

INTRODUCTION THEORY IN THE MATRIX

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The *Matrix* trilogy continues to split opinions widely, polarising the downright dismissive and the wildly enthusiastic. This includes reactions within academic circles and from film and cultural critics who have been all too eager to pronounce themselves on all kinds of issues relating to the *Matrix*.¹ Significantly, some kind of uneasiness quickly surfaces in most contributions to the debate. For some it may still be a question of “serious” academics having to be apologetic about delving into “low” popular culture and indulging in some form of compromising but ultimately “immature” and therefore embarrassing “pleasure.” For others it might just be even more evidence of (cultural) theory’s or cultural studies’ weakness to take blockbuster culture – produced for quick consumption and short-term profit – too seriously. How can “serious” thinkers, even philosophers, sink so low as to find their inspiration in facile, superficial and largely incoherent, eclectic mass media franchises? Who forces them to be “cool” or even speak “cool” to get their message across to a seemingly ever more disenchanting, disconnected, radically hedonistic, intellectually ill-prepared generation of students? Is it the market? The *Matrix* itself? The university in ruins? Should one not rather resist or even try and reverse the trend by deliberately ignoring “populist” culture and instead return to the more “serious” stuff? Is theory or cultural studies, in allying itself to, and in reading “culture” as a mere “way of life,” not becoming part of the problem it nevertheless seeks to describe, comment upon, analyse and even criticise? In short, is theory today (in) the *Matrix*? Is the increasing desire for “post-theory,” for leaving the theory, culture, science etc. wars legacies behind, not a sign that people in English and other “serious” departments are wishing for a Morpheus to turn up and offer them the red pill? Others who are not so ready to let theory slip might

¹ A little note on usage: we have tried to be as consistent as possible throughout the volume in differentiating between *The Matrix* (the first film of the trilogy), *Matrix* (everything that refers to the Wachowski “brand,” e.g. the *Matrix* franchise, the *Matrix* trilogy, etc.), Matrix (the “programme,” SF “concept” or “topos”) and matrix (general usage, as in “biological matrix,” or Judith Butler’s “heterosexual matrix”).

instead be waiting for some kind of theoretical Neo to lead them in the fight against the machines. Captured in the virtual reality of theorese some may be looking for a Neo to unplug them from postmodernism, poststructuralism, postfeminism, postcolonialism, postmarxism, and, most recently, posthumanism.

The present volume is unashamedly but not dogmatically theoretical even though there is not much agreement about what kind of theory is best suited to confront “post-theoretical” times. But it is probably fair to say that there is agreement about one thing, namely that if theory appears to be “like” the *Matrix* today it does so because the culture around it and which “made” it itself seems to be captured in some kind of *Matrix*. The only way out of this is through more and renewed, refreshed theorising, not less. Therefore it seems interesting in itself to point out that in addition to its unprecedented success as film, video, computer game, franchise, etc. the *Matrix* has been fully embraced as a rich source of theoretical and cultural references. There have been far too many interventions in journals, at conferences, on the internet to be listed here. Some of the most influential references can be found in the bibliography at the end of this introduction. The main predecessors to this volume on the *Matrix* are also listed there (Irwin 2002; Badiou et al. 2003; Haber 2003; Yeffeth 2003; Clover 2004; Kapell & Doty 2004; Irwin 2005).

The *Matrix*, and thus writing about the *Matrix*, has by now gained some canonicity in curricula at various levels. There is what could be called a “*Matrix* phenomenon” (some might even go as far as to speak of a whole “*Matrix* generation”) which has not failed to attract analytical interest from all corners. This volume probes the effects the *Matrix* trilogy continues to provoke and evaluates how or to what extent they coincide with certain developments within theory. Is the enthusiastic philosophising and theorising spurned by the *Matrix* a sign of the desperate state cultural theory is in, in the sense of “see how low theory has sunk”? Or could the *Matrix* be one of the “master texts” for something like a renewal, the sign of “New Cultural Theory,” understood as an engagement with “new cultural and theoretical debates over technology” (Armitage 1999) and as being mainly concerned with new and changing relations between science, technology, culture, art, politics, ethics and the media? Several essays in this volume evaluate this possibility, notably in the ones in the last section.

There is thus first the question of the relationship between the *Matrix* and theory which guides this volume, and in particular the use of theory (i.e. concepts usually associated with philosophy, cultural theory, theology, etc.) in the films. Can one still speak of simply “applying” theory to a film that itself engages with theoretical, philosophical, theological and other issues,

and which could instead be thought of as a theory-film or a film “about” theory? Is it because the sinister, deeply metaphysical scenario and the “concept” of the Matrix itself strike a fundamental chord in these “postmodern,” “posthumanist,” and “post-theoretical” times? Or maybe is it because theory itself – in its institutionalised and orthodox form – is now being experienced as some kind of Matrix, namely as a discourse or jargon that critical readers feel incapable of finding an exit from that would open out onto the “real” (the real world, the real problems, or theory’s own suppressed “real,” its history, exclusions, unacknowledged translations etc.)? It is difficult to envisage how theory could be escaped or left behind (“posted”) without replacing it by something very much resembling theory. “After theory” would inevitably involve some Morpheus-like move that says: “unfortunately, no one can be told what the Matrix is. You can only see it for yourself.” At the same time it is of course also emblematic for the kind of “liberal humanism” underlying this idea of “free choice” which theory has always attacked and based its critical self-justification on. The moment you are offered a red or a blue pill there is no choice, only a decision (not a “decision in the strong sense” which, as Derrida would say, must be an unconditional one). Not to choose would confirm the status quo (choosing the blue pill is therefore an option but not really a choice); choosing the red pill is a decision but, in the absence of a radical and unknown alternative, not an unconditional or “radical” one.

So if the *Matrix* is, amongst many other things, an allegory of theory, then a “good reading” (or serious textual criticism) of the film must be a case of “theory striking back.” It is a reminder of what theory was articulated or invented for in the first place: to counter, for example, “moral criticism” of the Leavisite kind: theory is not interested whether seeing the *Matrix* turns you into a better or worse person. Theory is not “therapeutic” or “cathartic” in this sense, it is not encouraging you to join another self-help group. It may be worth reminding that increasing the visibility of theory was a reaction against certain “fallacies,” e.g. the “intentional fallacy.” Not that it is immaterial what the Wachowski brothers have to say about their intentions and their techniques, but a text develops its own life and dynamic. Or take the “affective fallacy.” Not that the impression a text makes is not important, but criticism should not aim to take the place of behavioural psychology. “Subjective” responses need to be seen as extensions of the text itself.

If the *Matrix* presents theory with its own post-theoretical image, it makes a theoretical engagement with it at once absolutely desirable and very tricky. An adequate response to the *Matrix* involves theory dealing critically with its own cultural “emanations,” with generation, canonisation and renewal, while at the same time dealing with some of its own “repressed,”

i.e. the return of some of theory's spectres like technological determinism, humanism, the question of gender, sexual and racial difference, the role of capitalism and science and the role of culture itself. This volume is not concerned with giving preference either to the *Matrix* or to theory; it does not use the *Matrix* to illustrate theoretical, philosophical, theological and other concepts. It also does not simply "apply" theory to a powerful narrative, genre, film etc. Neither does it claim any precedence for the *Matrix* as such, although one cannot escape the fact that the *Matrix* probably deliberately "uses" or even teases theory. Certain well-established postmodern topoi and ideas are cited in typically postmodern, "pastiche-like" aesthetic practice. It is not a question of theory finding itself in the *Matrix*, nor the *Matrix* "being" theoretical. What is most often forgotten in the many attempts to hijack the *Matrix* for educational purposes (whether it is simple life-coaching, philosophy, theology, literature, film studies etc.) is that the *Matrix* is first and foremost a (filmic) text and a powerful piece of (science) fiction. First of all it therefore needs to be "read" on its own terms. It provides the stimulus, the input of the discussion and in order to do it justice, a reading needs to meet it on its own, textual, terrain. This is what theory has always been about – delete the "literary" from "literary theory" and place it alongside its practical complement, namely "criticism" – a theoretically informed practical reading of a text and its "effects," its (wider cultural, historical, aesthetic etc.) context, its saids and unsaid, its presences, absences, gaps, desires, implied readers, narratives (and other technical) devices etc.

Only through a careful reading of the films can the main theoretical "issues" portrayed in the film be further discussed, like the ontological status of virtuality, the question of cyberspace and embodiment, the role of race, gender, ethnicity, class etc. in posthuman subjectivities and identity formation (and the ethical and moral problems related to posthuman forms of desire and repression, the "technological" unconscious and the future of psychoanalysis); or political issues related to revolutionary action (the possibility of change, new forms of alienation and community, the role of aesthetics and the future of Marxism); or philosophico-theological aspects concerning messianism, apocalypticism, the role of utopia, the future of democracy under the conditions of virtuality; or even socio-theoretical engagements with the representation of the future of multiculturalism, the city, technoculture, etc. All of these questions have by now a firm place and are almost de rigueur in contemporary critical and theoretical engagements in (comparative) literature, cultural studies and media departments – and texts like the *Matrix* are most welcome to continue the dialogue between cultural criticism and popular culture. The fact that the contributors of this volume interpret these issues in very different ways should be taken as a sign that this

dialogue is far from being “established” or indeed based on any kind of premeditated consensus.

In this vein, the contributions in Section Two of this volume (“Virtualities”) constitute a critical reevaluation of various forms in which the *Matrix* has been appropriated (for mainly didactic and illustrative reasons) to help readers re-engage with the philosophical problems the films seem to “quote” (like “Plato’s Cave,” Descartes’ “Evil Demon,” etc.) and which have become reference points or even topoi in contemporary theory and wider “posthumanist” circles. Chris Falzon expands on this philosophical aspect of the *Matrix*, carrying on from his *Philosophy Goes to the Movies* (2002: 19-48). The relation between philosophy and the *Matrix* is here understood through “mutuality:”

The Matrix both alludes to the philosophical problem of scepticism about the external world, and makes its viewers confront the question. At the same time this engagement with philosophical themes opens up the film to a further level of interaction with philosophy, because it becomes possible for this engagement to be criticised, for the film to be subjected to philosophical criticism.

In a similar but even more vigorous tone, Elie During makes his claims – first published in *Matrix – machine philosophique* (2003; co-edited by During, with contributions by Alain Badiou and others) – accessible to an English-speaking audience. During’s approach is that the *Matrix* is a philosophical “machine” in a Deleuzian sense, which in its visual and textual combinatory plays through the possibilities of the virtual. The main idea of the film is in fact not to reject the virtual as a lesser form of the real – a facile opposition wrongly but frequently set up – but to make the *Matrix* “palatable” for human experience: “What distinguishes a film like *The Matrix* from other films that deal with the same topic is that it makes one see how the real and the virtual are set out *in practice*, not in the terms of an imaginary topology where reality and simulation are always conceptualised, whether intended or not, as two distinct but adjacent ‘worlds,’” During explains. In order to illustrate his rather provocative approach, he focuses on the role of the telephone in the *Matrix*, as well as the “bullet-time” technology used by the Wachowski brothers, and opposes the idea of virtuality achieved here with an earlier attempt in *Tron* (1982).

To bring the discussion back to the question of theory: despite the rapprochement between philosophy, theory and the *Matrix* in these contributions, it would nevertheless be naïve to think that there is a simple parallelism, mere coincidence or a “shared interest” between the *Matrix* science fiction and current developments in theory. It would be naïve for two

reasons: it would mean to ignore that cultural theory has come under siege and is in serious trouble. This does not mean that an end to the practice of “theorising” – something that would literally be unthinkable – is in sight, as many of theory’s enemies are all too eager to announce, but it does mean that the specific body of theoretical texts that has been growing ever since the 1960s and 70s, which transformed the humanities beyond recognition and created an unprecedented interdisciplinary arena grouped around notions like culture, text and more recently, technology, is under attack from all corners, left, right and centre, and in serious crisis. Recent works by Cunningham (2002), Eagleton (2003) and Patai & Corral (2005) and many others before them are only the tip of the iceberg. The increasing number of references to “post-theory” are a sure sign that theory’s “archives” are being opened up for scrutiny, reinterpretation and rewriting. This is to a certain extent a welcome development because it will ensure the renewal of critical engagement at once with the critical practice of theorising and the necessary adaptation of theory to new political and cultural circumstances (in terms of the history of technology, the challenges of “posthumanism,” the future of globalisation, questions of environmentalism, religious fundamentalism, terrorism etc.). The *Matrix* however engages with theory in its current state of dissolution. It returns to theory an image of itself that is not only simplified but also nostalgic. This is most obvious in the use of Baudrillard. In this volume, Sven Lutzka provides a good summary and critique in this respect.

The “appropriation” of Baudrillard by *The Matrix* certainly is not without irony but, of course, as Baudrillard was quick to point out himself, in the long list of films and other texts that deal with the impossibility to distinguish between real and virtual, the *Matrix* merely constitutes something like a “paroxystic synthesis.” But by trying to make this dilemma “transparent” the films actually contribute to the process rather than either effectively criticise or even resist it. “*The Matrix* is like the film about the Matrix that the Matrix would have produced” (Baudrillard 2003: 127). *The Matrix* is thus part of the “problem” it seems to describe, rather than its solution. But is the same true for theory? Baudrillard famously demanded that theory drop its fundamentally “realist” legitimization of truth in a time of a “disappearing” world and instead embrace the idea of using “fatal strategies” like “seduction” and seeing itself as “theory-event,” as its own performance:

Let’s be like the Stoics: if the world is fatal, let’s be more fatal than the world. If it is indifferent, let’s be even more indifferent. One has to defeat the world and seduce it by an indifference that is at least equal to its own. (Baudrillard 1987: 86).

Theory has problems with products of mass culture that throw reflections of theory or critical thought and philosophy back at it because its own critical reflexes become invalidated by this. It puts the question of the place and use of the critic back on the table. It confronts, à la Baudrillard, theory with its own simulation. What is the specific “fatal strategy” for theory in this situation? It rearticulates the question of theory’s “identity”: what is it, and who and what is it for? Neither commentary nor illustration, neither morally didactic nor purely aesthetic, etc. In the case of the *Matrix*, theory no longer occurs *après coup*, but in the true nature of the “post” it occurs at once too late and too soon. Theory is forced to do its own anamnesis. But maybe theory, *n’en déplaie à Baudrillard*, does not have to go to these metaphysical extremes. Theorising the *Matrix* may first of all demonstrate that there is a huge difference between any critique of the “system” and systematic critique.

However, it would also be naïve to overemphasize any idea of reflection between the *Matrix* and theory for another reason. It would actually be neglecting to *read* the *Matrix* theoretically. As long as there is a serious and systematic and analytical engagement with the *Matrix* as a filmic text that comes along with a context in which it also intervenes (see the contributions grouped in the section the *Matrix* as “Cultural Phenomenon”), there will be a need for a theory and theoretical concepts applicable to and adapted for the occasion. The *Matrix* phenomenon, i.e. the whole aspect of reception, the hugely important marketing campaign before, during and after, the numerous accessories, the games, the websites, the entirety of genres serving as source and spin offs to the film, the entire aspect of cultural fashion and transformation that might have engendered a “*Matrix* generation,” maybe even the beginning of a new “cosmology,” need to be *read*, that is analysed, critically reflected upon, theorised. And since theory is part of the baggage the films bring along, this means theory critically reflecting upon itself (which is one possible understanding of the term “post-theory”).

In this sense, the *Matrix* phenomenon is also a (cultural, historical, psychological, material...) “symptom.” The essays in the first section of this volume explore precisely this aspect. Jon Stratton undertakes the invaluable task of anchoring the *Matrix* trilogy within its cultural historical context (“From Y2K to Post 9/11,” as he puts it). One of the striking aspects about the reception of the trilogy is in fact, after all the excitement about the scenario set up in *The Matrix*, the huge disenchantment with sequels one and two, *Reloaded* and *Revolutions*. On the one hand, there is of course an intrinsic inevitability about this disappointment. The contemporary cultural obsession with sequelisation is buying into audience expectation, desire and

its partial fulfilment and deferral, but all too often this is too visibly commercially driven. As Stratton also argues, the narrative logic of the sequelised story is often overtaken by external cultural and historical developments (cf. Budra & Schellenberg 1998). This might explain why ideologically the sequels of the trilogy seem much “tamer” than the first part. It is not that *Reloaded* and *Revolutions* were deliberately produced to serve as American propaganda, but rather that “these films work within the American cultural imaginary... they reproduce dominant American understandings of the position, and role, of the United States at the present time.” The *Matrix* trilogy is thus not immune to the fact that

action and science fiction sequels renovate their narratives and characters in ways which either absorb or displace feminist and postcolonial challenges – features of social and historical context of their production – to sexual and racial oppression. They absorb, or make allowances for, critiques of dominant power by rehabilitating white patriarchy. The white male hero (and sometimes the villain) is, in a sense, domesticated in the interests, not of ideological containment, but for promoting, in different ways and to varying degrees, a kinder, gentler patriarchy (but a patriarchy nonetheless). (McLarty, in Budra & Schellenberg 1998: 206).

In sum, then, the *Matrix* trilogy could just be another example, according to Stratton, of the “white trauma” the United States are experiencing and “exporting” to the rest of the world.

Kimberly Barton’s contribution to this volume sees the trilogy in a much more positive light. According to her, “*The Matrix* enlists its audience in the revolutionary unshackling of contemporary culture from its bondage to the entertainment industry as it draws movie goers into the cathartic experience of self-liberation from the technologically engineered synapses of the managed ‘self.’” Barton would like to propose an analogy between the *Matrix* and other often critically underrated aspects of popular media culture, and developments within her own discipline, sociology, towards “reflexive modernisation.”

However, it needs to be stressed that this volume is trying to escape the simple “appropriation” of the *Matrix* for any self-legitimizing purposes. It is not using the film to illustrate philosophical questions, explain allusions to literary history, questions of religious pluralism, faith or dogma, etc., but instead engages with the *Matrix*-text. It is of course necessary not to lose sight of the cultural context in which the *Matrix* trilogy occurs, for example the question of the global resurgence of religion and the role of America in this process, but a reading must do justice to the “letter” (or “digit”) of the actual text. It is also not just a case of “exegesis” although both from a

theological and technological point of view this can be very illuminating (cf. for example most of the essays in Irwin 2002 and 2005). It is rather the proximity to certain psychoanalytical insights and reading techniques that characterise the theory-criticism approach. A “symptomatic” reading of the *Matrix* as, on the one hand, a cultural product of its own time (including traces of unconscious desires, repressed, fetishisms etc.) and, on the other hand, a dreamlike tale of subjectivity and sublimation, will tend to the letter of the text even where the text itself might “forget” or want to gloss over its literality and hence its ambiguity and uncontrollability. In this sense the *Matrix* is not only a philosophical machine (cf. During, in this volume) but of course, like any carefully crafted and multi-layered construct, a *textual* machine. Like any fictional text, therefore, the *Matrix* works, as Slavoj Žižek (in Irwin 2002: 240) says, like a “Rohrschach test.” It answers to the imaginary of whoever reads it. All the more important therefore to tend closely to its symbolic and to its real. The reason why the idea of the Matrix has managed to strike so many chords is that it is connected to fundamental psychological uncertainties like the question of control and denial. However, it is important, while continuing to work with and to further develop psychoanalytic concepts in application to the readings of texts, to also reject psychoanalysis as a “dogma” replacement, or to turn Freud (or Lacan) into an equivalent of the Architect figure.

Another major aspect of the *Matrix* cultural phenomenon is the fact that, like most Hollywood blockbusters now, it is a “franchise.” Commercialisation precedes it and is inextricably woven into the film. While this fact cannot be neglected, it is also maybe too reductive to see the *Matrix*, as some (neo) Marxist readings attempt to do, merely as the contemporary equivalent of religious “opium,” as a kind of cultural “prozac” (cf. Danahay & Rieder, in Irwin 2002; Danahay, in Irwin 2005). Christian Krug and Joachim Frenk explain in this volume what is remarkable about the franchise character of the *Matrix*:

the radically new potential of the *Matrix* franchise [which] derives from the status of the various media involved in the process. An established hierarchy is turned upside down since comics, animated short films, and even a computer game now supplement film, a medium that has attained far greater cultural prestige. It is one of the foremost tasks of New Media Studies to analyse and discuss the ongoing intricate exchanges and reconfigurations within the media hierarchy, especially the ways in which new digital media interact with the established electronic media. Within the new configuration of the Matrix, the game is a site of intense negotiations between the different media involved, and the film still claims supremacy.

They go on to critically evaluate the idea of “interactivity” promised by the videogame *Enter the Matrix*, which they characterise as “retro-game” in its being representative of a certain generation of video gamers. This is something which affects the entire experience not only of the video game but also the films themselves.

Looking at the *Matrix* as a cultural phenomenon leads one quite naturally to seeing it as a symptom of a certain transformation of sensibilities, maybe even as the beginning of a new “structure of feeling,” to use Raymond Williams’ phrase. One powerful way of naming this new structure of feeling is by referring to it as “posthumanism.” Denisa Kera (and also, from a more theoretical point of view, the essays in the last section of this volume) reads the trilogy as a contemporary example of a “titanomachia” and a powerful constitutive myth allowing humanity to embrace its own posthumanist future. She critically evaluates the chances of a posthumanist community between “hardware, wetware and software.”

It is of course important, as many essays demonstrate, to locate the *Matrix* trilogy within the history of genre, namely its role within science fiction and cyberpunk, its technological extension of the genre through the technique of “bullet time” for example, its participation in developing a new subgenre that may be called “Edge of the construct” (cf. Clover 2004), etc. However, while an entirely formalist and immanent reading of the *Matrix* is helpful but incomplete, a purely generic contextualist view is also narrowing. Instead, the *Matrix*’s belonging or exploding of (a) genre also needs to be firmly rooted in the changes of the cultural environment in which both the text and the genre participate, neither as mere reflections, nor as autonomous agents of change. The question is of course why the contemporary Western, and increasingly global or globalised, cultural imaginary is so obsessed with the genre of science fiction. This is where the idea of posthumanism as the latest wave within theoretical generations becomes relevant. It is also connected to the question of nihilism which links the *Matrix* to a whole dimension within theory, from Descartes to Nietzsche and to Baudrillard.

It may be that the actual common core between the *Matrix* and theory lies precisely in this: the *Matrix* seems to articulate certain contemporary anxieties and desires, by projecting them into the future of course, that have so far been one of theory’s domains: namely the critique of a hegemonic system in combination with “last man” and “first posthuman” narratives. The difference between the first wave of theoretical anti-humanism in the 1960s and 70s and the current posthumanist wave of “New Cultural Theory” is the exponential technological development, without which the *Matrix* films could not have been realised: techniques of simulation, of the virtual, cyberspace; the acceleration of “cyborgisation” and the intensification of

human-technology or prosthetics; the advent of the information society and digital and e-culture; new uncertainties about the role of science in society; ethical questions about eugenics, artificial intelligence etc. The *Matrix* films are at once products of these developments and commentaries on them, and, like the *Terminator* films, whose postapocalyptic and posthuman scenario they take as their starting point, they have to deal with the ambiguity of their own paradoxical “representationalism” (see Cohen 1994: 260ff.; see also Clover 2004: 69ff.). A critically posthumanist reading (as the contributions in the last section attempt to perform) would therefore have to deal with the prevailing conservatism of form and ideology of mass culture and, through deconstructive readings, would attempt to liberate the potential that is often foreclosed. The posthuman scenario with its anxieties and desires presented in science fiction is both a justified critical reflection of the present and all too often an unjustifiable return to commonsensical and conservative, moralistic values.

A major issue in the representation of posthuman scenarios and posthumanist desires is the question of the body and (dis)embodiment in general. For Alain Milon (2005), most science fiction films (and the *Matrix* in particular), like many enthusiasts of virtual reality, indeed display something of a “*refus du corps* [a rejection of the body],” which needs to be countered by a radically materialist understanding of the “virtual body” as an “immersed” and “augmented” extension of a nevertheless real (not artificial) body. In speaking of a virtual body, Milon explains, “it is not a question of replacing the real body by technological artefacts, but rather of appreciating the veritable limits of the body” (Milon 2005: 8). All thus hinges on a more critical notion of virtuality, and this is exactly what the *Matrix* sets out to do, but, according to Milon, fails to deliver in the end.

Three essays in this volume are mainly concerned with the question of embodiment. Don Ihde seeks to demonstrate that it is through the question of embodiment that it can be shown that the *Matrix* uses an oversimplified version of Plato’s Cave argument to intervene in the current version of theoretical debate on the relation between “appearance and reality.” Aimee Bahng highlights the politics of representation of race and sex at work in the *Matrix*. The apparent embrace of ethnic diversity and multiracial hybridity in the films, she claims,

operates only at the level of aesthetics; it does not permeate the project’s underlying ideologies whatsoever. The films cultivate a pan-ethnic aesthetic that pretends at a consolidated humanity but ultimately reveals itself to be a superficial bronzing over of racial differences. Despite promoting an attention to the constructedness of social realities, the films fail to consider the social construction of race.

Instead, the revolution promised by the trilogy, rather than overthrowing any hierarchical structures culminates, ends “in these all-too-familiar, nation-consolidating affirmations of the church, the family and ‘freedom.’” In sharp contrast to this, Bahng looks at the far greater radicality of “queering” practices at work in the “slash fiction” circulated mainly on the web by *Matrix* fans.

Rainer Emig’s essay is equally sceptical about the role gender and sexuality play in the *Matrix* films. He provides a parallel reading with Judith Butler’s “heterosexual matrix” and asks to what extent popular culture uncritically follows or maybe subverts theoretical ideas like Butler’s. Emig pinpoints an outrageously obvious but far-reaching discrepancy about the downplaying of sexuality in the *Matrix* films:

If one of the prominent uses of the so-called cyber-reality already available to us in the shape of the Internet is sexuality (and the number of porn sites by far exceeds that of all others), why does sexuality feature so little in a film which problematises virtual reality so drastically? Why does the film at the same time declare bodies a simulation and insist on their fetishistic adornment, training and transformation into androgynous fighting machines, but also penetration, mutilation, and random multiplication?

This apparent paradox makes one realise that a major aspect of a theoretical-critical engagement and reading of the *Matrix* must surely be an ethico-political one. First of all, what is the diegetic ethics in the films? This concerns mainly the question of revolution, the role of Neo (in a certain parallel to the role of the activist and the intellectual), the representation of a posthuman future, questions of race and gender, ideology and the subject, embodiment and the use of violence. The ethics “in” the text inevitably spills over into the ethics of reading and of reception. Can the film really be blamed for what its viewers do as a result of seeing it (cf. Anderson, in Haber 2003; Flannery-Dailey & Wagner, in Kapell & Doty 2004; Nardone & Bassham, in Irwin 2005)? In evaluating the role the *Matrix* films have been playing in and for contemporary theory, the contributions of section four in this volume are addressing once more the question of theory’s political involvement with texts and the ethical assumptions that lie behind the practice of theory.

Salah el Moncef proposes a Deleuzian reading of the *Matrix* that evaluates the deterritorialising and heterotopian potential in the opposition between the Matrix and Zion, while my own contribution attempts to read Neo’s transformation through theory’s key concept of subjectivity. The *Matrix*’s main theoretical interest could be seen in its projections of posthuman subjectivities to come. Finally, Ivan Callus asks what the studios

and serious academic engagement with the *Matrix* trilogy tells us about the current state of the humanities: “what can be learnt about the theoretical humanities if one studies them studying *The Matrix* trilogy?” Callus is skeptical about the eager embracement of the trilogy as a representative and legitimate object for “new theory” and for its engagement with posthumanisms of all sorts. Posthumanism, as Callus succinctly defines it, is:

the episteme which arguably succeeds postmodernism and yields a “new” discourse for our time. Posthumanism, whether this is approached in the key of “post-humanism” or in the key of “post-human-ism,” understands that the challenges of the digital, the virtual, the nanotechnological, and the biotechnological mean that the agendas for the humanities have to be rethought in step with the reappraisal of the integrality and the specificity of the human, and of the constantly enhanced encroachments of the prosthetic. The realisation that many of the scenarios of science fiction are no longer futurological or speculative but, in some very immediate ways, expressions of what is in fact a new realism, means that the uncertainties produced by the prospects for a reengineering of the human find, in a work like *The Matrix*, sublimations of some deep fears and concerns. If *The Matrix* acquires canonicity, therefore, it is because it has provided to the contemporary imagination and to critical discourse a vivid and dramatic fictive rendition of those fears and concerns: one that recasts and reworks established traditions and blends them with depictions of crises that appear very exclusively of our time and of our worst futures. In that sense, *The Matrix* is an important posthumanist film and a leading point of reference in the posthumanist canon.

Since “there can be no ‘new theory’ compelled by a text that does not, in effect, work to alter critical and philosophical idiom itself,” and if “new theory” were to live up to its ambitions, it would have to demonstrate that what is at work in the *Matrix* is an entirely new, namely “posthuman” aesthetic.

In summary, it could be argued that the *Matrix*, as the critical readings in this volume demonstrate, is located between two “posts” – post-theory (theory in the state of coming to terms with its own institutionalisation and popularisation) and posthumanism (a renewal of cultural forces under global capitalist technoscientific conditions that call for an urgent reengagement with the question of the crisis of humanism and renewed theorisation). The challenge for this “new theory” to come is thus to renew itself and renew its capacities to critically read cultural texts like the *Matrix* under these new, posthuman conditions, or put differently, to set in motion a critical posthumanism that builds on theory’s undeniable achievements (its critical

tradition) and generates the force of self-transformation that is necessary to deal with future and already existing posthumanist and globalised challenges.

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