"Did You Ever Eat Tasty Wheat?": Baudrillard and *The Matrix*

William Merrin, University of Wales, Swansea, UK

There is a scene early in The Wachowski Brothers' 1999 film The Matrix where the lead character, Neo (Keanu Reeves), is visited by his friend Choi who has arranged to buy some software from him:

> He closes the door. On the floor near the bed is a book, Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*. The book has been hollowed out and inside are several computer discs. He takes one, sticks the money in the book and drops it on the floor. Opening the door, he hands the disc to Choi. (Wachowski, 1997)

As Neo picks up the book in the film, we read the title. Jean Baudrillard is in *The Matrix*.

The reason for his inclusion is, on one level, clear: the producers of an ubercool, big budget, action-movie, effects-fest whose theme is the virtual reality computer simulation of our entire world, get to name-check for the cognoscenti *the* theorist of simulation. The once "high priest of postmodernism" (Baudrillard, 1989) is now elevated to the patron saint of a knowledge; a zeitgeist; a complete contemporary experience of the real, and, for the Wachowski brothers, of our future. Baudrillard's inclusion is, therefore, an acknowledgement that his theory of simulation and the simulacrum is, in some way, central to the film. *The Matrix* succeeds in illustrating many aspects of his media theory, explicitly linking them to developments in new media technologies and their possible future path, using Baudrillard to draw out the epistemological implications of developments in the simulation of experience and consciousness. However the film moves beyond a merely illustrative function; its use of Baudrillard opening up an important arena to discuss contemporary developments in virtual reality, virtuality, and simulation, as well as in cinema and technology. It is this arena that I want to explore, considering in detail both *The Matrix*'s use of Baudrillard and Baudrillard's own possible response to the film and his appearance.

The plot of *The Matrix* follows the life of Keanu Reeves' Thomas Anderson, "a program writer for a respectable software company" who, by night, is a computer hacker going by the name of "Neo". Apparently obsessed with discovering from fellow hackers the identity of "Morpheus" and the meaning of "the matrix", he is contacted by "Trinity" (Carrie-Anne Moss) who, along with Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), has been trying to find him. Introduced to Morpheus, and accepting the chance to discover "the truth" about the matrix, Neo discovers the entire world he has lived within is unreal, and that he is actually in an embryonic sac connected to an incubation pod in a future world where machines have evolved to enslave humanity, harvesting and feeding off their energy, keeping them unconscious of this by connecting their brains to a giant, virtual reality, "neural interactive simulation that we call 'the matrix'". The world he lived within, therefore, was merely a virtual reality illusion: instead of it being 1999, Morpheus tells him, "It's closer to 2199". The

rest of the story involves the guerrilla resistance of Morpheus's group who inhabit a submarine in the sewers of this future world and who have been hacking into the matrix to find "the one", a prophesied saviour whose power to internally manipulate this computer matrix will lead to human freedom from the machines.

That this prophecy is realised and that it is Keanu Reeves that achieves this Christ-like state is inevitable. That the whole is wrapped up in state-of-the-art, computer-generated special effects; the complete range of action movie clichés; designer hyper-violence; a thin veneer of trite philosophy; the aestheticised *hypercool noir* of shades, black leather, mobile phones, machine pistols, and military hardware, and a tacked-on, hero-gets-the-girl, love interest, is equally inevitable for a mainstream, summer-release, Hollywood style "blockbuster". Despite this, however, there is more going on in *The Matrix*. Beneath this banal, over-financed, action-movie and its ultra-violent cyberchic, there is another reality; another film; one containing an important exploration of the question of new media and the epistemological issues they raise. To get at this film, however, one must, like Neo, follow a path that leads beyond the merely apparent.

"Welcome to 'the Desert of the Real'"

The stock of references employed by the Wachowskis for Neo's path to reality include, at various times, both *The Wizard of Oz* and *Alice in Wonderland*. *Alice* it may be, but it is *Alice* read through Jefferson Airplane's acid trip "White Rabbit" where pills not cookies bring the expansion of consciousness, though, in the late 20th C world of *The Matrix*, West Coast psychedelia gives way to the thumping techno of *Rage Against the Machine*; the promised harmony of the age of Aquarius is replaced by a vision of a dystopic reality of charred nature and machinic domination, and "free your head" becomes not a counter-cultural mantra of creative exploration and cosmic attunement but an evangelical statement of millennial anarcho-libertarianism. However, this explicit linking of Neo's evolution of consciousness with the journeys of Dorothy and Alice (see Felty, 1999) is misconceived. Whereas there the heroine's journey takes them from the real into a fantastic world from which they later awake, Neo passes instead from fantasy to reality -- from the simulated world to the reality of the future; a world from which, unlike for Dorothy or Alice, there is no return. "I can't go back, can I?", he asks. "No, but if you could would you really want to?", Morpheus replies.

If Dorothy and Alice, therefore, are not sufficient to understand this journey, perhaps a better source might be Descartes' attempts in his *Meditations* (Descartes, 1968) to achieve epistemological certainty. For Descartes sensory evidence is inadequate for this task as we might at any point be dreaming, hence, he argues, "there are no conclusive signs by means of which one can distinguish clearly between being awake and being asleep" (1968: 96-97). It is precisely this central Cartesian question of dreaming that is posed in *The Matrix* as all Neo's early scenes open with him waking, wondering if he is, or was, dreaming: opening the door to Choi he asks "have you ever had that feeling where you're not sure if you are awake or still dreaming?", and, meeting Morpheus, he is himself asked the question, "Have you ever had a dream, Neo, that you were so sure was real? What if you were unable to wake from that dream? How would you know the difference between the dream world and the real world?" Once posed by *The Matrix*, however, this central philosophical question that so interested Descartes, is immediately answered as the film wakes Neo to the true reality -- to his life as a "crop". Rescued by the hovercraft in the sewers he is brought to meet Morpheus who greets him with the words, "welcome to the real world".

Here, however, this philosophical problem of dreaming is updated, being presented as a consequence of developed virtual reality technologies simulating the sensation of the real. From within, a perfected simulation would be indistinguishable from the real. As Morpheus asks Neo, in the 1996 script, "If the virtual reality apparatus …was wired to all of your senses and controlled them completely, would you be able to tell the difference between the virtual world and the real world?". "You might not, no", Neo answers. "No you wouldn't", Morpheus replies (Wachowski, 1996). You wouldn't, unless you were woken, hence "Morpheus" -- the Greek god of the underworld and of dreams -- dispels the Cartesian sleep to reveal the truth to Neo who is himself destined to wake humanity to the real, just as, at the film's end, Trinity wakes the flat-lined sleeping beauty back to life with her kiss.

Descartes himself soon moved beyond the question of dreaming, however, to a more interesting realisation: even if we are awake, all of our senses may be being manipulated by some external maleficent force. Our whole "reality", therefore, may be a deliberately illusory product of some *mal genie* -- an "evil demon" of images whose reality and reference cannot be proven (Descartes, 1968: 100), an idea *The Matrix* explicitly repeats in its picture of this world as a digital simulation and imagic illusion created by the intelligent and evil force of the super-evolved machines. As Larry Wachowski explains, "the premise for The Matrix began with the idea that everything in our world, every single fibre of reality, is actually a simulation created in a digital universe" (Probst, 1999; see also Unattributed, 1999a). Although this idea of electronic simulation draws upon both virtual reality and the work of Baudrillard, it needs to be understood, along with Descartes' *Meditations*, as part of a longer history of images: of concern at the image and at its epistemological foundation and possible deception (see Merrin, 2001).

Looking at this history of images and their reception it becomes apparent that images have always been seen as efficacious -- as having the power not merely to represent reality but also to present themselves as what they represent, in assuming for us the force of the real. This is a power long recognised in the founding theologies and philosophies of the west, especially in Judeo-Christianity and Platonism which each saw this physical world as an illusion, a mere image or copy of a higher divine reality, and which each opposed this illusory image's power to attract and divert the minds of men from that reality. Each also attacked human made images in this world as compounding this error, hence Christianity's assault upon the "eidolon" -- the "idol" or "simulacrum" (see Barasch, 1992; Candea, 1987a, 1987b; Ries, 1987; Freedberg, 1989) -- and Plato's attack upon images, and upon the "simulacrum" in particular as an image that simulates fidelity to the divine form to deceive us as to its reality (see Plato, 1955: 359-77; 1986: 26-27, 66-68). Such deception could only be evil hence the western demonisation of the image, explicitly repeated, for example, by Descartes. Finally, each also saw this imagic world as a place of confinement, Plato explicitly describing us as prisoners chained in a cave mistaking shadow-play upon the cave wall as reality (1955: 316-25). It is this question of the simulacrum, therefore, that *The Matrix*, in its "trip into Plato's cave" (Wark, 1999), returns us to -- to the issue of the powerful image which eclipses the real to assume its position, rendering impossible in its usurpation the distinction of image and original, and to the enchaining of humanity to the image and its evil deceptions.

Thus *The Matrix* explicitly connects these philosophical debates to projected developments in the electronic "virtual reality" simulation of sensory experience, a medium which, in its aspirations at least, is part of a western movement, since the development of that "pencil of nature" photography, towards the production of images of increasing visual fidelity and "realism". Mechanical and electronic technologies such as cinema and television improved

this realism through the twentieth century but, for many, virtual reality offers a hope of a further development in an exact simulation of the sensory signals that constitute our experiential reality. If a real, virtual reality has yet to emerge in this form, it nevertheless represents the goal of much contemporary military, scientific, and entertainment research, whilst, arguably, a virtual, virtual reality has already come into existence in its fictional representation. Thus, whilst the exploration of alternative realities is not new, it is significant that the themes of the electronic simulation of memory, experience, and life, or the development of a competing electronic virtual reality, are increasingly found in both fiction - for example in the work of Philip K Dick (1964; 1994; 1997a; 1997b), William Gibson (1995), and the "cyberpunk" movement -- and in film -- in *Tron* (1982), *Blade Runner* (1982; 1992), *Total Recall* (1990), *The Lawnmower Man* (1992), *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995), *Strange Days* (1995), and *eXistenZ* (1999). Indeed, cyberpunk, and Gibson's *Neuromancer* in particular, were important explicit influences upon the Wachowski brothers, who named their own "cyberspace" after "the matrix" described by Gibson (1995: 11; 67 -- although another electronic VR called "the matrix" appeared eight years before Gibson's in BBC TV's *Dr Who*).

However, unlike other representations of this cyberspace (such as in *The Lawnmower Man*), *The Matrix* eschews the narrative movement from the real into this realm, to reveal, shockingly, that we are *already* in the virtual realm, the perfection of virtual reality technology being seen to create, not a neon, video-game, wonderland, but rather a reproduction of the physical world in all its ordinary banality. From within this everyday reality is completely convincing: once caught in it, no one can be "told" the truth, they have to be woken to it. As Morpheus explains:

> Do you want to know what it is? The matrix is everywhere. It is all around us. Even now in this very room. You can see it when you look out of your window, or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.

The effects of a complete simulated sensorium are made clear in the training program Morpheus loads himself and Neo into. As Neo feels one of the chairs appearing before him he asks if it is real. Morpheus replies: "What is real? How do you define real? If you are talking about what you can feel; what you can smell; what you can taste and see, then real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain". If this is so then the perfect simulation of these signals, especially if fed straight into our central nervous system, bypassing external add-on media, does not produce a "false" sensation, but one indistinguishable from the real and thus as real and effective as if the physical referent were there. It is no longer even a mere *image* and this is the simulacrum's secret.

Hence Baudrillard's appearance in the film. As Production designer Owen Patterson admitted, the film owes a debt to his theory of simulation (Bond, 1999); a debt acknowledged in the 1996 and 1997 scripts when Morpheus introduces the matrix to Neo: "As in Baudrillard's vision, your whole life has been spent inside the map not the territory. This is Chicago as it exists today… 'The desert of the real'" (Wachowski, 1997), a quotation from Baudrillard's 'Precession of the Simulacra" (from *Simulacra and Simulation* again (1994: 1-42)) -- that survives into the final screenplay. Baudrillard's "desert" itself reworks Borges' fable of an empire who created a 1:1 scale map covering the land completely before being left to rot in the desert (Borges, 1975: 131), but Baudrillard escalates Borges to argue that today it is the

map -- the process of the materialisation of a programmed, preceding model of the real -- that precedes and produces the territory, making the distinction impossible. With this "precession of the simulacra" we are left with "the desert of the real", as "it is the real and not the map whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts" (1994: 1). So, in the training program, Morpheus similarly reveals the matrix to Neo as the precession of the map as its own and only reality, the loss of the sovereign difference in this precession and the resulting desertification of the real -- its obliteration and replacement -- for the unconscious, electronically harvested remains of humanity.

The simulacrum, therefore, from Judeo-Christianity, to Plato, to Descartes, to Baudrillard, forms one of the main and recurrent themes of *The Matrix*. Consider the breakfast scene where Mouse complains of the processed slop they eat, asking, "Do you know what it really reminds me of? ... *Tasty Wheat*. Did you ever eat *Tasty Wheat*?" As *Tasty Wheat* exists only in the matrix it is pointed out that no-one has actually eaten this. "That's exactly my point. Exactly", Mouse replies. "Because you have to wonder now, how did the machines know what *Tasty Wheat* tasted like, huh? Maybe they got it wrong; maybe what I think Tasty Wheat tasted like actually tasted like ... er ... oatmeal ... or tunafish ...". Existing only within the matrix, *Tasty Wheat* is its own effective reality; it cannot, as Mouse suggests, even taste "wrong". Compare this "last supper" before Morpheus's capture with the Judas Cypher's restaurant meal with the agents inside the matrix. Just as *Lucifer* fell to this secondary imagic world of sensory temptations, so too does *Cypher*, for whom the simulacral reality similarly eclipses the real. Witness his pleasure at eating the steak: even if it "doesn't exist", and even if "when I put it into my mouth the matrix tells my brain that it is juicy and delicious", this is sufficient: the simulacral steak eclipses the breakfast slop. Plato's cave is happy enough if you know no better. "Ignorance is bliss", he says between mouthfuls.

For Baudrillard our simulation of the real, our production of the real as pre-coded signs which operate as the real, leads to a "hyperreality". This seems to involve two processes as he suggests any attempt to materialise the real *as the real* implicitly involves its forced materialisation as its own perfect exemplar, and thus as a hyperreality, but he also sees the resulting real as eclipsing our own experience in its hyperreal semiotic perfection and "pornographic" representation, fidelity and hypervisibility (see 1990: 28-36). "The matrix" operates at both levels, both as a hyperreal simulation of everyday reality, and as a hyperreal experience that eclipses that reality, for those held in it as well as for those who remember its charms and whom, like Cypher, wish they'd never left and who would choose its slavery over the freedom of reality. Hence his retort to Trinity's comment that the matrix "isn't real", on the contrary, he says, "I think that the matrix can be more real than this world". "Welcome to the real world huh baby?" is his mocking response, as he unplugs a comrade whose death registers more on the faces of those watching it in the matrix than on his own in the real world.

Baudrillard, of course, is not the only influence on the film. The Wachowski's aim of producing "an intellectual action movie" (Felty, 1999), led to its packing with appropriate references, and a minor industry has arisen (on the internet -- on Gibson's "matrix") to mine the film's meanings. Many commentators have emphasised *The Matrix*'s strong religious themes and the recurrent Christian symbolism (see Unattributed, 1999b; 1999c), although references in the film to Judaism, Greek mythology, Taoism, and Buddhism complicate this reading. Here, however, the use of religious allegory avoids becoming the confused postmodern pastiche or genre cliché it appears to be (think of *Star Wars* or Frank Herbert's *Dune*), instead bearing directly upon the concept of the simulacrum. As we find in both

Judeo-Christianity and Platonism a denigration of this world as a secondary and deficient realm and as an illusion which must be transcended to see through this veil to the true reality, so Neo must achieve the same transcendence of the phenomenal to reveal the matrix as a streaming green neon code. And just as the Christian and Platonic war on human images was always only part of a wider assault upon the image -- upon the simulacrum of this world itself -- so *The Matrix* declares war on our own entire, fallen reality. The film mimics too a theology of salvation in its appeal to the divine as the only agency that can banish the false realm of the simulacrum and domesticate it once more as a "good" image. Thus, just as Descartes searches for the proof of a God whose perfection would prohibit deception and thus both guarantee and expose the sensory images which beset us, so Morpheus searches for the divine saviour, the "one", who can banish the same evil demon and accomplish the same feat for humanity.

Just as the simulacrum of this world is too tempting for Christianity to break its spell, so the matrix is too powerful for Morpheus and his crew. "The matrix is a system", Morpheus says, and all those caught in it, "are our enemy": "You have to understand that most of these people are not ready to be unplugged, and many of them are so inert, so hopelessly dependent on that system, that they will fight to protect it", he concludes. Thus, as he cannot break the magical spell of the image over them, iconoclasm is the only answer: their entire apparent reality must be destroyed at any cost. Hence Morpheus' resort to a hyper-paranoid, anarcho-libertarianism, combining Old Testament fundamentalism, new-age mysticism, *X-Files* hyper-conspiracy, backwoods militia, Japanese doomsday cult, and a proto-Fascistic aestheticisation of violence, fashion, and military hardware. His is an evangelical paramilitary terrorism sacrificing the life of all those who oppose him as martyrs in the greater cause of a final apocalyptic gun-battle between the saved and the demons and their minions; between the divine truth and the diabolical image. The millennial redemption offered by *The Matrix* combines traditional Christianity with a Waco-style, "Heaven's Gate" suicide-cult. Nerve-gas on Japanese subways and gun-battles on tube platforms; the bombing of Federal offices in Oklahoma and "Government lobby" shoot-outs: the acts are identical and all coalesce in the confused, evangelical politics of the film. Morpheus is the Unabomber of the matrix.

But the simulacrum has one last trick to play on us here. As Deleuze says, the simulacrum is no mere copy, rather it "contains a positive power which negates both original and copy, both model and reproduction" (1983: 53), constituting "the act by which the very idea of a model or privileged position is challenged or overturned" (1994: 69). This power cannot be abolished, returning to undermine all foundations raised against it, he argues, quoting Nietzsche's critique of Plato: "Behind every cave… there is, and must necessarily be, a still deeper cave: an ampler, stranger, richer world behind every bottom, beneath every foundation" (Deleuze, 1983: 53). Thus *The Matrix* plays with the simulacrum as a plot device but domesticates it again beneath a higher and true reality: not once does Neo consider whether this "real world" he is shown might not be just another level of virtual reality -- perhaps this "reality" is one created for the machines by another intelligence to keep the machines themselves in happy slavery? However, a mainstream, blockbuster film needs truths to deliver and neither the film nor the audience could withstand this logical extrapolation of the central premise, for, as Deleuze admits, the simulacrum sets up an "internal reverberation" and "resonance" that overflows into madness. Nevertheless, the simulacrum removes the possibility of the real which the plot of *The Matrix*, ultimately, depends on.

Interestingly Baudrillard faces the same problem with the simulacrum. Having employed the concept to explain the successive transformations of the significatory and imagic productions of the post-Renaissance era (see 1993: 50-76), the contemporary domination of signs and images and their precession over lived experience, he has struggled to identify a foundation for his own critique. His most famous ground is the concept of "symbolic exchange", a mode of relations, meaning and communication he derives from the Durkheimian tradition of social anthropology, through Mauss, Bataille and Caillois, but in opposing simulacra with the symbolic he sets the latter up as a realm of lived experience and reality that the simulacrum always threatens to undermine (see Merrin, 2001). Baudrillard's own war on simulacra therefore echoes that of *The Matrix*, and both also fail to control or destroy its power.

The theme of slavery provides a final example of the simulacrum's power. For Marshall McLuhan even our familiarity with and use of media blinds us to its effects upon our cognitive and sensory life, and as such constitutes a form of service. "By continuously embracing technologies we relate ourselves to them as servo-mechanisms" (1994: 46), he says, even suggesting in a 1968 interview that we will soon all thus be slaves of our computers (McLuhan and Zingrone, 1995: 264). Beyond, therefore, that enslavement by evolved machinery predicted by Butler in 1872 (1970: 198-226), we can see that even our use, maintenance, reliance upon and reproduction of technology is a mode of slavery and it is one that already exists: look around yourself in any city and see the hunched over people walking by, their faces down-turned, oblivious to the world, as thumbs fly over an SMS keypad.

Thus the use of machines by Morpheus and his followers -- the VR chairs, the mobile phones and guns, and the hovercraft and helicopter gun-ship -- integrates them and enslaves them to their technology as surely as the matrix does. As they download special moves and abilities as in a video-game they become identical to the agents -- those super-powerful "sentient programs" that police the matrix. Although Neo's mastery of "bullet time" is supposed to indicate his mastery of the new virtual dimensions (see Probst, 1999), it only emphasises his cybernetic transformation and the fact that the real future of humanity lies, not as is claimed, with the "100% pure, old-fashioned, home-grown human. Born free. Right here in the real world. Genuine child of Zion", but with those who include in themselves the technology they claim to oppose.

The Matrix's championing of "real humans" against "machines", therefore, begins to collapse upon inspection. The symbiotic relationship of humanity and technology (Butler, 1970: 221), in our use of and servitude to it, arguably makes the moral and ontological distinction of "human" and "machine" unsupportable. Those critical appeals to the lived reality of humanity, whether in Baudrillard's privileging of symbolic exchange (see Merrin, 1999) or in Paul Virilio's theologically and phenomenologically defined humanity which he sees as reduced to a "terminal citizen" in an electronic network (Virilio, 1997), both rest, therefore, upon uncertain foundations. And what is it that undermines this critical foundation? McLuhan described our technological extensions as "images" of ourselves, which we come to serve as idols (1994: 46). If we follow the etymology of this term, "eidolon", we discover again that our service of our technology is a service to the simulacrum.

"The Secret of Cinema"

If *The Matrix*, therefore, can be used to illustrate and develop Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum and of simulation, how does it fit into his wider theory of cinema? Although

Baudrillard's work is frequently cited in film studies his actual writings on cinema have not to date attracted any systematic critical attention. Whilst he does not develop a complete and original philosophy of this medium, his comments on it are important in the context of his media theory and his discussion of the simulacrum. Much of what Baudrillard has to say about the cinema is personal, expressing his pleasure in the medium (see Gane, 1993: 23-4; 29-35; 67-71), and revealing his belief that the medium is "symbolic" in nature (1993: 31), in creating that Durkheimian mode of communion which he privileges against the processes of the semiotic and its hyperreality. Hence, as "our own special ceremonial" (1993: 31), he prefers cinema to the cold electronic image of that semiotic medium, television (1993: 30; 69).

This position is complicated, however, by Baudrillard's criticism of contemporary film-making and of a style found predominantly in those Hollywood style films he claims to prefer (1993: 31; 67), as he complains that film-making today has become little more than "a spectacular demonstration of what one can do with the cinema" (1993: 23). He describes, therefore, "cinema and its trajectory" as it passes "from the most fantastic or mythical to the realistic and the hyperrealistic" (Baudrillard, 1994: 46), with each development in technical prowess contributing to the fading of "the cinematographic illusion" (Baudrillard, 1996: 30) as it aims instead at a perfection of representation. He describes this as part of the western desire to technologically grasp and materialise the real in all its "pornographic" hyperreality, getting closer "to the absolute real in its banality, its veracity, in its naked obviousness, in its boredom", to become that real itself (Baudrillard, 1994: 46-7). However, Baudrillard argues, "the more things you add to make things real, to achieve absolute realistic verisimilitude, perhaps the further you stray from the secret of cinema" (Gane, 1993: 32), thus the cinema is currently abolishing in its content that symbolic dimension that, for him at least, defines its experience.

Hence Baudrillard's condemnation of those historical films whose only aim is absolute, visual, historical correspondence, and "whose very perfection is disquieting" (Baudrillard, 1994: 45). To his list of 1970s film we could add any number from the contemporary Hollywood factories -- think of *Titanic*'s (1997) reconstruction of that ship down to the smallest details, and the orgy of visual hyperrealism that marks Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). There we find the belief that the truth of an event can be realised merely by adding on the signs of the real, by reconstituting reality in a simulacral image that, for its audience, comes to constitute that real, eclipsing precisely the experiential reality that constitutes its actual meaning. Thus a visual hyperfidelity dominates in which historical details are perfectly recreated to stand now, not as themselves in their symbolic interrelationships, but instead as signs of "history", to signify the real of the age, resembling nothing "except the empty figure of resemblance" (1994: 45). Whilst this hyperrealism isn't new in cinema, a medium built upon chemical and mechanical simulation, that this has become the raison d'etre and star of the film and that historical reality may be losing ground against it, perhaps is.

Although Baudrillard explicitly targets this mode of hyperrealism, another has emerged today about which he has yet to comment: the development of computer-generated, digital cinematography (see Bennun, 1999; Green, D 1999; Kane, 1997; Logan, 1999, and especially, Pierson, 1999). The digital manipulation and production of images is now common film practice, being used to clean up or alter existing images, as in the "digital cut-and-paste" of *Forrest Gump* (1994); to create CGI special effects, such as those pioneered in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991); to fill in for deceased actors, such as in *The Crow*

(1994) and *Gladiator* (2000), and even to create entirely new stars, such as those in *Jurassic Park* (1993) and *Star Wars: Episode 1 The Phantom Menace* (1999). The future of film-making may lie, therefore, in the development of the "synthespian" (Logan, 1999:16) -- of fully digital actors -- whether "virtual icons", such as "Kyoko Date", or the digitally grave-robbed recreations of stars of the golden age (Kane, 1999). To date the only fully digital films are those considered as "animation", such as *Toy Story* (1995) and its sequel, though many in the industry see its future here. Baudrillard's feelings towards this new, digital hyperrealisation are not difficult to guess, as all his comments upon the abolition of the symbolic relationship with and investment in the image in its forced "obscenity" apply here too. The hyper-clean, hyper-literal, perfectly realised digital image ends its quest for the real, as Romney points out (echoing Baudrillard), by expelling the real from itself -- in its presence, particularity, and uniqueness (Romney, 1996). Thus all those auratic or symbolic properties that Baudrillard defends are now digitally dispelled.

The Matrix represents, therefore, precisely that form of film-making that Baudrillard does, or would, oppose. Here the technical capacities of the medium are the point, and the advertised star of, the film, and a technologically produced hyperrealism dominates its aesthetics as we linger scopophilically upon the quality of the film and upon its *look*; upon the cybernoir tones, shades, and metals of the fashion and technology on display. Arguably the stars of the film for our identification are not Neo and Morpheus but their clip-on shades, leather coats, machine guns, and mobile phones. This is *film itself* as a techno-chic object of consumption; as style, statement, and pure sign-object. And if it is possible to identify so completely with the shade-adorned, VR enhanced, kung-fu-programmed and hyper-armed video-game characters, do we not thereby lose the right to side with Neo in defence of the "100% pure, old-fashioned, home-grown human"? Shouldn't we really be rooting for the machines?

The Matrix, of course, relies upon a profusion of digital effects for its power. We are first introduced to "bullet time" early in the film as Trinity jumps to kick a policeman, before freezing mid-air, mid-kick, with arms outstretched, in a pose part martial arts, part praying mantis. In a freeze-framed instant, echoing the chrono-photographic results of Janssen, Marey and Muybridge, the camera whirls vertiginously around her; before the moment is over, the pause button is released, and she kicks him across the room into the wall. As visual effects designer John Gaeta explains, "It's slowing down time to such an extent that you really see everything around you as clearly as you possibly could" (Gaeta, 1999). Or rather, *as you possibly couldn't*: for, in this hyperrealisation of the instant, in this unreal "real time" and its atemporal, omniscient vision, we move beyond human time to that of technology; to the time of the bullet.

Following Ernst Mach's first photographs of the passage and impact of bullets in 1888, we pass now into the cinematic realisation of the experience of this time, as we watch Neo dodge the agent's bullets, weaving between their slow-motion shockwaves, and as we lovingly follow the "government lobby" shoot-out. Here Neo and Trinity gun down a platoon of heavily armoured soldiers whilst performing an immaculately choreographed, balletic display of cartwheels, kicks, jumps, and acrobatics, as bullets, cartridges, bullet-impact explosions, and the infinite fragments of the walls and pillars float in the air, forming dense fractal patterns, all beautifully, almost ecstatically, hyperrealised, with each tiny fragment pursuing its own trajectory among the clouds of debris. We achieve here Ernst Junger's "second, colder consciousness", that of technological distantiation, as we "endeavor … to go further and peer into spaces that are inaccessible to the human eye" (Phillips, 1989: 207-08). Photography represents, Junger says, the height of this precise and objective vision, "our characteristically

cruel way of seeing", as part of our "urge to endow the living process with the character of a slide prepared for the microscope", helping "to create a space where… pain can be regarded as an illusion" (Phillips, 1989: 209-10). In the film "the matrix" is that space; for us it may well be cinema itself. Junger's "storm of steel", that raging maelstrom of lethal fragments and explosions that was the battlefield of World War One, has been replaced for us by a cinematic storm of pixels.

Beyond both the inherently imagic nature of the medium and the film's reliance on special effects, the film appears as ultra-imagic, a quality deriving in no small part from the Wachowski brothers' debt to their own comic book "graphic novel" backgrounds; to comic art and Japanese Manga comics and Anime films (they aimed for "a real-life depiction of anime" [Green, M.E, 1999]); to Hong Kong Kung Fu movies and their wire fighting techniques, as well as to the American super-hero genre (*The Matrix* was conceived in part as an "origins" story for a new breed of super-hero). Their complete comic book storyboarding of every scene, angle, image and effect also adds to the imagic impact of *The Matrix*, as does the film's future as it continues on the internet as a comic and, in time for the two sequels currently being planned, as a video-game. Here one cycle of influence is complete, as the film also draws upon the style, look and feel of video-games, as Poole notes: "*The Matrix* contains the most successful translations to date of certain video-game paradigms to the celluloid medium" (Poole, 2000: 87). In its array of jumps, kicks, and super-human "special moves" executed without effort or pain, the film is a recreation of *StreetFighter*, *Tekken*, or *Mortal Kombat*, a link made explicit in the script as the crew watch Neo and Morpheus trade punches in the virtual dojo on a VR screen, "like watching a game of *Mortal Kombat*" (Wachowski, A and L 1997). Except The Matrix goes further: here reality itself is transformed into a virtual beat-em-up, the location for an aspirational hyper-violence in which only computer "lives" are lost. The virtualisation of our own everyday life, therefore, is mimicked in the film in this Baudrillardian telescoping of the real and the virtual that, in a disaffected teenager's dream come true, allows the release of an aestheticised ultra-violence.

"The Matrix of the Cinema"

If, therefore, *The Matrix* represents a form of filmmaking that Baudrillard criticises, it might still represent a form of *fiction* he advocates. Despite his on-screen reference, discussion of Baudrillard's significance for *The Matrix* is rare on web-sites, reviews, and fan-literature. Jim Rovira has attempted an analysis, arguing that 'Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* is probably the best starting point for a philosophical and sociological approach to the movie's content' (Rovira, 1999), but his paper is brief and does not expand on this claim. He is, I believe, right, and an essay in that book, "Simulacra and Science Fiction", does give us an important way of reading the film (Baudrillard, 1994: 121-27). Here Baudrillard returns to the three orders of simulacra introduced in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993: 50-86), to describe the "imaginary" of each order which he sees as passing from the utopian projection of the pre-industrial order (creating fantastic other worlds), to the mechanical and metallurgic, Promethean projection of the industrial order (creating robots, spaceships and technological civilisations), to a new situation: the implosion of imaginary and real in a forced hyperreality that creates a problem for fiction today. How can fiction exist when we can no longer exceed our world, he asks? If we can no longer "fabricate the unreal from the real" the process must now be:

> …to put decentered situations, models of simulation in place and to contrive to give them the feeling of the real, of the banal, of lived experience, to reinvent

the real as fiction, precisely because it has disappeared from our own life'. Hallucination of the real, of lived experience, of the quotidian, but reconstituted, sometimes down to disquietingly strange details... brought to light with a transparent precision, but without substance, derealised in advance, hyperrealised (1994: 124).

Science fiction, therefore, must "evolve implosively, in the very image of our current conception of the universe, attempting to revitalise, reactualise, requotidianise fragments of simulation, fragments of this universal simulation that have become for us the so-called real world" (1994: 124). If Dick and Ballard are examples of this fiction, might not *The Matrix* also qualify?

In its extrapolation of a technology towards its possible future *The Matrix* remains within Baudrillard's second order; however, it does also, occasionally, offer us Baudrillard's third order experience in exposing this world as a simulation and in providing that experience of the "uncanny" in which, as Heidegger argued, the "tranquilised assurance" of Being-in-the-world is broken and "everyday familiarity collapses" (1962: 233). This is the moment *The Matrix* shows us: the "hallucination of the real… down to disquietingly strange details", putting a model of simulation in place and giving it the feeling of the real all the better to expose its simulacral nature. Thus the epiphanic moment of the film is not, as McKenzie Wark argues, when Neo awakes to the real, machinic future (Wark, 1999), but rather when he returns to the matrix, watching it from the car whilst "simple images of the urban street blur past his window like an endless stream of data rushing down a computer screen" (Wachowski, A and L 1997). Like Neo we hallucinate upon its verisimilitude, sharing his confusion. "Unbelievable isn't it?", Morpheus says.

Of course, to the best of our knowledge, our world is not a virtual reality illusion and so *The Matrix*'s central revelation has its own shelf-life. If this simulation pales, therefore, upon leaving the cinema, Baudrillard's does not, for his claims about our simulacral world are more radical than those offered in *The Matrix*. For him, simulacra are efficacious as the real: they are not unreal media productions (which is, after all, what The Matrix still proposes), rather they are precessionary, coded, and materialised models that come to invade and invest all areas of our lives, experience and behaviours as the real, such that we too reproduce them as reality. Thus our entire everyday world becomes a produced, semiotically hyperrealised, mapped-out and anticipated, programmed experience. It is this production and reproduction that constitutes simulation and its effects are real.

Baudrillard, therefore, has no need to appeal to virtual reality in order to reveal this world as a simulation for this is already our experience, he claims. Cinema, for example, invades our lives such that it comes to constitute our experience. Hence Baudrillard describes his travels around America as a cinematic experience: "…go to America and… you *are* in a film. In California, particularly, you *live* cinema: you have experienced the desert as cinema, you experience Los Angeles as cinema, the town as a panning shot…" (Gane, 1993: 34). The cinema in America, therefore, is not to be found in the auditoriums or in the tired, fake spectacle of the studio tours but outside in the street: "the whole country is cinematic" he concludes (Baudrillard, 1988: 55-56). Only America has this power of the cinematographisation of everyday life, he says, "*It is there that I discover the 'matrix' of the cinema*" (Gane, 1993: 34). Here, two years before Gibson, and seventeen years before the Wachowski Brothers, Baudrillard theorises "the matrix". This matrix, however, is the

simulacral power of the image to invade, invest and assume the force of the real. The matrix is the simulacrum.

It is only in that moment of Neo watching the world from the car, in that panoramic shot of everyday life, that *The Matrix* approaches the power of Baudrillard's simulacrum. In that moment of confusion as Neo struggles to reconcile the knowledge of the electronic illusion with the apparent reality of the world before him, the film also articulates our own experience. This is the experience of mundane, everyday reality in all its banality at that moment when the matrix breaks through, when the lighting, the scenography, the editing, are just right. It is the moment of the confusion of real and image; of the cinematographisation of everyday life: of that hyperreality that we hope for that simultaneously heightens life and degrades reality; of that disquieting "hallucination" that transforms experience into imagic spectatorship and the world's "substance" into a digitally perfect screen effect. We do not have to look to the year 2199 for this: the virtualisation of everyday life is already well underway.

"The Matrix Has You…"

Early in *The Matrix* Neo receives a message on his computer screen saying simply, "the matrix has you". At the film's end we cut to the matrix's own computer screen of streaming, green neon code as Neo threatens its destruction. The code stops and the words "system failure" are seen. For us there is no system failure to return us to the real and this is where the horror of Baudrillard's vision surpasses that of the Wachowski's. As he wrote in *The Consumer Society* there is indeed a code governing our lives and securing our integration and complete, unthinking, conformity, but this code is not electronic and virtual but semiotic and actual: for him the "pacification of everyday life" operates, not through virtual reality but through the semiotic processes of a communicational and consumer society (1998: 174; 94). Baudrillard, therefore, presents us with our own simulated reality: a world where every act and thought is preceded by its own semiotic model; where all behaviour is a pre-coded response to a coded society; where the simulations which govern our world are those which we too help to reproduce; a society where real and imaginary implode; where all our experiences are overexposed first in the cold, electronic light of the mass media, in the aspirational, high-definition of the advertising image, and in the hyper-cool, hyperreality of digital cinematography; where our most fervent hope is for the cinema, or television to give meaning to our existence by broadcasting it, or for our lives to attain their hyperrealistic effect. This is a matrix that is more penetrating, complete, and attractive than any yet realised on our cinema screens, and this matrix does, indeed, have us.

Ask yourself: have you ever *really* eaten *Tasty Wheat*?

References

Barasch, Moshe (1992) *Icon*. London: New York University Press.

Baudrillard, Jean (1988) *America*. London: Verso.

Baudrillard, Jean (1989) Politics of Seduction, interview with Jean Baudrillard, Suzanne Moore, Stephen Johnstone, *Marxism Today*, January, pp. 54-55.

Baudrillard, Jean (1990) *Seduction*. London: Macmillan.

Baudrillard, Jean (1993) *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. London: Sage Publications.

Baudrillard, Jean (1994) *Simulacra and Simulation*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.

Baudrillard, Jean (1996) *The Perfect Crime*. London: Verso.

Baudrillard, Jean (1998) *The Consumer Society*. London: Sage Publications.

Bennun, David (1999) One Day Soon All Actors May Be Made this Way, *The Observer Magazine*, 12th December, pp. 24-30.

Borges, Jorges Louis (1975) *A Universal History of Infamy*. London: Penguin.

Butler, Samuel (1970) *Erewhon*. London: Penguin.

Candea, Virgil (1987a) Iconoclasm, trans. Sergiu Celac, in Mircea Eliade (ed) *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. Volume 7. London: Collier Macmillan, pp. 1-2.

Candea, Virgil (1987b) Icons, trans. Sergiu Celac, in Mircea Eliade (ed), *The Encyclopedia of Religion. Volume 7*. London: Collier Macmillan, pp. 67-70.

Deleuze, Gilles (1983) Plato and the Simulacrum, *October*, 27, Winter, pp. 45-56.

Deleuze, Gilles (1994) *Difference and Repetition*. London: The Athlone Press.

Descartes, Rene (1968) *Discourse on Method and the Meditations*. London: Penguin.

Dick, Philip, K. (1964) *The Simulacra*. London: Methuen.

Dick, Philip, K. (1994) *We Can Remember It For You Wholesale*. London: Harper Collins Publishers.

Dick, Philip, K. (1997a) *We Can Build You*. London: Harper Collins Publishers.

Dick, Philip, K (1997b) *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* London: Harper Collins Publishers.

Freedberg, David (1989) *The Power of Images*. London: The University of Chicago Press.

Gaeta, John (1999) What is Bullet Time? On Wachowski A and L, *The Matrix*. Warner Home Video.

Gane, Mike (ed.) (1993) *Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews*. London: Routledge.

Gibson, William (1995) *Neuromancer*. London: Harper Collins Publishers.

Green, Dave (1999) Forward Projection, *The Guardian*, G2, 22nd July, p. 23.

Heidegger, Martin (1962) *Being and Time*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.

Kane, Pat (1997) Half of Hollywood Has Fallen in Love With This Sweet Little Thing, the Other Half is Terrified of Her, *The Guardian*, G2, 17th January, pp. 1-3.

Logan, Brian (1999) Things To Do in Hollywood When You're Dead, *The Guardian*, G2, 17th September, pp. 16-17.

McLuhan, Eric and Zingrone, Frank (eds.) (1995) *The Essential McLuhan*. London: Routledge.

McLuhan, Marshall (1994) *Understanding Media*. Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Merrin, William (1999) Television is Killing the Art of Symbolic Exchange: Baudrillard's Theory of Communication, *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 16, No. 3, pp. 119-40.

Merrin, William (2001) To Play With Phantoms: Jean Baudrillard and the Evil Demon of the Simulacrum, *Economy and Society*, Vol. 30, No. 1, pp. 85-111.

Phillips, Christopher (1989) *Photography in the Modern Era*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Aperture.

Pierson, Michelle (1999) CGI Effects in Hollywood Science Fiction Cinema 1989-95: The Wonder Years in *Screen*, Vol. 40, No. 2, Summer, pp. 158-76.

Plato (1955) *The Republic*. London: Penguin Books.

Plato (1986) *The Sophist*. London: The University of Chicago Press.

Poole, Steven (2000) *Trigger Happy. The Inner Life of Video Games*. London: Fourth Estate.

Ries, Jonathan (1987) Idolatry, in Mircea Eliade (ed), *The Encyclopedia of Religion. Volume 7*. London: Collier Macmillan, pp.72-82.

Romney, Jonathan (1996) Terminated? *The Guardian*, The Week, 21st December, pp. 6.

Virilio, Paul (1997) *Open Sky*. London: Verso.

Wachowski A and L (1999) *The Matrix*. Warner Home Video.

Websites

Bond, Jeff (1999) Creating the Surreal World of *The Matrix* With Production Designer Owen Patterson, in *Eon Magazine*, 16th April, http://homes.acmecity.com/thematrix/trinity/279/interviewarticles/interview20.html (contacted April 1999).

Felty, Steven (1999) The Matrix Guid [sic], *Eon Magazine*, 26th March, http://homes.acmecity.com/thematrix/trinity/279/interviewarticles/interview21.html (contacted April 1999).

Green, Michelle Erica (1999) Tough-Guy Actor Takes on Reality Itself, in *Another Universe*, April, http://homes.acmecity.com/thematrix/trinity/279/interviewarticles/interview3.html (contacted April 1999).

Probst, Chris (1999) Welcome to the Machine, in *American Cinematographer*, April, http://homes.acmecity.com/thematrix/trinity/279/interviewarticles/interview5.html (contacted April 1999).

Rovira, Jim (1999) Baudrillard and Hollywood: Subverting the Mechanism of Control and *The Matrix*, http://www.uta.edu/english/apt/collab/texts/hollywood.html (contacted April 1999).

Unattributed (1999a) The Making of the Matrix, *NZone Magazine*, March, http://homes.ac.mecity.com/thematrix/trinity/279/interviewarticles/interview2.html (contacted April 1999).

Unattributed (1999b) What is the Matrix? in *Cleave*, http://homes.acmecity.com/thematrix/trinity/279/philosophy2.html (contacted April 1999).

Unattributed (1999c) The Movie 'The Matrix' Viewed Allegorically, http://homes.acmecity.com/thematrix/trinity/279/christ2.html (contacted April 1999).

Wachowski A and L (1996) The Matrix, 8th April, http://members.xoom.com/_XOOM/moviescript/scripts/matrixthe.txt (contacted April 1999).

Wachowski A and L (1997) The Matrix, 3rd June, http://www.hundland.com/scripts/TheMatrix_1997.txt (contacted April 1999).

Wark, McKenzie (1999) The Matrix: Keanu Lost in Plato's Cave, http://www.nettime.org/nettime.w3archive/199911/msg00181.html (contacted April 1999).