as it does in the world of the Matrix, the first film opens the floodgates of a vertiginous scepticism that undermines any foundation for a stable reality. The point of view of the next two films, however, puts the audience on the side of "reality" against the evil machines, and the franchise returns us to the Matrix only as tourists. The sequels never return us to a sense that the Matrix is where we are comfortable and at home. For this reason, the first *Matrix* is a much more effective metaphor for the condition of hyperreality than its sequels.

In particular, the very last scene of *The Matrix* emphasises Neo's commitment to working within the Matrix to raise the consciousness of its inhabitants, among whom, it is understood, is the audience itself. In his parting statement to the machines, Neo pledges that he will show the inhabitants of the Matrix "a world without rules and controls, without borders or boundaries, a world where anything is possible". What world is he talking about? This is certainly not a description of the "real world" of 2199, a world characterised by remorseless military discipline and the constant threat of death. Rather, Neo seems to be describing the fantastic possibilities that can result from manipulating the code of the imaginary world. Once one cracks the code of the Matrix, as Neo does, intra-matrical reality becomes available for an endless variety of visually arresting permutations. None of these hallucinatory effects, however, has anything to do with liberation from the Matrix. We are told several times during the film that nothing you can

do or see in the Matrix can provide awareness of the true nature of the Matrix. Liberation requires nothing more dramatic than swallowing a red pill, upon which one disappears from the Matrix to see for oneself the true infrastructure of the illusory dream-world. It is difficult to imagine how Neo will use his intra-matrical flips and twists to liberate anyone from enslavement to the machines, and even his most mind-bending acrobatics will be useless if his unconscious body is vaporised by Squiddies while he's flying around in the dream-world. Indeed, within the logic of the Matrix universe, Neo's peroration makes little sense, since the goal of Morpheus's resistance movement is supposedly to liberate people from the Matrix, not to convince them how cool it can be to live in a Matrix if you go about it the right way. Neo's statement only makes sense if we take it to apply to us, the audience, living in the "real 1999", with no real world to wake up to. The possibilities of intra-matrical miracle-working signify nothing more than an absurd game in 2199 but, in 1999, they represent vivid metaphors for the power of the imagination to transform a simulacral world and, indeed, they do seem to echo Baudrillard's assertion that "it is in this tactical universe of the simulacrum that one will need to fight—without hope, hope is a weak value, but in defiance and fascination" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 152). If most viewers don't even notice that Neo is operating at cross-purposes at the end of the film, it is most likely because the subtext, taken for granted, is that he is talking to his 1999 audience rather than his 2199 audience.

The Peak of Your Civilisation: The Mirror-function of the Matrix

We members of the "real 1999" do in fact make a cameo appearance in *The Matrix*. Morpheus explains to Neo the truth about the reality of 2199 in a simulated environment known as the Construct. In this cyberspatial environment, Morpheus is able to call upon a number of visual aids to assist his apocalyptic narrative, one of which is an old 1950s-style Radiola television set. "This is the world you know", Morpheus tells Neo, "the world as it existed at the end of the twentieth century", clicking on the kitschy television to show a *Koyaanisqatsi*-style montage of urban footage: skyscrapers, highway traffic and bustling crowds of rush hour pedestrians that we instantly recognise as a representation of our own civilisation. Televisions feature prominently in *The Matrix* as well as in Baudrillard's writing. In the Matrix, we see Neo appear on a bank of television screens when he is being interrogated by Agent Smith, for example, and Apoc (Julian Arahanga) and Switch (Belinda McClory) die in a television repair shop. In the symbolic landscape of the Matrix, television screens coexist alongside mirrors and other reflective surfaces to suggest the extent to which intra-matrical objects are both imaginary (in the sense of being images rather than substances) and replicable. It is fitting then that the film uses a television screen to present its audience with a mirror-image of themselves. Baudrillard's philosophy of hyperreality has been called "a conspiracy theory based almost entirely on an analysis of television" (Cook 160), as in his likening of television to "a miniature terminal that, in fact, is immediately located in your head—you are the screen, and the TV watches you—it transistorizes all the neurons and passes through like magnetic tape" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 51). For Neo, watching television in the Matrix (or the Construct), it is literally true that the television is in his head, along with everything else in his perceptual environment. For us, watching Neo watch television, we see ourselves depicted as a televisual montage. "This is the world you know", Morpheus tells Neo, not "This is a representation of the world you know". It may be somewhat distorted for having travelled 200 years both ways to reach us, but this strange

mirror image turns out to be just as identifiable to us as a representation of "contemporary civilisation" as the self-consciously retro appliance is identifiable as a "television". Seeing ourselves through the mirror of a televisual montage compiled by historians of the distant future is a uniquely Baudrillardian style of self-perception, one that emphasises the extent to which reproduced images play a decisive role in defining the popular understanding of contemporary reality. This mirror-function of *The Matrix* corresponds closely with Žižek's observation that symbolic fictions are a key element in the regulation of reality itself. In his discussion of *The Matrix* in *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (Sophie Fiennes, 2006), Žižek famously requested "a third pill", a pill which would enable one to see "not the reality behind the illusion, but the reality in illusion itself". While both Žižek's and Baudrillard's critical perspectives effectively problematise the Platonic dualism of a naïve interpretation of *The Matrix*, Žižek's recourse to the unconscious provides his psychoanalytic reading with a stable frame of reference according to which the categories of real and illusory can be discriminated, whereas Baudrillardian hyperreality is characterised by a more radical collapse of ontological registers. The vision of our reality we glimpse through Morpheus's magic mirror reflects Baudrillard's definition of the real as "not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced: that is, the hyperreal" (*Simulations* 146).



The citizens of the "real 1999" make a cameo appearance in *The Matrix* (1999)

The images on the television and the Matrix world itself are both densely urban environments. Even if Neo's world were not a neural-interactive simulation—that is, if his world really were our world—he would still live in a space that is entirely artificial. Neo moves through apartment buildings, hotels, office buildings, subway stations, city streets and other built spaces, and it is difficult to remember if there is anything so much as a single plant in the whole film to break the consistency of inorganic shapes. Neo's apartment is a sleeping-cube

reminiscent of the amniotic pod that his "real" body inhabits, and the array of skyscrapers in which he works mimics the design of the towers in which these pods are arrayed. Architecturally, Neo's real world and the Matrix world seem to mirror one another. When Neo has to flee the Agents at his office, he ducks and weaves through a maze of cubicles, the right angles and straight lines of which reinforce the audience's impression that he lives in a world invented by machines. When Neo falls into the Agents' custody, we see his image replicated on a grid of television monitors, and the interrogation room itself is a hell of squares, a graph-paper world. The most characteristic shade of lighting in the Matrix scenes is a tint of green that is not the chlorophyll green of organic life, but the moribund, pallid green of bureaucratic waiting rooms and fluorescent lights. All of these visual components are cues to the audience (if not to Neo) that the Matrix world is simulated according to the mechanical principles of regularity and repetition and is not a natural space. It turns out, however, that Neo's world looks the way it does, not because it was designed by computers, but because it is modelled on our world, allowing us to recognise in Neo's unnatural Matrix world a representation of our own contemporary habitat. The sense in which Neo's world is simulated by computers parallels the sense in which our world—the world that Neo thinks he lives in—is itself simulated by computers according to the same principles of rationalised efficiency that govern machine-logic in all times and places.

Whether or not any given member of the 1999 audience of *The Matrix* lives in a place that physically resembles the unnamed city of the Matrix, as consumers participating in global mass-culture, the basic semantic structure of their cultural environment is identical to that of the Matrix. In the same way that the eternal 1999 of the Matrix simulates the Baudrillardian claim that America "lives in a perpetual present" (*America* 76), the spatial quality of the Matrix is similarly closed off. The entire world seems to consist of a single city that no one ever leaves and outside of which nothing seems to exist. This aspect of life in the Matrix suggests a centripetal self-referentiality that is reminiscent of the closed circuit of global capitalism. As surreal as the spatio-temporality of the Matrix may be, the same tropes of closed space and time are at the foundation of Baudrillard's analysis of contemporary reality. As William Bogard explains in his commentary on Baudrillard, "simulation is the cancellation of distance, space, and, ultimately (linear, historical) time itself, and the substitution of simulated distances, simulated times, etc." (317). The simulation of time and space is made possible, in both Baudrillard's theory and the narrative world of the Matrix, by the replacement of "the metaphysic of being and appearance" with the metaphysic of "the code" (*Simulations* 103). Indeed, Baudrillard could be describing the Matrix itself when he explains that, through the power of digitisation, "[t]he real is produced from miniaturised units, from matrices, memory banks, and command models" (*Simulation* 3). The opening shots of *The Matrix* stage a literal depiction of digital code—represented by the film's motif of streaming columns of data—taking the form of the physical hotel corridors through which the police force close in on Trinity. The Matrix is a world literally built out of information and, as a result, it is a densely semantic environment. As in any built space, every aspect of every artificial object has meaning—it was designed by someone (or something) with reference to economic, aesthetic and cultural values. The semantic landscape is therefore a paranoid environment in which nothing ever simply *is*, but in which everything *speaks*. According to Baudrillard, "[t]his approximates our general attitude toward the world around us to that of a reading, and to a selective deciphering. We live less like users than readers and selectors" (*Simulation* 121). Everything in the Matrix environment is freighted with significance.

If Neo could read the signs of his coded world, he might be able to interpret the truth about the Matrix's nature. Neo even recognises a veiled clue in the banal "have a nice day", uttered by Mouse (Matt Doran) when he is posing as an intra-matrical mail courier. The Matrix shares the semiotic quality of our late-capitalist terrain, in which "nothing is inert, nothing is disconnected, uncorrelated, or aleatory. Everything, on the contrary, is fatally, admirably connected" (*Fatal Strategies* 185). The significant difference, however, is that whereas the signs in Neo's world all indicate a single sacred Truth—that the Matrix is a ploy—the meanings in the Baudrillardian hyperscape have no such transcendent interpretation, referring rather back to themselves in an orbital precession. In general, the metaphor of the Matrix dramatises a very accurate rendition of Baudrillard's description of contemporary reality, failing only in its portrayal of the Matrix as an illusion, but this nuance, as important as it may be to Neo, is irrelevant to us, for whom the Matrix, however unreal it may be, is not an illusion.

In addition to replicating the "real 1999" in terms of its spatio-temporality and its semantic structure, the Matrix also mirrors back to its audience the social conditions of its own time. In his review of postmodern themes in *The Matrix*, David Weberman speculates that living in a matrix might be an improvement on real-world conditions, in that it facilitates "the elimination of poverty (for we see mainly business types and we mustn't forget that the machines want a docile human population and would be unwise to permit hunger and predation)" (233). When we consider the Matrix in terms of its 2199 function—to distract pod-people from their real existence—Weberman's supposition is logical, but if we consider the Matrix in terms of its 1999 function—to mirror back to us our contemporary moment—a more recognisable version of 1999 conditions is more appropriate. Indeed, while many scenes seem to be set in affluent business districts, the Matrix also features working-class and underclass neighbourhoods of Megacity and is populated by lumpenproletariat individuals (such as the hobo in the subway station or the blind man in the lobby of the Oracle's (Gloria Foster) apartment building). The fact that the Matrix is not a utopia is explained within the film by Agent Smith, who relates that the machine's original Matrix design was intended to be a perfect world, but that the human brain was not equipped to process an existence devoid of pain and suffering. To the audience, however, the social imperfection of the Matrix relates to two different conditions: that of reality in 2199 and that of "reality" in 1999. This referentiality is cleverly indicated in an early scene in which Neo is reprimanded by his boss for chronic tardiness and a generally uncooperative stance toward corporate life. We have already noted that Neo's skyscraper workplace recalls the towers of pods in the machine's bioenergy fields. His boss, Mr Rinehart (David Aston), furthermore, in his tone of voice, his clothes and appearance, and his proposal to Neo that he has a choice to make—this job or another one—echoes the Agents, who exhibit dehumanised speech patterns, standardised appearance and also propose a choice to our hero—life as Neo or life as Thomas Anderson. The parallelism between Neo's boss, himself supposedly another human battery dreaming in a pod, and the Agents, the personified enforcers of intra-matrical behaviour, suggests that life for Neo as a worker in a simulated capitalist environment is identical to his life as an amniotic pod-person. Throughout this scene, workers are cleaning the windows outside Mr Rinehart's office, the squeaking of their squeegees punctuating the dialogue. This obtrusive window washing seems intended to communicate an overt message to the audience, over the heads of the film's characters, about how *transparently* the scene renders the metaphorical relationship between Neo's job and his existential status as a slave of the machines. "Do I make myself clear?", Rinehart asks at the end of the scene. "Yes, Mr Rinehart, perfectly clear",

answers Neo. But, because Neo's world is a simulated version of our own, this winking gesture to the audience also clarifies the implication that the transparency of the metaphor cuts through three realities: 2199, the Matrix, and our own. The metaphoricity that links Neo's job to his status as a human battery is itself a metaphor for the extent to which we ourselves in 1999 are immersed in power structures that are both simulacral and dehumanising. If the machines were really super-intelligent, they would simply give Neo a more fulfilling career as a way of deterring him from his restless searching (as Weberman rightly argues they would be wise to do (233)). Depicting a more utopian world, however, would disrupt the transparency of the mirror-function of the Matrix for its 1999 audience.

Never Send a Human to Do a Machine's Job: Technology in 1999 and 2199

The most significant theme traversing the Matrix world, the 2199 world and the "real 1999", is that of technology. The first time we see Neo in the film, he is asleep in front of his computer, listening to techno music through his headphones. The pale glow of the computer monitor, lined with the shadows of scrolling text and images, plays across Neo's arm and face, suggesting that his very flesh is a digital effect. Of course, as we discover, this is precisely the case, as it also turns out to be the case that his sleeping in this opening shot is an allusion to his slumbering pod-enclosed body in 2199. Likewise, the cocoon of digital gadgets that surrounds Neo in this image mimics the totalised technological environment of the pod, suggesting the sense in which listening to music through headphones is different in degree, but not in essence, from receiving simulated sensations through an electrical port that plugs directly into your spinal cord. While the occipital plug presents a shocking image of the penetration of the nervous system by a technological apparatus, this image only literalises an underlying continuity between digital impulses and consciousness that exists whenever our senses are engaged in digital stimulation. Baudrillard, describing the phenomenology of hi-fi, describes it as a kind of Matrix world: "it is the simulation of a total environment that dispossesses one of even the minimal analytic perception constitutive of music's *charm*…Something else fascinates…you: technical perfection" (*Seduction* 30 emphasis in original). Of course, "charm" is not the most apt word one would employ to describe the aesthetic effect aspired to by the genre of music Neo listens to, the staple musical genre of the Matrix world, techno music, which itself strives to replace musical "charm" with sub-cognitive fascination in its technical perfection. When Neo visits a club in the following scene, the techno music blares so powerfully that, even without headphones, it constitutes a total digital environment that is tactile as well as auditory. But for a movie with a distinctly Luddite premise, *The Matrix* fetishises the technological sensory environment represented by techno music. Not only is techno music represented as cool and hip (at the same time as it is presented as a metaphor for the technological dehumanisation of pod-dwelling), but also Neo's prowess as a computer hacker is a kind of prerequisite to his ultimate ability to crack the code of the Matrix. Neo's career as the nemesis of the machines begins not by rejecting technology, but by penetrating it. The information scrolling across Neo's computer screen (and his flesh) in the opening scene is about Morpheus; it contains information about Neo's own destiny. Upon waking up, his computer addresses him personally, directing him to find Trinity and to begin his quest of discovery. Of course, the rebels themselves all need to be adept computer geeks in order to hack into the Matrix and perpetrate their terrorist incursions. In Neo's world, following the white rabbit of technology brings him into the real 2199, where he

discovers the truth that technology is a transcendently malicious force. For us in the "real 1999", however, with no real techno-dystopia to act as background for our relationship to technology, the implication of this double valence in the question of technology—is it moral or immoral, is it a path to self-understanding or a tool of self-deception, is it empowering or castrating?—remains unresolved. While Neo transcends this ambiguity by exiting his illusory 1999, we in the "real 1999" are left with the implosion of these two options. Of "hypertechnology without finality", Baudrillard writes, "is it good or bad? We will never know. It is simply fascinating, though this fascination does not imply a value judgment?" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 119). In the same way that Neo is in the Matrix whether he listens to headphones or not, our world is also pervasively simulacral, making any particular Luddite pose futile and naïve.



Neo's digital flesh

One piece of technology that is very important in the Matrix's mythology is the telephone. The explosion of compact cell phones, a prominent feature of the 1990s lifeworld, finds its way into the film, in which cell phones are an important means of communication between people inside the Matrix and people in the real world, but a landline connection is necessary to bodily transfigure a person between the two planes. Of course, in terms of the logic of the Matrix, this detail makes no sense at all, since the wires of intra-matrical landline phones are just as insubstantial as the signals sent by cell phones. This plot point does, however, suggest a significant implication about the 1990s technoscape to its audience in the "real 1999". As a ubiquitous symbol of technological progress, the cell phone in 1999 is in a unique position to serve as a symbol for technological progress *as such*, the objective correlative of the sense in which technological advancement seems to occur independently of any human decision-making process. The old-fashioned landline phones of the Matrix are capable of effectuating actual physical contact with real people in the real world, making it literally possible to "reach out and touch someone", as the old AT&T advertisements used to say. The cell phone, on the other hand, provides a disorienting style of communication. When Neo is on the cell phone with Morpheus in the cubicle maze, he has no idea where Morpheus is, or where on earth he could possibly be to have an apparently god's-eye-view of time and space. The placelessness of the interlocutor, moreover, redounds upon the cell phone user himself, as the question of where Morpheus might be is inseparable from the question of where Neo himself might be that his actions are so readily observable. This disorientation effect of cell phone communication is analogous to the films' metaphorical insinuation that cell phones strand their users in the Matrix. As a symbol of the advancing technologies of virtualisation, cell phones—those same gadgets that we rely on with

increasing frequency in the "real 1999"—indicate that the future reconstitution of the world as a grand neural-interactive simulation is already underway, if not already definitively accomplished, in the "real 1999". In fact, by 2199, the machines have overplayed their hand, making themselves less powerful through their establishment of themselves as humanity's "Other", an enemy that can be attacked. In the "real 1999", the machines are more powerful, for there is no way of contesting them; they are integrated into the very texture of human reality in a way that the Matrix illusion can only simulate and metaphorise.

Aside from any particular intra-matrical object or event, however, the total environment of the Matrix seems to reflect back to its 1999 audience a vision of reality that suggests the deep penetration of hyperreal ontology into the very fabric of time and space. For Baudrillard, hyperreality is not something we experience when we talk on the phone or watch television; the order of simulation affects all of perception at a structural level. *The Matrix*'s memorable bullet-time sequences reflect that aspect of Baudrillard's worldview that Bogard describes as a side-effect of living "within the envelope of the repeated past", namely, "time's immolation, its journey into the digital void" (319). Not only is the bullet-time effect achieved by digitally manipulating photographic images, but the effect itself signifies the digitalised nature of the Matrix's environment. This effect, though, so central to *The Matrix*'s marketing and legacy, has little or no meaning for the characters themselves; it exists exclusively for the benefit of the audience. The bullet-time sequence, used three times throughout the film, involves not only the slowing of the action, but also the rotation of the camera angle almost a full 360 degrees. The effect of these sequences on the audience is to pull at their sensory engagement with the film and twist the audience's perception into the screen image. Temporally, the slow motion draws out suspense, causing the viewer to lean forward into the temporality of the filmic action. Spatially, the travelling camera carries our visual sense into the *mise-en-scène* of the image, giving us a 360-degree view of the surrounding digital environment (digital both for Neo in the Matrix and for us viewing a computer-generated landscape), and also situates us bodily within the time and space of this world, creating as convincing an effect of transporting its audience into a cinematic ontological register as any two-dimensional image could conceivably achieve. Another thematically significant motif in the film is the pattern of concentric oscillations rippling across reflective surfaces, as in the mirror after Neo touches it with his finger or in the mirrored skyscraper façade after the helicopter crashes into it. As a phenomenon of physics closely associated with holography, the motif of concentric oscillations works within the Matrix to signify the virtuality of the intra-matrical environment. For the audience, however, the bizarre warping of images as they ripple across waveform reflecting surfaces accentuates the electromagnetic substratum of all perception, intra- and extra-matrical. Implicit in this recognition is a post-Helmholtzian understanding of human perception as an essentially biomechanical phenomenon. The machines, that is, have already colonised our self-understanding; we are already simulated cybernetic appliances. If it is possible to hook the brain up to an artificial electronically-simulated world, it is only because our perceptual world is already electronically simulated in its very nature. Finally, the preoccupation with fate, in both the Matrix world and the real world of 2199, reflects a Baudrillardian temporality. Fatality is the signature time-sense of the hyperreal, and shares the same definition: "This is the very definition of fate: the precession of effects over their very causes. So all things happen before having happened" (*Fatal Strategies* 198). The aporia centralised around the Oracle—do her prophecies predict the future or do they cause it?—reflects a typically Baudrillardian implosion of cause and

effect: "an absorption of the radiating mode of causality" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 31). In simulated time, freedom itself is only a simulacral shimmer over a surface of digitised code. While the fatal temporality of the Matrix world would seem to diminish Neo's heroic accomplishment (despite the film's theme of choice, Trinity's revelation of Neo's status as The One suggests that he could not have done other than he did), it does contribute to the Baudrillardian atmosphere of *The Matrix*'s simulated 1999.



Concentric oscillations in a mirrored surface

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, originally published almost twenty years before the release of *The Matrix*, Baudrillard achieves the appropriately Baudrillardian accomplishment of seeming to defend his position against its future distortion by the narrative of the Wachowski brothers' film. Whereas Neo was able to travel from the hyperreal world to another world from which he could view the illusory quality of what he had taken to be reality, "here…simulation is insuperable, unsurpassable, dull and flat, without exteriority—we will no longer even pass through to 'the other side of the mirror' [as Neo does], that was still the golden age of transcendence" (125). The likelihood that the Wachowski brothers were familiar with this passage (and many others like it) and deliberately chose either to ignore it or to dramatise its contradiction is bolstered by the manner in which they depict Baudrillard's book itself in the film. The film does not show us the familiar, iconic edition of *Simulacra and Simulation*, the white rectangular paperback, but a strange mock-up: a blue hardcover with embossed lettering that looks about ten times as thick as the actual book. Neo opens the book at the essay "On Nihilism", which is printed on the wrong side of the page; moreover, the book has been hollowed out for use as a secret storage area for illegal software. The writers seem to be fairly direct in admitting that the Baudrillard to which their film alludes is a distorted, eviscerated simulacrum of the "real" Baudrillard. (In fact, Neo's copy of *Simulacra and Simulation* is itself one of the simulated objects in the Matrix programme, suggesting the accusation of many of Baudrillard's critics that he is part of the hyperreal environment he professes to criticise.) The Wachowski brothers seem to be admitting their intention to stage a deceptive effigy of Baudrillardian concepts, requiring a thoughtful viewer to ask how *The Matrix* uses Baudrillardian ideas, rather than judging the film by whether or not it faithfully parrots them. Considering the film as a reflection of the "real 1999" provides a unique opportunity to observe the manner in which the film engages Baudrillardian concerns, and encourages its audience to recognise themselves in a Baudrillardian mirror.

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Randy Laist is Assistant Professor of English at Goodwin College in East Hartford, Connecticut. He is the author of *Technology and Postmodern Subjectivity in Don DeLillo's Novels* and the editor of *Looking for* Lost: *Critical Perspectives on the Enigmatic Series*. He has also published numerous articles on literature and film, popular culture, and pedagogy.