

I wrote this essay in 2018 for a graduate course in sociology at the London School of Economics. As usual, I left it until the very last minute, so it's much less polished than I would have liked. After submitting, I went back and fixed some typos and grammatical errors, so what you're seeing below is a slightly better version of what I submitted. It's still not very good, admittedly, but I did have a lot of fun writing it.

More details on the course here: <https://dellsystem.me/SO427>

-Wendy Liu

A critical analysis of *The Matrix*

Drawing on Adorno and Baudrillard

The best speculative fiction plunges us into a world that is both terrifyingly alien and uncannily familiar. By forcing us to consider the horrors of an imaginary world, it opens up a space that allows us to realise the horrors of our own.

The Matrix (1999) might just be one of the highlights of the genre. The film takes place in a post-apocalyptic distant future, where human beings are subjugated for the purpose of producing the energy needed by a machinic enemy that has achieved artificial intelligence. The population is placated through the use of a simulated dreamworld, the eponymous "Matrix" that bears no small resemblance to our own.

This makes the film a fruitful vehicle for exploring the theories of Adorno and Baudrillard, especially as they pertain to exploitation, ideology, and reality. The filmmakers themselves were known to have drawn heavily on the work of Baudrillard, particularly *Simulacra and Simulations* (2006), which was allegedly given to the actors to read as well as shown briefly in a scene from the movie¹. On the other hand, Baudrillard himself has insinuated that the movie misinterpreted his work², so I will also examine how the film sometimes goes against (or has an unorthodox interpretation) of his thought.

For Baudrillard, science fiction is not merely an "escape from everyday reality: on the contrary, it is an extrapolation from the irrational tendencies of that reality through the free exercise of narrative invention." (2005, p.128) That makes it worthy of investigation, as a means of better understanding our own reality. This essay will critically analyse the film from various angles, offering interpretations that range from the typical to those that go against the grain.

¹ The main character, Neo, keeps a hollowed-out copy in his room for storage purposes.

² In which case, perhaps we could say that the film represents a simulation of Baudrillard's thought.

What is the Matrix?



00:42:50

In the “real” world of The Matrix, the year is sometime around 2199. At some point, humanity developed superintelligent machines that took over, and humanity now occupies a sunless, hypermachinised wasteland where the vast majority of human beings are being exploited on an almost unfathomable scale. Harvested for energy in endless fields, deracinated and kept in isolated pods, their only salvation is the fact that most of them are unaware of their situation, distracted as they are by a simulation called the Matrix:



MORPHEUS: The Matrix is a computer-generated dream world built to keep us under control in order to change a human being into this.

—Morpheus explaining to Neo that human beings are being harvested for energy, 00:43:38

In 'The Precession of Simulacra,' Baudrillard writes:

"To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have." (2006, p.3)

Here, the simulation is of everything humanity once had but has since lost: mobility, control, freedom, agency. This simulation is a perpetually static world, disconnected from both history and from the future. This may be part of why the very idea of this simulation feels so repulsive to the viewer—as Baudrillard writes,

"We require a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin, which reassures us about our end." (ibid, p.10)

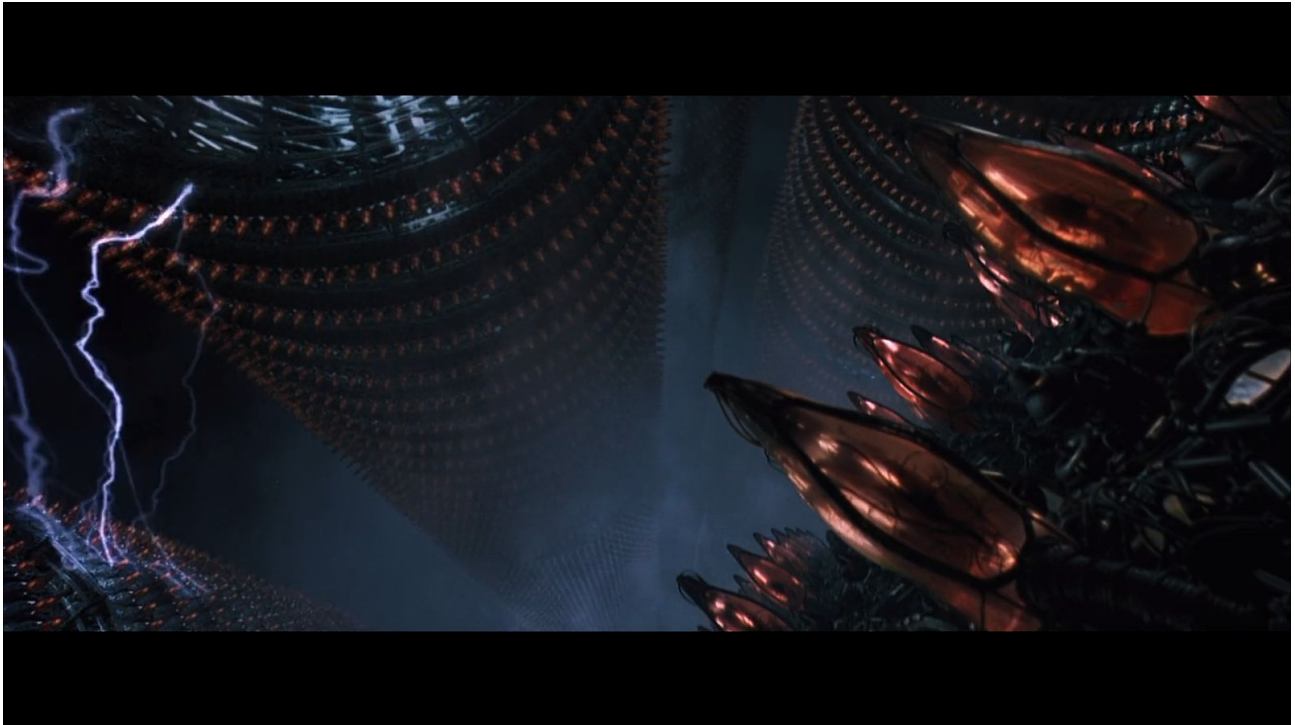
We need the past to make sense of the future, in order to come to terms with our eventual death. But this simulation is not grounded in any sort of "reality", and thus feels like an exercise in futility.

The Marxist approach

The ultimate horror of *The Matrix* is that of turning human beings into objects, where a human being becomes not something in itself, with its own agency, but is instead a means to an end.

The most obvious interpretation involves a Marxist approach, which both thinkers draw on even if they break from it in certain areas. Adorno, in particular, had much to say on the monstrosity of commodification under late capitalism, whereby living labour is turned into congealed products and human beings are reduced to the surplus value that can be extracted from them.

At its most base level, the entire scenario depicted in *The Matrix* is a fitting allegory for the exploitation of the proletariat under capitalism in an orthodox Marxist interpretation. The reality/simulation dichotomy corresponds to the base/superstructure in Marxian theory, whereby the barbarity of the relations of production are concealed by the soothing simulation that is the superstructure. The pod-based system is analogous to the extraction of surplus value from a field of etiolated proletariat who, even worse, do not even realise the degree of their oppression.



Neo looks in horror at the bondage of his fellow proletariat, 00:33:32

As a result, life has become “mere consumption, dragged along as an appendage of the process of material production [...] Our perspective of life has passed into an ideology which conceals the fact that there is life no longer.” (Adorno, 2005, p.15) The simulation of life that is the Matrix is meant to conceal the utter lack of life. The famous quote at the beginning of *Minima Moralia*, 'Das Leben lebt nicht' [or: Life does not live] by Austrian poet Ferdinand Kürnberger (ibid, p.19), seems especially apt here. Fredric Jameson interprets this as acknowledging the “maimed and damaged nature of human living under late capitalism” (2007, p.113), but it can equally well capture the futility, the lifelessness, of life—such as it is—under this mode of production.

Adorno’s description of late capitalism in ‘Is Marx Obsolete?’ (1987) sheds additional light, showing that the mode of production in *The Matrix* is eerily analogous to industrial capitalism. “Men are still dominated by means of the economic process” (p.6) and “Production takes place today as ever before for the sake of profit” (p.7) writes Adorno, but in *The Matrix* is the machines who serve as a stand-in for the economic system, and this reminds us that both systems that dominate humanity were, indeed, created by humanity itself.

The Matrix is everywhere

MORPHEUS: The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us. Even now, in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.

NEO: What truth?

MORPHEUS: That you are a slave. Like everyone else, you were born into bondage, born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. A prison for your mind.

—Morpheus explaining to Neo what the Matrix is, 00:27:46

You could hardly wish for a better illustration of the role of ideology in maintaining the system of exploitation that is capitalism.

Both Adorno and Baudrillard explore how ideology works in preserving oppression through a form of false consciousness. Although both thinkers highlight how consumption serves to distract workers from the misery of their situation, by keeping them in a somnambulistic state of acedia while they keep producing, each has a slightly different focus.

Adorno's culture industry

An important part of Adorno's work involved fleshing out a theory of a sophisticated media culture industry as the psychological arm of capitalism, which was not typically accounted for in standard Marxist theory. This examines how society produced the "culture" necessary to keep people placated, best illustrated through his joint essay with Marx Horkheimer, 'The Culture Industry' (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997). The Matrix, as simulation, can be conceived of as precisely this culture industry—an all-encompassing ideological system that both derives from the mode of production and is necessary to keep it going³, to keep the "workers" in this system from rebelling. The result is to leave those in the system powerless and, further, dependent on the structures that reinforce that powerlessness. They are enslaved by the system, but they cannot imagine exiting it:

MORPHEUS: Most of these people 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.

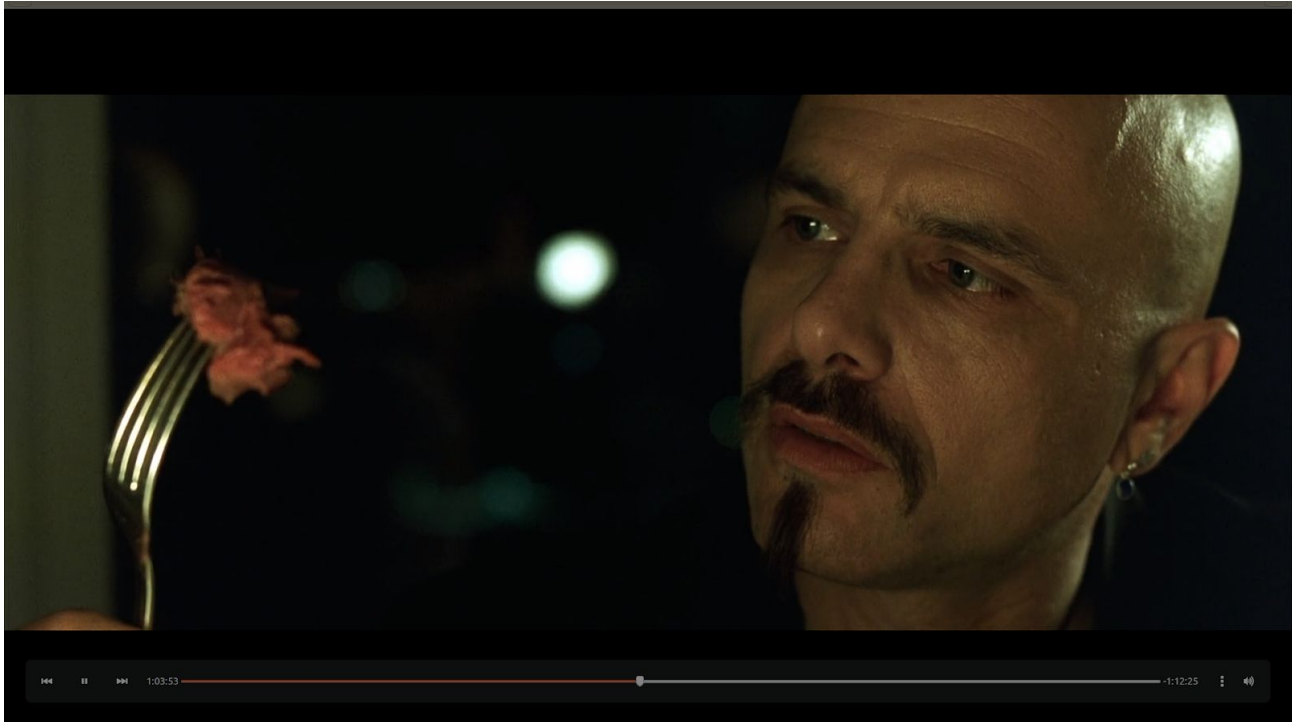
—on other people in the Matrix, 00:56:59

Baudrillard's consumer society

In a complementary vein, Baudrillard theorises on the system of consumption—whose apex is advertising as a semiotic system—and its relation to production. Much of *The Consumer Society* (2009) is premised on the idea that consumption is "a powerful element of social control" (p.84), whereby desires—long detached from actual material needs—are instilled as part of a system of signs and subsequently satisfied via another system of signs (i.e., commodities). Advertising is about *seduction* via the world of forms (2003, p.24), and as long as desires continue to be artificially created, the world of production remains subordinate. Instead, we have the primacy of the system of consumption, whereby commodities constitute a "signifying fabric": "the virtual totality of all objects and messages ready-constituted as a more or less coherent discourse" (2005, p.218). This isn't far off from the world of *The Matrix*: as long as people are seduced by the simulation, the mode of production—no matter how barbaric or unthinkable—will remain.

³ "The culture industry sprang from the profit-making tendency of capital. It developed under the law of the market [...] and then, by a dialectical reversal, ended up having the result of solidifying the existing forms of consciousness and the intellectual status quo." (Adorno, 1969, p.152)

Falling for the swindle



CYPHER: 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 realised? Ignorance is bliss.

—Cypher making a deal to re-enter the Matrix, 01:03:50

One of the most potent storylines involves a character who is aware of the artificiality of the Matrix but still wishes to re-enter it. For him, knowing the truth is not enough, given the harsh realities of life in the “real world”, and he would prefer the distraction of the simulation. Adorno would characterise this as “renunciation of utopia”—“deciding in favour of a thing even though I know perfectly well that it is a swindle” (2011/1989, p.54). The real-world analogue is gratification via mindless consumption, despite knowing the brutal realities of production and knowing that consumption is intended precisely to placate or distract them from the former, in a turn to self-deception. Adorno terms this “falling for the swindle”:

“They force their eyes shut and voice approval, in a kind of self-loathing, for what is meted out to them, knowing fully the purpose for which it is manufactured. Without admitting it they sense that their lives would be completely intolerable as soon as they no longer clung to satisfactions which are none at all.” (1975, p.10)

The red pill



MORPHEUS: You take the blue pill, the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.

—Morpheus offers Neo a choice, 00:29:05

In a particularly memorable scene in the film, Neo is given a choice between two pills. The blue pill is a return to the oneiric comfort of the Matrix; the red pill represents a chance to learn the truth. Cypher's decision to re-enter the Matrix is him symbolically choosing the blue pill, and given that Cypher is eventually killed off—his death not even mourned—the film makes it clear that the blue pill is the wrong pill. Neo, on the other hand, goes straight for the red pill, and his subsequent heroic arc confirms that it was the right choice in the context of the film.

The dangers of the red pill

But is the red pill always the right choice? We can investigate this through the way the very concept of “red-pilling” has seeped into popular culture, resulting in an intriguing blending between fiction and reality which any critical analysis of the film (and especially one that draws on Baudrillard) would be remiss to ignore. The most well-known usage refers to the men's rights movement, which I would personally classify as a reactionary backlash against feminism dedicated to misunderstanding its implications. The term also often refers to accepting a broader set of what I would call conspiracy theories: 9/11 being an “inside job”, “chemtrails”, antisemitic theories about who controls the world—what I suspect Adorno would call undialectical thinking.⁴

Which brings us to the question of what the red pill actually *means*. Is it necessarily the right choice? Does it always bring about a deeper truth? A straightforward reading of the film tells us

⁴ Jameson describes dialectical thinking as “reflexivity, self-consciousness, ‘thought to the second power’” (2007, p.25), which I personally categorise these theories as lacking.

yes, but acknowledging the porousness of the boundary between the film and real life—between the simulation and the Real, which Baudrillard would surely encourage—casts doubt on that. We are then left at an impasse, an epistemological aporia, whereby both reality and conspiracy theory are represented by *the same pill*. After all, one person's incisive and trenchant analysis is another's conspiracy theory, and whether it's objectively accurate or not is inherently buried within subjectivity. There is no ontological separation between the truth and illusion in this constructed dilemma, at least not one that feels satisfying.

For both Adorno and Baudrillard, the “truth” is likely to fall somewhere in the ballpark of critical theory, based on a Marxist understanding of reality. But this is inferred from studying the purposes to which they dedicated large parts of their lives (i.e., writing on critical theory); their actual written work is more open-ended and leaves us with further questions. Each theorist offers an alternative hypothesis that can be seen as a critique of (uncritical) red-pilling, highlighting the potential dangers of going down the wrong rabbit hole.

Adorno on occultism

In ‘Theses Against Occultism’ (2001, p.172-180), Adorno inveighs against astrology and other forms of what he describes as occult thinking. For Adorno, occultism is a “symptom of regression in consciousness” (Thesis I); it is a devolved state. Stemming from the loss of the ability to “endure the conditional”—that is, to cope with the misery of everyday life—it manifests as a desire to find some greater truth.

In the film, Neo is shown to have been searching for precisely such a greater truth:

MORPHEUS: Let me tell you why you're here. You know something. What you know, you can't explain. But you feel it. You felt it your entire life: Something's wrong with the world.

—Morpheus and Neo first meet, 00:26:37

For Adorno, such a desire is rooted in the particular form of societal configuration specific to late capitalism (Theses II to IV). In this light, occultism is merely the logical extension of commodity fetishism, whereby the reflexive tendency to imbue commodities—“menacingly objectified labour”—with spiritual qualities is transferred onto the natural world. Alienated from the products of human labour, which now only appear in commodity form, and forced to live a “world congealed into [those] products”, the response is to turn the natural into the supernatural. Such, it appears, is the escape mechanism, the search for an “outside” to the present state of reified commodification.

In other words, Adorno sees the tendency toward occultism as core to society. It is a “reflex-action to the subjectification of all meaning, the complement of reification”; the other side of the coin as alienation, it represents a desperate yearning for meaning in a world that has been deliberately stripped of all meaning. Thought itself, which has “assimilated to late capitalist forms”, has been coerced by late capitalism into fulfilling a crucial role in the system: that of promising an escape. And yet, this putative escape is nothing more than “pathetic attempts to squint through the chinks in its walls, while revealing nothing of what is outside” (Thesis III). It is an ideological tool, a false escape absorbed by a totalising capitalism that is capable of subsuming any attempts to escape. It cannot reach the outside, if there is an outside to be reached at all.

Seen in that vein, Neo's journey takes on disturbing implications. What if this answer that Neo is searching for is just another wild ideological goose chase—just another conspiracy theory, akin to believing in astrology? What if his search is a false hope? Looked at through this lens, the storyline with the Oracle and the prophecy, which lends the film a fantastical element, seems rather dubious.

The straightforward interpretation of the film is that Neo is a revolutionary hero who has discovered the way the world really works—has found the hidden meanings—and is trying to save the rest of the world by getting them to wake up. Following the tropes of cinema, he is the hero; the camera centers his perspective, which tells us we are meant to sympathise with and even identify with him. By cinematic fiat, Neo is the character the viewer is meant to root for. But there is an alternative reading in light of Adorno's theses against occultism.

After all, in thesis V, Adorno makes it clear that the road to occultism is also the road to fascism. Fascism, too, is premised on finding hidden meanings, whereby a "consciousness famished for truth imagines it is grasping a dimly present knowledge" (Thesis V), some sort of cosmic higher power to fill in the blanks in one's cognitive map. Those seduced by fascism see themselves as "prospective victims of a whole made up solely of themselves", and are then only able to bear this possibility by "transferring that whole to something similar but external", inventing an "other" that can be blamed for the ills of the world.

The less comforting interpretation is Neo's entire journey is one of messianic self-delusion, whereby our (anti-)hero has been duped into believing that he is "the one" and that as a result, whatever he does can be justified under the aegis of oracular decree. In this reading, our protagonists are terrorists who have invented an "other" in the form of super-intelligent machines who can be blamed for all the inexpiable wrongs of the world and thus must be eradicated. One scene in particular begins to look more disturbing in light of this alternative interpretation, as Morpheus claims that their enemy can appear in any form:

MORPHEUS: The Matrix is a system, Neo. That system is our enemy. But when you're inside, what do you see? Businessmen, teachers, lawyers, carpenters. The very minds of the people we are trying to save. But until we do, these people are a part of that system, and that makes them our enemy.

—Morpheus giving Neo a justification for killing anyone who gets in their way, 00:56:38

This culminates in a scene where Trinity and Neo, attempting to rescue Morpheus, shoot their way through a building full of armed guards:



After Neo and Trinity have massacred people who were just doing their jobs, 01:44:17

This orgiastic spectacle is clearly meant to be exhilarating—the viewer is expected to celebrate our heroes’ glamorised triumph over their enemies, and cheer on their gravity-defying bellicosity—but in the shadow of this contrapuntal reading, it starts to look less like a victory and more like a horrific massacre. Perhaps Agent Smith was right all along: Morpheus may in fact be a terrorist, one who has managed to ensnare Neo in his deluded quest to return humanity to some prelapsarian state. Our protagonists, far from being revolutionary heroes who have seen through the veil, may instead be reactionaries, violently rebelling against a world they are unhappy with and leaving a trail of corpses in their wake.

The red-pilling did not take place

We can extend this analysis by turning to Baudrillard. In an interview with *Le Nouvel Observateur* about the film⁵, he suggests that the filmmakers misunderstood his work: “These people take the hypothesis of the virtual as a fact and carry it over to visible fantasms.” After all, the film sets up a clear dichotomy between the simulacra and the “real” world, between the world of the Matrix and the world in which people can plug in to the Matrix. And yet much of Baudrillard’s work is about challenging the idea of this clear dichotomy. This is best captured by his concept of “hyperreality”, whereby the real and the fake bleed into each other, such that any distinction between them is meaningless. In ‘The Precession of Simulacra’, Baudrillard writes:

“Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the "real" country, all of "real" America that is Disneyland [...] Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation.” (2006, p.12)

⁵ Available at https://web.archive.org/web/20080113012028/http://www.empyree.org/divers/Matrix-Baudrillard_english.html

In a way, the Matrix is more real than the real world itself. In one scene set in the “real” world, the characters discuss a food product called “Tastee Wheat”, which some of the characters have encountered in the Matrix. Ostensibly, this product is a copy of a product that once existed in the “real” world, before the human race was enslaved; on the other hand, as one of the characters asks, “how do the machines really know what Tastee Wheat tasted like?” And what guarantee is there that Tastee Wheat ever existed in the “real” world in the first place? Does it even matter whether it existed in the “real” world if its existence in the Matrix is functionally equivalent for the characters who have experienced it?

Taking this one step further, we can ask whether the “real world” we are shown is in fact the real world, or just another simulation—another “Matrix”. Not necessarily in the sense that this layer was also manufactured by machines, but in a more philosophical sense: what makes the “real” world more real than the Matrix if experiences are functionally equivalent—if dying in the Matrix entails dying in real life?

Whether this was intended by the filmmakers is debatable, but in a way, that is besides the point; the very medium of cinema itself blurs the whole subject of what is “real” and what is illusion. Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism* (2009) discusses Baudrillard’s fascination with “the way in which abolition of the Symbolic led not to a direct encounter with the Real, but to a kind of hemorrhaging of the real.” (p.48). The very ontological stability of what is and is not “reality” is threatened by the ability to jump between the worlds. In *Passwords* (2003), Baudrillard writes:

“[...] to bring a real world into being is itself to produce that world, and the real has only ever been a form of simulation. We may, admittedly, cause a reality-effect, a truth-effect or an objectivity-effect to exist, but, in itself, the real does not exist.” (2000, p.39)

Like much of Baudrillard’s writing, this should probably be interpreted in a somewhat ludic way, but it touches on a point that rings throughout Baudrillard’s entire body of work on the topic of the “real”. Perhaps the very existence of the Matrix makes it real, with simulation and “reality” bleeding into each other. Perhaps the entire notion of “red-pilling” is based on an unreasonably binary perspective that ignores the inherent liminality of the process.

There is no spoon

As nebulous and arcane as this point seems to be, there are some serious implications for the concept of “red-pilling”. Let’s return to the straightforward interpretation of red-pilling as radical thought, a way of cutting through the illusions to see the world for what it really is. Baudrillard might agree, at least on a simplistic level: “radical thought, for its part, wagers on the illusion of the world.” (2008, p.98) Critical theory, as a metaphorical “red pill”, is about seeing through the veil, recognising the buried mechanisms that characterise existence.

In that case, in light of the previous two sections, it becomes imperative to ask what sort of “red pill” it is. Is it a false escape? Is it merely a desperate search for meaning in a world where all possibility of meaning has vanished and its cinerous remains are on display at a supermarket? How can it avoid becoming another commodity that is neatly parcelled out into, as Adorno would say, “demonically grimacing objects” (2001, Thesis II)? If critical theory is an attempt to expand the lacuna between reality and appearance, to expose the mechanisms beneath the surface, then at what point does it become absorbed by the very surface that it is critiquing?

This may be a touch too dramatic, but it's hard to avoid thinking about this possibility when I am in the middle of writing a 5,000-word essay to be processed by the opaque bureaucracy of an increasingly commodified higher education landscape. Whereby my attempt to grapple with critical theory has become a mere instrument in the machinery of academia, which—far from being a refuge—is more and more turning into critical theory's worst fear: a commercial enterprise for quantifying the inherently unquantifiable, for triaging according to a rubric. Whose teleology is dictated by the vicissitudes of an ever-encroaching capitalist logic, pulling everything it touches into the ambit of a government-sponsored framework for assessing excellence.

Just as “reified consciousness does not end where reification has a place of honour”⁶, neither does the ability to define “capitalist realism” confer immunity from its effects. Unlike the world of *The Matrix*, our world—the “real” world, if such a concept can be taken at face value anymore—is not made manipulable through the act of understanding how it works. Seeing through the artifice of the system—recognising that there is no spoon—is not enough to bend the spoon. Understanding the logic of commodity fetishism does not neutralise the relentless march of capitalism; we can take the red pill, but there is no one to unplug us from the system.

The ultimate redpill

Taking a step back from the metadiscourse and returning to the subject at hand: the analysis of *The Matrix*. Sure, it's just another cheesy action film, but its impact on popular culture is remarkable, and it hasn't faded with age—for many, the idea of “waking up” has become indelibly associated with this film, through the concepts of “unplugging” and “red-pilling”. In a way, *The Matrix* itself may be the ultimate redpill, recursively exposing viewers to the possibility that there is something to be redpilled about. That message is made clear by the ending song, Rage Against The Machine's “Wake Up”, and the film's lasting effect on collective memory is a testament to the success of that message.

Why does that message resonate so much? Perhaps this taps into a general flickering recognition that social reality as it appears is not satisfactory, a suspicion that there is something deeper going on. Fredric Jameson touches on this with respect to Marxism in his book on Adorno:

No future is conceivable, however, from which the deeper ideological commitment to politics—that is to say, left politics—is absent. [...] Whether the word Marxism disappears or not, [...] the thing itself will inevitably reappear. (2007, p.251)

Seen in that vein, perhaps *The Matrix* tapped into something deeper than even the filmmakers intended. If the reason science fiction is so politically useful is because “it treats the fictional as a means of accessing the non-fictional” (Davies, p.26), then the dystopian imaginary world in *The Matrix* opens up a space that allows us to realise the dystopia in our own world, today. Sometimes the world on the screen reflects something of the world that contains the screen, bringing to the forefront something that was previously only in the viewers' subconscious.

Analysing the film's message through the work of Adorno and Baudrillard brings us to far more interesting hermeneutics: the red pill may not be what it appears. For Adorno, the very idea of

⁶ Quote from Adorno (1987) on the Soviet Union

some cleverly-named protagonist being “The One”, destined to lead a merry band of revolutionaries in pursuit of some greater truth, would be anathema; his experience of fascism led him to conflate self-described revolution with regression. For Baudrillard, what would even be the point of a red pill when anti-systemic ideas like Marxist merely provide the system with ontological ballast, and in any case there is no longer any such thing as reality?

If Adorno and Baudrillard have shown us anything, it's that the central choice of *The Matrix* is not some Manichaeian choice between good and bad, between red and blue. Imagine, instead, an infinitude of red pills. You have to pick one, but there's no way of telling which one is the right pill, or indeed if there even is a “right” pill. Choose wisely.

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Feedback

This is a really enjoyable essay – you set about analysing Matrix in a very imaginative way, and go to great lengths to make a number of intriguing connections with the movie and the work of Baudrillard and Adorno. Some of the connections work well – such as the link you make to commodification and the culture industry in Adorno's work, and of course, reality as Baudrillard conceives it. Elsewhere, I am a bit less convinced, the links you make need a lot more discussion and work – for example when you compare reality/simulation to base/superstructure on p. 3 – I am not sure this works, you would need to explore what Baudrillard himself does with these terms in Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign, as well as The Mirror of Production. My sense is that he would accuse you of complicity with a system which demands that there is a 'reality' at all, whereas his argument is that everything has collapsed into simulation (think of the Borges map). Likewise, I think you risk mis-characterizing Adorno's on p 10, when you talk about critical theory in relation to truth (he does not believe we can ever see through the 'veil'). So while the essay is strong, there are some question marks that keep it at Merit level. Mark: 65