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Source: *Cultural Critique*, No. 53, Posthumanism (Winter, 2003), pp. 28-46

Published by: [University of Minnesota Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1354623>

Accessed: 20/09/2011 23:39

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BACK TO THE FUTURE

THE HUMANIST *MATRIX*

Laura Bartlett and Thomas B. Byers

The purported demise of the unitary, coherent humanist subject of the modern era has been widely celebrated by postmodern theorists who welcome a radically new subjectivity—fragmented, fluid, and flexible. Donna Haraway's cyborg, defined initially in "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism" (1985, 65), is perhaps the most famous "image" or "myth" (the terms are Haraway's own [65, 92]) of this happily postmodern and posthumanist subject. This subject is also poststructuralist in the sense that it seems to be more a node in a network of texts and codes than any kind of reified "self"; it is based, as Haraway suggests, on "the reconceptions of machine and organism as coded texts through which we engage in the play [in a Derridean sense of that term] of writing and reading the world" (69). In political terms, the cause for celebration is the belief that the postmodern reconfiguration breaks down or deconstructs the oppressive boundaries of (phal)logocentricism—blurring the border between binary terms such as self and other, male and female, organism and machine, ontology and textuality, "science fiction and social reality"—thus posing a powerful threat to patriarchal capitalism (66).

In *How We Became Posthuman*, N. Katherine Hayles argues that "a defining characteristic of the present cultural moment" is belief in the notion that virtual reality technology will permit human consciousness to transcend the body and function as data in the circuits of a computer (1999, 1). This notion helps propel us toward a construction of subjectivity that sees "no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation" and in

fact “privileges informational pattern over material instantiation” (3). To assume that consciousness can become disembodied, Hayles argues, is to assume that it is not dependent on the body, and hence that artificial systems can achieve it. By the same token, this assumption also “configure[s] human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines” (3). Finally, this posthuman view also may imply that human dominance is not an inherent or essential attribute, but a negotiated position within a system, a position that can be overturned. The challenging of the human/machine (nature/culture) boundary, both theoretically *and practically* with advances in biotechnology, has propelled a contradictory battery of discourses defining the “posthuman” condition.

One strand of thought suggests that the posthuman constitutes a radical, subversive break from the Western tradition of liberal humanism, with its subject who has been historically interpellated by and for the forces of patriarchal capitalism. But another school of thought, a *critical* posthumanism, has come to question, as Hayles does, our open-armed embrace of the posthuman subject and has suggested that the posthuman may be an extension of liberal humanism rather than a break from it—or that, as discourses of postmodern subjectivity are appropriated by the popular media for the production of a contemporary style, the subject may exhibit a sexy patina of postmodernism while still not differing in any fundamental way from its liberal humanist predecessor. Moreover, while postmodern subjectivity itself may at first seem strikingly radical, it bears uncanny similarities to the structures of global capitalism. Fluidity, flexibility, boundary dissolution, and border crossings describe both. In sum, these developments raise a number of questions that are crucial for our comprehension of both present and future in the new world order of late capitalism. Is the posthuman necessarily posthumanist or postmodern, and if so, to what degree? Is the cyborg, defined as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism” (Haraway 1985, 65) or a “human being . . . seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines” (Hayles 1999, 3), necessarily any sort of threat at all to the contemporary refiguration of patriarchal capitalism? Indeed, is Haraway’s metaphorical or mythic (as opposed to more literal) cyborg—the fragmented, fluid, flexible, deconstructive, boundary-transgressive postmodern subject—necessarily a threat to

the new world order? Or is it recuperable by, or even produced by, late capitalism for the latter's own ends?

In what follows we do not intend to propose any definitive answers to these questions. Our much more modest goal is to see what light may be cast on them by examining the ways in which they are addressed (and/or repressed) in one extremely popular Hollywood blockbuster, *The Matrix* (dir. Andy Wachowski and Larry Wachowski, 1999). In our view this film, like many Hollywood texts whose style is conspicuously postmodern, is nonetheless ultimately "pomophobic." While it is in many ways a cinematic example of the cyberpunk genre, it is as much an affront as a homage to that movement, as it repudiates the genre's antihumanist stance and seeks to reinscribe the nature/artifice binary that cyberpunk generally deconstructs. *The Matrix* places posthuman subjects at the center of its action and flirts with a theoretical postmodernism only to reject the posthumanist configuration of subjectivity in favor of resurrecting a neo-Romantic version of the liberal-humanist subject. While it raises the question of the "reality" of disembodied consciousness, it does so largely in order to express our anxieties concerning this possibility, and indeed it initially converts "disembodied" to "false"—in the sense of ideology as "false consciousness." It acknowledges that artificial intelligence has the potential to become autopoietic, but the film rejects the human-machine articulation and seeks to preserve, as "natural," the organic human's dominant outside position.¹ Even at the end, when the virtual world as transformed by the individual hero becomes an acceptable field of experience and action, it becomes so precisely because it now ostensibly answers to the needs and desires of the humanist subject/agent.

The film depicts a future world in which humanity has been enslaved by artificial intelligence (AI). With only a few exceptions, the human beings of the future are simply an energy source. Biotechnologically produced in a kind of nightmare version of a corporate farm, they lie in rows, fed by tubes, and drained of electricity by cables, providing battery power to run the machines that dominate them. They are kept docile by the disembodiment of their consciousness, which perceives and experiences not the abject world where they are stored (and where the dead are fed to the living), but rather a virtual world called the Matrix that duplicates a reality much like

the film audience's own. The Matrix is the hallucination or illusion of a late-1990s America that, according to the AI's minion Agent Smith, was the peak of human civilization, a time, the hero's mentor Morpheus tells us, when "we marveled at our own existence as we gave birth to AI ... a singular consciousness that spawned an entire race of machines." While this technological euphoria and self-satisfaction may sound familiar, so is the aimless, alienated life of the hero Neo (Keanu Reeves) in the Matrix. He is a single twenty-something living alone in a city where by day he works in a high-rise building, cordoned off in a cubicle identical to the hundreds around him. By night he assumes an idealized cyber-identity. Most of his social interaction takes place on-line, where he is known as Neo, hacker extraordinaire. He is dissatisfied, vaguely depressed, looking for answers to questions he doesn't quite know how to ask.

If all of this sounds somewhat oppressively familiar, it is nonetheless important to keep in mind that Neo's virtual Gen-X existence seems far less bleak than the material reality it is designed to mask. While the condition of life in the future is completely passive for all but the select few who have escaped the state of battery inflicted on them by the AI, the virtual world at least gives the illusion of freedom of choice—if not a real resistant agency, then at least some digital wiggle room. Sci-fi fans will recognize "matrix" as William Gibson's term for cyberspace, defined in *Neuromancer* as "a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions" (51). For Gibson this "hallucination" is merely a sensory and spatial representation of stores of information. In the film, however, the hallucination is thematized; it is not only an electronic illusion, but also an ideological one. It is perhaps in pinpointing society's need to buy into the illusion of free agency and individual autonomy that *The Matrix* is most disturbingly accurate. The Matrix metaphorizes our willingness to fantasize that the "freedom" rhetoric of e-capitalism accurately reflects our reality and our propensity to marvel at our technological innovations even in the face of mass alienation and social malaise.

Indeed, the film's entire vision of the future invites a more detailed allegorical reading. Anyone familiar with the elementary-school science experiment in which a potato powers a light bulb will be less than amazed by the notion that the AI has figured out how to make batteries out of the inert bodies of passive consumers of virtual

reality—otherwise known as “couch potatoes.” And indeed, the Matrix is something very like an advanced form of television; in fact, when Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) is revealing the truth of the Matrix to Neo, he says, “This is the world you know,” and shows it to Neo on a (distinctly 1950s) TV. Morpheus’s creed is that human beings can’t be free as long as the Matrix exists, so the efforts of his small band of revolutionaries are, in effect, intended to carry out the imperative of the popular bohemian bumper sticker: “Kill Your Television.” For the revolutionaries themselves, the Matrix resembles a video game, and their experience is much like that of video gamers. At will, they jack into an adventure where they fight bad guys and attempt to free their leader while, back in the real world, their bodies remain confined to their chairs even as they writhe with the excitement and tension of virtual combat.

To the degree that all of this can be seen thematically as a “take” on the present, the Matrix’s neural simulation serves as a metaphor for the entertainment culture of the late capitalist system. Moreover, it partakes of the sort of “judgment on mass culture” that, according to Fredric Jameson,

loosely derives from the Frankfurt School . . . but whose adherents number “radicals” as well as “elitists” on the Left today [as well, we might add, as some radicals and elitists on the Right]. This is the conception of mass culture as sheer manipulation, sheer commercial brainwashing and empty distraction by the multinational corporations who obviously control every feature of the production and distribution of mass culture today. (1992, 21)

If such mass culture has the effect of creating a false consciousness that serves as the chief contemporary opiate of the masses, Morpheus and his “happy” few seem to have something in common with the Frankfurt School critics themselves (or with Althusser’s “scientific” socialists), in that they are a vanguard that has somehow, inexplicably or magically, emerged from within the closed system to drop the scales from their eyes and free themselves.

They are also an active revolutionary cell, living collectively and trying to bring down an oppressive system that enslaves and exploits the common citizen for its own ends. As such, they may be seen as representing a Marxist-humanist alternative to the individualist liberal

humanism that the film finally, in our view, affirms. To the degree that this is so, and to the degree that they seek the destruction of the Matrix, their project seems radical in terms of class, but actually in one sense reactionary, in terms of their time, in that their solution to the oppressions of the posthuman world is simply to try to unmake it. Thus they are very much at the other end of the spectrum from Donna Haraway, who explicitly states that “[t]he inheritance of Marxian humanism, with its pre-eminently Western self, is the difficulty” with traditional socialist feminism for her as a postmodernist feminist (1985, 76).

Finally, however, the terms of opposition on which the film is structured are neither capitalist ideology versus scientific socialism nor Marxist humanism versus postmodern cyborg socialism. Rather, it boils down to a struggle between human beings and machines over human subjectivity. That the AI prevails only by virtue of its capacity to separate consciousness from the materiality of the body suggests that in this world human enslavement occurs only when, and by virtue of the fact that, subjectivity is configured as posthuman. In order to exploit the body, the AI must create a simulacrum in which the human mind can interact and in which it is duped into believing that it still inhabits and senses bodily reality. But the fact that the mind must be so engaged for the system to work suggests that human beings have the potential to regain an “outside” position with relation to the Matrix—to recognize the constructedness of their reality and change it. Thus, the film suggests the ultimate autonomy and supremacy of human consciousness, intimating that the artificial system is still essentially allopoietic or subservient to a humanity that remains in essence (if not in its existence at this historical moment) autopoietic.

The conflict of the subject with the system thus reflects a kind of neo-Luddite formation wherein “rage against the machine” is not understood as a metaphoric imperative of resistance to the system served by the machines, but rather is focused on the literal machines; the means of production become the target in place of their owners. In that sense the struggle between Neo and the agent of the AI is not far from being a late-capitalist repetition of the struggle between John Henry and the steam drill of classic capitalism. (Indeed, in both cases the question is largely whether the human or the machine can work

faster; no human being until Neo has ever triumphed over an agent because the latter are too fast in their processing of data.)

Ultimately, the triumph of Morpheus's band depends on a fantasy whose affinities are more fascist than socialist: the fantasy of the coming of a single, superior, "chosen" strong leader. That leader is Neo, whose difference from his allies is not merely a matter of degree (as was John Henry's, who represented the laborers on the railroad simply because he was the strongest of them). Rather, Neo is different in kind from other human beings; he is not merely the representative, but the apotheosis, of the subjectivity that is threatened by the AI. His name not only rhymes with "hero" but also is an anagram for the key word of his honorific title: "the One," with all its resonances of the messiah (of which more later). As is so often the case in films of this sort, his story closely fits the paradigm of the hero myth (Hollywood's consciousness of which is succinctly outlined by Linda Seger in her how-to book for screenwriters, *Making a Good Script Great*). More important, both in action, in his pursuit by the mysterious agents of the AI, and in dialogue, in Morpheus's revelations about his true heroic identity and central importance and about the AI's systematic deceptions as to the nature of reality, Neo's story also neatly embodies the structure of paranoid fantasy.

This invocation of paranoia has at least two major significances. On the one hand, it once again suggests how the film flirts with critique of the system of late capitalism. It exemplifies Fredric Jameson's comment that contemporary narratives of conspiracy and paranoia

are themselves but a distorted figuration of something even deeper, namely, the whole world system of a present-day multinational capitalism. This is a figural process currently best observed in a whole mode of contemporary entertainment literature—"high-tech paranoia"—in which the circuits and networks of some putative global computer hookup are narratively mobilized by labyrinthine conspiracies. . . . [C]onspiracy theory (and its garish narrative manifestations) must be seen as a degraded attempt—through the figuration of advanced technology—to think the impossibility of the contemporary world system. (1991, 38)

Jameson goes on to say that the genre of cyberpunk, of which *The Matrix* is a cinematic example, "is fully as much an expression of transnational corporate realities as it is of global paranoia itself" (38). To say this is to say, in effect, that postmodern paranoia is not paranoia

at all, but simply a way of talking about the material conditions of postmodern life. It is far from accidental that the “agents” of the enslaving AI who chase Neo throughout the film appear in the Matrix as white men in business suits, or that the chief of them bears a striking resemblance to Neo’s tight-assed boss at the megacorporation where he works at the beginning.

But there is another way of looking at such paranoid narratives. They can be seen as a further extension of the displacement of class conflict into a conflict between humanist and posthumanist subjectivities—or into anxieties about the postmodern dissolution of humanist subjectivity. Thomas Byers has argued elsewhere that such narratives are reactions against the nomadic schizophrenia produced by late capitalist economic arrangements (1995, 10–13). This schizoid subjectivity is particularly evident in the disembodiment of the cybersphere, and, as we have seen, this disembodiment is one of the themes of *The Matrix*. In this world, the villains are those who side with the pleasant virtual against the gritty real, such as the traitor Cypher, or those who despise anything at all bodily, even if it is illusory, such as Agent Smith. While meeting with Agent Smith in the Matrix and enjoying his virtual steak, Cypher (whose name suggests both that he is a moral zero and that he is happier as disembodied code in the Matrix), explains his motivation: “You know, I know this steak doesn’t exist. I know that when I put it in my mouth, the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious. After nine years, you know what I realize? Ignorance is bliss.” Later, as he prepares to murder his compatriots, he argues with Trinity about freedom and reality, both of which he maintains are to be found in the Matrix rather than in Morpheus’s ship. Since Cypher is portrayed as the most reprehensible human character in the film, it is clear that the film is inviting us to reject his unprincipled choice of virtual pleasure over materiality and authenticity.² Further implications of his character are revealed as he outlines his demands for compensation: “I don’t want to remember nothing. Nothing. You understand? And I want to be rich. You know, someone important, like an actor . . . I get my body back into a power plant, you insert me into the Matrix, I’ll get you what you want.” The snapper here is that the betrayer of the real in favor of the second-order simulacrum, he who wants to be a rich actor who remembers nothing, is called “Mr. Reagan” by Agent Smith.

Smith himself, a fully posthuman subject in that he is actually a part of the AI, goes even further in his rejection of the material real: as we have already mentioned, he cannot stand even the illusion of the body. At one point while in the Matrix he wipes sweat from the captured Morpheus, holds his fingertips to Morpheus's nose, and says, "I hate this place. This zoo. This prison. This 'reality,' whatever you want to call it, I can't stand it any longer. It's the smell, if there is such a thing. I feel saturated by it. I can taste your stink and every time I do, I fear that I've somehow been infected by it." The body as stinking threat of infection is the body as abjection, cast out from the pure—but purely vicious—mind of the AI. And indeed Neo's body briefly becomes exactly such a site of abjection—a corpse, in fact. Yet through the power of love (in perhaps the weakest moment in the script), he is literally corporeally resurrected, and it is at this point that he becomes the One, the prophesied messiah, who can defeat the minions of the evil AI. This deification of a unique, embodied, and romantically/erotically loved subject asserts the triumph of one form of traditional humanist subjectivity over the posthuman.

It should be noted in connection with the strong leader fantasy that the hero's natural and supernatural superiority go along with a certain disturbing sense of elitism and *droit de seigneur*. The movie suggests that those who remain under control of the Matrix do so only because they have an inferior consciousness, susceptible to AI colonization and unable to recognize, as Morpheus says, "the world that has been pulled over [their] eyes." As Morpheus explains to Neo, the "businessmen, teachers, lawyers, carpenters . . . the people we are trying to save . . . are not ready to be unplugged. And many of them are so inert, so hopelessly dependent on the system that they will fight to protect it." For that reason, we need not mourn the numbers of them who constitute Neo's body count in the final action sequence.³ It seems clear by this point that this is no fantasy of socialist revolution (or, for that matter, of the coronation of a prince of peace), but rather something much closer to the triumph of the *Übermensch*.

In this regard, *The Matrix* bears a significant relation to any number of Hollywood films about bourgeois-liberal heroes who must save their communities. An interesting example, precisely because pairing it with *The Matrix* seems so counterintuitive, is Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*. This film, too, contains—in a dual sense of that

verb—a critique of the capitalism of its time, and at first seems to offer a rather pointed political commentary. It hinges on a hero who must be awakened to his true identity and role in life, and who must suffer annihilation as part of his process of personal and community salvation. And *Wonderful Life*, for all its egalitarian populist rhetoric, finally boils down to a kind of battle of the titans in which the fate of everyone hinges on the capacity of one exceptional and exceptionally good man to defeat an individual embodiment of evil. Only George Bailey can prevent Bedford Falls from becoming Pottersville; in his absence the evil individual can vanquish the entire community. Only Neo, the One, can save Zion from the AI or show the benighted masses a new world. That world “where,” as Neo says in the film’s last speech, “anything is possible” can come into being only through the auspices of the one who makes all things possible: the individualist hacker messiah.

What finally sets Neo apart from the machines, and uniquely above them, is the former’s capacity to operate outside the rules of given structures. As Morpheus explains to him, “What you must learn is that these rules are no different than the rules of a computer system. Some of them can be bent. Others can be broken. Understand?” He explains that while the AI’s “agents” are bound by the artificial rules of the system they have created, human consciousness is not: “Free your mind. I’ve seen an agent punch through a concrete wall. Men have emptied entire clips at them and hit nothing but air. Yet their strength and their speed are still based in a world that is built on rules. Because of that, they will never be as strong or as fast as you can be.” Neo’s “gift,” as Morpheus calls it, is natural and organic, not artificial and instrumental, and it is finally grounded not in rational intelligence but in mystical intuition: “I’ve watched you,” Morpheus tells Neo. “You do not use a computer like a tool. You use it like it was part of yourself. What you can do inside a computer is not normal. I know. I’ve seen it. What you do is magic.” And all he has to do to realize his magical potential is free his mind of the mind-forged manacles of the Matrix, which Morpheus calls “the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.” In sum, Neo is an icon of neo-Romanticism, and the film’s ideology turns out to be a version of “natural supernaturalism,” in which the superiority of human nature to artifice, and of humanist to posthuman

subjectivity, is guaranteed by the investment of the human hero with the value of the divine.

Indeed, the deck is stacked in favor of the human. As Morpheus explains, “When the Matrix was first built, there was a man born inside that had the ability to change what he wanted, to remake the Matrix as he saw fit. It was this man that freed the first of us and taught us the truth. . . . After he died, the oracle prophesized his return, and that his coming would hail the destruction of the Matrix, end the war, bring freedom to our people.” By suggesting the spontaneous generation of such a subject even in the most oppressive of circumstances, the film implies the supremacy of human consciousness, despite its temporary eclipse by the AI. It also suggests a messianic religious paradigm that escapes and transcends the rationality represented by the machines—a paradigm of which Neo is the fulfillment. From the very beginning of the movie, he is presented to us as a Christ figure. Accepting contraband software from Neo, Choi tells him, “You’re my savior, man. My own personal Jesus Christ.” Morpheus and his band of hackers on the *Nebuchadnezzar* (all except the Judas-like traitor Cypher) also believe that they’ve found their savior when they find Neo. When Neo accepts “the truth,” he joins a holy family along with Morpheus, the father figure, and Trinity(!), the feminine incarnation of the Holy Spirit. He is then sacrificed and raised from the dead to liberate the Matrix and transform it from the city of destruction to the city of God.

The positioning of the human—both Neo and his spontaneously generated prior incarnation—outside the rules not only restores the human to the autopoietic position as defined by Maturana, but also suggests that it is the real grounding center of the system. According to Jacques Derrida:

[I]t has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality. This is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside* it. The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its center elsewhere. . . . The concept of centered structure is in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility

and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play. And on the basis of this certitude anxiety can be mastered, for anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game, of being caught by the game, of being as it were at stake in the game from the outset. (1978, 279)

The AI may appear to be in the position of the center, but, because it can never stand outside the rules, never escape structurality, it is revealed as in some sense an impostor—a poor substitute for a humanity that can spontaneously generate, even within the apparently closed system, the power to stand outside it and change its reality. The AI is a temporary stand-in, not the real ground (as is also suggested by the fact that the human is the origin of the AI). The story of Neo is a story of an “eschatology, [which] is an accomplice of th[e] reduction of the structurality of structure and always attempts to conceive of structure on the basis of a full presence which is beyond play” (Derrida 1978, 279). The story of *The Matrix*, like the Christian story of Earth after the fall, is basically the story of an interregnum coming to a predestined end with the (re)appearance of the messiah, the real central figure of history. As such, it provides relief from the anxiety of the human subject’s being “caught by the game” of posthumanism, a system, as we indicated at the beginning, wherein the human is but one of a number of equally valid and substitutable sites for consciousness, where nature is not superior to artifice, where human dominance is not an inherent or essential attribute, but a negotiated position within a system. Neo’s story is a story of salvation; as such it runs directly contrary to the postmodern posthumanism of Haraway’s cyborg for, as Haraway says pointedly, “The cyborg incarnation is outside salvation history” (1985, 65).

The eschatological quality of *The Matrix* is also the film’s solution to the conflict between freedom and agency on the one hand, and external control and fate on the other. Initially the resonance of this opposition is basically Marxist, as Morpheus and his cadre are rebelling against the enslavement of humanity and trying to destroy the Matrix because it is an ideological instrument of oppression. But again the problem is displaced into one of individual subjectivity and autonomy. When Morpheus and Neo first meet, Morpheus asks him if he believes in fate, and Neo responds, “No, because I don’t like the idea that I’m not in control of my life.” His resistance to control and

its implication that on some level he feels that he may not be in control are seemingly the result of a superior human consciousness, one that can defy or transcend artificial consciousness. Morpheus's response, "I know exactly what you mean," admits Neo to the "happy few" constituted by the other freed hackers. And at the end, when Neo promises to show the AI's slaves "a world without rules and controls, without borders and boundaries, a world where anything is possible," the notion of total freedom is celebrated.

Yet a great deal of the film focuses on Neo's fulfillment of a mystical, preordained destiny, seen by the Oracle but at first unknown to Neo himself. The savior of humanist freedom is thus the instrument of a purpose and plan higher than his own. We suggest that the clash between freedom/autonomy and external control/fate is defused—and depoliticized—when fate is not economic but metaphysical. Thus, Neo's "lack of control" ceases to signify his status as a subject of the Matrix (or global capitalism) when he is revealed as the instrument in a divine plan, one that sets him apart from and raises him above the machine. Moreover, though Morpheus has told us that human beings can never be free as long as the Matrix exists, it seems that Neo's sacrifice has redeemed it for them. His resurrection symbolically stages the resurrection of the liberal humanist, and at the moment of his ascension, the Matrix is converted into a realm of infinite possibility. It is important to note that the film does not end with any indication of change in, or even any continuing concern about, the real material conditions for which the Matrix earlier served merely as an opiate.

This comes as something of a surprise given not only that destruction of the Matrix had been the goal, but also that so often throughout the film the interface of human beings and machines results in horror, and the images of biotechnology are monstrous or abominable. The first such image is a gothic-looking power plant comprising row after row of towers, each one trellised with mechanical wombs where human bodies are stored. The horror of the human in the grips of the machines is literally depicted in this scene when Neo's body is clutched in the pincers of the attending AI. The abomination of biotech infancy is melodramatically emphasized in another gothic image. As the camera surveys a scene in which mechanical tentacles pick baby "eggs," Morpheus explains to Neo that "There are fields, endless fields where human beings are no longer born. We are

grown.” His comment is punctuated by dramatic music as the scene shifts to oily black liquid flooding a compartment containing an artificially produced baby attached to long black cords, and Morpheus tells us that the AI liquefy the bodies of the dead and feed them to the living. In a third important, although less dramatic scene, Neo realizes that outside of the Matrix his body is scarred by implants, and he reacts in shock and revulsion. In his hesitant gesture to touch the plug in the back of his head, one can almost see the film version of Frankenstein’s monster touching the sprockets on the sides of his head and realizing that he is not human. Finally, we may note the pride with which Tank proclaims the purity of his human origins when he tells Neo that he (Tank) and his brother are “both 100 percent pure old-fashioned home-grown human, born free right here in the real world. A genuine child of Zion.” These images and words are not surprising in a film that seems to want to police the nature/artifice boundary that biotechnology puts into question. This overwhelmingly negative presentation of biotechnology, and particularly Tank’s invocations of purity and native rather than immigrant status, are suggestive of Donna Haraway’s comments: “I cannot help but hear in the biotechnology debates the unintended tones of fear of the alien and suspicion of the mixed” (1997, 218), and “It is a mistake in this context to forget that anxiety over the pollution of lineages lies at the heart of racist discourses in European cultures as well as of linked gender and sexual anxiety” (217).

In images such as these, as in Morpheus’s take on the real, *The Matrix* is more closely aligned with a previous generation of science fiction than with cyberpunk. While the latter is generally “antihumanist” in its celebration of the breakdown in the nature/culture binary, traditional science fiction may problematize this boundary, but generally upholds the sanctity and superiority of the human subject (Hollinger 1990, 30). According to Hollinger,

[Bruce] Sterling, one of the most prolific spokespersons for the Movement during its heyday, has described cyberpunk as a reaction to “standard humanist liberalism” because of its interest in exploring the various scenarios of humanity’s potential interfaces with the products of its own technology. For Sterling, cyberpunk is “post-humanist” science fiction which believes that “technological destruction of the human condition leads not to futreshocked zombies but to hopeful monsters.” (31)

Such “hopeful monsters” are not really offered as a possibility until the ending’s retreat from what seemed to be the goal of destroying the virtual in favor of the material real. In the final scene Neo does not pull the plug on the Matrix, but voluntarily jacks back into it. The key, of course, is that it has been putatively refashioned by his defeat of an AI agent, so that it has become the world of infinite potential, with no center, no boundaries or controls. It is no longer a trope for TV as an instrument of corporate capitalism, but rather a figure for the computer geek’s fantasy of the Internet as free and subversive space—a space of individualist self-realization. And in this space, Neo says at the end, “Where we go . . . is a choice I leave to you.” Notice how close this is to what is perhaps the most famous question of our era: Microsoft’s “Where do you want to go today?” Now, it may be that the Internet carries certain real potentials for decentering and subversion. But the notion that it is an egalitarian space where the rules of capital don’t apply is just silly. In fact, it seems increasingly obvious that this collapse of boundaries is more in the interest of the globalization of corporate capital and its economic triumph over the modernist nation-state than it is about the creation of a world of Donna Haraway cyborgs. After all, it is Bill Gates who is asking where we want to go—and we all know how much freedom of choice he wants us to have.

Equally important is what Neo’s return to the Matrix says about the relation of subjectivity to the body. In the end what is chosen is precisely the sort of boundless, disembodied subjectivity that the text seemed to be repudiating. And this may lead us to recall that, for all the spectacular physical stunts that help make *The Matrix* an eyepopper, the reality of Neo’s heroism is both cybernetic and amazingly passive. He is the One not because he is a karate kid, but because he is a supreme hacker. All his amazing defiances of gravity and dodges of death come while he is, in fact, strapped and wired into a chair in a kind of trance. In addition, during his training when he is first proving how exceptional he is, what is exceptional is how long he can lie still and receive data: when Morpheus asks how he is doing, Tank responds, “Ten hours straight. He’s a machine.” In a text where the human/machine opposition is key, and the whole point seems to be to reassert the ascendancy of the former, what makes the hero superhuman is precisely his posthuman, cybernetic, information-machine-like

qualities. Moreover, the difference between Neo and the human batteries finally turns out to be no greater than the difference between the couch potato who watches TV all day and the video gamer for whom virtual recreation offers a fantasy of agency.

Thus a resistant reading of *The Matrix* suggests that the opposition that is really at stake may finally be a generational one, concerning how technology interpellates the passive consumer subject of late global capitalism. Is Neo's superiority to those who passively have the world pulled over their eyes finally a Gen-Xer's fantasy of the superiority of their Internet surfing to their parents' and grandparents' channel surfing? Is the question of who is the One simply a question of who has, or lacks, a joystick?

On the other hand, Neo's final speech does capture the spirit of the hacker's ethic of free information and decentralization:

I know you're out there. I can feel you now. I know that you're afraid. You're afraid of us. You're afraid of change. I don't know the future. I didn't come here to tell you how this is going to end. I came here to tell you how it's going to begin. I'm going to hang up this phone and then I'm going to show these people what you don't want them to see. I'm going to show them a world without you, a world without rules and controls, without borders or boundaries, a world where anything is possible. Where we go from there is a choice I leave to you.

The speech serves the function not only of preparing the audience for a sequel (which is now in production) but also of contrasting two versions of possibility for virtual reality—one conservative, the other anarchic. The "you" addressed here is, grammatically, the AI and what it stands for: the forces of domination before whom the gauntlet is thrown down for a struggle over who is to control the Matrix (read, the Internet). The final line, however, also may strike the audience (at least, it struck both of us) as a rallying cry addressed to us as subjects who may wish to follow the path of liberation that Neo has blazed. Then as the credits roll, we are exhorted, as Neo was by Morpheus and Trinity, to "Wake Up," a song by Rage Against The Machine about conspiracy and paranoia that rails against "the land of hypocrisy" and the "networks at work, keeping people calm."

But here, as elsewhere, the messages of resistance resonate with echoes that place it rather disturbingly close to the order it seeks to

subvert. “Where we go from there is a choice I leave to you” is rhetorically extremely close to such famous e-commercial messages as Microsoft’s “Where do you want to go today?” and Nortel Network’s “What do you want the Internet to be?” The movie and song that urge us to “see the world that has been pulled over [our] eyes to blind [us] from the truth” are, respectively, an exceptionally high-tech special-effects spectacle and a song that comes to us on a CD or as an MP3 file. *Rage Against The Machine* exists for us as a machine. The irony of this digitized Ludditism points to the irony that both film and song themselves exemplify the capacity of late capitalism and its mass media to commodify everything, including messages of subversion.

No doubt this is why Neo’s final return to the Matrix ultimately suggests that human liberation does not require radical change or the destruction of the system, as Morpheus had suggested. Rather, it requires only self-actualization and an assertion of autonomy—the very defining characteristics of the liberal humanist “self”—together with state-of-the-art technological know-how. Information technology is not the instrument of a more advanced form of capitalism or the evolutionary extension of and heir to industrial machinery, but is the liberating medium. Our use of the new technologies is not the indoctrination necessary to creating the consumers of late capitalism, whose consumption of commodified information fuels the global economy. Rather, our utilization of the technology is our pathway to freedom. Neo’s realization that he doesn’t need to change the system, but only learn to make it work for him, invokes the oldest of capitalist myths and once again exposes the complicity of liberal-humanism with capitalism.

The Matrix begins by tapping into the alienation and suspicion of those subjected to late capitalism in the technologically advanced nations—cordoned off in your cubicle you process data, you pay your taxes, you have contact with other human beings only through the ones and zeroes that constitute the graphic interface of a computer network. But ultimately, the very conditions that alienate Neo from his labor and lead to his malaise and discontent—the isolation of both work and social life in a technological world—become the conditions of his salvation. All the time that he’s been slugging away at his keyboard, staring at a computer, wondering what difference

any of it makes, life has actually been preparing him for the ultimate showdown when he will don a (virtual) cool leather coat, take up the (virtual) automatic weapon of his choice, and, with the loving support of a devoted, sexy female sidekick, virtually decimate all the suits in the world. Whoa! Déjà vu!

Notes

1. Working in the field of cybernetics in the 1960s, Humberto Maturana theorized the relationship between living and artificial systems. Maturana suggests that “power struggles often take the form of an autopoietic (or self-making) system forcing another system to become allopoietic, so that the weaker system is made to serve the goals of the stronger rather than pursuing its own systemic unity” (Hayles 1999, 160).

2. The problem with this, however, is that the reality of the real is so bleak that it is hard to imagine why anyone would choose it. Moreover, even though in terms of plot the Matrix is fraught with peril, it is visually the site of exhilarating fantasy. Yvonne Tasker (1993, 6) has pointed out the dangers of reading action films in a way that overemphasizes both dialogue and narrative closure at the expense of downplaying the pleasures of spectacle. In a sense *The Matrix* as a text itself interestingly embodies the split that Tasker locates primarily in audiences’ ways of seeing, for the film’s overt ideological stance, as revealed primarily through dialogue spoken by the villains, is at odds with the pleasures it delivers. The film may ethically champion the cause of the authentic, but it delivers aesthetically primarily in the spectacle it creates, and in this regard the scenes in the reality of the alien ship are far less interesting than those in the virtual reality of the Matrix or the programs that train Neo for it. While we may be asked to identify with Morpheus in his belief that only liberation from the falsehood of the Matrix will truly liberate us, as consumers we think we resemble Cypher—drawn more to the sensual satisfactions of artifice than to the rectitude of harsh reality.

3. It is interesting to imagine this sequence from the perspective of the security guards and clerical workers in the building that Neo and Trinity enter. While our heroes may see themselves as great liberators, to the working stiffs they encounter they probably look more like black-coated mass murderers on the order of the “Trench Coat Mafia” killers at Columbine High School eighteen days after the film was released in the United States.

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