Virtual | Reality

An analysis of Jean Baudrillard's theory of Hyperreality, using the films "The Matrix", "Inception" and "Hyperreality"

By Dionysis Toumazis

Virtual | Reality

An analysis of Jean Baudrillard's theory of Hyperreality, using the films "The Matrix", "Inception" and "Hyperreality"

Dionysis Toumazis
Unit 26

BENV GA05 Thesis
April 2017

The Bartlett School of Architecture
University College London

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Stylianos Giamarelos, my thesis tutor, for his supervision and steady advice on producing this thesis.

Abstract

In this paper I will analyse Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality using the films "The Matrix", "Inception" and "Hyperreality", in order to better understand the relationship between the real and the virtual. The purpose of this research will be to identify the line that divides the real from the virtual, in a world oversaturated by symbolic associations, social media and other representations of reality such as Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality.

Contents

INTRODUCTION

[Fig.1.0]

Even though the internet and smartphones have been in our lives for a number of years now, we have recently observed the re-emergence and implementation of older technologies, such as virtual reality and augmented reality in our social media platforms. The term "Virtual Reality" (VR) was coined by Jaron Lanier in the early 1980s, when he developed a new technology that would allow its users to interact with the digital world using physical gestures. One would be fully immersed in a constructed three-dimensional digital environment which could be seen through head mounted displays which would then create the illusion of an alternate reality. However, the resolution of the images and the synchronisation of movement and representation were not enough to create the illusion of an alternate reality and thus VR was brought to a big halt (Chan, 2014).

Due to the fact that computer graphics were not advanced enough to process fully digital three-dimensional spaces that VR required, Tom Caudell (1990) talked about "Augmented Reality" (AR), a synthetic reality comprised of virtual and real objects. In contrast to VR which completely replaced and simulated reality, AR overlaid digital information on the real world in real time. It used a camera to record footage of the real world and then merged it with digital information. The synthetic image of this result could be seen either by using special glass or on monitors (Steuer, 1993). Those technologies remained mostly in industries such as the military, aerospace, entertainment etc, but never reached the public. Many people speculated on the symbiosis of the virtual and the real including science fiction writers such as Gibson, Sterling, Catigan who wrote novels on what the future might look like when technological advancement reaches the point where the virtual and the real world coexist as one reality. During that period the French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard in his book "Simulacra and Simulation", examined the different signs and representations that exist in society and how they alter our perception of reality. He coined the term "Hyperreality" to describe the seamless coexistence of fiction and reality to the point that they become indistinguishable from each other. He also talked about the influence of technologies such as holograms (Baudrillard, 1981).

Moving forward to the present, VR and AR are starting to re-emerge and are finding their way into the public through gaming platforms and smartphone applications. There are now many applications that use 360-degree VR videos and AR

on real live footage, such as the game "Pokémon GO". Moreover, many companies are constantly developing applications for these technologies to be further implemented in our handheld devices and are creating new hardware like the "HTC vive" VR headset and the "google glass" AR glasses. It seems more relevant now than ever before to examine this merging of the virtual and the real and its impact upon our perception of our reality. If these two realities were to merge, would we be able to identify them separately or would we be immersed into this new paradigm and consider it the new normal?

Since VR and AR have been revived from the past to continue where they left off, it gives us the opportunity to reconsider Baudrillard as well and reinterpret his theories on hyperreality to identify the relationship between the real and the virtual according to the course of our current society and the impact it has had from social media. Many philosophers use images, stories, fables and allegories to exemplify their theories. For instance, Plato (381 BC) used the allegory of the cave in his book "The Republic" to describe the lack of education during his time and Baudrillard (1981) uses Borges' fable to exemplify the state of our age as "The Desert of the Real". I will use film as a representation method to extract the relevant information that will assist me in comparing Baudrillard's theories to our modern digitised culture. The reason for choosing film as a model of comparison is because it is long in duration and many points can be deduced from different scenes using a coherent narrative and characters, thus making it easier for the reader to follow through. Furthermore, I will use scholarly literature on film analysis which is common in investigating complex philosophical concepts.

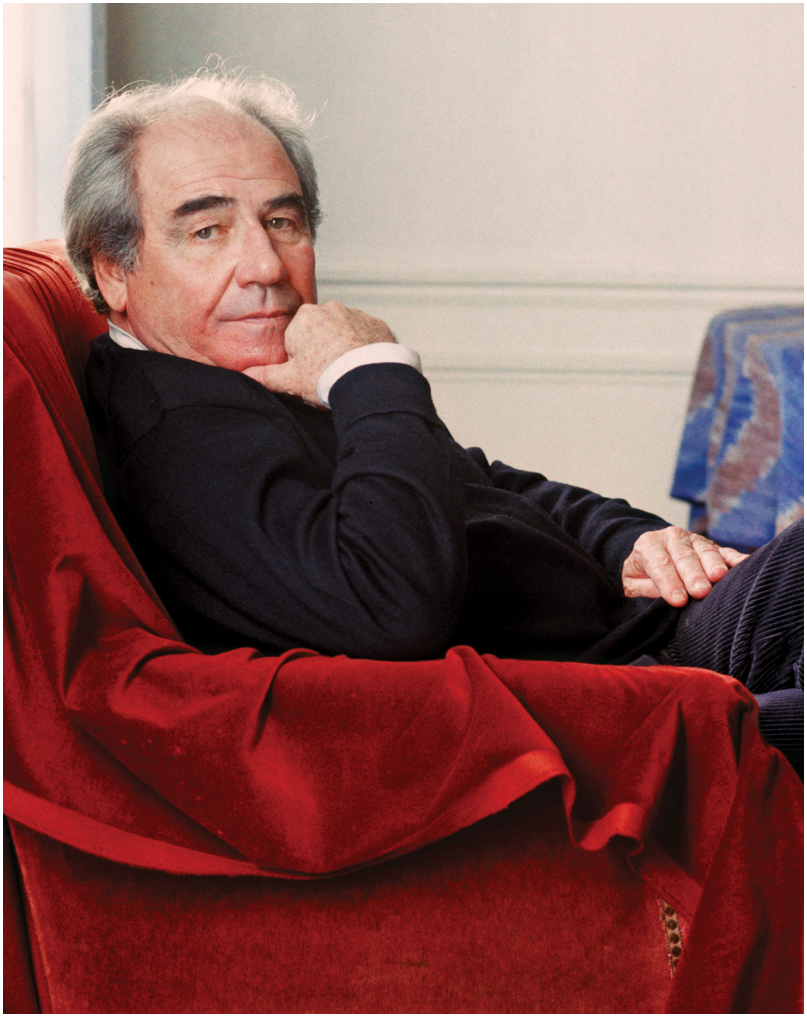
For the purpose of this thesis, I will be using two pop culture films, "The Matrix" and "Inception" and a short independent film called "Hyperreality". One of the methods of analysing these films will be through the reactions of the main characters in each film as the story develops and how those in turn affect the reactions of the audience. All three films portray a real reality and a constructed reality. "The Matrix" is a film that is based around two realities and this can help introduce Baudrillard's concepts of simulations. We will see how the characters in the film live in a constructed reality, that they are unaware of, and how they come to find out the truth about the world they live in. I will compare this to our world and how it resembles a constructed reality. I will then move on to analyse

"Inception", which portrays different levels of reality and will help deepen the discussion about the concept of simulations as well as the concept of hyperreality. "Inception" is a development from "The Matrix", in terms of examining the relationship of the virtual and the real, as it portrays four constructed realities, each one further detached from the real. Therefore, we can see how we can distinguish the virtual from the real. Finally, I will use the short film "Hyperreality" in addition to the findings from the first two films, to identify the relationship of the real and the virtual and how technologies such as smartphones, VR and AR, affect our perception of reality.

As architects, our main job is to design the physical spaces of the built environment. In that process we must have a good understanding of many other disciplines to make better informed decisions for the spaces we will eventually create. Therefore, we must not only engage with the material world that our eyes can see, but also with the politics and other hidden ideas that make it up. It is essential for us to see the world from as many perspectives as possible and that will give us the chance to design both the physical world as well us the various non visual filters that surround it.

[Fig.1.1] Mixed Reality concept. Screenshot from Magic Leap demo video.

VIRTUAL & REAL AND SIMULACRA & SIMULATION



[Fig.2.0]

Nowadays social networking has become one of the main protagonists of the internet and our lives. Platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, WeChat, Snapchat, LinkedIn, Instagram and others have changed the way we interact with each other and the way we are exposed to information. It is the largest database of personal information that has ever existed. It is expected that by 2020 around 2.95 billion people will be on social media, approximately a third of the world's population (Statista, 2017). We are living in two parallel realities, one is our real life in the physical world and the other is our avatar, or various avatars, on the online world. The line dividing virtual and real started to blur with the turn up of mobile internet and more specifically smart phones. Being "online" and "offline" was something new when computers and the internet started to find their place in every household. Initially computers, mostly desktop computers at the time, acted as the means to connect to the internet and be "online". A modem was required to connect to the internet, through a phone line, connected with a cable to a computer. Therefore, one had to stay fixed to a location to be online. Any other time spent, not on a computer, would be considered "offline". Today however, the internet is accessible from so many devices such as smart phones, tablets, laptops, watches and other new wearables such as google glass, as mentioned earlier. It is therefore harder now to distinguish the "online" from the "offline", as one can be connected to the internet at any time of the day and from any location. Likewise, with the emergence of VR and AR into the public scene, we might see the virtual and the real becoming so intertwined where it will be hard to distinguish between the two. One of the earliest frenzies cause by AR was with the hit mobile application game "Pokémon GO". People were walking around cities catching Pokémon and even news broadcasters would give out information about locations of rare Pokémon, even though they only existed on smartphone screens (BBC, July 2016).

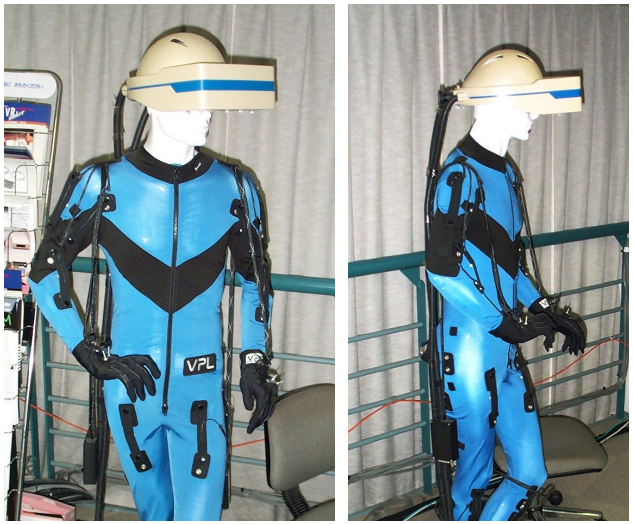

NEWS

Technology

Pokemon Go unleashed in the UK

[Fig 2.1] An article of Pokémon GO form the BBC on it's release date in the UK

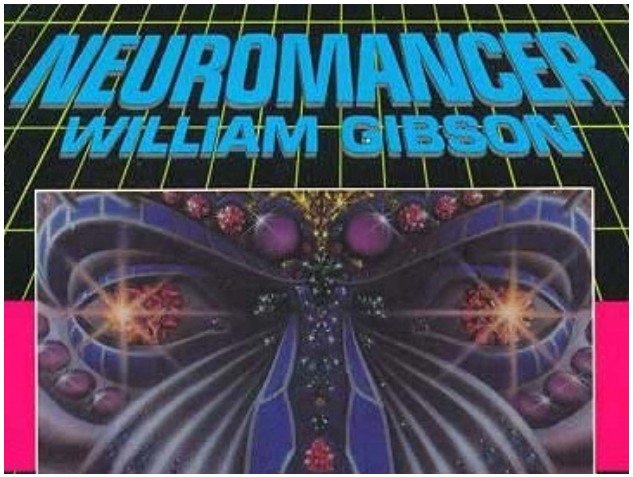
Discussions on what this wave of new technologies and information can mean to the future of humanity have been taking place since the 1980s. The exact definition of VR is "Near Reality", which could mean almost anything. The most common use of the term and the one usually implied commercially is a computer-generated environment in which one can be immersed and where the computer-generated image encompasses the user in every direction, instead of looking at it through a frame. The user can also interact and navigate within this environment, hence simulating reality (VRS, 2017).



[Fig. 2.2] A VPL Research DataSuit, a full-body outfit with sensors for measuring the movement of arms, legs, and trunk. Developed circa 1989. Displayed at the Nissho Iwai showroom in Tokyo

As a new concept at the time, VR technology created a lot of discussion around the 1980s regarding what the future might look like and how it could be the next big technology that everyone will use. Rheingold (1991), traced the historical record of VR, describing its origins in Silicon Valley and the interest it received from university research and tech companies. Wooolley (1993) described the politics and philosophy surrounding VR and questioned whether this is a new reality or whether it is a detachment from reality itself. "The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality" (Heim, 1994) was one of the most compelling publications of that period. It drew on the technological capabilities of VR as well as the philosophical aspects of it in terms of the virtual and real becoming intertwined. Heim also commented on the appearance of VR in pop culture films such as "Star Trek", "The Lawnmower Man" and Gibson's (1984) novel "Neuromancer". Gibson was one of the main protagonists of "The Cyberpunk Movement' which mostly talked about the future through the rapidly evolving technology that seemed to be taking over. It was about urban settings being saturated with high technology where the protagonists used that technology to get ahead of the game and rebel against an established system. The main theme of this movement was dystopian, depicting how people were turning

into machines and machines were turning into people. In "Neuromancer", Gibson described how everyone would be connected to a global network called "Cyberspace", a term he invented, through a laptop-type object called a "deck". After "jacking-in" into Cyberspace, one would find himself in an endless matrix of towers and streets, where all the world's data would be stored. He envisioned what we call today the "world wide web" or internet, but in a virtual three-dimensional environment; a virtual reality. "Neuromancer" was not substantially important simply because it was an entertaining piece of science fiction, but because it could also be used as a backbone for explaining future predictions and philosophical concepts.



[Fig. 2.3] 1984's Neuromancer

As mentioned previously, Baudrillard was writing about very similar concepts even before VR was introduced. In the same way that Cyberpunk novels portrayed dystopian views about the future where the virtual world will replace the real world, Baudrillard was presenting that as the present. His work was mostly related to the notion that symbolic signification and meaning are only understood in terms of signs and types of representation, such as simulations. He argued that our world is so over saturated with symbols, to the point that they have completely masked any trace of reality. Later on in his research he explains that our reality is being simulated by images and those images are then being simulated by other images and become simulacra. He coined the term "Hyperreality" to describe this state of our age (Baudrillard, 1997).

"The image cannot imagine the real any longer, because it has become the real. It can no longer transcend reality, transfigure it, nor dream it, because it has become its own virtual reality" (Baudrillard, 1997, p.12)

In 1981, he published the book "Simulacra and Simulation" in which he stated that our society is only a simulation of reality and that all meaning has been replaced by symbols and signs. In the first chapter of the book he mentions the fable

"On Exactitude in Science" written by Borges, an Argentine writer and poet. The fable is about cartographers of an empire, who have created a one to one scale map that very precisely covered the land of their whole empire and touched the real geography at every point. However, through time that map disintegrated and ended up in the "deserts of the west". Baudrillard uses that fable as an allegory in the opening of his book to compare it to the relationships between simulations and reality in his chapter "The Precession of Simulacra". He says that the map is a simulacrum, and points out that the map loses every relationship to reality. Reality exists only as disintegrated bits, fractured and lost. He compares this to the state of our age, that we focus only on the model of reality, the map; the real is no longer relevant and only clings as vestiges. He then concludes that the culture we have created is "The Desert of the Real" (Baudrillard, 1981). The real has become the "Hyperreal", where it only simulates traces that traced reality. A world filled by simulacra.

Discussions regarding the relationship of the real and virtual are not recent. In fact, one of the earliest recordings of writings regarding this subject date back to the times of Plato, which is also the time where the term simulacrum was conceived. He wrote about the relation of the real and the virtual using his allegory of the cave in his book "The Republic", written around 2400 years ago. The use of stories, allegories and images are always ideal when describing theories, as the reader or listener can follow a narrative which can be imagined and thus the theory can be understood visually. Plato's allegory is about people who were born as prisoners in a cave, chained by their hands, legs and necks, who had no other understanding of reality apart from the one they were living in. Puppeteers behind them casted shadows of carved animal figures in front of them using a fire light, same as in a puppet show, and the prisoners believed the shadows to be real objects themselves. Through this allegory, Plato wanted to exemplify how human beings can be conditioned to only know of the material world and not of the "Forms" and ideas that create it (Irwin, 2002). Plato identified two types of reality, a faithful one and an intentionally distorted one, a simulacrum. Though Plato's allegory is clear enough to understand the concept of a dual reality, Baudrillard further developed and identified four stages of reality, in which a simulation transitions into a simulacrum. The first and fourth stage can be taken as definitions of what is a simulation and what is a simulacrum, respectively.

1. The first stage is a "reflection of a profound reality", a faithful representation of an actual image, which might even be correct.

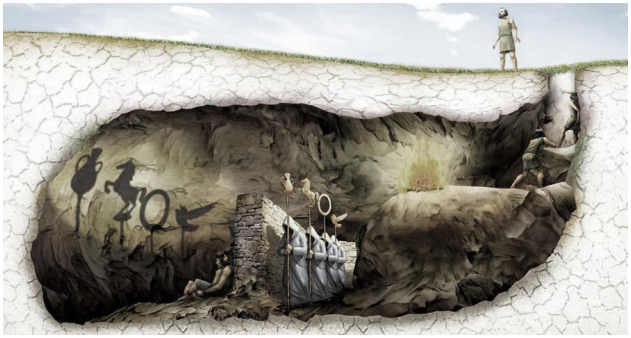
2. The second stage "masks and denatures a profound reality". It can be seen as an unfaithful copy. The image does not reveal reality, but cannot perfectly hide the fact that it is not real.

3. The third stage "masks the absence of a profound reality". The image acts as a faithful copy, however it is a copy with no original. It is simulating something real, but it does not represent anything that is real.

4. The fourth stage is an image that "has no relationship to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum". The image is simulating images that claim no representation to any reality. It is a "Hyperreal".

"The very definition of the real becomes: that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction . . . At the limit of this process of reproducibility, the real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced. The hyperreal . . . transcends representation . . .only because it is entirely in simulation."
(Baudrillard, 1983, p. 146-147)

Baudrillard (1981) argued that the world at that time was a hyperreality. A world of pure simulacra. Since then the world has changed dramatically and as mentioned before, the smartphone revolution and social media have created a new kind of reality that we carry around with us everywhere we go as we constantly go "online" and "offline". Now with the re-emergence of VR and AR, the digital realm will eventually belong to the real and vice versa. By having a better understanding of Baudrillard's theories and his stages of simulation, it will help us identify how our world is a hyperreality, as he claims, and how we can identify what is real and what is virtual. With this new light, we can transition into a new realm of technologies with a conscious understanding of reality. In order to analyse his theories, I will use film as a method of representation, in the same way that Plato and Baudrillard used stories to portray their messages.

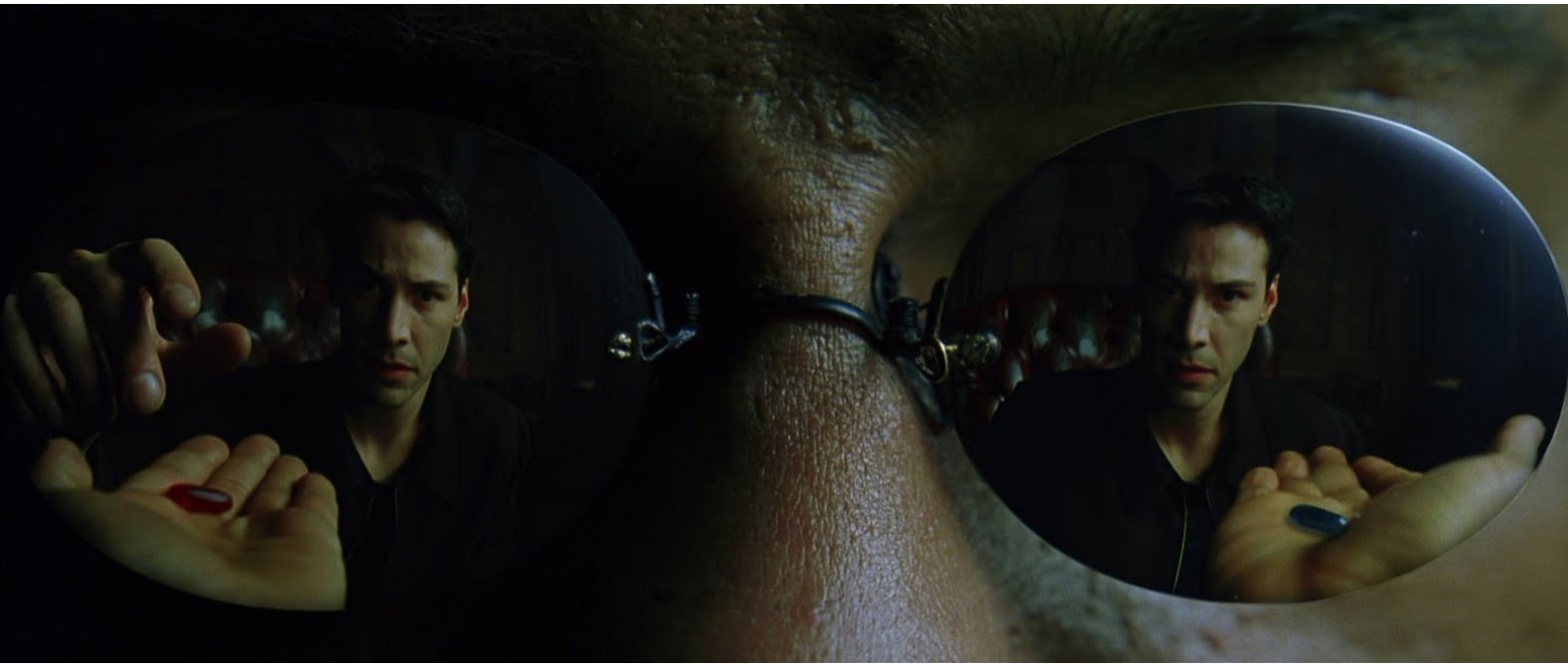


[Fig.2.4] Depiction of Plato's "Allegory of the cave"

"The Matrix" was a film that was very inspired by the cyberpunk movement, and mostly by "Neuromancer". Its plot is similar to those of cyberpunk novels, taking place in a virtual environment in the future. What makes it stand out from other similar storylines, is the fact that it also tries to take on the philosophical interpretation of VR and compare it to the world we live in today. It especially references Baudrillard on two occasions and includes many symbols and philosophical hints throughout the film. The combination of these two interpretations of VR and speculation about the future, makes "The Matrix" an ideal film to use as a model of interpreting Baudrillard's theories of hyperreality. However, he stated that "The Matrix" is not the perfect example to portray his theories, and that other films such as "Mulholland Drive" and "The Truman Show" are more accurate representations of what he wanted to say (Lancelin, 2003). Nevertheless, "The Matrix" is the film most commonly used by film analysts in scholarly literature to analyse Baudrillard's theories, as it is filled with discussions relating to the existential questions raised when discussing virtual worlds and virtual consciousness. This film is also a good base for the reader to understand what hyperreality is.

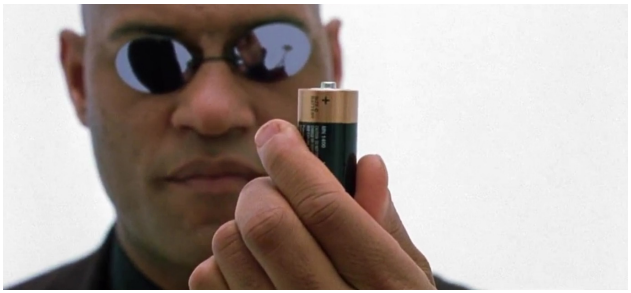
[Fig.2.5] Photo taken by Baudrillard, displayed in Sainte Beuve in 1987. The anatomic trace on Baudrillard's chair suggests his absence. He presents his disappearance as a hyperreal version of himself.

THE MATRIX AS THE DESERT OF THE REAL

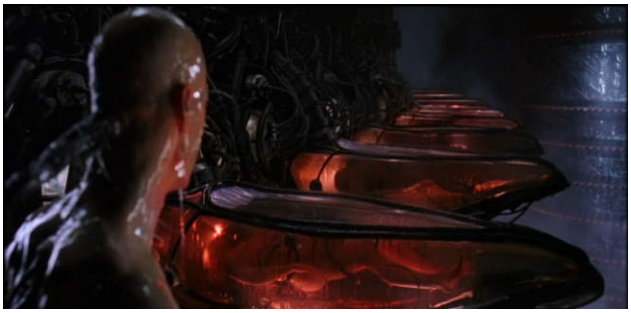


[Fig.3.0]

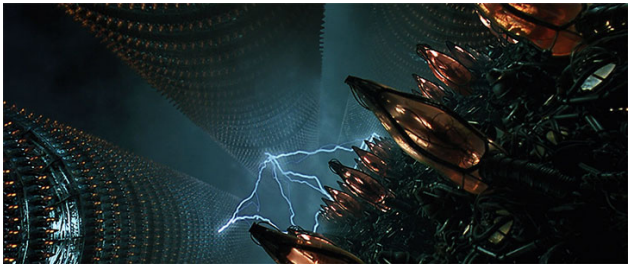
The Matrix is a 1999 science fiction film, written and directed by The Wachowskis. The main character is a computer programmer, who lives a double life; by day he is an average computer programmer called Thomas Anderson and by night a hacker who goes by the alias Neo. Neo is always questioning the purpose of his life and searches online for answers when he eventually gets contacted by another computer hacker, Morpheus, who the government considers a very dangerous terrorist. Morpheus tells Neo that he has been living his whole life in a fake reality, a neural interactive simulation called The Matrix. The real world has become a desolate wasteland and taken over by A.I (artificial intelligence) machines. Humans are farmed and kept sedated in booths for the machines to use their body heat and electrochemical energy as their main source of energy. They are kept mentally alive using a VR simulation, in which they are unknowingly imprisoned. Many years ago, one human managed to wake up from this and started freeing more people. Neo, together with Morpheus and the rest of his crew are on a mission to free more people from the Matrix whilst having to deal with the "agents", the strong "anti-virus" program of the Matrix, whose job is to keep everyone in line with what the machines intended.



[Fig.3.1] Scene from "The Matrix". Morpheus explains to Neo that humans are being used as an energy source.



[Fig.3.2] Scene from "The Matrix". Neo wakes up in the real world and sees the fields.



[Fig.3.3] Endless fields of humans in stasis chambers in the real world.

The Matrix" draws on views from Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Descartes, Berkeley, Aquinas, Kant, Nietzsche, Sarte, Sellars, Nozick, Baudrillard and others. There have been many interpretations of the Matrix by film theorists and critics as well as philosophers within the academic realms[1]. Despite its highly sophisticated, even though not original, story line, "The Matrix" gained a lot of attention for its high end special effects which revolutionised the film industry at that time. That of course had a huge impact on its popularity within the mainstream film industry audience and pop culture, thus bringing more attention to the different discussions regarding the film. Žižek compares the film to a Rorschach test, where philosophers extract different meanings of the film (Irwin 2002). The Wachowskis prefer to leave the film open to interpretation. I will attempt to use the film as a Rorschach inkblot test to interpret Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality

At the very beginning of the film, a friend of Neo visits him to buy one of his software hacks. He hands him a stack of money and Neo hides it in a book that is hollowed out, that book is Simulacra & Simulation (S&S). This is an early hint in the film of what ideas might be portrayed in "The Matrix". At that point in time however it has no meaning to the viewer whatsoever. It is only when the viewer understands what the Matrix is really about that the symbolic representation of this specific book becomes more relevant.

[Fig.3.4] Simulacra & Simulation shown in "The Matrix".

1
- "Welcome to the Desert of the Real". Slavoj Zizek analyses the political responses of the 9/11 attacks and compares the desolate wasteland of the real world with the aftermath of 9/11. (Zizek, 2002)
- "Philosophy and the Matrix: Return to the Source". An analysis of various symbols shown in the film, and the philosophy regarding free will and divine love. The documentary references the theories of Plato, Socrates, Descartes, Kant, Berkeley, Nietzsche, Baudrillard and Nozick. (Oreck, 2004)
- "The Matrix and Philosophy". An analysis of various philosophical ideas. Existentialism, Metaphysics, Neo-Materialism, Fate, Freedom, Foreknowledge, Buddhism, Religion, Ignorance, Happiness (Irwin, 2003)

In one of the early scenes of the film, Morpheus presents to Neo the truth about the Matrix, that it is a fake wonderland, a simulation of reality. He takes him into a computer program that simulates the actual real world and says the words "Welcome to the desert of the real". It is a quote from Baudrillard's first chapter of his book S&S. Neo sees for the first time the truth about the reality he was living in, i.e. a hyperreality, a world completely different to what it actually looks like. In fact, the real world is a desolate wasteland where no traces of any recognisable elements of his current reality can be identified. It is a hyperreality, and no one living in the Matrix can see the reality of it unless it is presented to them. It is also questionable if people can believe that they are living in a hyperreality if they are told about it, because it eliminates every aspect of truth that existed during that person's life. We can see this when Morpheus tells Neo, "Unfortunately nobody can be told what the Matrix is, you have to see it for yourself." The Wachowskis, whether intentionally or not, have created a type of simulacrum in presenting to the viewer what the Matrix is. The viewer is watching a film that portrays a world where a reality is shown, only then to be revealed that that reality is only a simulation. When explaining this to the viewer, and to Neo in the film, the Wachowskis use the fable "desert of the real" of Baudrillard, who uses the fable of "On Exactitude in Science", who talks about a map that simulates the real world which becomes a simulacrum. We therefore have the Wachowskis fable referencing Baudrillard's fable, referencing Borges' fable, all of which describe reality and present it as a hyperreality.

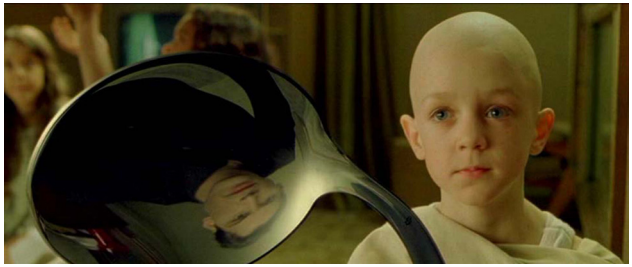
[Fig.3.5] Morpheus: "Welcome to the Desert of the Real"

In the same scene where Morpheus presents to Neo the truth about the Matrix, Neo touches the sofa in the simulation room and asks "This isn't real?", to which Morpheus responds, "What is real? How do you define, 'real'? If you're talking about what you can feel, what you can smell, what you can taste and see, then real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain." (The Matrix, 1999). Neo questions the authenticity of objects in the Matrix even when he knows the truth about it. Everything that exists in the Matrix is an exact replica of how our (the audience) world looks like. It is therefore a stage one in Baudrillard's stages of simulation, a reflection of a profound reality. However, in the film the real world is completely different to the Matrix, therefore for the characters in the film the Matrix is a hyperreality. This is one of the main reasons that "The Matrix" is successful in portraying hyperreality. It is important to identify with the audience using recognisable objects and images and then present them as fake. If the Matrix was portrayed as a completely unrecognisable environment, then the viewer would not be able to relate to any aspects of the world portrayed in it. In addition, many people are comfortable living in a stage one simulation even if it is obviously fake. An example of this is shown in "The Matrix", where Cypher conspires with agent Smith and asks him to plug him back into the Matrix and make him belong to that world only. He asks him to erase his memory so he doesn't remember anything about the real world and quotes: "Ignorance is bliss". He can identify more with the dream world than the real world, which depresses him. This is an "unpostmodern" example, as Cypher prefers the dream world to the real world. He is presented as the hedonistic character who puts pleasure over freedom (Irwin, 2002). The example of Cypher here suggests to the audience that even though one might know the truth about reality, it doesn't mean that it must be preferred by default. We sometimes consciously plunge ourselves deeper into the hyperreal as it can make us feel better than the "ugly truth" (Irwin 2002). It is worth mentioning that the real world is depicted as a very unattractive place in the film and also Baudrillard presents hyperreality as a dystopic reality. It is best to consider these as examples of what could be, but in the end, it is up to us to form our opinion on the nature of our reality.

After Neo is presented with the truth about the Matrix and the real world, it is not only a surprise to Neo, but to the audience as well. The fact that what we, the audience, thought that the world we consider as the real world is in fact a simulation program, raises a lot of questions. One of the

classic questions raised is how do we know that our own reality is real and not a simulation? What would we do if we discovered that what we considered real is in fact not? Could Neo continue living in the Matrix after he had been awakened? It would most certainly not have the same effect on him, as the basic principle of the Matrix is that it relies highly on the fact that the minds that are part of it are not aware of their simulation; the subject is separate from the object, the perceiver from the perceived. Therefore, going back into the Matrix, Neo is able to respond "freely" to the new reality that he perceives, he has "Response-ability" (Krishnamurti 2009). In another scene when Neo returns to the Matrix for the first time since his awakening, he sees a restaurant that he used to go to and laughs because he now perceives reality in a very different way. He knows that what he thought was noodles was in fact a simulation of noodles. Even though the taste of noodles will still be the same if he eats them again, the experience will be different. Identifying a hyperreality ruins the illusion of it, in the same way as a magic trick doesn't seem impressive once the trick is revealed.

At the end of the film, Neo realises that he is the chosen one, the reincarnation of the first mind who managed to free itself from the Matrix. He goes up a level and has the ability to manipulate the environment in the Matrix in ways in which he couldn't before, he views the world around in him in code and becomes unbeatable by any agent. He is not subject to any condition nor boundary formed by the Matrix and he is thus free to construct his own reality. Baudrillard (1997) states that the simulations are self-referential, however that doesn't mean that they are all out of our control. In a scene where Neo visits the Oracle he is in the living room waiting for her to see him and one of the students there is holding a spoon and bends it just by staring at it. The student sees that Neo is puzzled by it so he hands him a straight spoon and says, "Don't try to bend the spoon, that's impossible. Instead only try to realise the truth, there is no spoon. Then you'll see that it is not the spoon that bends, it is only yourself". We can see the blurring of reality and virtual, objectivity and subjectivity. We can recognise that the virtual is the real



[Fig.3.6] Neo bends the spoon at the Oracle's house.

and that there is no difference between subjectivity and objectivity, therefore as Neo could control the Matrix after his awakening, so can we, alter our perception of our reality by the meaning we give to it (Springett, 2010).

Baudrillard's views, together with what was mentioned in the previous paragraphs, can lead us to the conclusion that the world we live in is an infinitely self-perpetuating simulation that forms our experiences and individual constructions of what we consider an "objective reality". The hyperreality is self-referential, meaning that the simulations within it rely on other simulations to create new ones which turn into simulacra. The same applies to simulacra which eventually spread like a virus and form a hyperreality. It is easy to present this idea as losing grasp from reality thus making it look dystopic, as Baudrillard does. He doesn't provide us with any positive feedback from this nor does he offer a sustainable solution. Whereas in "The Matrix" all the characters in the film who have been freed and live in the real world, have super powers when plugged back into the Matrix. They are much stronger and faster than the average person, they can jump really long distances as well as dodge bullets and when Neo dies and is then resurrected, he can see the world in Matrix code. This can be a metaphor of being able to see through the simulations and simulacra and having the "power" to manipulate reality by interpreting and interacting with the simulations in different ways rather than being in their authority.

Baudrillard might have seen this in a dystopic way where we must free ourselves from this hyperreality, however it could be said that we have always lived this way, where our reality forms our cognitive reality and our cognitive reality re-forms reality. A never-ending feedback loop. Whether this is sustainable or not is another question. The main point of this chapter though was to identify that our reality can be a type of hyperreality and that we can question it and see whether we are aware of its existence. That in turn can alter our experience of the world and the way we interact with it.

In the final scene, we see Neo walking out of a phone booth standing still, staring at the people around him whilst everyone is rapidly walking as if in a state of trance, minding their own business. It was the same feeling he had when he saw the noodle place he used to go to. It is symbolically shown how he is the only one who is truly awake and conscious of all the simulacra (Oreck, 2004). Films and cinema are types of simulations and

conscious hyperrealities. The lights go down and we enter an imaginary world. As Worth said: "When engaging with fiction we do not suspend a critical faculty, but rather exercise a creative faculty. We not actively suspend disbelief, we actively create belief" (Worth, 2002, p.184). Therefore "The Matrix" leaves its audience with a lot of questions as they exit the cinema. One might relate to Neo, exiting the phone booth, whilst exiting the cinema. Reality can be questioned in many ways. It is also worth questioning the film itself as well. "The Matrix" has shed a new light on perceiving reality and hinted to the audience that the real world is not the one we perceive every day and it might exist somewhere else or on some other level of perception. However, we have never questioned the authenticity of the real world in "The Matrix". What if that desolate wasteland is also another type of simulation? Maybe the Matrix was not simulating reality, but rather simulating a simulation. The film does not raise this question and maybe the reason Baudrillard was not satisfied with it as a representation of his theories was because he would have liked the directors to enter deeper into the concept of simulations. In an interview regarding "The Matrix", he said that the characters in the film are shown either in the Matrix or in the real world. He said what would really be interesting would be to show what happens when the two worlds collide (Lancelin, 2003). This is where "Inception" is a good example in further analysing Baudrillard and the notion of Hyperreality, as it depicts reality on four levels, such as the four stages of simulations. Baudrillard unfortunately died in 2007 before "Inception" was released.

[Fig.3.7] Neo staring at the people around him whilst exiting the phone booth in the very last scene.

[Fig.3.8] Neo can manipulate his environment and stop bullets in the Matrix.

INCEPTION AND THE PROCESSION OF SIMULACRA

[Fig.4.0]

"Inception" is a 2010 science fiction film, written and directed by Christopher Nolan. Dom Cobb is a professional thief who practices the art of extraction, a process by which he secretly infiltrates a subject's mind whilst dreaming and extracts valuable information, without the subject realising. He does this through a machine created by the military, to train soldiers, called "dream-sharing technology". A corporate espionage job offer comes to him and requires him to do something that only he knows how to execute, that is to insert information rather than extract. This means that he must plant an idea into the subject's unconscious and make him think that he has thought about that idea by himself; they call this "Inception". As this is a far more complicated process, the way to perform inception is by entering deep into the subject's unconscious. That is, sedating the subject and entering his dreams and then repeating this process whilst in the dream world, which is a dream within a dream.

Unlike "The Matrix", "Inception" consists of dream worlds where the users are sometimes aware that it is a dream and sometimes not. Users can enter each other's dream worlds and are able to interact with them. In the film, Cobb's assignment is to perform inception onto Fischer (the subject of the job), an idea that will make him reconcile with his dying father and restore their relationship before it's too late; this will eventually make him break up his father's monopolised company. To do this, he must construct a series of dream worlds that will act as simulations of the real world where Fischer's consciousness will be uploaded to, using the dream sharing machine. In the dream world, Cobb will orchestrate a series of events that will lead Fischer (his consciousness) to make certain decisions that will eventually alter his consciousness when he wakes up back in the real world. At the end of the film, Cobb's mission turns out successful and Fisher wakes up feeling differently about his father. He reconciled with him in his dream, not knowing that someone else intervened, but the fact that it was all a dream is something that he is aware of. Even though in reality his relationship with his father is highly problematic, he prefers to let that feeling go and settle for a semi-real one where he feels more satisfied (Brzostowski, 2010). The dream world was so convincing and real to him that merged with his consciousness to form a new real. We see a merge of the virtual and the real, and how they feed off each other to create feedback loops and produce a hybrid reality, a hyperreality.

Freud defined dreams as "the royal road to the unconscious" (1994, p.608). Prior to that theory, it

was believed that dreams were memories and recently experienced thoughts, randomly thrown together. According to Freud dreams can be analysed to identify certain symbols which represent feelings, moods and memories that lie in our unconscious. Therefore, dreams are our mental map, the model of our reality, a record which can be accessed and analysed. In the film, Cobb and his crew must go deep into Fischer's unconscious to implant the idea so the subject cannot trace its origin thus making him believe that it is genuine, and to do that they place him on the dream machine and upload him on constructed dream levels that Cobb and his crew designed (Greco, 2007). In each dream that Fischer enters, he carries with him his unconscious as projected images and objects, with which Cobb can interact and eventually perform inception by implanting information in his subconscious. They enter three levels down the dream worlds, that is a dream within a dream within a dream. Each dream level is even more detached from reality. That is where they implant the idea and then wake him up in each level until he wakes up back in reality with the new implanted idea. A fourth level called "limbo", the unconstructed dream space that exists in its own dimension. By comparing these dream levels to Baudrillard's stages of simulation, we can deduce the following:

1. The first dream level is represented as a busy street on a rainy day where Fischer is leaving his office, "**it is the reflection of a profound reality**", a simulation, a true copy. The world seems normal to Fischer as it is an exact replica of reality. He is then secretly put to sleep using a strong anesthetic.

2. In the second level, Cobb tells Fischer that he is in a dream, and convinces him that Cobb is a projection of his consciousness. He is presenting himself as Fischer's subconscious dream guard, the one responsible of fighting intruders that enter his dreams. What Fischer doesn't realise is that Cobb is not a projection of his consciousness, but is an intruder who is there to steal from him. With this strategy, Cobb starts gaining Fischer's trust and slowly turns him against his own subconscious projections, away from his known reality. What seems real to Fischer is actually a simulation of Cobb's simulation. Cobb "**masks and denatures a profound reality**".

3. The third level is situated on a snowy mountain, in a fortress like hospital with armed guards surrounding it, where Fischer goes to find his dad. The place looks highly unlikely

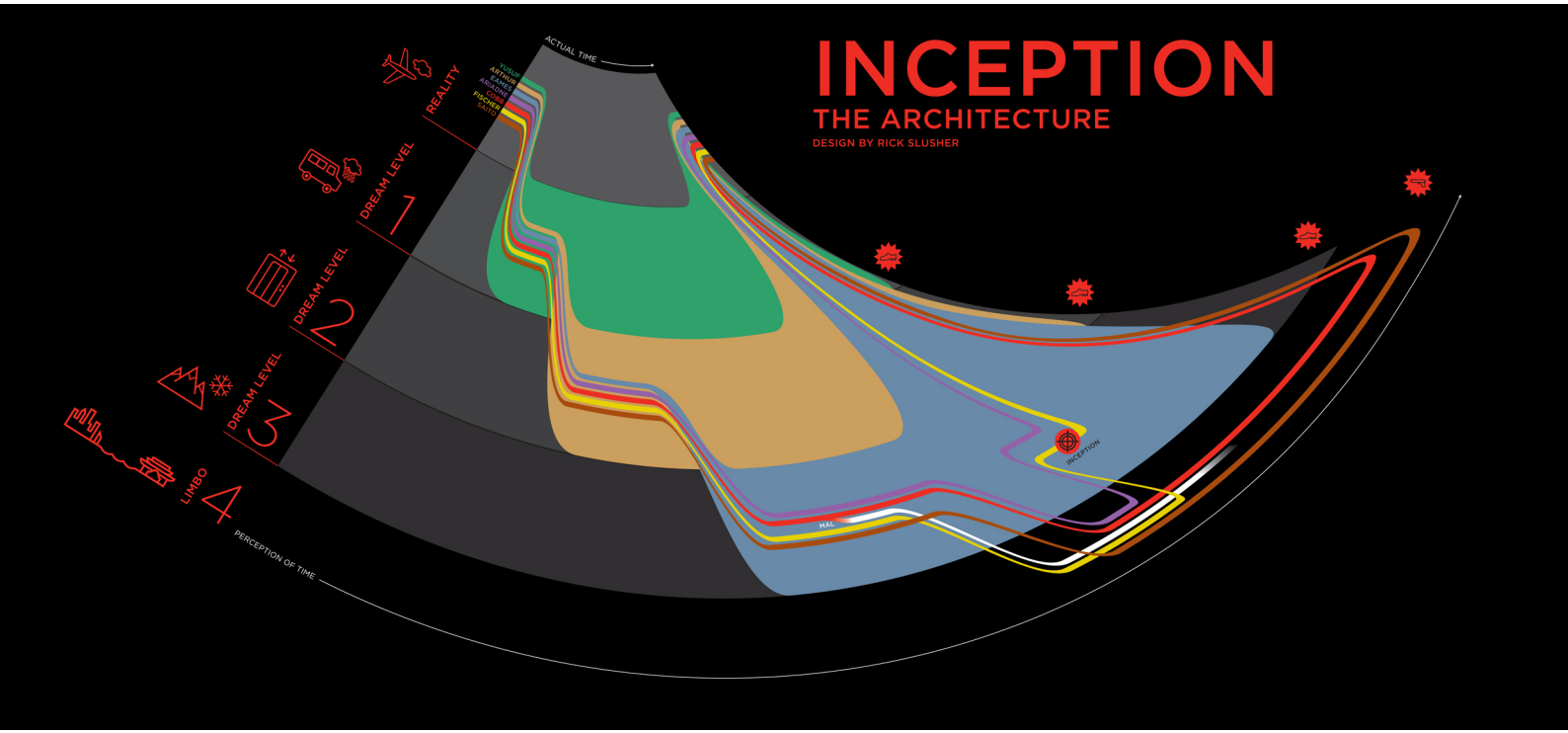
to be a real hospital, there are no doctors or nurses in sight, only a room that has a highly-secured door as if it were a bank vault, in which Fischer's dad is located. When the door opens, the interior is a high-tech space, like the ones in the movie "Tron". At the end of the room lies Fischer's dad on a hospital bed and behind him is his personal bookshelf that has no place in a hospital. Everything seems to be out of context. The third dream level "**masks the absence of a profound reality**".

[Fig.4.1] Hospital where Fischer's dad is located

[Fig.4.2] Fischer's dad hospital room

4. The further down the dream levels one goes, the slower time goes by. One hour in the real world is 20 hours (1x20) in the first dream level, 400 in the second (1x20x20) and so forth. At some point in the film we learn that Cobb and his wife, Mal, were living in limbo for about fifty years. They built a neighbourhood that consisted of every building they ever lived in. All their memories were situated in the same block and all the buildings were sitting on water with bridges connecting them to a central passage. Limbo is presented as this surreal place where anything applies, a space of pure infinite unconscious. A reality with "**no relation to any reality whatsoever; a pure simulacrum**." (Fletcher, 2012) Though most of the places in Limbo are references from their real life, Cobb and Mal were initially conscious of the fact that they were in a dream world and thus used it to their benefit by building their own hyperreality. But because they used real life memories to construct their world, Mal then forgot that she was in a dream and considered it to be true.

[Fig.4.3] Cobb's house in Limbo.



[Fig.4.4] Infographic of dream levels

As mentioned before, the deeper down the dream level one goes, the more disconnected he gets from reality. When Cobb enters a subject's dream, that subject is not aware that he is dreaming, therefore Cobb often reassures himself that he is not unknowingly in someone else's dream by using a totem. A totem is a unique object that only he can identify its characteristics, so if someone wants to secretly put Cobb into a dream world, the one constructing the dream world would not know how to simulate it correctly, thus giving away to him the illusion that he is in a dream. In Cobb's case, his totem is a spinning top that if he spins it and eventually stops spinning it means that he's awake, but if it spins without ever falling then he is dreaming. The dream worlds are realities filled with simulacra. The real and virtual are so interwoven that they become indistinguishable, therefore the need for reassurement of what is real and what it not is essential in order not to lose track from reality. The film ends with Cobb successfully finishing his mission and as soon as he arrives at his house he spins his totem to check whether he's still dreaming or not. He then sees his children which he hasn't seen for many years and walks away from his totem before waiting to see whether it will topple over or not. The totem is still spinning and then it jitters right before the scene ends, leaving the audience with the question of whether Cobb is awake or still in a dream world. That would mean that the whole film could have all been his dream and he might never find out that he was sleeping. It raises similar questions to the viewer as in "The Matrix"; whether or not we are aware that we are in a kind of hyperreality. As discussed previously we saw that the Wachowski's did not present any evidence of whether or not the real world is not yet another simulation. In "Inception" we see how more than two realities can exist. Indeed, in this film the characters wake up from a dream only to find themselves within another dream, however it is still possible for them to have got lost within dream worlds and considered them real. So even if we question the authenticity of our reality and wake up from a dream, we might find ourselves within another dream, a hyperreality.

[Fig.4.5] Cobb waits to see whether his totem will topple over.

In both "The Matrix" and "Inception", we can see two different versions of a Hyperreality. In "The Matrix", there is a duality of realities, the real world and the Matrix. We can see that once Neo realises the truth about the Matrix, he is permanently awakened and he can clearly distinguish in which world he is living in. In "Inception" however, we can see different realities constantly being constructed and the level of separation they have from the real world. Furthermore, as we have seen in the case of Cobb, even though he is the one who consciously enters dream worlds, he is never sure whether he's dreaming or not. It could be that the reason Baudrillard wanted to see the different levels between the real and the hyperreal is because even though we might identify the simulacra in our reality, it doesn't mean that we are forever freed from them, as in the case of Neo. The hyperreality is self-referential and keeps reproducing more simulacra, therefore there is a need for constant awareness and check on reality, as Cobb does using his totem.

One of the main differences of the two films is that in "The Matrix" the hyperreal, the Matrix, is an objective reality that everyone experiences in the same way. All people living in the Matrix live in the same bubble. Whereas in "Inception", hyperreality, Limbo, is a subjective reality created by personal experiences. Each person can live within their own bubble. What Baudrillard failed to explore was the role of the people within hyperreality and how it is personally experienced. As mentioned earlier, Freud (1899) discovered that dreams can be analysed and certain symbols can be identified that represent experiences that lie in our unconscious. If we draw parallels between Freud's and Baudrillard's theories then our unconscious is filled with simulacra. We construct a mental hyperreality according to our experiences from the real world. Therefore, the hyperreality does not only reference itself in the real world, but also within each subject living in it, creating unconscious hyperrealities. Thus "Inception" explores the unconscious world i.e. the subjective hyperreality and "The Matrix" explores the material world i.e. the objective hyperreality.

Reflecting on this argument, we will see how these two aspects of hyperreality exist in our world and how they might become more dominant with the use of technologies such as VR and AR. Matsuda explores this concept with a short film that depicts a merge of the virtual and the real.

[Fig.4.6] Group of people who dream share every day.

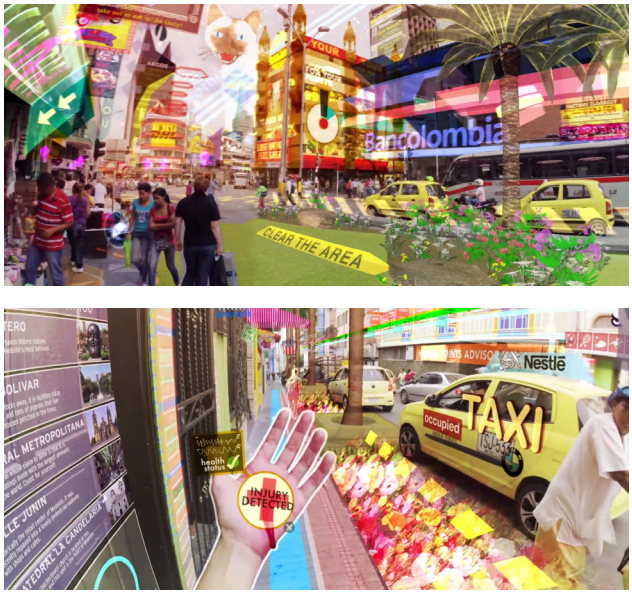

"They come here every day to sleep?
"No. They come here to be woken up, their dream has become their reality, who are you to say otherwise, sir ."

[Fig.4.7]


COOTRASANA
HERNAN ORTIZ
GET YOUR
MONKEY
Google
Who am I?
BONUS JOB
PROOF READING
premium only
5 MONKEYPOINTS
shopping list
- pineapple
- yoghurt
3 NEW
JOB MONKEY LEVEL 4

[Fig.5.0]

In 2016, a film maker called Matsuda made a short, six-minute, film called "Hyperreality" (hyper-reality, 2016). Inspired by the advent of AR technologies as well as philosophical theories of Baudrillard, Benjamin and technological theories from Manovich, he portrayed an image of the world where the physical and virtual realities merge, and how digital media oversaturate every part of the material world. The film is shot in a first person shot and takes the viewer on a journey throughout Medellin, Colombia. Throughout that journey the protagonist, Juliana, is engaging with different kinds of augmented images that surround her reachable environment, such as playing games or collecting points in the supermarket trolley from a digital pet. Shopfronts are augmented with glowing lights and animated arrows point to the entrance. The street is masked with a green landscape and fake palm trees to indicate that she can enter that zone and when the traffic lights turn green the landscape disappears and signs indicate that the area must be cleared. All the signs that Juliana and the viewer see are customised to her perspective. Early in the film we see her opening a profile of herself that shows her profile picture, her points and achievements, status and other personal information. Apart from the personal information, the environment is also customised to her experience. In a scene in the supermarket, the augmented reality software starts to malfunction and whilst she holds up a yoghurt, the augmented sign on the yoghurt changes from a pink sign that says, "beautiful you – pro biotic yoghurt" to "MAN YOG – FOR REAL MEN ONLY". The surrounding of the supermarket changes and the "help support avatar" that pops up front of her to fix the problem, calls her Emilio. Her biggest worry is losing all her points and achievements, and that is what eventually happens at the end of the film where she must start again from level 1.



[Fig.5.1] Scenes from "Hyperreality"

It is unknown whether Matsuda wanted the viewer to understand this film as a realistic depiction of the future, in terms of the technology, or as a symbolic representation of our hyperreality. Of course, the extreme oversaturation of images in the film catches the viewers' attention and causes a lot of discussion on whether this is something that might be realised in the near future and if so, whether this is a utopian or dystopian reality. The fact is that Matsuda overlaid another level of hyperreality on top of an existing hyperreality. It is obvious to us now and stands out because it is something that we are not used to seeing and thus every image can be seen consciously and identified as a simulacrum. If however, all the augmented images were normal to our reality, then we wouldn't be discussing them; in the same way that we don't comment on the underlaid depiction of reality which is in fact our actual reality. In any case, the film is becoming less and less fictional as time goes by. Nowadays such as Facebook and Snapchat, have very recently added a new feature that motion tracks the camera footage of the user in real time and augments images, such as masks and hats onto the user's face. The smartphone game Pokémon Go, which was released in 2016, created a worldwide phenomenon having the most downloads in the first week in history. Large groups of people were gathering in different parts of cities to catch Pokémon. It even made the headlines when on many occasions there were accidents on the motorways of people slowing down speed to catch Pokémon. In other instances, crimes were committed by armed robbers who were waiting for Pokémon hunters in isolated parts of the city and in lonely streets. This stage of simulation is what Baudrillard added, in his further development of his research, as the fractal stage. It is when "…the notion of the referent changes to that of the combinatorial. Meaning is produced by the combination of different signs within a signifying system" (sited in Chan, 2014, p.42). One of its main characteristics is the proliferation of simulacra in mainstream culture and their rate of production, circulation and exchange. Baudrillard compares this to cancer and how it spreads rapidly to cause dysfunction in the body. In the same way, the fractal stage of signification, doesn't make the world more intelligent and causes unrest and imbalance. He quotes:

"We don't need digital gloves or a digital suit. As we are moving around in the world as in a synthetic image. We have swallowed our microphones and headsets, producing intense interference effects, due to the short-circuit of life and its technical diffusion." (Baudrillard, 1999, p.19).

CONCLUSION

[Fig.6.0]

Whilst it is very helpful for us to use Baudrillard's theories as a strategy of identifying and categorising different types of simulacra as well as their actual existence within our lives, it is not always necessary to take sides and label them as good or bad. It is ironic that Baudrillard seems to do that quite a lot, it is as if he is adding a layer of simulacra on his own theories. I think we can agree that various representations can distract us from what is really happening and highly distort our perception of the world. We could actually be living in Plato's cave, Borges' map, the Matrix or in Limbo without being completely aware of it. Baudrillard's statement on the state of our world as "the desert of the real" is presented as a negative. He doesn't propose any solutions on what one could do to escape that reality and when films like "The Matrix" attempt to depict a desert-of-the-real-like reality, he rejects them. His writings are therefore limiting in that manner. Also, judging by his definition of a simulacrum, that it is a copy with no original, then a hyperreality is a reality with no reference to any "real". However, his stages of simulation indicate that there used to be a "real" somewhere and at some point in time. It is unclear whether he considers that the "real" still exists today somewhere hidden from us. Thus, it is difficult for us to come to a resolution where we begin to search for the "real" world as we cannot be sure if there is one to begin with. From what we have seen in the analysis of "The Matrix", we can at least question the world around us and identify the different signs that will eventually become simulacra. In this way we can define them, instead of the simulacra defining themselves. It gives us the ability to give meaning to the world around us and construct our reality in the same way Neo was constructing the Matrix. However, as we have seen from the analysis of "Inception", the hyperreality exists within us and any meaning we give to the world is informed by our perception of our own constructed reality. It is therefore impossible to escape hyperreality as we are defined by it and in return we define it. Žižek argues that we need to keep redefining the present as the ground zero of the real and start anew. A constant reboot of reality as the real cannot be defined nor uncovered, it will always be subject to simulacra and in a state of hyperreal. In the first sentence of S&S, Baudrillard quotes Ecclesiastes:

"The simulacrum is never what hides the truth, it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true" (Baudrillard, 1981, p.1)

Along with the rapid production of new technologies such as VR and AR comes a rapid production of simulacra. The hyperreal is constantly expanding, but looking at the world from this new light we can say that the hyperreal is the real. New technologies might change the way we live, the way we interact and the way we see the world. What is considered normal today might be considered chaos tomorrow and vice versa. The merging of the real and the virtual is already happening and whether we should be worried about it or not is unclear. However, what Baudrillard helps us understand is that now we can be aware of reality as a living organism that self generates and evolves. He offers us a chance to get out of the autopilot mode of progress and observe what is happening and towards which direction we are headed. Whereas before we searched for the line that divides the virtual from the real, now we can draw it. As the designers of our built environment and of our reality, we should consider this as our responsibility.

References

Baudrillard (1981) Simulacra and Simulation

Baudrillard (1997). Art and Artefact

BBC (2016). How Pokémon Go took over the web. Article [Online] Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-36824737 [Accessed Apr. 2017]

Chan (2014). Virtual Reality: Representations in Contemporary Media

Fletcher (2012). The quarterly conversation. On Inception by Christopher Nolan. [Online] Available at: http://quarterlyconversation.com/issue-28 [Accessed Mar. 2017]

Freud (1994). The Interpretation of Dreams, Fifteenth edition

Gibson (1984), Neuromancer

Graham (2017). The Subtext. [Online] Available at: https://thesubtext.net/2017/02/02/lawnmower-man/ [Accessed Feb. 2017]

Heim (1994) The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality
Inception (2010)

Irwin (2002). The Matrix and Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real (Popular Culture and Philosophy)

Jung (1944). Psychology and Alchemy (2nd ed. 1968 Collected Works Vol. 12)

Krishnamurti (2009). Freedom from the Known, Thirty-first edition

Lancelin (2003). The Matrix Decoded: Le Nouvel Observateur Interview With Jean Baudrillard [Online] Available at: http://www2.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/vol1_2/genosko.htm [Accessed Apr. 2017] (Jean Baudrillard was interviewed for Le Nouvel Observateur (19-25 June 2003) by Aude Lancelin. The Editors of IJBS are grateful to Ruth Valentini and Le Nouvel Observateur for

permission to translate and publish this interview in English http://www.nouvelobs.com. Aude Lancelin conducted the original interview for Le Nouvel Observateur.

Matsuda (2016). Hyper-reality. [Online] Available at: http://hyper-reality.co/ [Accessed Apr. 2017]

Oreck (2004) Philosophy and the Matrix: Return to the Source (Full Documentary) [Online] Available at: https://vimeo.com/53000177 [Accessed Feb. 2017]

Reco (2007). Philosophy Compass, Vol.2

Rheingold (1991) Virtual Reality

Springett (2010). Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Philosophy of Dreaming article. [Online] Available at: http://www.iep.utm.edu/dreaming/#SH1a [Accessed Mar. 2017]

Statista (2017). Statistics and facts about social media usage [Online] Available at: https://www.statista.com/topics/1164/social-networks/ [Accessed Feb. 2017]

Steuer (1993). Defining Virtual Reality: Dimensions Determining Telepresence, Department of Communication, Stanford University. 15 October 1993

Stolze (2016) Contradictions of Hyperreality: Baudrillard, Žižek, and Virtual Dialectics
The Matrix (1999).

VRS (2017). Virtual Reality Society. What is Virtual Reality? [Online] Available at: https://www.vrs.org.uk/virtual-reality/who-invented-it.html [Accessed Feb. 2017]

Woolley (1993) Virtual Worlds: A Journey in Hype and Hyperreality

Worth (2002). The paradox of real response to neo-fiction in: Irwin (2002) The Matrix and Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real (Popular Culture and Philosophy)

Zizek (2012) Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism

Figure References

Figure 1.0. Virtual reality and real reality are not separate https://tigerspike.com/virtual-reality-and-real-reality-are-not-separate/

Figure 1.1. Screenshot from magic leap demo video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LM0T6hLH15k

Figure 2.0. Baudrillard, 1991 - Pyke Hulton Archive. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jean-Baudrillard

Figure 2.1. Pokemon go - (BBC, 2016) http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-36793610

Figure 2.2 Data suit - (Pape, 1999). https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:VPL_DataSuit_1.jpg

Figure 2.3 Neuromancer book cover, Gibson (1984), Neuromancer
Figure 2.4 Learning Mind: Plato's Allegory of the Cave. http://www.learning-mind.com/plato-allegory-of-the-cave/

Figure 2.5. Sainte Beuve" (1987), in Haladyn, 2006. http://www2.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/vol3_2/haladyn.htm#_edn5

Figures 3.0 – 3.8. Screenshots from "The Matrix", Matrix (1999)

Figure 4.0. Wallpaper Safari. https://wallpapersafari.com/inception-wallpapers/

Figures 4.1 – 4.3 & 4.5 – 4.7. Screenshots from "Inception", Inception (2010)

Figure 4.4. Inception infographic: Slusher (2017) http://www.rickslusher.com/Inception-The-Architecture

Figures 5.0 & 5.1. Screenshots from "Hyperreality", Hyperreality (2016) https://vimeo.com/166807261

Figure 6.0. Screenshot ftom "The Matrix Revolutions", The Matrix Revolutions (2003)