



Representations of Digital Alienation in Film Literature: A Critical Study of The Matrix Trilogy



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ARTICLE INFO

Received:

February 23, 2026

Revision Received:

March 13, 2026

Accepted:

April 02, 2026

Available Online:

April 11, 2026

Keywords:

Digital alienation, The Matrix, Catherine Belsey, Textual analysis, Simulacra and simulation.

ABSTRACT

Digital alienation has become an important social issue in the twenty-first century. It is deeply connected to globalization, new technologies, and the way digital life affects human relationships. Movies often show these feelings of distance and loss of connection in society. The Matrix series, directed by Lana Wachowski, creates digital worlds that show the struggles of humans between reality and virtual existence. A number of researches have been conducted on the characters and themes of the film series, but there is inadequate research that focuses on the representation of digital alienation. Thereby, utilizing Catherine Belsey's method of textual analysis under the broader umbrella of simulacra and simulation theory, this thesis examined digital alienation through the idea of simulation and virtual realities in The Matrix film series. Ultimately, the research demonstrated that the films depict the hyperreal digital space not merely as an illusion, but as a structural condition that actively separates humanity from physical reality, psychological agency, and authentic human connection.

1. Introduction

During recent years of the twentieth and early twenty first century the advent of digital technology changed human experience so drastically, that a new age of hyper connectivity and extreme isolation were born. In this strange way, this "digital alienation" is a symptom of the growing distance that exists between the person and their organic, lived environment in a world that is becoming more mediated. Hassan, R. (2020). These fears are reflected in film literature as an important and valuable cultural mirror, offering a story and a visual plan for the examination of the psychological and structural implications of technological control. In the modern era of science fiction cinema, the boundaries between reality and what is not are clearly examined through the strategic use of the cinematic language and dystopian visions, in which the identity of man is systematically attacked by the very systems that are supposed to protect it. Wachowski, A., Wachowski, L (1999)

Lana and Lilly Wachowski film The Matrix (1999) is a paragon of this cinematic quest. The movie presents a dark future in which humans are living in an algorithmic computer simulation, called the Matrix, without their knowledge and their bodies are harvested by the machines for bio-electric power. The Matrix is a philosophical exercise in freedom and control, authenticity and perception, capable of posing profound questions. It portrays a society that is stuck in a digital ecology and is therefore the perfect book to explore not just the emotional sense of digital alienation, but its overall existential meaning. In order to grasp

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this multifaceted phenomenon, the analysis that follows is based on the postmodern philosophy of Jean Baudrillard, particularly his theory of Simulacra and Simulation published in 1998. Baudrillard, J. (1998)

In the present society, Baudrillard says, all reality and meaning have been replaced by symbols and signs, leading to a condition of “hyperreality” in which there is no longer any distinction between the real and the artificial. In this context a “simulacrum” is a copy lacking a referent. The concept is captured beautifully in the Matrix: that the “real” world of 1999 is a third order simulacrum that camouflages the worst truths about humanity's incarceration. The present study examines the hyperreal world of the film and its ability to harness the desire and its essential separation from matter through the prism of the concept of “hyperreal” as introduced by Baudrillard. Wolny, R. W. (2017).

In operationalizing this theoretical framework, the study uses Catherine Belsey's model of textual analysis. Belsey treats the film as a rich, multimodal work of 'film literature' and systematically considers what the film says, how it communicates meaning through visual and verbal elements, to which audience it is addressed, and how it affects the audience's ideology. Belsey, C. (2013). This article will critically deconstruct how the film produces digital alienation, examining closely the conversation, visual themes and plot of Matrix. Finally, what can be gleaned from the combination of Belsey's interrogative reading of the text and Baudrillard's theory of postmodernity is The Matrix as an analysis of a society completely dominated by digital illusion, which is structured so that it could serve as a guide to the understanding of the existential horror of a technologically mediated life.

1.1 Problem Statement

Digital alienation is one of the significant problems in the twenty-first century as individuals are becoming less connected with reality due to the increased reliance on technology and online environments. With the introduction of technology into the everyday lives of people, people tend to lose the actual human touch and experiences. Contemporary films are significant in presenting these issues. The movie trilogy, Matrix, created by Lana Wachowski depicts the worlds where humans are imprisoned in the digital networks that dictate their lives. Nonetheless, little studies have been done on the display of digital alienation using concepts of simulation and virtual reality in these movies thus this paper examines the expression of digital alienation using concepts of stimulation and virtual reality in these movies.

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To explore the phenomenon of digital alienation through hyperreality in the film series The Matrix?
2. To explore the phenomenon of digital alienation through third order simulation in the film series The Matrix?

1.2 Research Questions

1. How does hyperreality depict the phenomenon of digital alienation in the film series The Matrix?
2. How does third order stimulation explore the phenomenon of digital alienation in the film series The Matrix?

2. Literature Review

Digital alienation is a concept that in modern sociological and media studies is a significant development of traditional Marxist estrangement but tailored to the age of hyper-connectivity and algorithmic capitalism. According to Robert Hassan in his book *The Condition of Digitality: A Post-Modern Marxism of the Practice of Digital Life* (2020), digital alienation is a relation of relation lessness. In this condition, the ubiquitous and automated aspect of digital technologies isolates people in meaningful and analogue engagement with their physical space and genuine human relationships. Digital alienation exists in a continuous and invisible manner as opposed to the traditional alienation of the industrial age where workers do not see the physical results of their efforts. Users are active, and usually unaware, creators of information that platforms commodify their actions, disaggregate their identities, and mediate their social realities. The person is therefore not only alienated in his/her work in the digital (scrolling, posting, communicating), but in his/her subjectivity, being confined to a digital ecology that requires constant interaction and at the same time ends up becoming increasingly isolated in existence.

It has been argued that the theory of hyperreality has played a central role in shaping modern cultural and media studies since it has shifted the critical focus towards the conventional reality to the mechanisms that govern the production of meaning in simulated spaces. The most fundamental text in this discussion is *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994) by Jean Baudrillard, which proposes the idea of modern society substituting lived reality with signs and representations. Elaborating on this, Merrin (2005) presents a critical introduction to Baudrillard application to the modern media, highlighting the way simulacra take over modern communication. Fields (2008) further develops these structural underpinnings by exploring the way in which the illusion of meaning is actively produced and reproduced in the context of hyperreal spaces and preconditions, the interpretation of digital space as an all-pervasive system of simulation.

The idea of alienation dates back to the classical theory of sociology. In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, Karl Marx (1844/1978) coined alienation as an aspect where people lose touch with their work, society and self. According to Marx, industrial systems transform human beings into machines, and people lose their identity and their meaning. This theoretical concept has been applied in contemporary realities whereby technological and digital alienations have also been incorporated. In *Social Acceleration*, Rosa (2015) has gone further to state that contemporary life is defined by a swift change in technology, which undermines the attachment of individuals to social and natural surroundings, exacerbating a sense of alienation.

As the media and the consumer culture grew, the notion of alienation was extended to the area of representation and imagery. In *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Debord believed that contemporary society is dominated by images and mediated experiences, when real social life is substituted with the representations. He stressed that people are mere observers and not actors in the real world. In an equivalent fashion, in *Media Culture*, Kellner (2003) described how mass media produces identities and creates perceptions of reality, which makes people interact more with symbolic representations as opposed to real experiences.

One of the most significant theoretical turns was made by Jean Baudrillard whose *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994) has essentially changed the concept of reality and representation. Baudrillard pursued the thesis that reality is replaced by simulations in the postmodern society, producing simulacra, or copies that have no reference point. He coined the phrase hyperreality in which people are unable to differentiate between real and artificial experiences. This theory is the key to the digital alienation because it describes the way virtual spaces substitute the real interaction with people and produce a feeling of disconnection.

After Baudrillard, these concepts started being applied to digital culture and media. In *The Mediated Construction of Reality*, Couldry and Hepp (2017) stated that media technologies are actively involved in the construction of social reality, shaping the perceptions of individuals and their interactions with the world. On the same note, Fuchs (2014) in *Digital Labour* and Karl Marx applied the same theory of alienation to digital capitalism and argued that technological systems exploit human labor and fuel the new kinds of alienation in online space.

3. Methodology

The methodology used is qualitative and is based on a framework of textual analysis provided by Catherine Belsey. Textual analysis is a crucial tool in literary and cultural studies, helping to uncover the layers of meaning within a story. Belsey's model is a systematic way of analyzing a text by asking what, how, who and what for questions. The study adopts this systematic method and is beyond the point of mere superficial observation of the selected films, it critically deconstructs the philosophical and ideological structures of the selected films. The qualitative paradigm is well suited to exploring the profound existential themes as it enables a nuanced and interpretative understanding of how digital alienation is constructed and manifested in the technologically dominated cinematic space. Belsey, C. (2013).

3.1 Theoretical Framework

The postmodern philosophical approach of this research is based on the theories of Jean Baudrillard, particularly his work *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994). In a techno world, says Baudrillard, Reality and Representation have become indistinguishable. When this collapse occurs, a culture is imbued with signs, symbols and images that no longer point to any material truth or original reality.

3.1.1 The concept of hyperreality and digital alienation.

Hyperreality is the final stage in the simulation: a state where reality and representation coincide and are indistinguishable to the subject. Baudrillard, J. (1998). In a hyperreal state, the simulation is more perceived as real, desirable, and coherent than is physical life. The Matrix builds a perfect hyper realized universe where humans' perceptions, relationships with one another, and consciousness are entirely produced by the code of the computer. Barroso, P. (2022).

3.1.2 The third order simulation and simulacra.

Third Order Simulation and Simulacra, according to this Baudrillardian sense of things, simulation is the process of substituting the real with anything artificial, active. It is not simply a copy; it is the manufacture of a fake, something that is capable of covering the lack of real depth. Individuals, images or representations that inhabit this simulation are called simulacra. Baudrillard recognizes various "orders" of simulacra throughout history. Baudrillard, J. (2019). The postmodern age is the age of third order simulation, that is, the simulation before the real, the precession of simulacra. During this period, a simulacrum is an image that is not related to any real thing, it has no predecessor. Baudrillard, J. (1981).

4. Analysis

4.1 Section 1: Hyperreality and representation of digital alienation.

The first research question is addressed by a discussion of the use of the concept of hyperreality for representing the phenomenon of digital alienation in *The Matrix* (1999) and *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003). This analysis is deconstructive in the sense that it uses Catherine Belsey's model of textual analysis that questions what a text says, how it constructs meaning and the ideological effects it produces to interrogate a cinematic representation of a society being completely absorbed by a digital simulation. Relying on Jean Baudrillard's theory, the films are examined not only as science fiction stories, but as texts that are deeply questioning and reveal the existential disembodiment of human consciousness from the material world.

4.2 Hyperreal Construct: Introduction to the Hyperreal Constructs

The Matrix is a tale of a digital construct superseding the traditional physical geography of the main human habitat. The explanation of character's digital alienation will require an understanding of the space in which they live. The film's story does not passively mirror reality but rather is a critical construction of the technological reliance of late capitalism through Belsey's critical lens, translating Baudrillard's notion into the realm of hyperreality.

When reality and representation merge in complete convergence, the subject cannot tell the difference between the two, it is Hyperreality as described by Baudrillard. The Matrix itself is the ultimate movie application of this idea. It is a third-order simulacrum, a perfect digital copy of late-20th century Earth which conceals the horrific lack of a lived, real truth. This hyperreal condition is immediately set in the film by making clear to the audience that the characters' baseline existence is completely constructed. They operate, interact and construct identities in a digital "ecology" unaware that their bodies are suspended in a viscous fluid, harvested for bio-electric energy by intelligent machines.

Belsey's approach involves analyzing the text in terms of what it says to whom. This hyperreal alienation is introduced in the film by a system fragmenting identity. Thomas Anderson leads a divided life: during the day he is a software developer for a good company, at night he is a "Neo" hacker. This duality is the first step into digital alienation. Neo has lost touch with himself, his society and his labor, and is looking for a meaning that he can feel that he is missing but cannot articulate. During a security interrogation by Agent Smith, a sentient security program of the Matrix, Smith refers to this fragmentation:

Agent Smith: "As you can see, we've been watching you for some time now, Mr. Anderson. It seems that you've been living two lives: one that has a future, and one that doesn't."

Smith's speech is an overt expression of the control of the hyperreal space. The digital environment insists on a single identity, one that's rather tame: the corporate citizen. And it wants to expel the weird one: the hacker. Both of Thomas Anderson's lives are "not real" because of this alienation. His corporate identity and his rebellious hacker are algorithmic variables in a closed system of digitality. His mind is living in a hyperreal cycle, with no real physical or spiritual support.

4.3 The material world must be eradicated

The most visceral is the visual and thematic contrast of the hyperreal simulation with the dead material world, as in *The Matrix*. The emphasis of Belsey's analytical framework is on the ideological implications of visual representation. The filmmakers use different color schemes and layouts to convey the unnaturalness of the digital world, and the hard truths of the physical one.

The movie switches from an epistemological mystery to a horrific discovery of a sense of alienation of the body when Neo comes out of the simulation. The audience and Neo are at once thrown into the physical world, a place with no late-twentieth century charm.

**Figure 1.1**

This is a visual and cinematic analysis activity for the film “The Desert of the Real”.

The Matrix's environment is inky green throughout, with the same sickly-green hue as many early computer monitors. This green wash is a visual marker to the audience that any representation in this frame is mediated, artificial and coded. The architecture is stiff, structured, and crushing, the sort of precision that algorithms expect. Everything else is in stark contrast, both the kingdom of Heaven (Zion, the city in the midst of the earth) with cold, harsh blues, greys and deep shadows and the surface of the earth scorched.

**Figure 1.2**

The impact of digital alienation is summed up in the critical moment when Morpheus reveals to Neo what the reality of the planet is. Morpheus is the character who is able to activate a simulation of the real physical world in a minimalist, white digital

construct (the “Construct”). The change of scene is shocking: the sky is permanently and vainly filled with black clouds, and the land is a land of broken rock.

Morpheus: “All of mankind was united, and we marveled at our own magnificence at that time, giving birth to AI... We have only bits and pieces of information, but we know for certain that at some point in the early twenty-first century, all of mankind was united, and we marveled at our own magnificence at that time, giving birth to AI.

Neo: “Artificial Intelligence, AI.

Morpheus: “A single mind that generated a host of machines... Welcome to the desert of the real.

It is a direct and deliberate use of the term “the desert of the real” from Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation*. The film uses Baudrillard’s precise phrasing for the character’s dialogue to make it clear that it is the same critique that is being reflected upon in the film. The “desert” Morpheus speaks of is not only the environment ravaged by human activity but is the sense of spiritlessness that follows when the human experience is completely replaced with a simulation.



Figure 1.3

This alienation is further illustrated through the visualization of the human “fields”. According to Morpheus, humans are no longer born but are “grown”. The camera cuts back and forth, capturing the endless, towering structures with glowing pink pods, into an unimaginable void. The contents of each pod were naked, hairless, human fetuses floating in a gooey amniotic fluid with large cybernetic cables connected to their nervous systems.

Thinking through this image with Belsey’s methodology brings to light an alarming ideological effect: the total commodification and mechanization of the human form. Physical body has become totally redundant, all that remains is a battery, a source of thermal energy. Human consciousness has been violently removed and lodged in the hyperreal matrix, leaving it completely alienated. A person becomes separated from nature (brought up in a lab and not exposed to the sun or the earth), from society (living alone in a pod, interacting only with algorithmic projections), and finally from the body itself (living an alternate life while its own muscles wither away in suspension). This is the ultimate in digital alienation: a situation where the hyperreal is the only real one that is available, and the material self is merely biological fuel for the digital device.

4.5 Escalation of Hyperreality in The Matrix Reloaded

The Matrix Reloaded (2003) takes the concept of hyperreality and examines it further, revealing how the alienation of humanity in the matrix is far deeper than was first introduced. Belsey’s method encourages us to consider what might be missing from a text, what is contradictory. The first movie has the contradiction of escaping the Matrix = being free. This is what Reloaded aggressively challenges.

The audience is tricked into believing that Neo, aka “The One,” has the special power of being the one to break the digital system. But the climax of the film, Neo’s meeting with the Architect, creator of the Matrix, undermines this.



Figure 1.5

The Architect: “The Matrix is more than six years old now. It's been around longer than you know. I prefer counting from when the first anomaly appeared until the next one, so this is the sixth version of the Matrix... The job of the One is to go back to the source and let some of that code out, so that the prime program can be inserted again.

It's a conversation that has the potential to change the way digital alienation is understood on screen. Baudrillard's view is that the human rebellion (Zion) and the prophecy of “The One” are part of the design of the simulation. They are systematical simulacra, artificial constructions created by the machines to control the 1% of human minds that reject the initial hyperreality.

Here is a deep sense of alienation that is the complete absence of human agency. Neo's choices, his rebellion, and being a savior are not human developments, but mathematical inevitability that make the system continue to live. The plugged-in masses' bodies are not the only ones that are controlled by the digital system; the notion of human resistibility is anticipated, commodified, and controlled. What's true is that the alienation is total because the characters realize that even their fight for freedom has been digitally mediated and ahead of their fight, and pre-calculated by an algorithmic overlord.

4.6 Simulacra as Distraction and Control

Although the subject of the exhibition was “The Woman in the Red Dress,” the pieces here on view were instead titled “Simulacra as Distraction and Control.”

It's time to delve deeper into the process of hyperreality creating digital alienation by looking at the mechanism that the Matrix uses to get people to behave. In Catherine Belsey's methodology, narrative analysis is used not only to examine the text, but to examine the effects the text has on its subject. The Matrix is a world of digital constructs that actively arm human desire to keep people estranged from their real, imprisoned world. This is perfectly captured in the scene “Agent Training Program”.

Neo is inserted into a custom digital simulation crowded street in an urban environment where everyone is an identical pedestrian dressed in business attire. Then, a beautiful woman in bright red walks by. But Neo's attention is immediately captured, and she turns to look at him.



Figure 1.6

Neo: “Yes, Morpheus. Morpheus: “Then you know what the Council of Elders is doing. Were you watching the red dress-clad woman?”

Neo: “I was...”

Morpheus: “Look again.”

Neo then turns back, and the woman is Agent Smith, holding a gun to his head.

The Woman in the Red Dress exists within the world of Baudrillard in which the image is a pure simulacrum. She has no references in the real world; she is a mathematical model and is created specifically to be appealing and fascinating, to have an effect on the biological and psychological system. There are two dimensions to the alienation of the digital. First, Neo's instinctual human nature is taken over by a line of code. Secondly, it shows the way in which hyperreality ensures control: by providing the captive human minds with endless, stimulating simulacra (consumerism, desire, entertainment) to distract them from the basic danger of hyperreality (the Agents). The person is outsized and made estranged by the manipulation of their desires within the digital architecture, to be made docile.

4.7 The Oracle and the simulation of free will

The nature of the Oracle is a more complicated issue when considering the concept of digital alienation. In the first movie, the Oracle is shown as a mystic, prophetic figure that's not bound by the rules of the Matrix. Belsey's perspective does however compel us to examine the ways in which the text constructs 'truth'.

The space that Neo enters, that of the Oracle, is a hyperreal space, a domestic space made comfortable and familiar, a working-class space designed to disarm the subject. Neo approaches a vase that she is going to knock over but tells him not to worry about it. He recoils in astonishment, knocking it over.

What will “really bake your noodle”, later, is, would you still have broken it if I didn't say anything, the Oracle?

The dialogue is an interrogation into the nature of human agency in a digital space. If Matrix is truly a well-coded world, then there should be no real humans, other than a few bugs. The Oracle's arrival brings an uncanny dimension of disaffection: human concepts of “prophecy” and “choice” are digitally manufactured.

The Oracle is not a human mystic, as this will be revealed later in *The Matrix Reloaded*, but an intuitive program that can enquire and learn about the human psyche. She was designed to give the human minds a false choice in the hyperreal equation, so they will not throw off the simulation. The characters' dependence on the Oracle, then, accentuates their total estrangement. They think they're operating by their own free will and looking for a guide to their spiritual growth and health, but what they're

really doing is engaging with diagnostic software designed to help them maintain their subservient position. They are just data points that are being processed by the system, they are spiritual, and they are rebellious.

4.9 The Office Cubicle: Working in a Fake World

Before Neo awakens in the first film, it is useful to explore the very beginning of the film, before the onset of hyperreality and digital alienation. Catherine Belsey's approach encourages us to consider the context of everyday settings of a text. Thomas Anderson is a software developer at a company called "Metacortex" in *The Matrix*, and his routine as a programmer working on corporate software is a perfect example of alienation of modern work in a digital era.

A closeup of Thomas Anderson's small, grey, identical office cubicle, with him looking like he's trapped and exhausted.

Thomas Anderson is caught in a maze of identical grey cubicles in this scene. His superior reprimands him for believing that he is "special" and asks him to obey the company's rules "to the very letter. The office job is a hyperreal construct according to Baudrillard's theory. The work that Thomas Anderson is doing is secondary, it's a job in a simulation of an economy, it's just for him to keep his mind occupied until his actual body is harvested for energy.

This digital alienation rings very true. Thomas Anderson's work doesn't fill him up and he doesn't feel connected to it because, subconsciously, he understands that it is empty. He is separated from his work, his fellow workers and his own time. The film demonstrates that the Matrix does not only intimidate people, it takes them out of their humanity by forcing them to live in a logic of the routine, the identical, the banal.

4.10 The Red Pill and the Blue Pill: The Fear of the Real

The Matrix does an excellent job of showing the effects of digital alienation on human psychology in one of the most popular scenes. Morpheus eventually encounters Neo and presents him with two pills; a blue pill and a red pill.

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

Through Belsey's textual analysis this dialogue exposes a dark secret of the hyperreal world – that it depends on people's eagerness to be misled. The blue pill symbolizes the comfort of the digital simulation. It's a chemical code that will wipe away Neo's memory and permanently reinsert him into the hyperreality.

What is most remarkable about this scene is the digital alienation as the blue pill is indeed a tempting offer. The hyperreal world (the Matrix) has been created to be so comfortable and familiar that real life is terrifying. According to the theory of Baudrillard, people tend to go for the simulation rather than the real thing. The fact that Neo even has to consider the choice shows how far removed he feels from the real world; he has been so indoctrinated with this digital world that the physical world is like an unfamiliar and frightening concept.

4.11 How to Get the Real Food in the Real World – Fake Food vs. Real Food

Another obvious and easily understood example is the depiction of food and human senses in the movies. On the true hovercraft, the crew is fed a disgusting grey slime containing elements of basic vitamins and minerals. In the Matrix, however, food tastes and looks great.

In the real world, a crew member named Mouse complains about the grey sludge and mentions a fictional food in the Matrix called "Tastee Wheat.

Lightly edit the photo to remove the turquoise background, retaining only the table and the crew. Trim away the turquoise background, leaving the table and crew.

Mouse: If you close your eyes, it's almost as if you were eating runny eggs... But how the machines know what Tastee Wheat tasted like, right? Perhaps they were mistaken, perhaps what I thought of as Tastee Wheat was tuna fish, or "oytmeal".

Using Belsey's approach, the words of Mouse reveal an undercurrent of ideology. He is doubting the nature of human sensorial experience. They have lived in a hyperreality, their memories of taste, smell and touch were fully programmed by machines.

This is an alienation that is very physical. Humans have lost their real sensory experiences. The machines have been taken over by their taste buds. When Mouse realizes that machine determines the flavor of his food, it is clear that humans in the Matrix have been detached from nature. They have no idea what real earth tastes like, nor do they know what real fruit tastes like, nor do they know what real meat tastes like. They only have an understanding of the digital code that recreates the flavor. This is evidence that digital alienation is not only mental, it takes away the simple and natural things that the human body enjoys.

4.12 The Bug in the Stomach: The Invasion of Privacy

We can get an idea of how intensely the digital world enforces its control by looking at the interaction between Agent Smith and Neo, as Neo is interrogated and a 'bug' is placed inside of him.

Neo is subdued and his mouth literally is melted shut (a visual metaphor for the system silencing him), and a mechanical "shrimp" crawls in his belly button to monitor him.

A close shot of the mechanical tracking bug going into Neo's stomach as he is panicking.

Neo awakens in his bed and thinks it was a dream. Later, Trinity extracts him from the car in the back using a device created by Trinity. For Baudrillard, this tracking device is a piece of malicious software that is embedded on Neo's digital avatar.

The digital alienation shown here is the total loss of personal privacy and autonomy of the body. The system can even get into Neo's body, change his avatar (melt his mouth), and monitor his movements without his consent. He is separated from himself in his own safety. The hyperreal world is revealed to be a Panopticon, a prison in which the "prisoners" can be observed and can be manipulated at any moment by digital "overlords" who are not visible to them.

4.14 Agent Smith's Viral Assimilation: The Erasure of Individual Identity

In *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*, digital alienation moves away from the control of space to the complete destruction of one's identity. This is well summed up by Agent Smith's transformation from a system enforcer to rogue computer virus. Smith isn't only killing avatars anymore – he's hacking his own into the avatars, turning inquisitive spectators, other programs, and, yes, actual people (such as Bane) into true replicas of himself.

In *Reloaded*, Smith faces Neo to hundreds of copies of himself in the "Burly Brawl" fight.

Smith: "The thing about being me is there are soooo many 'me's'"

A wide shot of dozens of identical Agent Smiths standing around in the pouring rain, around Neo in the courtyard.

With Belsey's methodology, this visual representation conveys the worst of digital commodification. The human avatar in the Matrix is revealed, and he's totally empty – a vessel that can be filled with malicious code at any moment.

The great alienation here is that the "self" is completely absent. In a hyperreal world, one's appearance, personality and consciousness are nothing more than data files. The person who can overwrite people, as Smith can, shows that in the digital context individuality is a mirage, one that can be formatted and substituted with an algorithmic uniformity. The human subject is not only set apart from society, but even from his or her own individual right to live.

This is the aesthetics of the black man in the era of the mask. It's the black man's aesthetics, in the age of the mask.

The Matrix Revolutions brings an additional degree of digital alienation by setting in "Mobil Ave", an anagram of "Limbo". It is a rogue train station program that is set up as a smuggling checkpoint between the Matrix and the Machine City. Neo's mind has been detached from his body but not connected to a computer; he awakens in this brightly lit, sterile subway station.

When Neo attempts to get on a train, the Trainman, who controls the domain, violently throws him against a wall.

Trainman: "D'you think you do? Down here I built it, down here I make the rules, I make the threats, I'm God."

Neo sits alone on the brightly lit, white-tiled, endless subway station bench of Mobil Ave, looking completely alone.

Here, the concept of hyperreality is key to Baudrillard's theory. Mobil Ave. is a fake transit station, but it has no connection to any other station, it's a closed loop. It's an architectural expression of exile.

Neo is trapped between the physical world (the place where his body is in a coma) and the hyperreal world (the Matrix). He is a virtual refugee basically. The digital alienation is total: he has no physical control, no access to the simulation and is completely under the control of a rogue piece of software whose intelligence is divine. It shows that digital systems can produce purely isolated environments, purgatories of code, in which humans can become ensnared and lost forever.

4.15 The Simulation of Human Emotion is a program in the Program Family.

Neo's stuck in Mobil Ave where he encounters a family of programs - Ramakandra, Kamala and their daughter Sati. They are machines who have made a child program for no reason and are hiding her in the Matrix to save her from being deleted. Neo is amazed when he hears a machine speak of love.

Neo: "I just have never heard a program about love. Ramakandra: It's a word and it matters what the word implies I see you are in love. Can you tell me what you would give to hold on to that connection?"

Close-up of Ramakandra's gentle and earnest expression as he holds Sati's hand, looking directly into the camera. Medium close-up of Ramakandra speaking softly to Neo in the clinical train station with Sati's hand in his, facing the camera.

This dialogue tackles the last of human's unique qualities: emotion, using Belsey's textual analysis. The concept of love and human relation is demonstrated as the forces that machines cannot understand throughout the first film. However, *Revolutions* subvert this.

This is very much a philosophical matter of alienation. What is the special quality of human emotion, if a machine can perfectly simulate it with code? The idea of "love" is put on the lips of digital programs, implying that even the most powerful of emotions can be measured, modeled and reproduced with AI.

4.2 Section 2

4.16 Third-Order Simulation and the Deepening of Digital Alienation

This section takes up the second research question and concerns the role of third-order simulation to explore and deepen the phenomenon in the film series *The Matrix Trilogy*. Jean Baudrillard's theory suggests a third-order simulacrum is a representation that has completely severed ties with any true reality, concealing the lack of a fundamental reality and presenting itself as an appearance. The simulacrum in this stage turns into its own pure, self-referential truth. This analysis is based on Catherine Belsey's model of textual interpretation, which focuses on the use of third order simulations (digital avatars and environments) to present a situation in which humanity is alienated not only from the physical world, but the concept of originality.

4.17 The Residual Self-Image (RSI) is a Third-Order Simulacrum.

The third order simulation's concept of the "Residual Self-Image" (RSI) is the most direct and intimate use in film. Humans don't look like their cybernetically pierced and emaciated physical bodies when plugged into the Matrix. Rather, they present a virtual persona.

Neo is initially presented to the loading program (the Construct) and is amazed by the visage of his own hands. Furthermore, he is wearing his standard hacker attire, whereas in the real world, he is bald. Also, he has a full head of hair, whereas his physical one is bald.



Figure 1.8

Morpheus: "It is the mental representation of your digital image... residual self-image as we say."

In the light of Belsey's analysis, this discussion conveys a deep split in ideology. This is a third order simulacrum, since it is a reference to a reality which no longer exists. Neo's perception of himself is an internal one, a psychological one, but it's a perception that was created in the artificial construct of the Matrix. There is no physical original to his "self;".

This generates an intense form of digital alienation. The person becomes separated from his/her body. The characters are developed self-image, aesthetics and gender roles are built on a purely algorithmic representation. They are separated from their own body. The focus on the RSI is meant to suggest that in a technologically mediated life, no longer is the human subject rooted in the physical body, but is wholly defined through the digital.

4.20 The Hyperreal Void is the aesthetics of the Highway Chase.

In order to further texturalize the notion of third-order simulation in *Reloaded*, the film's cinematic construction, particularly the iconic highway chase sequence, needs to be discussed.

Here is a large shot of the long, grey, barren, repetitive highway from *The Matrix Reloaded*. A big shot of the seemingly infinite grey highway with its sterile and repetitive geometry from *The Matrix Reloaded*.

For Belsey it is crucial to consider the construction of a text and how it creates effects. The Wachowskis built a real 1.5-mile physical highway that was used for this scene but had a lot of CGI. As part of the story, this highway is a closed code area where the Merovingian's exiled programs (Twins) and the Agents fight against the human protagonists.

The highway is a third order simulacrum. It appears to be a utilitarian structure of a human infrastructure, with signs on the road, cars driving through it. However, it leads nowhere. A closed circuit of digital space for the transportation of data. The humans around the chase inside the cars are the greatest victims of digital alienation, they are driving to non-existent jobs on the non-coordinated highway and anxiety rides with them. The grey concrete is visually endless, thus emphasizing the fact that there is no place to escape from this reality which has been totally replaced by a self-referential map.

4.21 Zion as a Systemic Simulacrum: The Illusion of the Real.

To complete its analysis of how third-order simulation brings about digital alienation, one has to question the "real world" beyond the scope of the Matrix program. The most explosive of the text's ideological paradoxes are one of Catherine Belsey's focal points in her textual analysis is the revelation of the City of Zion on the surface.

Throughout the first movie and most of the second, Zion is shown as the true reality, unaltered and unmediated. It's the opposite of *The Matrix*. But when Neo speaks with the Architect, this binary is broken apart.

The Matrix is older than you know, the Architect said, the first Matrix I designed was perfectly so... The inevitable doom is already apparent to me, as a result of the imperfection that exists in all human beings... I redesigned the Matrix... The anomaly is systemic; there are fluctuations in even the most simplistic equations... At last, the moment of truth, when the fundamental flaw is finally manifested, the anomaly is the beginning and the end, there are two doors, the door to your right leads to the Source and the salvation of Zion, the door to your left leads back to the Matrix, to her and to the end of your species.

The Architect reveals that Zion has been destroyed and rebuilt five times before, and Zion is no longer a home of human authenticity. Baudrillard reveals (in his theory) Zion as a third-order simulacrum. It is not truly popular opposition but rather a strategic 'subroutine'. It is a containment that was created by machines to 'catch' the 1% of the human population who simply do not accept the Matrix programming.

The level of digital alienation here is the most alarming. The Zion humans believe they have broken out of the simulation, but they have only been moved to another algorithm, on the macroscopic level. What they do, how they suffer, and a "free" society are all expected factors in the machine's larger mathematical equation. They are not only rejected by the digital world, but also by the idea of freedom. The system has simulated the concept of "freedom" to make them docile in a larger prison.

4.22 Dialogic Contradictions: Counselor Hamann and the Engineering Level

Belsey gives emphasis to asking questions of the text and drawing out the ideological undercurrents. An important question and answer scene occurs at the engineering level of Zion between Neo and Counselor Hamann in *The Matrix Reloaded*. As it were, this is a perfect picture of third-order alienation, even out of the digital plug-in.

NEO and Hamann stand next to a railing, looking out at the massive, underground engineering facility of Zion, dwarfed by the massive water-purification machines.

Counselor Hamann: "Look at those machines. They're keeping us alive, but other machines are coming to kill us, interesting, isn't it? Power to give life, and then how to take it away." Neo: "We do what we do, we are meant to do it. Counsellor Hamann: "Then perhaps we are not all that different from them.

The dialogue reveals a deep structural irony. Humans of Zion are people whose identity stands in stark contrast to the machines, but who rely on them for their survival. Without significant technological interventions, they can't breathe the air, drink the water or generate heat.

From a Baudrillard perspective, the "reality" of Zion is very mediated. The human beings cannot live in an unmediated environment. Hamann is saying "not so different" because he is profoundly alienated from humans. The connection between the human and the organic earth is broken; humans have an alternative connection, to life-support technology. They've turned into a localized dependency loop, like a carbon-based piece inserted into a metal infrastructure, emulating the very digital enslavement they think they're trying to stave off.

4.23 Mythological Simulacra: The Merovingian's Exiles

In order to be able to further develop our understanding of third-order simulation in cinema, we need to investigate the visual and narrative representation of the "Exiles" in *The Matrix Reloaded*. The Merovingian's servants—namely the Twins—along with the numerous programs which are "vampires" and "werewolves"—are pure Baudrillardian simulacra.

A shot of the ghostly Twins sliding through stationary matter during the highway chase or a shot of the Merovingian's henchmen using medieval weaponry in the Chateau.

When humans meet ghosts, angels or vampires, the Oracle tells Neo that it's just a rogue program doing something it shouldn't. This is the old, non-working software used in the old Matrix.

These characters are used by Belsey as a way of saying human history and mythology is coming to an end. Vampires and ghosts are in the physical world, and are subjective constructs created by human culture. In the Matrix, these myths have become literal, in the form of rogue code. They are third order simulacra; that is, digital (program) representations of fictional (myth) objects that didn't exist.

This alienation is cultural. Within the Matrix, humans have no real connection to human folklore. Their cultural history, their superstitions, and the narrative of monsters have been hijacked by the system and used to explain away software glitches. Humanity is separated from its own imagination: Even the realm of the supernatural is shown to be outdated and evil code.

4.24 The Architect's Panopticon: The Quantifiable Anomaly.

For Catherine Belsey, an analysis of third-order simulation's ideological impacts necessitates a consideration of the "visual positioning" of a text. The climax of *The Matrix Reloaded* the meeting with the Architect in the movie – is a visual alienation lesson par excellence.

The room of the Architect is completely spherical, made of hundreds of TV screens. While talking to the Architect, these monitors show Neo the exact moment, but hundreds of different ways he could be feeling and thousands of different outbursts he could have in that moment.

Neo, standing in the middle of the room, surrounded by walls of television screens, all of which are broadcasting his own face screaming, arguing, or thinking, is the subject of this wide shot of the Architect's room.

According to Baudrillard's theory, these screens are ideal representations of third order simulacra. They are creating copies of Neo's reactions that haven't occurred. They are mimicking an emotion that has yet to be experienced by humans.

The digital alienation seen here is extreme. Neo is visually confronted with the fact that he is a quantifiable, predictable algorithm as he thinks he's the savior of humanity, acting with great free will. The system has already mapped out all the possible firing patterns of his brain. The screens impart the message that his "individuality" is a statistical variation. He is cut off from his own mind and soul: the machine system knows him more than he can ever know himself, making his humanity nothing more than a series of predictable data outputs.

4.25 The "Burly Brawl" is the first of three films in the series

One of the most important features of the third order simulacra is the disappearance of the diversity in the original in order to be replaced by a never-ending and meaningless replication. The fight against the Agent Smiths is cinematically illustrated in *The Matrix Reloaded* when the sequence is known as the "Burly Brawl," where Neo is engaged in battle against the Agent Smiths that are multiplying in number.

In a more recent scene in the film, there are multiple – but simulated – human characters in the Matrix. But with Smith's rogue code taking control of the system, everyone gets corrupted and becomes a duplicate of him.

Neo is surrounded by more than a hundred of his identical Agents Smith, each of them in black suit and shades, highlighting the lack of variation in the virus' appearance.

With Belsey's interrogative reading, this scene is not just an action sequence, but a visual thesis on the terror of a hyperreal system collapsing inward. The simulacrum (Agent Smith) is reproducing, and there is no referent reality. The visual homogeneity of the Smiths is the highest form of erasure of human identity.

Alienation: loss of the “other”. In material society, a healthy society is one in which the human being can define himself through his relationship with different people. In this late-stage simulation, that diversity is ruthlessly wiped out. These human avatars are not killed the traditional way, however, they are erased and replaced by self-referential digital monoliths that are written by Smith. The Matrix is no longer a simulation of society, it's a simulation of a single, constantly repeating piece of malware.

4.26 The Simulacrum breaches reality: Assimilation of Bane

The most frightening mutation of digital alienation in the case of third-order simulation is vanishing distinction between the hyperreal and material world. Agent Smith is able to wipe away the digital Bane from Zion rebel Bane while he is attempting to send his consciousness back into his own body on a hardline telephone from his hovercraft in *The Matrix Reloaded*.

Consequently, Agent Smith's code is programmed into Bane's brain.

Bane's eyes open in the real world on the hovercraft, but with the cold, calculated demeanor and mannerisms of Agent Smith.

The films' binary is violently broken in this narrative development. The characters used to think that their flesh-and-blood bodies in the real world were a place of human truth, no matter how alienating the Matrix was. This is incorrect as Bane was assimilated.

From Baudrillard's perspective, Agent Smith is the third order simulacrum, which has fully freed itself from its digital source and taken over a biological body. This is the highest degree of alienation! Bane's body is now strolling through the material world, but his human mind has been erased and replaced with a line of code. He is separated from himself, his mind. But what makes the Matrix so terrifying is no longer a computer server – it is now the simulation itself that reveals that human flesh is so easily replaceable and weak that a computer virus can be installed on it as readily as a floppy disk. The real, where men remain true to themselves, is overrun by the hyperreal.

Seraph and Algorithmic Handshake: The Simulation of Trust

To grasp that this third-order simulation has the ability to intrude into human interaction, we need to scrutinize the concept of “trust” in the Matrix. The Oracle is guarded and protected by a program known as Seraph, who Neo meets in *The Matrix Reloaded*. When he meets Neo, he immediately starts fighting him briskly with martial arts techniques and when he is satisfied, he stops and apologizes.

Seraph: “Please excuse me, you don't know a person until you fight with them.”

Medium shot of Seraph in traditional white martial arts outfit, slowly bowing to Neo in the teahouse, much like he did after his intense fight.



Figure 1.9

This dialogue, when read with Catherine Belsey's interrogative reading, shows an essential change in the way relationships are configured in a hyperreal. In real life, knowing someone means a time commitment, empathy & emotional vulnerability. In the Matrix, however, Seraph is a cryptographic firewall. It isn't a battle of flesh and blood, it's a digital handshake, a battle of code to prove user true.

Baudrillard's perspective on this interaction is a third-order simulacrum of human intimacy. It is an appearance of physical struggle, which is merely a mathematical process (verification of Neo's algorithmic signature). The digital alienation here is when human connection is completely mechanized. The subject is separated from organic emotional intuition and is compelled to resort to violent data exchange, simulation and quantification for purposes of establishing truth and trust.

4.27 The Oracle's New Shell: The Discardable Nature of Identity

The Oracle's New Shell: The Discardable Nature of Identity is a documentary web series portraying the recent events surrounding the creation of the Oracle.

The Matrix Revolutions is a gripping look into the concept of identity alienation through the Oracle. She completely transforms into the third one. When Morpheus and Trinity ask her about this, she shrugs it off as a mere change in her "shell" and says it was caused by a malicious attack by the Merovingian.

Oracle: "It's a result of what I did... I had to sacrifice my shell... And these two programs, that I know, took my shell's termination codes and gave me the life of a child."

A close-up of the Oracle's new mug in Revolutions, with her casually lounging in her kitchen, puffing on a cigarette as if nothing's changed in the barest of strokes.

This is an interesting theoretical problem for Belsey's textual criticism and analysis. The Oracle's "shell" is her visual front end, a Graphical User Interface (GUI) that is displayed as a human being. It can be used for trade, destroyed and replaced without its essence changing, which is the ultimate realization of Baudrillard's 3rd order simulacrum. This face is a representation which makes no reference to the underlying reality.

This deepens digital alienation immensely to the human observer. It validates that in the Matrix the human shape is completely insignificant. It's not sacred – it's a throwaway file format. The face and the body are the only parts on which humans rely for their concept of individuality. The film shows that a face is only a "shell" that can be deleted or replaced with a line of code, thus portraying a life without bodily continuity or biological stasis, where people are continually separated from humanity.

4.28 Club Hel: The Fetishization of the Underworld

In order to discuss the environmental constructs of third-order simulations, however, the simulation of human notions of morality and afterlife must be investigated. In Revolutions, the heroes must protect Neo from the Merovingian who rules the underground club "Club Hel".

The club is a hyper-sexualized, chaotic environment with Exiles dressed in fetish gear, hanging upside down from the ceiling and participating in decadent and violent acts all bathed in harsh red lighting.

A dark, red-lit scene of the Club Hel's interior interior, where patrons wear latex and leather and are suspended in cages and strolling around on the ceiling, simulating the underworld.

In Belsey's methodology, the ideological impact of this aesthetics needs to be questioned. The club is meant to remind one of Hell, the place of sin, punishment, and debauchery. But according to the Baudrillardian theory, this is a third order simulacrum of an afterlife that does not exist. Programs do not sin and have no soul to be damned.

It is cultural and spiritual digital alienation here. The Merovingian and his Exiles are playing dress-up, simulating human vice, religion and underground culture, since they do not have any original culture of their own. They indulge in human myths. What is missing is the human subject's own spiritual story, because even the word damnation, the "underworld" has been demystified and turned into an edgy theme on their spiritual night club, software written for a long time ago.

4.29 Sati's Sunrise: The Eradication of Natural Beauty

Perhaps the last and greatest example of digital alienation through third-order simulation is at the end of The Matrix Revolutions. After Neo's sacrifice and the setting up of peace between humans and machines, the Matrix is restarted. The previous versions were sickly green in color, but this is now changed for an amazing colorful sunrise.

The little child program Sati asks if she had anything to do with it.

Sati: "For Neo I did it. The Oracle: "That's good, he would like it."

At the conclusion of the film, a wide, sweeping shot of a beautiful, multi-colored sunrise over the simulated city skyline appears, contrasting with the green tinted skies of the beginning.

This is a triumphant and optimistic conclusion, at first glance. What Belsey did, however, is to examine the texts themselves, instead of the ideology they contain, and this exposes a disturbing reality. The sky is not real (beautiful). It's a virtual painting, which is created using software (Sati).

This is the ultimate example of the third order of simulation as described by Baudrillard. The sunrise is a pure and perfect copy of the natural one, but it happens on a planet where the real sky has been permanently blackened by a nuclear winter ("the desert of the real"). The alienation is deep and complete: what humanity's ultimate prize is and what they see as peace and beauty, is synthetic wallpaper. They're totally cut off from organic nature. Due to its horror, the characters accept the simulacrum, thus receding from the material to the hyperreal.

The second research question is then analyzed by using the work of Catherine Belsey's textual analysis and Jean Baudrillard's theory of third order simulation, which shows that the Matrix trilogy portrays digital alienation as a structural condition that actively eradicates the notion of an "original" reality.

When the Oracle is an "overlay," the Residual Self-Image alienates individuals from their body and identity, and when Agent Smith is the "virus," the redundancy of the message renders the human body and identity dispensable. The films' environmental constructions, including the temporal stasis of 1999, the spatial circle of the highway, the Club Hel purgatory and the wonderfully made-up sunrise by Sati, show this: the sense of 'old' history, 'old' spirituality and 'old' nature have become self-referential empties.

Mostly, it has been revealed that human rebellion (Zion) is a calculated subroutine, and Agent Smith downloaded into a physical human brain (Bane), which shows that the system has simulated the concept of freedom itself. The distinction is no longer made between the hyperreal and the real. Digital alienation is therefore discussed not only as the loss of reality, but as the frightening understanding that the "real" has been forever destroyed, and humanity is forever lost in an infinite cycle of algorithmic copies that is impossible to escape.

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