



## Style and Substance in *The Matrix*

Review: Stacy Gillis. Ed. (2005)

*The Matrix Trilogy: Cyberpunk Reloaded*

Wallflower Press: London and New York

ISBN: 1-904764-32-0

195 pp.

**Thorsten Botz-Bornstein**

Tuskegee University

In *The Matrix* a reality of millions is declared to be due to cognitive manipulations effected by machines and computers. The constellation, not unknown in science fiction films, has obviously a highly metaphysical appeal. In the nine years since the first *Matrix* film has been launched, philosophers have produced an impressive output of academic writings, beginning in 2002 with William Irving's popular volume, *The Matrix and Philosophy*, leading to extremely serious academic studies attempting to link the Matrix reality to Plato's allegory of the cavern, as well as to the skepticism as raised by Berkeley, Hume, and Descartes. Yes, we have had a lot of philosophising on the 'brain in the vat' scenarios, and

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almost any ethical or epistemological aspect of the trilogy has been considered reaching from phenomenological and Gnostic interpretations to existentialist and Buddhist meditations.<sup>1</sup>

*Cyberpunk Reloaded* does not choose a philosophical angle but wants to be understood as a work in cultural studies. Though this book also addresses the films' underlying philosophical concepts, its main focus lies on the trilogy's and its byproducts' style and aesthetic in the context of science fiction theory, posthuman studies, and cyberspace anthropology. Examined here are not only the films but also broader cultural phenomenon covering animations, websites, and computer games.

Having said this, it is true that 'cultural studies' analyses on the trilogy are not lacking either: in the bibliography of the book alone I found seven 'culturalist' book length studies of *The Matrix*. Is it still possible to say something new about *The Matrix*? The contributors have managed to do so by giving detailed answers to questions like: 'Why does Trinity wear fetish clothing?' 'Why is the city of Zion predominantly populated by black people?' and 'Is it possible to attack a system from within?'

The last two questions are treated at several places in the book which shows that some themes are more important than others. From there arises this book's 'difficulty' (which does not necessarily mean a weak point): certain themes are randomly distributed over the different chapters, and the logical order of ideas is not always easy to follow.

*Cyberpunk Reloaded* contains thirteen contributions on themes as diverse as: narrativity/textuality; technical questions in relation to culture; questions of race; and 'women in *The Matrix*' (questions of feminism). Only five of the thirteen contributors are working outside the UK. Because many themes overlap or recur in the various essays, the

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<sup>1</sup> William Irving: *The Matrix and Philosophy* I and II (London: Open Court, 2002 and 2005); Matt Lawrence: *Like a Splinter in your Mind: The Philosophy behind the Matrix Trilogy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Christopher Grau (ed.): *Philosophers Explore the Matrix* (Oxford University Press, 2005); Glenn Yeffeth (ed.): *Taking the Red Pill: Science, Philosophy and Religion in The Matrix* (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2003).

organisation of these themes must have been a difficult editorial task. Personally, I would have chosen another approach than that of Stacy Gillis's who, instead of adhering to concrete thematic categories, divided the book into two abstract sections: 'Media Intertexts and Contexts' and 'The Politics of Modernity and Postmodernity,' a division which, as I found, rather mystifies than clarifies.

A further editorial difficulty must have been to find a common label for the collection. The focus on 'cyberpunk' makes sense and works well throughout the book though the notion itself should have been established more clearly at the beginning. Stacy Gillis explains in the introduction that academic criticism has always been relatively favorable towards the genre of cyberpunk as a 'would be rebel' (3) and that 'cyberpunk has been understood to articulate the tensions between human and machine, often through the abjection of the corporeal, apparently exemplified by the cyberspace cowboy Case in *Neuromancer*' (4). There would be more to say about punk's emphasis on bodily experience in contrast with the 'unbodily' experience of living in the matrix. Gillis finds that Neo is concerned with the body, the city, and technology, which makes him 'a flâneur, always watching, always slightly detached' (5). We get some essential clues about cyberpunk from other contributors. Anne Cranny-Francis explains that 'cyberpunk fiction of the 1980 [...] took science fiction into the world of information technology' (108) and Kate O'Riordan points out that cyberpunk favors the 'critique [of] the capitalist, computer and information-dominated cultures of the present' (142).

Also, the meaning of the 'virtual' should have been explicitly defined in the introduction, as some contributors give slightly varying accounts of this phenomenon. In the following I will address the content of the single chapters by pursuing my own four-fold scheme.

## **Narrativity/Textuality**

Four articles explore the particular narrative strategies developed in *The Matrix*. Aylish Wood, in her contribution on 'Transtextuality and Complexity in the Matrix,' analyzes animations (some of which have been written by the Wachowski brothers themselves) as well as the *Enter the Matrix* computer game and the Matrix-Online website. In particular, Wood is concerned with the textual structure of *The Matrix* as it 'slips between an actual and virtual presence' and 'complex non-linear relations [that] lead to intertextual connections able to turn back on themselves creating dynamic circuits rather than unidirectional ones' (12). *The Matrix* arises as 'a complex text, a network of interplay between different elements creating non-linear vectorial dynamics that destabilize the status of chronologies and origins' (21). Here a clear delimitation of the virtual from the actual would have been necessary because Wood's definitions are not commonplace: 'Actual in the sense that each element exists, both in a substantive form as text and also as a more contingent form established through transtextual connections. Virtual in the sense that not all potential connections are active, remaining possibilities rather than actualities (12).' While it is right to oppose the virtual to the actual, it would have been necessary to point out that the virtual is not 'non-actual' either; it cannot be established simply by pointing to its 'potential' or 'possible' character but must be clearly distinguished from the imaginary.

In a similar way (and by referring to an earlier work by Aylish Wood), Diane Carr establishes in her contribution *The Matrix* as a 'text that tells a narrative equivalent to working through levels of a video game (36).' 'How do games tell stories?' is the question that is explored with the help of Michel de Certeau's philosophy of space (already used by Henry Jenkins) in which stories are said to customise spaces. Computer games are spaces in which stories are not told but 'spun' via actions. But Carr is also concerned with time which is established in the trilogy through relationships between different texts:

*Enter the Matrix* is not an independent sibling-text, existing in an open relationship with *The Matrix Reloaded*. On the contrary, the events recounted in the game, are

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bound to the 'main event' of the first narrative: the primary, embedding narrative, the 'now' from which other events are ordered. (45)

Dan North argues in his contribution on virtual actors, spectacle, and special effects, that *The Matrix* has shown that 'special effects technologies can stimulate the spectator intellectually by connecting text with context, image with apparatus' (48). In other words, narrative and spectacle get intertwined on a fundamental level. The narrative character of visual representation is questioned since in *The Matrix* spectators are asked to marvel at 'the discrepancy between the real and its mimic' (49); narrative does not produce an independent simulacrum.

Paul Sheehan compares the ontological conditions of cyberspace (which he considers to be an imaginary – or hallucinatory – space) with 'the stage, the screen or the pages of a novel' (162). Also, in Pirandello's 'Six Characters in Search of an Author,' the personages strive to escape the virtual realm of their author's imagination, and in Borges' 'Circular Ruins,' the 'dreamer is a figment of another dreamer's nocturnal imagination' (164). When Sheehan likens these phenomena to cyberspace, I find that, like in Wood's contribution, the argument suffers from a confusion of the virtual and the imaginary. Still, his conclusion, which he reaches via 'Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern' and Heidegger's 'man,' is right: 'To inhabit the imaginary space of cybernetic circuitry is the ultimate techno-fantasy, a dream of immanence that other generations projected onto the otherness of nature' (165).

### Technical Questions in Relation to Culture

Four chapters address technical questions. Andrew Shall digs into the history of cinema to crystallise the genealogy of body movement in films. First of all, Shall points out that 'the cinematic body moves in an environment of unending movements of matter, it is experienced as gravity-irrespective' (25), that 'both Andre Bazin and Roland Barthes have

alluded to the cinematic body as ontologically undead' (26) and that until today 'the felt equivalence between cinematic body and the animated figure has persisted' (31). In *The Matrix* the cinematic body is released 'from the vaguest impression of ground by combining the moving body and moving camera with a mobile surface' (33).

Also, Anne Cranny-Francis singles out the 'fluidity of movement not seen before in Western cultural production' (107) saying that this kinesic excess signifies 'the move from industrial to post-industrial society' (113).

Kate O'Riordan talks about another excess: that of technology which 'has broken the bounds of containment and knows no boundaries. It inserts itself into the micro-structures of the physical body and the dream space of the mind' (147). *The Matrix* puts forward a typically posthumanist position, which sees humans as actors in a network: '*The Matrix* simultaneously repopularizes cyberculture whilst rendering it as a product of this technological excess. It symbolizes the return to the modern re-packaged in a postmodern aesthetic and represents a resurrection of dualism over materialism of the web' (140).

Quite contrary to this, Catherine Constable reflects upon Baudrillard's idea of the hyperreal and the postmodern destruction of meaning. She rightly points out that 'very little of the secondary literature addresses the films' engagement with Baudrillard' (151), which is amazing since the Wachowski brothers have been very outspoken about the influence of Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*. Constable argues that the trilogy can be seen as a response to Baudrillard's key question 'How can we conceive of change or revolution within a pre-programmed system?' (ibid.). Baudrillard talks explicitly about 'the possibility of attacking the system from within' (156) and about radical actions once one is embroiled within a system. Constable also finds a hint towards Baudrillard's conception of our relation to the television image (you are the screen and the TV watches you) during Neo's meeting with the Architect.

## Women in the Matrix

Two contributions analyze the appearance of women in the trilogy. Stacy Gillis establishes woman in film noir as desirable but dangerous (77). Trinity, hypersexualized, fetishized and indomitable (79) as she is, can be understood as 'a simulation, a reflection of a profound reality of the femme fatale. That is, the femme fatale is the articulation of deep-rooted fears and concerns about the conjunction of femininity' (81). Gillis might go over the top when stating that Trinity is 'verbally castrated [...] when Neo – whose name cannot be sensibly abbreviated – repeatedly refers to her as Trin' (82).

While Gillis is concerned with the way in which costume is used to locate Trinity within the *femme fatale* tradition, Pamela Church Gibson discusses the spectacle of costume in the films in a more general fashion. The reasons are obvious: *The Matrix* uses 'many of the visual conventions associated with commercials, fashion shoots and even catwalk shows' (117). Gibson is anxious to point out that, here as elsewhere, costumes are not 'mere costume props' but that they can reinforce the narrative and even 'construct and maintain a discourse that functions independently of it' (115); 'Costume is key to the patterning of the film and its construction of the 'real' and the 'unreal'' (ibid.). While a messiah (Neo) is not normally known for his dress sense (117), in Gibson's opinion *The Matrix's* fetishism is 'largely emptied of sexual content' and also 'denies its effects from the world of contemporary fashion and style' (ibid.). This strategy, however, is not maintained until the end of the trilogy. In conclusion Gibson finds that in the trilogy 'style triumphs over substance' (124).

## Questions of Race

Three contributions deal with race, two of which approach it as an aesthetic component of 'black style.' Thomas Foster chooses Tony Daniel's motto that 'it's the dream of every hacker since ancient times, to get root on reality. To make the natural hack' putting

forward that 'hacking can provide a model of knowledge' (62). However, through a transversal – rather difficult to understand – link, Foster's chapter has also to do with biology and race. Foster observes a 'kind of genetic hybridity' in *The Matrix*, 'incorporating fairytale conventions or the magic realism of Asian martial art films' (68), a genetic hybridity which he explores also in the realm of race. *The Matrix* establishes 'postbiological' conditions. There are some flashing insights on these pages on how to 'cut the hardwired shackles' but Foster's project is lacking precision. The 'shackles' are 'most often conceived as the determination of identity by bodily particularity and as behavioral compulsions' (62). Foster finds that cyberpunk excels 'in its refusal either to follow Daniel Dennett in opposing hardwired or evolved instincts to neural plasticity and a capacity for learning and change, or to imagine that the only way to overcome our own immutable "biological urges" is to deny the body' (ibid). He suggests that this thematics is not only known in cyberpunk narratives but also 'in alternative texts by feminists and writers of color' (ibid.). Unfortunately there is no footnote indicating what he means by this exactly. In any case, Foster concludes that race does – most of the time – *not* appear as a modifiable style (71) but that it is represented as 'solid' and unalterable rather than 'fluid'. In *The Matrix*, Asianness is reduced to 'a generalisable and appropriable set of signifiers [and] [i]ts detachment from any ontological grounding in fixed biological or anatomical features is not liberating, but instead only imposes a narrow limit on what kinds of performances can count as "Asian" (or white or black)' (71). However, Foster's conclusion that 'the film's representation of immersive virtual realities gains power by analogy with the forms of privileged access to deeper levels of programming languages' is difficult to link to the idea of 'cutting the shackles' of race as the analogy is formulated in a too suggestive fashion.

Much clearer is Claudia Springer's 'Playing it Cool in the Matrix,' which is one of the most instructive pieces in the collection. Zion is populated predominantly by black people (94), and *The Matrix* is immersed in an evocation of American culture of the 1950s

as young white Americans appropriate cool. Of course, Springer is not the first person to recognise this, and she summarises all literature that has dealt with *The Matrix* and cool. Her attempts to juxtapose the 'literal incarnation of the kind of bloodless society of drones that [1950s] hipsters loathed' (92) and the 'racist paradigm associating black people with authenticity and life and white people with artifice and death' (94) leads to a view of *The Matrix* as a social critique: 'In the Matrix films, the AI regime has literally remade everyone in its own image of what a smoothly functioning human society would look like' (92). Springer sees references to slavery and bondage, and Neo's task becomes that of the salvation of American slaves.

Lisa Nakamura reinstates Springer's claims because also, for her, 'whiteness represents the soullessness and seeming transparency of modern interface culture [and] the multiple Agent Smiths [...] represent the vanishing point of personal identity and subjectivity' (132) while 'blacks are never depicted as masters of the interface' (136). Nakamura announces in her chapter on *The Matrix's* visual culture of race that she will investigate the nature of African-American *mojo*, but explains neither the sense of *mojo* nor in which way its function would be different from that of cool. I happen to know that *mojo* is Southern slang for powerful magic and would have liked to learn more about how it is used in this particular case 'as a construct against oppressive whiteness' (131). For Nakamura, 'blackness is represented as the source of human agency in this techno-future' (132). As Foster has mentioned, Nakamura defines race as an unalterable entity. Still Nakamura holds, contrary to Springer, that *The Matrix* 'break[s] a new ground in depicting black men in relation to computers' (126).

Though all contributions are pertinent and cover a wide range of subjects, it remains an ironic truth that, here as elsewhere, *The Matrix* remains enclosed in its own system, which is a Hollywood universe strictly confined to American popular culture. Overall, the trilogy is compared with *Blade Runner*, *The Truman Show*, *Lawnmower Man*, *Johnny Mnemonic*,

etc. that is, to cultural items that are similar to *The Matrix* anyway. No steps are undertaken to compare the trilogy with another science fiction tradition represented, for example, by Eastern European or Asian films and writings.