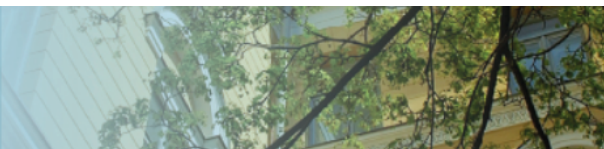


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The Concept of Hyperrealism in Cyberpunk Films. The Film *The*

***Matrix* (1999): a Case Study**

1. Introduction

At the dawn of twenty first century, the people, especially in the developed countries are living in a world dominated by digital technology and its by-products, described by the French philosopher Baudrillard as “simulations”. This simulation in everyday life has led to the development of a new postmodern theory called Hyperrealism. I have endeavoured to study the concept of hyperrealism as expounded by various hyperreality theorists, predominantly European thinkers, to find out how it is expressed in cyberpunk art forms. The reasons for studying this concept are threefold. First of all, I have taken the film *The Matrix* (1999) as a representative cyberpunk film, which openly gives the cue that it is engaging with the concept when it makes numerous references to Baudrillard and his landmark book *Simulacra and Simulations* (1981). Secondly the hyperreality concept provides the base to understand the contemporary situation better than any other postmodern theory. Thirdly hyperrealism is a by-product of the technological developments, more specifically, the computer and virtual reality. In order to show that cyberpunk offers an effective critique of contemporary western world it is essential to look into the most relevant contemporary theory, that is, hyperrealism.

2. Definitions of hyperrealism

It is first essential to examine the connotations of hyperrealism with reference to how it has evolved over the years, to understand its significance in cyberpunk. After describing these concepts, each theoretical position is spelled out in detail with special emphasis on Baudrillard. Real is variously defined as factual or actual.¹ It is most often identified by what it is not supposed to be. It should not be imaginary, pretended, artificial, etc.

Hyperreality melts these opposing concepts like, real and illusion, fact and fantasy, into one unified experience. It can be either realistic representation of fantasy or fantastical representation of the real. This hard to define concept has been examined by various hyperreal theorists from various angles and at different points of time in history.

3. Jean Baudrillard's views on simulation

Jean Baudrillard dealt with this issue as a postmodern theorist through the publication of his book *Simulacra and Simulations* (1994)² which was first published in French in 1981. In this book he looks at the postmodern culture which is characterized by endless mass reproduction of copies through media and other forms of simulations. He looks at simulation in various fields like history, media, advertising, ethnography, etc and describes that these simulations or copies have no reference to the original. Since the representation of real has effectively replaced the real, he says there is no more reality in this world. Since there is no reality, there can be no imaginary either. So he concludes that everything has become hyperreal and this whole world is simulation. This is one of the major themes that influenced the making of the film, *The Matrix*.³

4. Cyberpunk and Hyperrealism

Cyberpunk and Hyperrealism share some common grounds in that both are recent developments and they deal with one of the most significant and fast emerging problems of contemporary western culture. Cyberpunk and Hyperrealism, both have their birth in association with the development of sophisticated digital technology that could recreate a world of illusion. However, they are not just illusions.

The hyperrealism theory talks about illusions of various kind. There are social illusions like celebrities whom Daniel J. Boorstin⁴ calls as human pseudo-events; there are economic illusions where Umberto Eco⁵ says consumers buy products as if they are playing fiction; there are aesthetic illusions where a digitally printed copy of a painting looks more attractive than its original dull painting, etc. Most of the illusions have their existence mainly due to the development of technology, especially digital and its related fields. This is similar to the genre cyberpunk, which owes its existence to the computer technology and its relationship with humans.

In cyberpunk, the plot is usually set in worlds that are artificially created in a virtual medium which is accessed by characters by plugging into some advanced technology. Cyberpunk accepts the presence of real and virtual worlds though there is no consensus over which is real. Simulations are presented as real and the real are simulated. This presence of real and fictitious world in reality is shared by the hyperreal theorists, with the exception of Baudrillard who denies the existence of real.

Both cyberpunk and hyperrealists dwell on issues like human experiences and how people get confounded by the two and in the process mistake hyperreal for real.

Cyberpunk and hyperrealism deals with issues like organized economic exploitation by mega corporations. The mega corporations or any authority that produces the simulation also make sure that the consumer or user does not become aware of this truth by providing them an enhanced reality.

5. Hyperrealism in the film *The Matrix* (1999)

The film *The Matrix* (1999) is a phenomenal movie in the cyberpunk genre. The most relevant contemporary issue the film touches on is, ‘what is real?’ Though the film is set in the virtual world and talks in detail about virtual reality, it also strikingly captures the essence of the contemporary West, especially America, where another phenomenon called Hyperrealism is happening throughout the country.

The movie, through its virtual reality concept deftly analyses the issues of both the computer generated virtual world as well as the hyperreal world. The character Morpheus acts as a kind of Hyperreal theorist and takes Neo and the audience through various kinds of illusions and representations that they encounter in their everyday life. Morpheus tells Neo, “I promised you the truth, Neo, and the truth is that the world you were living in was a lie.”⁶

In the first scene, the film sucks us into the Matrix or the virtual world by zooming in the camera into the binary codes. The audience at first does not realize its significance until

Morpheus comes and explains to Neo that we are seeing the virtual world constructed by the AI. He explains to Neo that the world he is living in is an illusion. In fact, in the original script, he mentions that Neo is living in the world Baudrillard envisioned. Then Morpheus shows the real Chicago set in future which looks like a wasteland and says, “Welcome, to the desert of the real.” This is a direct reference to Baudrillard’s first chapter “The Precision of Simulacra” where he uses Borges’ fable to define hyperrealism.⁷ The film tries to capture Baudrillard’s simulation concept through the virtual medium. Baudrillard comments that the end of message signifies the end of medium. So there is no longer any media or difference between one state and another.

In *The Matrix* film, the virtual reality medium is used to illustrate the concept of the hyperreal which almost unifies all medium for its existence. However, unlike Baudrillard’s argument, the film is not devoid of content. It also does not end with pessimistic note as Baudrillard’s theory suggests that everything is empty and has lost its meaning. The film ends positively, with Neo saying, “I’m going to show them a world without you. A world without rules and controls, without borders and boundaries. A world where anything is possible. Where we go from there is a choice I leave to you.” This shows that the people in future will understand the virtual medium better and will try to control the simulations instead of being slave to images.

This idea is explained through the film’s narration as we see the slow transition of Neo from an ordinary hacker to a superman like saviour. Neo learns several lessons through out the film. He is first afraid to jump between skyscrapers, later he becomes adept at it.

In the beginning he dodges bullets fired by the Agents. In the end we see him stopping the bullets in mid-air by using his mind. This shows that he has learnt that everything around him is only a construct created by the AI. In the last scene when he calls the Agents from a phone booth, he makes it clear that he understood the way he was controlled and ruled by the AI by using a highly sophisticated virtual world. The film ends with the beginning of Neo's enlightenment about the world he has lived in so far. This can be understood better if one applies Walter Benjamin's argument on mechanical reproduction of art. Benjamin in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"⁸ illustrates how the early critics spent time on trying to find out whether photography can be considered as an art, instead of realizing its impact and how it has transformed the entire nature of the 'traditional' art forms. Similarly virtual reality is in its beginning stage but it has a definite impact on how we look at reality today.

According to Baudrillard, there is no real anywhere in this world, for one to escape. He describes that there is only the existence of hyperreal and it is the world we live in. But the film shows co-existence of multiple worlds where human beings wander from one world to another. The real world is not shown as desirable since Chicago is shown in ruins after a post apocalyptic war that has burnt the earth and the sun.

The film *The Matrix* describes that the world surrounding us is a simulated reality. Like what Baudrillard and Eco say, the Matrix is an illusion created by the AI for some purpose. Just like Disneyland which recreates a simulated world and makes us consumers, here the AI is using us for electrical energy by keeping us in illusion. And

both make sure that we forget the fact that we indeed are living in a simulated world. We are kept in prison like pod and are not given any choices.

There is another view that it is all about control and power. In the postmodern world, when capitalists and government control is slipping away, the mega corporations try to have their control in a simulated environment which is seen as most feasible.⁹ Eco in *Travels in Hyperreality* (1986) calls the Disneyland an “allegory of the consumer society” and also a “place of total passivity. He describes,

Its visitors must agree to behave like robots. Access to each attraction is regulated by a maze of metal railings which discourages any individual initiative. The number of visitors obviously sets the pace of the line; the officials of the dream, properly dressed in the uniforms ... regulate every move (“Now wait here please, go up now, sit down please, wait before standing up,” always in a polite tone, impersonal, imperious, over the microphone). If the visitor pays this price, he can have not only “the real thing” but the abundance of the reconstructed truth. (Eco 48)

This is the kind of prison the people in the Matrix are made to live under the ever watchful eyes of the agents. Only few people, like Neo try to protest against the system which controls them with an iron hand, by doing things that are illegal. They are the

dissenters who perpetually try to break the system which is extensively organized to prevent any freedom to the individual.¹⁰ So the hackers of the Matrix can be alluded to as people who rebel against the mega corporations, like Disneyland in US that try to have complete control in simulated environment rather than the real world where control is becoming increasingly ineffective.

The laws in the Matrix are created by AIs and its order is maintained using Agents who are software programs designed for this purpose. This is similar to the ‘officials of the dream’ who control the visitors in simulated environment so that the owners of these mega corporations can have complete order and control over their recreated world. And the Matrix, like other themed environments, is created and controlled by exerting the same logic that which the people or visitors are experiencing is real or more than real. Both Matrix and other themed parks are controlled using technology. Though in these themed environments the capitalists use technology to achieve control over their recreated world, in Matrix, it takes us one step further where the technology itself takes control over the world it creates. In both cases, it is the total authority and control over the people that is desired.

6. Conclusion

Baudrillard proclaims the end to science fiction as well as theories, in his book *Simulacra and Simulation* under the heading “Simulacra and Science Fiction”. He explains it is impossible to either theorize or depict the kind of universe which is neither real nor imaginary, which is the characteristic of the postmodern culture, ruled by simulations or

the hyperreal. It is in this scenario, cyberpunk becomes more significant as it effectively captures those problems posed by the hyperreal world and guides us in understanding the complicated situation created by more and more sophisticated technologies.

Baudrillard describes that science fiction can no longer make use of the imagination because there is no reality which will function as a foundation on which the imagination develops. But cyberpunk has shown the ability to bring out these two different themes like fast disappearing reality in the real world and the more real like recreated world together.

The main theme of the cyberpunk film *The Matrix* is to make the audience aware of the simulation that surrounds them in everyday life. Morpheus makes Neo understand that he is living in a simulated world. Morpheus explains to Neo about the nature of Matrix. He says,

Do you want to know what it is? The Matrix is everywhere. It's all around us, even here in this room. You can see it out your window or on your television. You can feel it when you go to work, or go to church or pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth. (Wachowski Brothers)

Andrew Gordon in his essay “The Matrix: Paradigm of Postmodernism”¹¹ points out that hyperreal theorists like Baudrillard do not have a full knowledge of the cyberculture. Gordon says that Baudrillard tends to club television, theme parks and virtual reality together though at the time of his writing, internet was just beginning to establish itself as a major influence. It is reasonable to think that the virtual reality has not reached the level as envisioned by the Wachowski brothers, yet it is proper to think that these hyperreal theorists have given some direction for us to navigate the fast evolving virtual and the hyperreal world. Since cyberpunk is a critique of the present day world it is essential to make an in-depth analysis of the various concepts offered by the hyperreal theory as it presents a genuine picture of the contemporary developed world.

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¹ “Real,” *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, 1996 5th ed.

² Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (1981; Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1994).

³ This fact that Baudrillard's view on simulation inspired Wachowski Brothers in the making of the film *The Matrix* is acknowledged by Wachowski Brothers and it is referred to in many articles and essays. I have taken this information from the website, "The Film Journal". See Vartan P. Messier, "Baudrillard in the Matrix: the Hyperreal, the Hollywood, and a Case for Misused References," *The Film Journal* 21 Aug 2007 <<http://www.thefilmjournal.com/issue13/thematrix.html>>.

⁴ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide To Pseudo-Events in America*, 25th ed. (1961; New York: Vintage, 1992).

⁵ Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (1973; New York: Harcourt Brace, 1990).

⁶ Larry and Andy Wachowski, "The Matrix," *The Internet Movie Script Database (IMSDb)* 23 Aug 2006 <<http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Matrix,-The.html>>.

⁷ Borges in his short story "On Exactitude in Science" writes about representation and real. In this story the people of an Empire are so obsessed with accuracy and science that they want the model (map) to be an exact replica of the original (territory) that they end up making a map the size of the Empire. This map is later discarded in a desert as useless. Jorge Luis Borges, "Of Exactitude in Science," 21 Aug 2007 <<https://notes.utk.edu/bio/greenberg.nsf/0/f2d03252295e0d0585256e120009adab?OpenDocument>>. Baudrillard has used this Borges story to explain his views on simulations in his book *Simulacra and Simulations*.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *The Value of Knowledge: A Miniature Library of Philosophy* 10 May 2008 <<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>>.

⁹ Borgmann in his book *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (1992) argues that present day multinationals are global but they are neither universal nor totalitarian. According to him, unlike the 'modern hierarchical corporation' of the modern period, running a totalitarian regime would be burdensome and costly in the postmodern world. The multinationals appeared to be having power over entire nations. In reality, much of their operations depend on various local factors as its existence is global. Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1992), 63-64.

¹⁰ Bruce Sterling in his “Preface from Mirrorshades” says that cyberpunk is an integration of technology and 1980s counterculture. He writes, “An unholy alliance of the technical world and the world of organized dissent – the underground world of pop culture, visionary fluidity, and street-level anarchy” (345).

Bruce Sterling, “Preface from Mirrorshades,” *Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Fiction*, ed. Larry McCaffery (Durham: Duke UP, 1991), 343-348.

¹¹ Andrew Gordon, “The Matrix: Paradigm of Post-modernism or Intellectual Poseur? (Part II),” *Taking the Red Pill: Science, Philosophy and Religion in “The Matrix”*, ed. Glenn Yeffeth (Dallas: Benbella, 2003) 85-102.