

Baudrillard and Hollywood: subverting the mechanism of control and *The Matrix*

by Jim Rovira

As I was driving to a jobsite with my supervisor one day he started giving me, off the top of his head, some pretty shrewd social analysis in the form of simple observations. He told me how dependent everyone was on "the system." By this he meant everything we take for granted on a daily basis: electricity, cars, gasoline, maintained roads, grocery stores, the police, telephones, computers. . . the list could be multiplied indefinitely. His point was that we've become dependent upon these very things for our very survival. If all the grocery stores closed, tens of thousands of people would literally starve to death unless someone fed them. We were all, as a result, slaves of the system. We're sheep waiting to be slaughtered or enslaved, and if and when that time comes there won't be much we'll be able to do about it. This is, I believe, the central concern of the Wachowski Brother's latest blockbuster movie, *The Matrix*, largely because of an incidental connection made within the movie to a book by French sociologist Jean Baudrillard.

In one early scene, Thomas Anderson (a.k.a. Neo, played by Keanu Reeves) opens a copy of Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* to a chapter entitled "On Nihilism." The book is hollow, serving as Neo's hiding place for computer programs he sells on the black market. Curiously, "On Nihilism" actually closes the book, it's not a middle chapter as depicted in the movie. I believe this misplacement of the chapter serves as a device employed by the film makers to provide specific philosophical context for this complicated, intriguing film. While such widely divergent streams such as Christ imagery, eastern philosophy, and Greek mythology all inform the narrative and the characters, Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* is probably the best starting point for a philosophical and sociological approach to the movie's content.

In *The Matrix*, computer technology finally developed to the point of producing artificial intelligence; a thinking, willing, self-determined computer. It continued to learn and grow, gaining control over human society incrementally to the point of almost total control. Human revolt took the form of a mass cataclysm, nuclear in nature, intended to block sunlight from the surface of the earth and shut down the solar-powered computer. The computer then started to breed humans for use as a power source. They were born, grew, and died within gel-filled pods, fed nutrients intravenously while their body heat and electro-chemical impulses were tapped to power the computer. To keep people alive as long as possible, the computer created a program called "the matrix," a VR world serving as an exact sensory duplicate of late 20th century earth. Humans in the pods were plugged directly into the computer network through implants at the base of their skulls. Each individual within the matrix perceived themselves as living out a normal life somewhere on 20th century earth, while in reality their lives were spent within a pod.

In Baudrillard, a simulacra is "a copy without an original." This is the exact nature of the matrix. In the film, twentieth century earth is gone. The real world is a nuclear wasteland; cities are charred and empty, life on earth is only possible beneath the surface. But an exact copy exists in the form of a computer program. People are living life in a simulacra, a copy which is its own reality. According to Baudrillard, exploring this type of pseudo-reality is the next step for modern science fiction. Early science fiction projected the pioneer impulse onto outer space; just a cursory survey of science fiction from Buck Rogers to Star Trek reveals that older forms of science fiction were nothing more than pioneers fighting Indians to conquer new territory -- nothing is changed but the clothing and the weaponry. While our planet still carried with it some element of mystery, so long as there was a frontier, the human imagination could project this frontier to outer space. The frontier is gone, and with it the older forms of science fiction.

Baudrillard says that science fiction will take a new direction, "it will 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 life. Hallucination of the real, of lived experience, of the quotidian, but reconstituted, sometimes down to disquietingly strange details. . ." (Baudrillard 124). The very world of the matrix was a "model of simulation" given the feeling of the real, done so for the sake of maintaining control and reducing human beings to "coppertops," energy sources feeding the system upon which they are dependent for their survival.

This is the world in which we live. We work to earn money, spending the money in grocery and clothing stores, paying our mortgages, living as model citizens (just as Neo was pressured to do) for the sake of our survival. We take money from the system and feed it back into the system, like cattle fertilizing the ground upon which they graze. The film assumed that reducing a human being to a "coppertop" was an intolerable, dehumanizing condition. "Neo," the new man, the Christ figure (who died and returned to life, had miraculous powers within the matrix and was betrayed by the Judas figure Ciper) was "the One" destined to take control of the matrix and end it, freeing humanity from its servile condition. Morpheus (the god of the dream world in Greek mythology) played a John the Baptist figure, serving as a herald declaring the arrival of Neo, most importantly to Neo himself. Within the film the central opposition was between truth and comfort; Ciper chose to betray his friends in order to be reinserted into the matrix and live an enjoyable life with no memory of his past betrayals. However false his reality, he preferred it to the harsh "real world" outside the matrix. Morpheus, Neo, and those who believed in them chose reality at any cost and fought the matrix at any point possible.

These are the decisions we must face in our real world environment. Recognizing that we're enslaved by a system is the first step. The next step involves a willingness to sacrifice safety for freedom. Both these steps were taken by all the film's protagonists, is there something beyond them? The chapter of *Simulacra and Simulation* entitled "On Nihilism" advocates terrorism as the means of "checking in broad daylight" the mechanisms of control, but observes that the system is itself nihilistic and can absorb even violence into its indifference. Thus, to Baudrillard, the problem seems insoluble.

This advocacy of terrorism explains the violence permeating the film. Does the film point to a solution? At the end, Neo has realized his identity and power within the matrix and has, we are led to believe, ended the program. But what then? Within the world of the film literally millions of people are in pods, unaware of their true condition and not ready for the real world as it is. What would happen to these millions should the system suddenly shut down? The world is not capable of feeding this many people all at once, much less are the people themselves ready to be awakened. Should Morpheus and Neo shut down the program and condemn millions to death? Is such an insurrection justified in the service of humanity? Especially when the only alternative is to allow the system to run as it is, and this too is unacceptable. What needs to happen in the world of the film is that the mind of the system needs *to be controlled by human beings again*. The malevolent computer needs to be lobotomized and then controlled. It needs to be stopped from breeding more human beings, and those in pods need to be awakened as they are able. Those unable to adapt could be allowed to live out their lives to their VR end. When they die, they won't be replaced. Within a generation the computer could be shut down.

But the matrix within which we are caught is *already controlled by human beings*, however much they may be just as malevolent and control oriented as the A.I. of the movie. What options do we have? When Neo finally realized his power to control the matrix, he plunged himself into an Agent and exploded him from within. Terrorism fails because it attacks the system from the outside and endangers those caught within it. Not only is insurrection in service of humanity morally unacceptable, it is doomed to failure. As Umberto Eco observed, no revolution that interrupted our soccer matches could possibly succeed. When people feel threatened, by and large they are willing to sacrifice freedom for

safety. We tolerate martial law in wartime. Our only hope is that the realization of the individual within the system means the lobotomization of the system. We may remain within a matrix, but knowingly, aware of our power to control it and refusing to be controlled.