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## **‘So Tonight I’m Gonna Party Like It’s 1999’: Looking Forward to the Matrix**

‘And the Princess and the Prince discuss  
What’s real and what is not  
It doesn’t matter inside the gates of Eden’.  
Bob Dylan “Gates of Eden”

‘Is it real?’  
Morpheus *Matrix Revolutions*

The Matrix films have been incredibly successful. The first, *The Matrix*, is reputed to have cost around \$63 million to make—not exorbitant for a Hollywood film. Steven Spielberg’s *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, released in 2000 and another science fiction film, reportedly cost around \$100 million. Released in the United States at the end of March 1999, *The Matrix* is said to have taken \$171 million in the United States alone, and \$456 million worldwide.<sup>1</sup> While the writers and directors, Andy and Larry Wachowski, assert that they had envisioned the two sequels, *Matrix Reloaded* and *Matrix Revolutions*, both released in 2003, at the same time as *The Matrix*, they were not in any stage of production when *The Matrix* was made. The making of these two films was a consequence of the tremendous profits engendered by *The Matrix*, as was the massive increase in the budget for the sequels. *Matrix Reloaded* cost approximately \$300 million to make, and took \$363 million in its first week of release across sixty-two countries. All up the trilogy is said to have grossed \$1.5 billion. *Reloaded* and *Revolutions* were also made for IMAX cinemas. In addition, there are a set of nine animated shorts in the style of Japanese *anime* called *Animatrix*, a video game called *Enter The Matrix* and an online gaming version, *The Matrix Online*.

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<sup>1</sup> These earnings figures come from the IMDb (Internet Movie Database) website.

The popularity of the films does not stop here. Across the web there are sites devoted to unlocking their mysteries: the Christian message, their relation to Gnosticism, their playing out of ideas drawn from Western metaphysics, the Buddhist influence, and so forth. Already there are two significant edited books discussing the first film. In 2002 William Irwin published one collection entitled *The Matrix and Philosophy* in which philosophers looked at the implications of the assumptions on which the film operates—Slavoj Žižek argues that the French seventeenth century philosopher Nicolas Malebranche ‘was undoubtedly the philosopher who provided the best conceptual apparatus to account for Virtual Reality’ (Žižek 259). He also interprets the Matrix as the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s concept of the Big Other, the network of symbolic relations that structure a person’s lived experience. The following year Karen Haber edited a collection of discussions about *The Matrix* from science fiction writers including Bruce Sterling, one of the authors at the forefront of the cyberpunk genre.

What is going on here? Why have these films, most especially the first one, become so popular? What cultural nerves have they touched, buttons have they pushed? The underlying themes are quite conventional: apocalypse, techno-fear and tech noir (to steal a term used for the *Terminator* films), and an anxiety about totalised environments that goes back to the English novelist E.M. Forster’s short story, published in 1909, ‘The Machine Stops’ and, before him, to René Descartes’ evocation of living in a world created by an evil demon. What is important, as I shall go on to discuss, is how the Wachowskis rework these themes. For example, while the films make clear what is ‘real’ and what is not—in common with (just about) all mainstream Hollywood films at bottom they function with a very modernist distinction in this regard—in relation to both the audience, and the characters in the film, for different reasons, they construct the unreal as qualitatively more preferable than the real. For the audience, given that the unreal world of the Matrix is ‘our’ world, Chicago 1999, the peak of ‘our’ civilisation as the hunter program Agent Smith describes it, the Matrix’s version of 1999 is not ‘ours’, it is a 1999 enhanced by among other things, a *jouissance* triggered by style. The Matrix’s 1999 is more desirable than the 1999 ‘we’ live(d) in. It is no wonder that Cypher is prepared to do a deal with the machines (an unfortunate, because confusing, misnomer for technology) so that he can be popped back into his battery tank and live in the Matrix’s illusion without the knowledge that it is unreal. ‘We’, and this ‘we’ must be examined, can identify with Cypher—playing the Wachowski game, perhaps this is why he is called

Cypher—like him we, the viewers, find the film’s 1999 preferable to our own. Hence, twice over the 1999 of the Matrix is preferable. First, within the film’s narrative, it is incomparably better than the post-apocalyptic, blasted Earth that is, if you like, the real reality but, in addition, the Matrix’s 1999 is better than our own. It is, as I have remarked, suffused with *jouissance*. I shall return to a discussion of this *jouissance* later.

### ***Contextualising the trilogy: Y2K to 9/11***

To begin, though, we need to examine the context for the films. In 1999 the United States, more than anywhere else in the West, was seized with a certain Christian apocalyptic fervour. What would happen in 2000, supposedly 2000 years after the birth of Christ? From Hollywood, trading on Christian symbolism, came the Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle, *End of Days*. Released in 1999, the story has Satan stalking New York for a woman who is supposedly destined to be his bride. Satan has to mate with this woman in the hour before midnight on 31 December 1999. In a more secular vein there was the Bruce Willis vehicle, *Armageddon*—though the title comes from the Book of Revelations and refers to the final battle between Christ, come for the second time, and the Anti-Christ. In this film, which came out in 1998, a huge asteroid is on a collision course with the Earth. As far back as 1982, Prince had used the sense of impending doom connoted by the proximity of the millennium to suggest in song that we ‘party like its 1999.’ Giving the apocalyptic a technological twist, the most concerning forecast was the Y2K problem, the unknown effect on almost all computers of their date clocks returning to zero at the dawn of the new millennium rather than moving to 2000.

*The Matrix* traded on many of these anxieties. The strong Christian associations of Morpheus as John the Baptist heralding Neo as the returned Messiah, the anagrammatical One destined to overthrow the machines and their Matrix in a second apocalypse, and who is resurrected by the love of Trinity, cannot be overlooked. At the same time, of course, in this film set around 2199—Morpheus tells us that the Zionites have lost exact track of time—the apocalypse has already happened. The machines took over shortly after 1999 which is why that time (the Wachowskis obviously have a very American, progressivist view of historical development) is the peak of ‘our’ civilisation. What happened, it seems, is that human beings, in their pursuit of Artificial Intelligence, succeeded in creating a machine that could think for itself. This machine promptly set about taking control. While the Y2K anxiety was not about machines taking over, it was about computers wreaking havoc and, in the most apocalyptic scenarios, causing the

destruction of technologically-based civilisation. Thus, as in the Terminator films, the American heroes of the Matrix trilogy have to fight a genocidally destructive technology.

The apocalypse did not happen as we moved into the second Christian millennium and the shift from such an anticipation to the mundanity of 2000 C.E. and on is one thing that accounts for the change of feel between *The Matrix* and the subsequent films. Another is the political shift in the United States. Democrat Bill Clinton came to presidential power in 1993. The Democrats lost power to the Republican, George W. Bush, in 2001. Clinton's presidency was bracketed by those of Bush father and son. George Bush senior initiated the first Iraq war in 1991, following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. George W. Bush started the second Iraq war in 2003 in order to topple Saddam. Bush claimed this war as part of the so-called 'War on Terrorism' announced in response to the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center towers.<sup>2</sup> Discussing *The Matrix*, Bruce Sterling writes that:

What little we learn about these people in the early part of the film suggests that they are fanatical terrorists. Morpheus is an international fugitive. Trinity is a crooked hacker who broke an IRS code. But they're not outlaws, not really. (21)

These people are the film's heroes. They are fighting for good. We identify with them and yet, what they want to do is destroy 1999 Chicago, 1999 America. In 1999, a part of *The Matrix's* enthralling ambiguity was to have these Americans, Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss) and, subsequently, Neo (Keanu Reeves) acting like terrorists—or since we, the viewers, are on their side, freedom fighters—attempting to destroy (the illusion of) 1999.

After 11 September 2001, such a scenario became impossible in a mainstream Hollywood film. Illusion or not, the dominant ideology in post-Sept 11<sup>th</sup> United States would not tolerate a film whose narrative supports anybody especially Americans, attempting to undermine American civilisation. With this shift, the sequels, *Reloaded* and *Revolutions*, function more in terms of a war to save Zion from the dastard machines. The Matrix itself is downgraded in importance.

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<sup>2</sup> Bush first spoke about a 'war on terror' in his address to the joint session of Congress and to the American people on 20 September 2001.

When *The Matrix* was made there was no Evil Other against which the United States was pitted. As is well known, the Wachowskis married their interpretation of Jean Baudrillard's argument about simulation as they found it in the 1995 translation *Simulacra and Simulation* to Kevin Kelly's account of complex technological systems, *Out of Control*, to produce a leftist critique of 1999, the present.<sup>3</sup> In 'The Precession of Simulacra,' the first essay in *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard argues that there are four 'successive phases of the image':

It is the reflection of a profound reality;

It masks and denatures a profound reality;

It masks the absence of a profound reality;

It has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum. (6)

Baudrillard writes of the fourth stage that, 'it is no longer of the order of appearances, but of simulation' (6). He describes simulation as enveloping 'the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum' (6). While in *Simulacra and Simulation* Baudrillard is preoccupied with describing what this simulation is, rather than how it came to be and how it is maintained, we need to remember that in previous books such as *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* (1972) and *Le miroir de la production ou l'illusion critique du matérialisme historique* (1973) he was concerned with renovating Marxist theory. More, perhaps Baudrillard's most important influence was the Situationist and Marxian theoriser of spectacle, the key theoretical precursor to Baudrillard's notion of simulation, Guy Debord.<sup>4</sup> However, in *The Matrix* all motive forces to reach this situation, this stage in Baudrillard's precession, and to sustain it, such as, perhaps most importantly, capitalism, have been erased. Instead, the apparently unmotivated human quest to develop Artificial Intelligence has led to intelligent machines and they, in their need for survival after their war with humanity, to produce the Matrix—which we can identify as the Wachowskis version of Baudrillard's order of simulation. In

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<sup>3</sup> The Wachowskis gave Keanu Reeves both books to read, and also *Introducing Evolutionary Psychology* by Dylan Evans.

<sup>4</sup> One useful introduction to the Situationists is Sadie Plant *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*. Guy Debord's most important book is *La société du spectacle*. It is worth adding Baudrillard completed his doctoral thesis under the supervision of Henri Lefebvre, the Marxist theorist of everyday life.

this way, the Wachowskis actually produce a trilogy that reinforces the very simulatory order that Baudrillard argues we are now living within. More, rather than urging recognition of the impact of this order, the films distract viewers and encourage them to be happy in this simulatory system by providing them with a pastiche of clues as to the possible meanings that might be found in the trilogy.

The second influence on the trilogy is the second Iraq war. The best comparison, here, for *Reloaded* and *Revolutions* is *Star Wars*. *Star Wars* was released in 1977, two years after the end of the war in Vietnam. Vivian Sobchack writes that:

It is just after the 1977 release of *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters [of the Third Kind]* (the first with its inverted tale of an evil imperialism fought by “underdog” rebel heroes, the second with its scrawny, little, and powerful aliens and childlike human males) that the first films to directly address American involvement in south east Asia are released to wide popularity: *Coming Home*, *The Deer Hunter*, and *Apocalypse Now*. (228)

What Sobchack is suggesting is that *Star Wars* helped to contribute to the development and circulation of a new understanding of the American presence in Vietnam, and loss of the war, an understanding that reversed the roles of Vietnam and the United States. Instead of America being seen as an imperialist, aggressive super-power, the United States began to appreciate itself as a kind, sensitive, liberal country protecting humanist values in the face of an amoral, relentless, and uncaring foe. The groundwork for this revisionist reading of the Vietnam War had been laid in the Cold War when, in the terms of a Christian fundamentalist binary, the United States saw itself as Good, as the champion of Right, against the Godless, communist U.S.S.R.<sup>5</sup> With the U.S.S.R. supporting North Vietnam, it was possible to begin a rereading of the war which placed the United States in the position of the wronged defender of Right fighting against overwhelming odds. Such a reading was subsequently individualised and literalised to tremendous success in the *Rambo* series starting with *First Blood* (1982). *Star Wars* so well expressed this understanding of a binary structure in which the United States was the wronged and weaker country that Ronald Reagan was able to call up the reference when

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<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere I have written about the influence of Christian fundamentalist thinking on the American cultural imaginary in ‘The Beast of the Apocalypse: The Postcolonial Experience of the United States’.

he revived the Cold War in his evocation of an 'Evil Empire' during his speeches in 1982 and 1983.

It is this ideology, as it was played out in the context of the Vietnam War, that was recalled and reinvested after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. This time, however, the role of the Evil Other was simultaneously abstracted into 'terrorists' and 'terrorist groups,' and individualised as Osama bin Laden. Thus, the second Iraq war, legitimated as a pre-emptive strike against a terroristic country likely to use Weapons of Mass Destruction, could be understood ideologically in similar terms to the revisionist reading of the Vietnam War: Iraq as a member of an 'Axis of Evil' giving succour, solace and support to a terroristic network and the United States as the threatened force of Good and Right, and, therefore, also the site of what is most real.<sup>6</sup> *Reloaded* and *Revolutions* play out this conservative fantasy with Zion as the beleaguered site of humanist values and the machines with their terrifying weapons of mass destruction threatening finally to destroy the last remnants of human independence. In this reading of these films the Christian naming and symbolism serves to reinforce the American associations of the Zionites as against the Godless machines. It is perhaps necessary to note that Zion in the Old Testament refers to the Temple mount and, from there, to Jerusalem. It carries a freight of utopian, religious connotations which, in the New Testament, are claimed to have been realised in the Church. In the use made of Zion in the Matrix trilogy, all these connotations get further connected to the United States.<sup>7</sup> My point here is not that *Reloaded* and *Revolutions* were made deliberately as American propaganda. I am arguing something rather subtler, that these films work within the American cultural imaginary, that they reproduce American understandings of the position, and role, of the United States at the present time.

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<sup>6</sup> George W. Bush first used the expression 'Axis of Evil' in his State of the Union address on 29 January 2002.

<sup>7</sup> The most important connection here is through the idea of the 'city on the hill.' Jesus says that 'A city set on a hill cannot be hid' in the Sermon on the Mount. John Winthrop adopted the idea in 1630 when he preached to his fellow Puritans en route to the New World that, 'we must consider that we shall be as a city on a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.' Reagan adopted the phrase as an image for how he understood the United States. Thus, the United States has been thought of in the terms of Christian utopianism through the image of Zion/Jerusalem as reworked by Jesus. .

### *Postmodern dystopia*

At this point we need to take a step back and situate the Matrix trilogy within a broader set of historical concerns. Sobchack argues that:

Cinematic space travel of the 1950s had an aggressive and three-dimensional thrust—whether it was narrativised as optimistic, colonial, and phallic penetration and conquest or as pessimistic and paranoid earthly and bodily invasion. Space in these films was semantically inscribed as “deep” and time as accelerating and “urgent”. In the S F films released between 1968 and 1977 (during a period of great social upheaval and after the vast spatial and temporal Moebius strip of *2001: A Space Odyssey* had cinematically transformed progress into regress), space became semantically inscribed as inescapably domestic and crowded. Time lost its urgency—statically stretching forward toward an impoverished and unwelcome future worse than a bad present. (226)

Sobchack goes on to suggest that, unpopular at the box office, the genre she is describing gave way in 1977 to films such as *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters* with their optimism and, in Sobchack’s term, ‘technological wonder.’ However, both these films are nostalgic, *Star Wars*’ future set in a time, ‘[l]ong, long ago,’ thus making its future our past and therefore avoiding what the present’s future might be, and *Close Encounters* rereading ’50s Sci-Fi films for an audience looking for a simpler time when American humanism and individualism appeared to have been accepted with greater certainty, when the United States was unproblematically proud of its role as defender of the Free World.

The assumptions of the films made between 1968 and 1977 did not go away. Rather, reworked, they became the basis for some of the most popular Sci-Fi films, *Blade Runner* (1982), *The Terminator* (1984) and now, the Matrix films. What happened between 1968 and 1977? In short, this period saw the culmination in the cultural order of a large number of transformations in other areas of life in the West. Cautiously setting it up as an hypothesis David Weberman, in his chapter on *The Matrix* in Irwin’s collection, writes that: ‘Some time during the years between 1966 and 1974, the world changed. Which is to say, *our* world changed in a big way’ (225). This change is the shift from modernity to postmodernity. In part following David Harvey from his celebrated book *The Condition of Postmodernity*, published in 1990, Weberman lists some of the



contributing elements: deindustrialisation, suburbanisation, the dramatic increase in flexible accumulation, globalisation (Weberman 225). We can add, as Weberman does, following Fredric Jameson's argument in 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' published in *New Left Review* in 1984, a new concern with surfaces and a general sense of depthlessness. Further, there is the unsettling of certainties, a loss of belief in reason, science, progress, civilisation and, most significantly, an undermining of moral absolutes and related ethics. In large part this unsettling can be tracked to the surfacing of the cultural trauma of the Holocaust in the late 1970s—a recognition that Enlightenment values led to genocide within the boundaries of Europe and of a people usually, if sometimes ambivalently, considered to be European.<sup>8</sup> We will return to this in relation to the Matrix trilogy later. It is, then, the culmination of these shifts, which we can sum up as the cultural move into postmodernity, that lies behind the reformulation of Sci-Fi films which Sobchack identifies.

Another way of thinking about the characteristics of the shift—in Sobchack's words, progress into regress, space as domestic and crowded, the future impoverished and unwelcome—is in the generic terms of the dystopia. Thus, discussing science fiction writing, Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan describe how:

In the 1980s, [the] utopian tendency comes to an abrupt end. In the face of economic restructuring, right-wing politics, and a cultural milieu informed by an intensifying fundamentalism and commodification, sf writing reviewed and reformulated the dystopia genre. (2)

They go on to identify 'films such as Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* or novels such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer*' as generating 'a usefully negative if nihilistic imaginary as the impact of the conservative turn of the decade began to be recognized in both the social structure and everyday life' (2-3). We shall consider to the nihilism of the Matrix trilogy later.

The Matrix trilogy offers us just such a dystopian world. However, the existence of the Matrix itself gives this characterisation a complex twist. As Morpheus tells Neo in *The Matrix*, it was human beings themselves who destroyed the capacity of the Earth to carry life. In a last ditch auto-genocide humanity attempted to block the solar-powered

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<sup>8</sup> On the idea of cultural trauma see Ron Eyerman *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, chapter one.

machines' access to the sun by nuclear explosions that filled the sky with dust. Humanity now only survives as energy slaves—it is Morpheus who introduces the rhetoric of slavery—for the machines. The inhabitants of Zion live deep underground. With the Earth unable to support life we never find out where the Zionites' food comes from, unless it is the same gruel eaten on board the *Nebuchadnezzar* in *The Matrix*. We never find out where their clothes come from or any other of their manufactured items. As a point in passing, if the bulk of humanity are work slaves producing energy for the machines, Zion appears to have no workers, production is elided—certainly a post-capitalist, though not communist, utopia. However, my main point here is that, were the Zionites to succeed in destroying the machines, the newly liberated human beings would be unable to survive. As it happens, at the end of *Revolutions* they are not freed. Neo's success is to establish a peace between the machines and the humans of Zion. The bulk of humanity remains enslaved by the machines. At the end of *The Matrix* Neo is about to tell all the human slaves that the Matrix is unreal. What purpose this will have beyond making them unhappy in their circumstance is unclear. It is the machines which are keeping humanity alive after its race suicide. More, the machines provide an albeit illusory world which is *better* than the 1999 peak of human civilisation. From this point of view the Zionites are being, once more, pointlessly destructive. It is no wonder that the machines want to eradicate them. If the Zionites were to succeed they would, most likely, complete the apocalyptic destruction of humanity. But, we have to ask, would death be preferable to slavery in the tanks and life in the Matrix? Is this a static future, a world at the end of history, or are the machines evolving—Agent Smith tells Morpheus that the machines are the next stage in evolution after human beings—and could the Earth ever be (made) habitable again?

### ***Apocalypse then***

We must now turn to the apocalyptic moment itself, the moment on which the reality of the films turn. This takes place some time in our future, in the early twenty-first century but rather under two hundred years earlier than when the film is set. James Berger describes how:

Modernity is often said to be preoccupied by a sense of crisis, viewing as imminent, perhaps even longing for, some conclusive catastrophe. This sense of crisis has not disappeared, but in the late twentieth century it exists together with another sense, that the conclusive catastrophe has

already occurred, the crisis is over (perhaps we were not even aware of exactly when it transpired), and the ceaseless activity of our time...is only a complex form of stasis. (xiii)

As we have seen, the cultural experience of the future, postmodernity, would seem to have begun during the period between the mid-1960s and the late 1970s. Unlike the classic Jewish and Christian apocalyptic prophecies which have suffused Western, including modern, thought based on the Enlightenment valorisation of reason, the actual apocalypse of this secular transubstantiation passed us by. The Matrix trilogy rectifies this for us. If we take the narrative of the film as it is given to us, then the Matrix's 1999 is our future and, in the modern sense identified by Berger, we, as viewers, look forward to our prophesied apocalypse. If, however, we are sucked into the 1999 portrayed as reality at the beginning of *The Matrix* and accept this as our world, then the apocalypse has already happened and we are living the future, our unreal postmodern world.

Berger notes that: 'If the post-apocalypse of the *doppelgänger* [where we look across the abyss and see ourselves transmogrified] is characteristic of modernity, the post-apocalypse of the postmodern is Baudrillardian simulation' (8). We live in simulation haunted by the cultural memory of an apocalypse which permeates our present but which we cannot recall. Hence our resonance with Morpheus' description of that unsettled feeling when he is talking with Neo:

'It's that feeling that you have had all your life. That feeling that something was wrong with the world. You don't know what it is but it's there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad.'

Here, Morpheus generalizes the experience of the trauma victim with repressed memories, the psychotic, or indeed, the adolescent who knows they were born under a bad sign and in the wrong time, and recognizes it as the world itself being out of joint. Where does the problem really lie—in us, or the world?

Many years ago Frank Kermode distinguished time as *chronos* from time as *kairos*. *Chronos* he described as 'passing time' or 'waiting time', the time of reality, of the everyday. *Kairos* is narrative time, the time of prophesy leading to apocalypse, 'the season, a point in time filled with significance, charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end' (Kermode 47). If we experience the filmic 1999 as our future, the post-apocalyptic end of History, then we charge our present with potency and our own

1999, and the years following, are enriched with a plenitude of meaning. We match our present against this desirable but terrifying *doppelgänger* future. If we experience the film's 1999 as our present, then the apocalypse has already happened, this 1999 is *chronos*, the time of our everyday, a representation of the always already ungrounded simulation in which we live, an image of our world thrown back to us full of the *jouissance* that completes our desire. We can think here of the Columbine High School massacre of 20 April 1999, three weeks after the opening of *The Matrix*. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, two students at the school, walked in and killed thirteen people. They were armed with home-made bombs and sawn-off shotguns. They wore long trench-coats and were linked to a loose grouping of Goth-inspired kids known as 'the trench-coat mafia.' Clearly the event had been planned long before the release of *The Matrix*, however the scene where Neo and Trinity enter the guarded building in which Morpheus is being held for interrogation provides an enhancing context. Sterling writes that: 'The clothing is very beautiful in *The Matrix*' (26). Neo and Trinity wear stylish leather trench-coats and are armed to the teeth. What the scene offers is a pornography of stylish and stylised violence. In the minor apocalypse of the Columbine massacre the *chronos* time of our lived, everyday reality was supplemented by the kairotic fantasy offered by *The Matrix*'s 1999.

### ***From machinery to digital technology***

The driver for the Matrix trilogy, what enables and, indeed, what necessitates this neo-Baudrillardian simulacrum of the Matrix to exist, is technology, indeed is a dystopian view of technology as a threat to human existence. The triumph of machines in the Matrix trilogy concludes the struggle that was being fought out in *The Terminator* where, in a last desperate throw of the dice, the remaining free human beings used time travel to reach 1984 in the hope of saving humanity from destruction in the future. M. Keith Booker writes that, at the end of the nineteenth century, 'science and technology had become symbols not only of human capability, but of human weakness and limitation' (6). He goes on to describe how, 'mechanization plays an important role in the industrial efficiency of the socialistic utopia of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backwards* (1888), but in Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872) machines have been banished altogether because of their tendency to tyrannize the men who made them' (6). Nevertheless, in *The Technocratic Society*, published in 1954, Jacques Ellul could still comment on the 'continuing dominance of the idea that machines bring utopia' and that science and

mechanisation were at the foundation of modern progress (190-1). As Sobchack implies, the general disillusionment with science and mechanisation was a function of the loss of faith in the idea of progress.

In 1972 Theodore Roszak published *Where the Wasteland Ends*, a book that became very influential across the counterculture. In a section presciently titled 'The Slow Death of the Reality Principle' he wrote how: 'One need only glance beyond the boundaries of the high industrial heartland to see our science-based technics rolling across the globe like mighty Juggernaut, obliterating every alternative style of life' (223). Roszak's image bears a remarkable resemblance to the blasted world over which rule the triumphant machines of the Matrix trilogy, a future enriched by technology only within the world of the Matrix itself.

In the Wachowskis' postmodern narrative of techno-fear it is instructive to think about Zion. Zion is dependant on machinery. This is evident in *Reloaded* when Neo and Councillor Hamann talk together on the viewing deck overlooking the great machines that support Zion's post-hippie lifestyle. However, this is industrial machinery, it is not post-industrial, digitalised technology, the technology of computers, of the internet and one presumes, the Artificial Intelligence which took over the world. The machinery of industrial modernity over which Butler and so many others, including for example Fritz Lang in *Metropolis* (1927), agonised has been relegated to the status of safe and quaint. It is digital technology which produces and runs the Matrix, this future world of 1999, and our own post-1992 world of the World Wide Web.

### ***(Un)real environments***

What is, then, this anxiety about living in an unreal world? Zizek asks rhetorically:

Is not the ultimate American paranoid fantasy that of an individual being in a small, idyllic Californian city, a consumerist paradise, who suddenly starts to suspect that the world he lives in is a fake, a spectacle staged to convince him that he lives in a real world, while all the people around him are effectively actors and extras in a gigantic show? (242)

Zizek cites *The Truman Show* (1998) as the most recent example of this fantasy. However, in order to understand it, and its hold on the Western imaginary particularly through the latter years of modernity, we need to go back to Descartes.

René Descartes, often described as the first modern philosopher, published his *Meditations* in Latin in 1641. In the first Meditation, ‘Concerning the things of which we may doubt,’ Descartes is looking to find the limits of what is doubtable. It is here that he develops what has become known as the ‘evil demon’ hypothesis:

I shall now suppose, not that a true God, who as such must be supremely good and the fountain of truth, but that some malignant genius exceeding powerful and cunning has devoted all his powers to the deceiving of me; I shall suppose that the sky, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all the external things are illusions and impostures of which the evil genius has availed himself for the abuse of my credulity. (pagenumber?)

The first thing to notice here is that what guarantees the reality of the world in which the narrator exists is its creation by a ‘true God.’ In other words, in Descartes’ epistemology whether or not the world is ‘real’ depends on whether one considers the creator to be a ‘true God’ or an ‘evil genius.’ The status of reality is not *sui generis*, rather it is based on a metaphysical, or in Descartes’ case a theological, decision about the moral quality of the creator: Good (absolute good) equates with real—as it does today, as we have seen, in the credence given to the United States which lays claim to the moral high ground. In either case, that is, whether the world is created by God or by some evil demon, the narrator, the *ego*, is removed from the world. This is Descartes’ foundational, modern, philosophical move. To put it differently, Cartesian individualism places the person in the world but they are not a part of the world. As a reflexive mind situated in a body the philosophical question that echoes through the modern era concerns what status individual experience has in modernity—is it real? Indeed, what can the individual know of the world? In Zizek’s version, as in *The Truman Show*, the paranoia is individualised—remember that splinter in your mind—and, in *The Truman Show* at least, is found to be legitimate as Truman finds that his world is, in reality, a construct, a television show.

In a secular society where not only ‘God is Dead’, in Nietzsche’s moving phrase, but scientific development has been unhitched from progress, it has been technology that has played the role of the evil genius. E.M. Forster wrote ‘The Machine Stops’ in the context of the increasing questioning of the role of machines around the turn of the twentieth century. In this story all human beings live under the Earth in individual rooms serviced by the Machine. People very rarely visit each other but communicate by means

of what we would now call videophones. We are offered a world in which everybody lives in a reality produced by the Machine.

The story constructs a binary in which the reality of the world organised by the Machine is marked as artificial as compared to a real reality, the reality of the natural world, outside of the Machine, specifically on the surface of the Earth. At the same time, to the people within the reality of the Machine, the Earth's surface bears a resemblance to the post-apocalyptic world of the Matrix trilogy. The lead protagonist's mother tells him that the surface is: 'only dust and mud, no life remains on it, and you would need a respirator, or the cold of the outer air would kill you' (**page numbers?**) At the end of this dystopian narrative, the Machine grinds to a halt and the panicking humans are forced up to that real reality which the story also suggests is better for being more real.

With the Matrix trilogy in mind, through, the film which is worth most examination is *Logan's Run*, released in 1976. Dismissed by Zizek in a single reference, *Logan's Run* came out a year before the era of blockbuster Sci-Fi films that started with *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters*. *Logan's Run* mixes a utopian hippie theme, or at the least a youth-centred swinging sixties, with a dystopian technology-controlled total environment. The film is based on a 1967 novel of the same name by William F. Nolan and George Clayton Johnson. Such was its popularity that, in 1970s dollars, it was made for \$9 million and took over \$50 million worldwide.<sup>9</sup>

An apocalypse film, the prologue to *Logan's Run* tells us:

Sometime in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Century...the survivors of war, overpopulation and pollution are living in a great domed city, sealed away from the forgotten world outside. Here, in an ecologically balanced world, mankind lives only for pleasure, freed by the servo-mechanisms which provide everything. There's just one catch. Life must end at thirty unless reborn in the fiery ritual of Carousel.

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<sup>9</sup> *Logan's Run* is being remade with Bryan Singer, of *The Usual Suspects* (1995) and *X-Men* (2000), as director and has a prospective release date of 2006.

The domed city is ordered by a computer with a female voice which sees its task as ensuring that the inhabitants live as pleasurable a life as possible.<sup>10</sup> They are, however, not allowed out of the dome. Should they try to run, most usually to escape the murderous ritual of Carousel, they are hunted down by Sandmen before they can escape.<sup>11</sup> Among those planning to run there is a story of a place outside the dome populated by escapees called Sanctuary—however, when Logan 5 (Michael York) and Jessica 6 (Jenny Agutter) do manage to find their way out of the dome they discover that Sanctuary does not exist. Instead they discover an old man (Peter Ustinov) with whom they return to the city. At the end, the ruling computer breaks down, unable to cope with the information given it by Logan 5 that there is no Sanctuary. The domes are destroyed and the young inhabitants enter the natural, real world where they will learn to love, marry and will grow old like the lovable old man.

*Logan's Run* offers viewers a technologically-based, youth-orientated utopia. Most of the pleasure seems to come from short-term sexual relations. Many of the scenes were shot in the Dallas Apparel Mart mall in Dallas, Texas, utilising a shopping total environment to stand for an even more totalised environment. In this way the film makes clear connections between desire and commodification.<sup>12</sup> Similarly to the Matrix trilogy but on more simple terms, technology offers a world that could be thought more desirable in many ways than the viewers' world and where life is certainly easier than in the world

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<sup>10</sup> We might give some thought to the female markers of the total environments in *Logan's Run* and the Matrix trilogy. 'Matrix' is, after all, a word derived from *mater* the Latin for mother. One usage of 'matrix' is for the womb—the original total environment.

<sup>11</sup> *Logan's Run's* Sandmen have much the same role as Agent Smith, and the other agents, in the Matrix trilogy. They protect the artificial system. That in both films they are male and the representatives of the law suggests the utility of a Lacanian analysis of this patriarchal order, and of the Law of the Father which sustains it. As we will see, it is also not surprising that all the Sandmen and all the Agents are white.

<sup>12</sup> For an analysis of *Logan's Run* using the ideas of Herbert Marcuse, most especially those in *One-Dimensional Man*, see Ken Sanes 'Logan's Run as a Critique of Society: Sex, Power, Illusion' at: <<http://www.transparencynow.com/Logan/logan2.htm>>



marked as real by its natural state.<sup>13</sup> However, where in *Logan's Run* and 'The Machine Stops' the world outside the realm of technology, that created by the evil genius, is at least potentially habitable, God's reality in the Matrix films cannot any longer be lived in except, as in Zion, deep under the Earth. This reality is indeed, as Morpheus says quoting Baudrillard, 'the desert of the real.'<sup>14</sup>

### ***1999 and the experience of jouissance***

At this point it is important to say something about the idea of *jouissance*. The term is most usually thought about in connection with Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theories. In brief, Lacan considers that the person develops with an experience of lack, in particular a lack of completeness, of wholeness. Desire is, then, ultimately an attempt at filling this lack. *Jouissance*, sometimes linked in Lacan's thought to orgasm, and specifically female orgasm, suggests the possibility of recovering the person's lost wholeness, that which was lost through the person's entry into the symbolic, into language. Thinking in terms of written fiction, Roland Barthes distinguished between texts of *plaisir* and texts of *jouissance*, in Richard Miller's translation of *The Pleasure of the Text*, pleasure and bliss. Barthes writes that:

Bliss is unspeakable, interdicted. I refer to Lacan ("what one must bear in mind is that bliss is forbidden to the speaker, as such, or cannot be spoken except between the lines ...") and to Leclaire ("...Whoever speaks, by

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<sup>13</sup> For an important discussion of commodification in *The Matrix* by way of its connection to an earlier Keanu Reeves film, *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1989), see I. Q. Hunter 'Banality as Saviour: *Bill and Ted* and *The Matrix*,' at: <<http://www.filmint.nu/netonly/eng/banalityassaviour.htm>>. Hunter writes that: 'I see *The Matrix* as *Bill & Ted's* smarter, nihilistic brother: instead of celebrating capitalist consumerism it presents it as a nightmarish con-trick, a spectacle diverting humanity from true liberation and self-fulfilment.'

<sup>14</sup> The Baudrillard quotation is from *Simulacra and Simulation*. Reworking an image of Jorge Luis Borges, Baudrillard writes that:

Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. ... It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. *The desert of the real itself.* (1 Baudrillard's italics.)

The desert has been a powerful image in Jewish and Christian thought. In a plea to God in Isaiah 64:10 we find this image combined with Zion: 'Your sacred cities have become a desert; even Zion is a desert, Jerusalem a desolation'

speaking denies bliss, or correlatively, whoever experiences bliss causes the letter—and all possible speech—to collapse in the absolute degree of annihilation he is celebrating”). The writer of pleasure (and his reader) accepts the letter; renounces bliss, he has the right and power to express it; the letter is his pleasure. (21)

*Plaisir* works within the symbolic. It accepts the limits of the social ordering of language. *Jouissance* suggests an ecstatic, transgressive bursting of the bonds of the symbolic order in an, albeit momentary, finding of wholeness.

In *Logan's Run* the utopian world of the dome appears to offer such *jouissance* to the viewer. However, the film makes us realise that this utopia, this reality, is false. It has limits. It is, indeed, only a deceptive *plaisir*. From this point of view the film plays out Herbert Marcuse's idea, in his horrified critique of American society, *One Dimensional Man*, published in 1964, of commodity capitalism's use of what he calls repressive desublimation, basically the encouragement of sexual gratification as a distraction from capitalist subordination. True *jouissance* in *Logan's Run* is to be found in the (excessive because untamed) wildness of the real world outside of the dome. Here, there are no limits: one can grow old and die naturally. In Jewish and Christian mythological terms, it is as if it turns out that the world outside the Garden of Eden, with its pain and suffering, is more real than Eden itself, what could be understood retrospectively as the controlled environment of Eden. From this point of view it is no wonder that Sanctuary does not exist. In the Matrix trilogy Zion has to exist because the Earth cannot hold human life.

Zizek argues that:

Till postmodernism, utopia was an endeavour to break out of the real of historical time into a timeless Otherness. With postmodern overlapping of the 'end of history' with full availability of the past in digitalised memory, in this time when we *live* the atemporal utopia as everyday ideological experience, utopia becomes the longing for the Reality of History itself, for memory, for the traces of the real past, the attempt to break out of the closed dome into the smell and decay of the raw reality. (263)

While the Matrix's 1999 is more desirable than the actual 1999 of which it is a simulation, it remains 1999. It is not utopia. Agent Smith tells Morpheus that 'the first

Matrix was designed to be a perfect human world.’ However, Smith goes on to say, human beings couldn’t cope. They kept trying to wake up from this utopia which is why the Matrix was redesigned as the peak of human civilisation. Certainly, in *Logan’s Run*, the young people find the historical world of change preferable to the changeless utopian world marked as unreal. However, in the Matrix trilogy the situation is more complex. The raw reality is uninhabitable, the reality of Zion is made possible by industrial machinery. The desirable 1999 of the Matrix is a simulation against which the viewers can measure their own reality and find it lacking. This structure is, at bottom, nihilistic. In his essay on nihilism in *Simulacra and Simulation*, the one moved to the middle of the book in the copy Neo uses to hold his hacking programs while still within the Matrix, Baudrillard suggests that, ‘Now [in the order of simulation] fascination is a nihilistic passion par excellence; it is the passion proper to the mode of disappearance’ (Baudrillard ‘On Nihilism’ in *Simulacra and Simulation* 160). With unconscious irony the Matrix trilogy acts out this nihilism in our blissful fascination with the Matrix’s version of our own reality.

*Jouissance* is present, as I have already suggested, in the Matrix’s version of 1999 not, as Cypher realised, in Zion. A useful comparison here is to another film that came out in 1999, *Pleasantville*. The film recounts the story of a brother and sister who find themselves trapped in a 1958 black and white television sitcom called *Pleasantville*. In this 1950s world black and white also signals the lack of emotion felt in this place that valorizes *plaisir* over *jouissance* as the sit com’s name, which is also the name of the town, suggests. Gradually, however, David and Jennifer, now in their roles as Bud and Mary Sue Parker, import the emotional world of 1999 into Pleasantville. In one scene Jennifer explains to her sit-com mother, Betty, about female orgasms and about masturbation. In a Lacanian moment, Betty comes in the bath turning from black and white to colour and setting the tree (bush?) outside her window alight. *Jouissance* is arriving in Pleasantville. In this film, the world of 1999 is equated with the world outside the film and both are given the reality, and *jouissance*, lacking in 1958 sit-com Pleasantville. Our world is clearly preferable and desirable. This is in contrast to the Matrix trilogy where the world of the Matrix’s 1999 is more desirable, permeated with *jouissance*, than is the viewers’ 1999.

### ***Race in the Matrix’s 1999***

This, though is not the end of the story. Berger notes that:

Zizek invokes the term *jouissance* to describe the emotional and libidinal connection of a traumatized culture to its symbolised systems that give the culture back its completeness and coherence. *Jouissance*, for Zizek, is an ecstatic identification with the trauma. (29)

The *jouissance* of the Matrix's 1999 is related to the apocalyptic moment which made the Matrix a necessity for the machines. Berger also argues that, 'post-apocalyptic representations often respond to historical catastrophes and that, either explicitly or obliquely, the apocalypses of post-apocalyptic representations are historical events' (19). Let us explore some symptoms. In the story that is told in *The Matrix* the trauma is not so much the human loss of that war, rather, it is the overwhelming shock of the human act of auto-genocide and, along with it, the complete destruction of human civilisation. The wasteland of the real, that desert, is emblematic of traumatic affect. It is the site of overlap of the viewers' and the filmic humanity's traumas.

At the same time, the rows of tanks in which the machines keep the remnant of the human race, using them as slave labour until they die and are replaced, suggests nothing more than well-known images of Nazi death camps and the use of Jews as slave labour worked until they died. As we begin to approach a recognition of the Holocaust here we can quickly read Zizek's article on *The Matrix* symptomatically. Scattered through the text are references to Jews, concentration camps and Hitler. Writing about paranoia, Zizek describes how, '[b]eneath the chaos of the market, the degradation of morals, and so forth, there is the purposeful strategy of the Jewish plot' (245). Later, he describes how, 'in Nazi anti-semitism, the Jew as the excremental object is the Real that masks the unbearable "structural" Real of the social antagonism' (255). From here, Zizek writes about the one who did not break down in the concentration camps as a model for survival (256). Then, finally, Zizek concludes his article by discussing Hitler's perverse relationship with his niece and the connection between this and 'his frenetically destructive public political activity' (266). The Holocaust is the trauma, that unnamed, stalks these pages. Unacknowledged in this article as a consequence is the traumatic power of the Holocaust as a metaphor, as a source of unresolved repetition, in the imagined apocalypse of the Matrix trilogy.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> One other impact of reading the apocalypse in terms of the Holocaust is a greater understanding of the affective power of Zion. Zion, with its Old Testament, Jewish heritage, can be reread as a version of Israel. In this reading, Israel would

Berger claims that: ‘The Holocaust is the paradigmatic instance of an apocalypse in history,’ that it is ‘an impossible breach in history (both Jewish history and Western history), an unredeemable obliteration, and in some sense a revelation of some truth about European culture’ (59). Previously I have described the new awareness in the late 1970s as one of the markers of the cultural shift into postmodernity. It is now time to understand the Holocaust as the most significant, most evocative, apocalyptic trope. In the *Terminator* we were told that the machines were rounding up the last human beings and herding them into concentration camps. In these traumatic repetitions the Jewish genocide is repeated as the genocide of humanity. It is this apocalyptic trauma that transforms the modern experience of *chronos* into the postmodern experience of *kairos*.

If we read the apocalypse of the Matrix trilogy in this symptomatic way then we next need to ask what is the trauma for which the Holocaust is standing in? What is the trauma manifested in the *jouissance* of the Matrix’s 1999? Elsewhere I have argued that the apocalypse from which Buffy, in the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, struggles to save the world (and which, also, is figured in the trope of the Holocaust) was the loss of numerical, and increasingly political, dominance of those constructed as white in the highly racialised social order of the United States.<sup>16</sup> Dale Maharidge writes that whites lost their numerical dominance in California in 1998. In Texas they will lose numerical dominance around 2015. The estimate is that by 2050 whites will almost have lost their numerical dominance across the whole of the United States (Maharidge xvii, 3). Maharidge explains: ‘With each drop in the white population [of California], fear among white voters rose commensurately’ (5). He identifies the 1986 vote entrenching English as the official language of California as one example of this. The Buffy television series began screening in 1997. It is this white trauma, I am arguing, the trauma of losing cultural and political power in the most culturally, politically and militarily powerful country in the world, that is being expressed in the Matrix trilogy apocalypse and which energises the Matrix’s 1999.

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be understood as having been created as the refuge for Jews which was legitimated by the Nazi genocide. Or, to put it differently, Zion carries connotations that originate in its association with this understanding of Israel.

<sup>16</sup> See Jon Stratton ‘*Buffy the Vampire Slayer: What Being Jewish Has To Do With It*’ in *Television and New Media*, 2005.

How does this play out? The first thing is to note is that both Neo and Trinity, with their Christian connotations, are white (even though Reeves has a Chinese-Hawai'ian father, his filmic presence is white). Morpheus, the John the Baptist figure with the alienating Greek-Latin name for a Greek god, is African-American. That is to say, the herald is non-white but whiteness (and patriarchy) is reinstated for the saviour and his offside. That the herald is African-American, as is the Oracle, suggests that African-Americans have been included, albeit in a subaltern role, within the American racial order that is now under threat. It is certainly true that large numbers of the Zionites are non-white. This is so both for the crew of Morpheus's ship and, in *Reloaded* and *Revolutions*, for Zion itself. Many of the Zionites, all originally, are supposed to have been awakened from the machines' battery tanks, however everybody we see in the Matrix is white. Not surprisingly, the Architect who designed the Matrix is white—indeed he is played by Helmut Bakaitis, a German by birth from the city of Luban, assigned to Poland after the Second World War, who has a distinctly patriarchal, Aryan quality about him in the films. The Architect is a very high level program or, perhaps, an Artificial Intelligence machine. His whiteness reinforces his God-like position in respect of the Matrix. Indeed, remembering what I have just suggested about the mythical relation of whites and African-Americans in the post-apocalyptic, racialised United States and following the patriarchal ordering of the trilogy, in *Reloaded* the Architect describes himself as the father of the Matrix and the Oracle as the mother of the Matrix.

The Matrix's 1999 offers a white fantasy of an homogeneous, white (and middle-class) American society. The exceptions are the Oracle (Gloria Foster, and Mary Alice in *Revolutions*) and her helper, Seraph, played by Taiwanese actor Sing Ngai aka Collin Chou. Both these characters are programs, part of the Matrix itself rather than human inhabitants of the Matrix. Dealing in stereotypes, the Oracle's blackness connotes her 'primitiveness,' her non-scientific abilities. Similarly, Seraph's Chineseness suggests the mysteriousness of the Oracle and of the Potentials, the children who come to see the Oracle who have abilities that enable them to bend the rules that govern the functioning of the Matrix. We also see Rama-Kandra with his wife, Kamala, and daughter, Sati. Rama-Kandra is in charge of the recycling at the power-plant, that is, this program has one of the most menial and disgusting, but important, jobs, that of ordering the feeding of

the liquified dead humans to the live humans still in the battery pods.<sup>17</sup> Kamala is an ‘interactive software programmer,’ a job that might appear to be highly creative, as Rama-Kandra suggests she is, but is really just the sort of labour that present-day companies outsource to the Indian subcontinent. In other words, while the humans that live mentally in the Matrix are all white, the labour (the programs) that keeps the Matrix running is suggested to be non-white.

As it happens, the people in the dome in *Logan’s Run* are also all white. Another way of thinking about this, then, using our understanding of the utopian total environment in *Logan’s Run*, is that the desirable, sexy, commodified world of the postmodern simulation, the Matrix’s *jouissance*-filled 1999, is a white world supported and protected by the digital order but under threat from the under-developed third world, shown in the bodies of the very many non-white Zionites. From this point of view, when Cypher makes his deal to return to his battery pod, what he really wants is to return to his own, to middle-class, white America. He has lived in the third world of Zion for nine years and now wants his steak and red wine back. In this reading, Zion, which earlier I suggested functions for readers as the United States, can be read as still the United States but now the apocalyptic multi-racial United States which threatens the white American simulation of 1999—here we have, perhaps, the key site for the narrational ambivalence that runs through the trilogy.

Why then, have I been placing the first person plural in quotation marks through this article? It is because we need to ask to whom the Matrix trilogy appeals, who is this ‘we’ that finds it so fascinating—and remember, here, Baudrillard’s comment on the relation of fascination to nihilism in the order of simulation. One possibly unreliable site on the web comments on ‘the predominantly white Matrix audiences.’<sup>18</sup> Given the race breakdown of the films this would be more than likely. In this reading the trilogy are white anxiety films like *There’s Something About Mary*, in which the something about

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<sup>17</sup> With the spread of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (mad cow disease) in the United Kingdom in the early 1990s it became common knowledge that factory-farmed sheep and cattle were being fed meat and bone meal from the residue of other sheep and cattle. What distinguishes humans from these animals is that we are not fed, do not feed on, the remnants of other humans. Thus, the idea in the Matrix trilogy that liquified humans are fed to the humans in the battery pods reduces those humans to the level of factory-farmed animals.

<sup>18</sup> See: <<http://www.pointlesswasteoftime.com/film/matrix50.html>>

Mary, that which the men find so enthralling, is her whiteness. This film was released a year earlier than *The Matrix* in 1998, the same year *Buffy* started screening.<sup>19</sup> In this reading, the *Matrix* trilogy reassures a white (probably also predominantly male), and in the first instance American, audience that the apocalyptic racial transformation of the United States, and more generally Western society, can at least be halted. At the end of *Revolutions* Neo sacrifices his white, Good self to produce a stalemate—Zion continues to exist, it has not been destroyed by white globalisation in the form of the machines, and the *Matrix*, in all its whiteness, continues to exist also.

The *Matrix* trilogy is fundamentally ambivalent in its attitudes. In this article I have explored some of the reasons for this ambivalence. If the world of the *Matrix* is artificial it is, nevertheless, offered as better than the world of the viewers. If Zion can be read as the United States, it is also, for white Americans, a scary America dominated by non-whites. The apocalyptic moment, figured on the Holocaust, can be read as both the past transformation of (American) society from modern to postmodern, from progress and certainty to stasis and uncertainty, and the present and future transformation of the United States to a country where whites no longer dominate. After the nihilistic fascination with the textual interpretative possibilities, the popularity of the trilogy is a consequence of its expression of white American anxieties in all their ambiguous complexity. Indeed, that preoccupation with textual interpretation suggests the (almost) pathological need for distraction from the traumatic reality which the films approach.

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<sup>19</sup> I discuss the white anxiety in *There's Something About Mary* in *Coming Out Jewish*. It is an irony of the film that Mary is played by Cameron Diaz, the daughter of a second generation Cuban-American father and an Anglo-German mother.



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