

Professor: F. van Wel  
Author: C.P.A. Lemmens

Draft: 032  
Student number: 0442151

**Final Draft**

## The **Matrix** a matter of perception: a postmodern understanding

*"There is white and black, in between there is gray, not such easy color. Gray represents the complexity of postmodernism"*

- C.P.A. **Lemmens**

## Forethought: Theme: "a getting together"

My original project aim was to provide an understanding of excellence on the topic of postmodernism. However, considered the little time we actually spent on the topic of media, made me realize that the emphasis was inconsistent with our actual assignment. Hence, this project merely focuses on understanding postmodernism from a media perception. The main question is based on the theory that the Matrix is a postmodern movie. Ergo, the main-question became: *what proof can be found to support this theory based on a media related perception?*

# The Matrix a matter of perception: a postmodern understanding

## Introduction <sup>1</sup>

During the summer of 1999, a new film was launched called "The Matrix", a creation of relatively unknown filmmakers. This film took the cinematic world by surprise with its postmodern style based on an old metaphor.

## The concept developed

To be able to understand why "The Matrix" is a postmodern film we first need to consider postmodernism as a process and, then we need to define it. The process functions as follows: someone invents another point of view on modernism, reconsiders the definition of modernism; it not only disarranges the aspects of modernism but it also develops a new definition of these aspects.

Postmodernism, as another point of view and interpretation of the world, has become apparent as a worldview that replaces all existing worldviews. A closer look at the former definition starts by defining "worldview".

Worldview is the overall perspective from which one sees and interprets the world. Worldview is also called weltanschauung, which is the German word for philosophy of life or ideology. Bringing these terms together, we get the following definition of worldview: it is the outlook on life, another term which needs a more narrowed definition. Life is the time for which something exists or functions. (Dictionary.com)

The characteristics of postmodernism are: it disarranges grandnarratives<sup>i</sup>, metanarratives<sup>ii</sup>, and micronarratives<sup>iii</sup>, distinction of genre, knowledge, universal truth, reality, boundaries, irony and playfulness. This means that postmodernism is a process of developing the future in our minds. Because of these aspects, thinking infinitely is possible; reality is not present; insanity is data; "there is no truth, only versions of it" (López & Garry, 2001); the boundaries of human meaning and value are flexible; so is irony; and the freedom to play with our thoughts is present. This leads us to science fiction, the next term begging for a definition. Science fiction is a literary or cinematic genre in which fantasy, typically based on speculative scientific discoveries or developments, environmental changes, space travel, or life

---

<sup>1</sup> Note that the word limit was extensively exceeded since diminishment would most probably result in incomprehensibility. Previously I asked for permission for this project and to exceed the word limit - which we agreed upon on the 29<sup>th</sup> of September 2007. Hence, I proceeded, notwithstanding.

on other planets, forms part of the plot or background. This fantasy involves the imagined impact of science on society. However, human beings produce knowledge and humans beings can be mistaken. Science is not pure and can contain an ideologically distorted element in both explanations and the methods used to arrive at them; this is my view on science fiction.

### Meaning – an aesthetic style

Technology creates a meaning by specific methods which require high skills to be able, such as Computer Generated Imaginary<sup>2</sup>, which is often applied to narratives such as science fiction. The latter often blurs the difference between the “reality” and the “simulated”. “The Matrix” demonstrates this by providing information on how to identify the real and the virtual world. Another word for simulation is “Virtual Reality,” which is created by humans and generated by the computer. The difference between the capacities of the computer and those of humans is that the computer is not able to produce an imaginary idea but only to process it. However “The Matrix” argues that the computer is able to consider the imaginary and that is a scary idea, because it means that the computer will be able to reprogram itself and to learn new concepts. This is called “artificial intelligence”.

New technologies always create a crisis in culture; science fiction has helped to invent metaphors to express the hopes and fears of the Machine Age, the Nuclear Age, (the Space Age), and now the Information Age<sup>3</sup>, and this is where concept of cyberspace comes up. But before dealing with cyberspace, we must note that in “The Matrix” the Information Age and Nuclear Age are past; the film takes place during the Machine Age. The term “cyberspace” was first used by William Gibson in his influential novel *Neuromancer*. “Cyberspace” attempted to capture the experience of computer users. Gibson believes that computer users think that there is a kind of actual space behind the screen; some place that cannot be seen but that you know is there. “The characters in Gibson’s novels enter cyberspace, the projected virtual space, by ‘jacking-in to the matrix’” (López & Potter, 2001). This virtual space is a post-modernity, meaning that it has no boundaries; no truth; neither knowledge, nor irony; and reality.

“The Matrix” shows us a new way to escape reality. It differs from our expectations. “Utopia<sup>iv</sup> has been used, especially in science fiction, imaginary vision of ideal social

---

<sup>2</sup> The CGI-aspects see Branston & Stafford (2002).

<sup>3</sup> The idea comes from: Bukatman, Scott; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scott\\_Bukatman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scott_Bukatman).

orders, though we more commonly now encounter *dystopic*<sup>v</sup> images of the future, such as 'The Matrix'" (Branston & Stafford, 2002). The utopia/dystopia dichotomy leads us to the concept of realism within "The Matrix"; however, before explaining this concept there is a need to define real in such way that we cannot doubt it.

"Reality is the state or quality of being real; actual being or existence of anything, in distinction from mere appearance; fact. In other words, reality is an actual existence; that which is not imagination, fiction, or pretence; that which has objective existence, and is not merely an idea" (Dictionary.com). In conclusion, real is thus all that is not simulated. "The Matrix" argues that the real world, referring to the world of nowadays, is actually the virtual world; and what we should consider as the virtual world turns out to be the actual "real" world. Baudrillard argues that simulations now determine reality, reflecting the "hyperreal" world. To quote him, "The real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, memory banks, and models of control and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these. It no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against an ideal." (Baudrillard, 1994) Unreal is defined as insubstantial or imaginary; not existing objectively or in fact. (Dictionary.com) "Hyperreal" could be a form of unreal and not a form of the real. However, we cannot say that yet.

"The Matrix" shows how everyone depends upon "the system". We are all, as a result, slaves of "the system". "The matrix" of the film's title is a computer program created to serve as a virtual reconstructed of the real world reflecting the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the machine age. The real world is, in fact, a nuclear wasteland; the nuclear age has passed, people are living in a simulacrum. However, this story is not like the original science fiction ones. Baudrillard argues that science fiction will take a completely new direction: "it will be to put decentred simulations, models of simulation in place and to contrive to give them the feeling of the real, of the banal, of the 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, 1994) This is a new kind of science fiction: I would call it "post-modern science fiction".

## The sign system revealed

Baudrillard invented the idea of "sign value" which he thinks of as having a higher importance than the classical Marxists' "exchange value" and "use value". In our consumer society, exchange is characterized by "sign value". The "truth" of contemporary object is no longer being of any use, but signifying. It is no longer being manipulated as an instrument, but as a sign. He also mentions the centralist platitude that every individual is a product of society, which simply masks the more radical truth that the totalitarian logic of any system of productivity growth must produce and reproduce individuals as productive forces in their freedom, their needs, and even their unconscious. He says, of the relationships of production and power behind the mass media's signs, that it opens doors to the examination of political economy and class conflicts, which explain nothing of the reality of our social world, since we live in "*hyperreality*", where the play of signs, the images, and the spectacles of the mass media replace every other kind of reality and are the key determinations of the shape and functioning of postmodern societies (Wilkerson, 2001 - 4). The real does not disappear to the benefit of the imaginary; it disappears to the benefit of the more real than the real: the "hyperreal". Truer than the true: such is simulation. As visible in "The Matrix", they make us understand the idea of accepting the simulated "virtual world" as the "real world", because the "virtual world" is a simulation which is truer than true.

"The industrial revolution made possible the serial replication of these signs, exterminating any reference, producing an explosion of referents. In the post-industrial era, metaphysical models of the code create a world of simulation without any reference to the real, an order of simulation that has no interest in the real whatsoever" (Wilkerson, 2001 - 1). According to Baudrillard signs become independent; this means that the sign needs to be transformed from symbol to sign; the concept of the independent sign is essential for understanding structuralism. This linguistic theory refers to the ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure, and his ideas on a system of internal differences rather than resemblances to objects in the material world. The signifier is the acoustic sound or material written word; the signified is the concept to which the signifier refers. This combination, signifier and signified, makes the sign. Thus the material acoustic sound is unique because it is surrounded by a whole system of differences, without referring to how it is different from another object. Thus difference is the key. Each sign also points to something beyond itself, but as sign it also points to a concept. Saussure calls this concept "signified"; this means

that we can think of the signified as a concept or idea that a community of speakers associates with the sound or written word. And again, the relationship between the signified and the signifier is arbitrary as well. The moment has arrived that we needed to clarify images into levels of reality for a better understanding of the image as sign. After doing so we can define the main images projected by "The Matrix" in terms of signs.

### The truth

To begin with the first level<sup>vi</sup>, this is where the image is a reflection of the basic reality; the second level is what masks and perverts reality in the image; the third level is the first aspect of masking the absence of reality within the image; and last, the fourth level is where the image bears no connotation or any reality whatsoever; it is its own simulacrum. The matrix's main image can be applied to the fourth level of images. On this level we move into a lucid and proactive utopian space, the creators who do not care that there is not any connection to reality, because the event itself has become the reality of concern. The main image is that which shows us the difference between the real and the virtual world. The difference is that the real world is a nuclear wasteland, dystopic, and the virtual world is a utopia. The real world is not only a nuclear wasteland; "there are endless fields with humans, as humans first were born now they are grown. Fate, it seems is not without a sense of irony" (Morpheus, Laurence Fishburne). Because the humans provided the machines with artificial intelligence the latter are able to enslave the human race. In this image, the metaphor of Plato materializes: mankind lives in a cave segregated from the rest of the world. Here, they are "as ignorant of the real earth and sky as frogs at the bottom of a pool." (Campbell, 1902) The prisoners are shown that their world is not real. The central example is Neo after being unplugged: "Don't touch me. Stay away from me. I don't want it. I don't believe it," (Reeves, Keanu) he shouts as he is awaked from the "dreamworld", the "virtual world". It is remarkable that there are four levels, just as there are levels of understanding according to Plato start with the first level: the shadow of the cave wall, the unreal, or fake reality; secondly the ideas behind the fake reality, those of the puppeteers; then, third we have the level of truth in its rawest form; finally level four, the key elements of the "real" world, the sun outside of the cave, and the knowledge of their existence (Spencer, 2000). Comparing the levels of Plato and the levels of image one could conclude that the difference is not that vast.

## Conclusion

In "The Matrix," the following happens: simulation replaces imagination; simulations and models of reality are disarranged to what once was supposed to be real. The difference between appearance and reality fades. Representation is superseded by presentation. Singularity of truth is replaced by plurality of viewpoint. The grand-narrative is replaced by more local accounts of reality. Just like the inflection of structuralism that moved attention from the concrete object to the object sign, the postmodern continues to move the attention from the signified to the signifier. "The Matrix" is not about rejection of reality, but about disarranging reality without boundaries. It provides us with a worldview and replaces all other worldviews, and that is what makes "The Matrix" a postmodern film.



## The search strategy

The search strategy was rather complex, the immense amount of information found was no surprise nor was its lack of general relevance. However, Google offers targeted functionality, such as “filetype:...” and Scholar, enabling for successful searches.

Thenceforth the most important search terms are listed for further assessment.

- Baudrillard, simulacra, hyperreal, Lyotard;
- Ferdinand de Saussure, signs and their value;
- Marxism, Marx, distinction
- Plato and cave theory;
- Postmodernism, Postmodernity, postmodern;
- The Matrix;
- Science fiction, information age;
- Utopia and dystopia;
- Worldview, weltanschauung;

## Bibliography

### Works cited: Recommended Readings

---

**Baudrillard, Jean.** Simulacra and Simulations. The University of Michigan Press: 1994.

**Branston, Gill and Stafford, Roy.** The Media Student's Book. London: Routledge, 1996,  
Used edition: 2002.

**Campbell, Lewis.** Plato's Republic. England: London, 1902.

**Hobsbawm, E.** Age of Extremes - The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991. London:  
Penguin, 1994.

**Jowett, B.** Plato, The republic. Vintage Classic Edition, United States, New York. March  
1991.

**López, José and Potter, Garry.** After Postmodernism; an introduction to critical realism.  
The Athlone Press, England: London. 2001.

**Spencer, Nicholas.** (2000) The Matrix. {offline}  
<http://www.utexas.edu/courses/greekmyth/matrix.html>.

**Wachowski, Larry and Andy.** The Matrix. USA: 1999.  
Characters cited: Reeves, Keanu as Neo Anderson.

**Wilkerson, Richard C.** DreamGate.com Computer Survey 2. DreamGate Publishing: San  
Francisco, CA. 2001.

**Bukatman, Scott.** Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Post-modern Science Fiction.  
Durham: Duke University Press. [http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/review\\_essays/gord61.htm](http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/review_essays/gord61.htm).

**Works Consulted:** Exploring Further

---

**Alvarez, Rosío.** There's more to the story: using narrative analysis to examine requirements engineering as a social process. University of Massachusetts Boston.  
<http://citeseer.ist.psu.edu/674873.html>.

**Aylett, Ruth and Louchart, Sandy.** Narrative Theory and Emergent Interactive Narrative. Centre for Virtual Environments, University of Salford. Narrative Theory and Emergent Interactive Narrative.

**Branston, Gill and Stafford, Roy.** The Media Student's Book. London: Routledge, 1996, Used edition: 2002.

**Baudrillard, Jean.** Simulacra and Simulations. The University of Michigan Press: 1994.

**Beavers, Anthony F.** Exploring Plato's dialogues.  
<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/bmerr/2000/MulheExploJan.html>

**Bukatman, Scott.** Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Post-modern Science Fiction. Durham: Duke University Press. [http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/review\\_essays/gord61.htm](http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/review_essays/gord61.htm).

**Chalmers, David.** The Marix as Metaphysics.  
[http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl\\_cmp/new\\_phil\\_fr\\_chalmers.html](http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl_cmp/new_phil_fr_chalmers.html).

**Dictionary.com.** <http://dictionary.reference.com>; Lexico Publishing Group, LLC.

**Dreyfus, Hubert and Dreyfus, Stephen.** The Brave New World of The Matrix.  
[http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl\\_cmp/new\\_phil\\_fr\\_dreyfus.html](http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl_cmp/new_phil_fr_dreyfus.html)

**Driver, Julia.** Artificial Ethics.  
[http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl\\_cmp/new\\_phil\\_fr\\_driver.html](http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl_cmp/new_phil_fr_driver.html)

**Felluga, Dino.** Modules on Barthes: On the Five Codes. Introductory Guide to Critical Theory.  
<http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/narratology/modules/barthescodes.html>

**Flannery-Dailey, Frances and Wagner, Rachel.** Wake up! Gnosticism and Buddhism in The Marix. [http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl\\_cmp/new\\_phil\\_wakeup.html](http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl_cmp/new_phil_wakeup.html)

**Grau, Christopher.** Dream Skepticism.

[http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl\\_cmp/new\\_phil\\_dream.html](http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl_cmp/new_phil_dream.html)

**Grau, Christopher.** Brains in Vats and the Evil Demon.

[http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl\\_cmp/new\\_phil\\_brain.html](http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl_cmp/new_phil_brain.html)

**Grau, Christopher.** The Value of Reality: Cypher & the Experience Machine.

[http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl\\_cmp/new\\_phil\\_experience.html](http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl_cmp/new_phil_experience.html)

**Hanley, Richard.** Never the Twain Shall Meet: Reflections on the First Matrix.

[http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl\\_cmp/new\\_phil\\_hanley.html](http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl_cmp/new_phil_hanley.html)

**Hobsbawm, E.** Age of Extremes - The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991. London: Penguin, 1994.

**Homer, Sean.** Originally by Fredric Jameson. (1991) *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.* Verso Books.

**Jowett, B.** Plato, The republic. Vintage Classic Edition, United States, New York. March 1991.

**Laseur, Carol.** The Field of Genre and Australian Filmic Texts: Transforming Cultural Narratives. <http://wwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/film/laseur/genre.html>:

- <http://wwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/film/laseur/chap1.html> (Chapter 1)
- <http://wwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/film/laseur/chap2.html> (Chapter 2)
- <http://wwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/film/laseur/chap3.html> (Chapter 3)
- <http://wwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/film/laseur/chap4.html> (Chapter 4)

**López, José and Potter, Garry.** After Postmodernism; an introduction to critical realism.

The Athlone Press, England: London. 2001.

**Kugler, Paul.** The Alchemy of Discourse: image, sound and psyche. Revised Edition, Daimon Verlag, 2002. [http://dreamgate.com/pomo/kugler\\_alchemy.htm](http://dreamgate.com/pomo/kugler_alchemy.htm).

**McKenna, Michael.** Neo's Freedom... Whoa!

[http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl\\_cmp/new\\_phil\\_mckenna.html](http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl_cmp/new_phil_mckenna.html)

**McNeill, Tony.** Roland Barthes: Mythologies (1957). The University of Sunderland, GB

<http://www.sunderland.ac.uk/~os0tmc/myth.htm#semio>

**Partridge, John.** Plato's Cave and The Matrix.

[http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl\\_cmp/new\\_phil\\_partridge.html](http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl_cmp/new_phil_partridge.html)

**Pryor, James.** What is so Bad About Living in the Matrix?

[http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl\\_cmp/new\\_phil\\_fr\\_pryor.html](http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl_cmp/new_phil_fr_pryor.html)

**Rank, Bernhard.** Theorie von Todorov. <http://www.ph->

[heidelberg.de/wp/rank/fantastik/download/vorlaeufig/todorov01.pdf](http://www.ph-heidelberg.de/wp/rank/fantastik/download/vorlaeufig/todorov01.pdf). (German)

**Shapiro, Gary.** After the future; Postmodern Times and Places. State University of New York

Press, USA: New York. 1990.

**Spencer, Nicholas.** (2000) The Matrix. {offline}

<http://www.utexas.edu/courses/greekmyth/matrix.html>.

**Underwood, Mick.**

- Semiotics – Saussure.
  - » <http://www.cultsock.ndirect.co.uk/MUHome/cshtml/semiomean/semio1.html>
- Postmodernism.
  - » <http://www.cultsock.ndirect.co.uk/MUHome/cshtml/general/pomodet.html>
- Meta-Narratives defined.
  - » <http://www.cultsock.ndirect.co.uk/MUHome/cshtml/popups/metanar.html>
- Postmodernism defined.
  - » <http://www.cultsock.ndirect.co.uk/MUHome/cshtml/popups/pomo.html>
- Nonverbal Communication. (part 1 - 6)
  - » <http://www.cultsock.ndirect.co.uk/MUHome/cshtml/nvc/nvc.html>
  - » <http://www.cultsock.ndirect.co.uk/MUHome/cshtml/nvc/nvc2.html>
  - » <http://www.cultsock.ndirect.co.uk/MUHome/cshtml/nvc/nvc3.html>
  - » <http://www.cultsock.ndirect.co.uk/MUHome/cshtml/nvc/nvc4.html>
  - » <http://www.cultsock.ndirect.co.uk/MUHome/cshtml/nvc/nvc5.html>
  - » <http://www.cultsock.ndirect.co.uk/MUHome/cshtml/nvc/nvc6.html>

**Vasiliou, Iakovos.** Reality, What Matters, and The Matrix.

[http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl\\_cmp/new\\_phil\\_iakovos.html](http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl_cmp/new_phil_iakovos.html)

**Wilkerson, Richard C.** DreamGate.com Computer Survey 2. DreamGate Publishing: San Francisco, CA. 2001.

- <sup>1</sup> Postmodern Dreaming: Inhabiting the Improveverse.
  - » [http://dreamgate.com/pomo/inhabiting\\_improveverse.htm](http://dreamgate.com/pomo/inhabiting_improveverse.htm)
- <sup>2</sup> Emergence or Replacement Imagery?
  - » [http://dreamgate.com/pomo/emergence\\_replacement.htm](http://dreamgate.com/pomo/emergence_replacement.htm)
- <sup>3</sup> Postmodern Dreaming, May 1997.
  - » [http://www.dreamgate.com/dream/articles\\_rcw/drmpomo1.htm](http://www.dreamgate.com/dream/articles_rcw/drmpomo1.htm)
- <sup>4</sup> Signs of Simulation, Symbols beyond Value
  - » [http://www.dreamgate.com/dream/articles\\_rcw/ baudrillard-dream.htm](http://www.dreamgate.com/dream/articles_rcw/ baudrillard-dream.htm)

About the movie itself:

**The Matrix** and **The Matrix Revisited**

Directed and written by the brothers Wachowski, Larry and Andy (1999)

- <http://www.whatisthematrix.com>

About: **The Wachowski Brothers**

- [http://www.ambidextrouspics.com/html/andy\\_and\\_larry\\_wachowski.html](http://www.ambidextrouspics.com/html/andy_and_larry_wachowski.html)
- <http://us.imdb.com/name/nm0905152/>
- <http://us.imdb.com/name/nm0905154/>

**The contributors can be found at:**

- [http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl\\_cmp/new\\_phil\\_fr\\_contribs.html](http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl_cmp/new_phil_fr_contribs.html)

## End notes

---

- i The term "grand-narrative" was invented by Lyotard. The term he uses is grand récit, the French word for narrative
- ii Meta narratives are ordinarily taken to be the objective "truth". However, there are only versions of truth as earlier explained. Or as cited from dictionary.com: "any story told to justify another story, especially involving artifice; a story about oneself that provides a view of one's experiences".
- iii In some cases interaction does not interfere with narrative and narrative is a spur to interaction (and the construction of more narrative). This applies to what I will call micronarratives. Even though micronarrative and interaction are not incompatible, there remains the problem of constructing a macronarrative out of interaction with micronarratives.
- iv Utopian: excellent or ideal but impracticable; visionary: a utopian scheme for equalizing wealth; proposing impracticably ideal schemes (dictionary.com).
- v Dystopia: an imaginary place or state in which the condition of life is extremely bad, as from deprivation, oppression, or terror; state in which the condition of life is extremely bad as from deprivation or oppression or terror (dictionary.com).
- vi Freud, Sigmund invented this theory about levels of images; I have regenerated the theory a little, especially the fourth level.