By T. Rob Brown, 2015

Looking past *The Matrix*'s code
Seeing the transhumanism in the Wachowskis' films

Morpheus: "The Matrix is everywhere, it's all around us, here even in this room. You can see it out your window, or on your television. You feel it when you go to work, or go to church or pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth." (Wachowski Brothers, 1999)

INTRODUCTION

As much as *The Matrix* (1999) and other motion pictures by the Wachowskis seem to focus on a battle between what we perceive as reality and what is merely illusion, they may be promoting another underlying message to moviegoers. In *The Matrix*, the Wachowskis' focus centers on "the desert of the real," as specifically stated by the character Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) while making one of several references to the work of French sociologist Jean Baudrillard and his thoughts on the hyperreal. Even Baudrillard's book *Simulacra and Simulation* is briefly shown in the film as a hiding place for illegal computer-hacking software in the apartment of Neo (Keanu Reeves). Throughout the Wachowskis' films there is an over-arcing theme, not unlike the works of cyberpunk author Philip K. Dick, of the blurred line between what is believed to be real and what is perceived not to be. Cyberpunk is a sub-genre of science-fiction which first appeared in 1983, typically "dealing with future urban societies dominated by computer technology," according to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary. The film also makes several literary allusions to *Alice in Wonderland* in relation to a journey into the imagination, or another world.

"What kind of tagline is 'Everything is exactly as it seems'?" Andy Wachowski asked *The Wall*

Street Journal (Steinberg, 2015). "Who wants to see that?"

Even for the Wachowskis themselves, everything is not how it always seemed. Andy Wachowski's older sibling, Lana Wachowski, was born Larry Wachowski. Their earlier films' directorial credit is listed as "the Wachowski Brothers" but by the 2012 release of *Cloud Atlas*, this had changed to "the Wachowskis." Lana Wachowski revealed her full-transgender self to the world by this point.

"While making the *Matrix* films, Larry began a gradual transgender process and appeared publicly as Lana for the first time—with her trademark fuchsia dreadlocks—while promoting their film *Cloud Atlas* in 2012." (Steinberg, 2015)

Aside from the blurred lines of reality, films by the Wachowskis have also focused on a blurred perception of the protagonist's, and often other characters', true identities or view of himself or herself. Dating back to *The Matrix*, Neo has doubts that he is "the One" (an anagram from "neo"). This certainly is not uncommon for a film's protagonist to deny their own destiny, in accordance with the Hero's Journey mythos by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. This mythos is part of the building blocks of the majority of hero-based stories in our culture. What sets Neo apart from the mythos is that he denies his own destiny, or identity as "the One," through much of the film and does not reach realization until the climax of the film. In most Hero's Journey stories, the hero accepts his or her destiny within the first third of the story, according to *The Writer's Journey, Third Edition* by Christopher Vogler.

In *Cloud Atlas*, the same souls are portrayed in various people even of different nationalities, ethnicities, and genders by the same actors. For example: Hugo Weaving, who is featured in a majority of the Wachowskis' films, plays six different characters (in *Cloud Atlas* alone) who share the same soul throughout time. One of those characters is a female (Nurse Noakes) and another is an Asian.

Their newest film, *Jupiter Ascending* (2015), features Channing Tatum in the role of a pointy-eared alien who is a genetically-altered humanoid blended with wolf DNA. This character, Caine,

shares several canine characteristics including speed, agility, a sense of faithfulness to his "owner," enhanced hearing and vision.

Lana Wachowski told *The Wall Street Journal* (Steinberg, 2015), she had been revisiting *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Odyssey*—both of those books, and film of the former, influenced *Jupiter Ascending*. She said Jupiter Jones (Mila Kunis) had things in common with Dorothy Gale. "That's why she has the blue and white gingham on when (Jupiter and Caine) first meet," Lana said.

Rather than jump down the proverbial "rabbit hole," or through the looking glass, as did the characters of *The Matrix*, Jupiter Jones goes on a "wild, other-worldly adventure" with her "Toto-like traveling companion" (Steinberg, 2015).

To some, the thought of the hyperreal might seem an exclusive thought to philosophers or science-fiction, but "Science says the universe could be a hologram, a computer program, a black hole or a bubble," (Jaggard, 2014). Cosmologists are also attempting to decode the nature of reality. While the *Matrix* stands for Baudrillard's hyperreal, blurring the lines of reality around us, the Wachowskis also share with moviegoers another philosophy about the blurred lines between who we really are and who society wants us to be. This could fall in line with agenda-setting theory, where the media doesn't tell people what to think, but rather what to think about. Even in *The Matrix*, they touched on the concept that the personal and societal views of ourselves are not the same.

"Your appearance now is what we call residual self image. It is the mental projection of your digital self," Morpheus told Neo after they entered a Matrix training simulator. (Wachowski Brothers, 1999). In other words, the image we store in our own minds of ourselves is not the same others see.

The concept that humanity could either change via genetic or technological means is known as "transhumanism" (Viennet, 2014). "Present-day humanity is merely *transitional*, and by means of new technologies, will tomorrow be 'outdated,' to a '*post*-humanity,' a *techno-sapiens*" (translated from French). Viennet further states that some "transhumanists" believe the human body is already obsolete.

In *V for Vendetta* (Wachowski Brothers, 2005), Evey (Natalie Portman) undergoes a

transformation where all of her hair is cut off during an imprisonment. When she emerges from this, she lacks several of the characteristics of her gender—as if she is removed from the hegemony of social standards and reborn as a new being, not unlike the metamorphosis (then) Larry Wachowski was undertaking. From this perspective, in accordance with agenda-setting theory, Lana Wachowski's work might be associated with priming—drawing attention to androgyny or transgender. In this regard, the screenplay and movie production, leading up to a release to the cinema, become the agenda-building process.

Perhaps the Wachowskis' underlying message is that hardly anyone is truly happy with who they begin their story as—a sentiment that would seem close to Lana Wachowski's heart in regards to her younger years as Larry. In *The Matrix*, even one of the computer programs—Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving)—seeks to leave the hyperreal world of the *Matrix* and become a human in the "real" world.

Agent Smith: "I hate this place, this zoo, this prison, this reality, whatever you want to call it. I can't stand it any longer. It's the smell, if there is such a thing. I feel repulsed by it. I can taste your stink, and every time I do I feel that I have been infected by it. It's repulsive, isn't it? I must get out of here. I must get free." (Wachowski Brothers, 1999)

Most of the research regarding the *Matrix* films has been centered around its relationship to, or influence from, Baudrillard. Hardly any of it seems to take into account Lana Wachowski's transgender process or consider the fact that Lana is likely using her films as a vehicle to promote transgender awareness and acceptance. In the genre of science-fiction, its audiences have typically been more willing to accept social change since they realize the future will always be different than the current hegemony. As an example, the first scripted interracial kiss on television occurred between Captain James T. Kirk (William Shatner) and Lt. Nyota Uhura (Nichelle Nichols) during the original *Star Trek* series ("Plato's Stepchildren", 1968).

Framing theory, which is linked to agenda-setting theory, can be interpreted as the idea that these moviegoers will use the sets of expectations—which they have learned by watching social change

in science-fiction films—to aid them in making sense of their social world.

The Matrix earned a domestic gross of $171,383,253 in the United States and $456,300,000 internationally. (Lavery, 2001, p. 153)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Philosophy of Reality and Presence Research

In the philosophy of reality, it is pondered what is real and what is hyperreal, as defined by French sociologist Jean Baudrillard, a controversial critic of post-modernism, in *Simulacra and Simulation* (Baudrillard, 1994). The hyperreal is described as living "inside the map, not the territory" (Lavery, 2001, p. 156). Though Baudrillard's thoughts are clear on his own research, researchers' opinions seem to vary as to rather *The Matrix* truly follows the work of Baudrillard. It certainly is at least influenced by the work, if not fully in line with it.

Baudrillard's "simulacrum" is not the same as representation: "...a simulacrum marks the absence, not the existence, of the objects it is supposed to signify" (Messier, 2006). For *The Matrix* to follow suit in the truest sense of Baudrillard's work, it is the "real" world that would be the simulation where people emulate what they are intended to be. This leads to the formation of the hyperreal. In the existential world of the hyperreal, the "real" has been wiped away. Yet, in *The Matrix*, we are expected to believe there is a "real" world outside of the Matrix. In Baudrillard's work, there is no escape from the hyperreal.

Some researchers have called the connection between Baudrillard's work and the *Matrix* films as, "ambiguous and ambivalent, and hence, that it is both appropriate and inappropriate" (Messier, 2006). Even Baudrillard himself pointed out the movie's failure in regards to the "implications of simulation" (Messier, 2006). For him, it lacked "increasing indistinctiveness between reality and virtuality" because his work stresses the notion that "simulation threatens the difference between 'true'

and 'fase,' between 'real' and 'imaginary.'" (Messier, 2006)

The opposing school of thought is that when Neo leaves the Matrix in the first film, he has been brought to an alternate iteration, or possibly a subroutine, of the Matrix. In the second film, *The Matrix: Reloaded*, while in the "real" world, Neo begins to exhibit powers outside of the Matrix which would defy the laws of physics in what we know as reality—this might indicate he has not actually entered the "real" world but has instead stepped into another "rabbit hole." Consider this possibly as a Matrix within a Matrix, or what might be called a recursion in the field of computer programming. This alternate Matrix has sometimes been identified as the "meta-matrix" or the "blue matrix" (Messier, 2006).

Another 1999 film titled *eXistenZ*, starring Jude Law and directed by David Cronenberg, also covered the concept of the hyperreal but without direct references to the work of Baudrillard. In *eXistenZ*, computer gamers are trying out a new virtual reality system that links into the human body. Again, as common in the cyberpunk sub-genre of science-fiction, nothing is as it seems. Inside the game, the players have game systems and enter a virtual world within the virtual world. In keeping with recursion from computer programming, they delve so deep that there are four game layers, or "hyperrealities," at play. The limitation in linking films that deal with multiple realities to Baudrillard's work is that he does not take into account the concept of more than one iteration of hyperreal. "Only at the movie's end do we realize that this whole narrative has been a game" (Lavery, 2001, p. 155). This leaves doubt in the viewer's mind as to rather any of it was "real" and to perhaps question their own views on what constitutes reality. If "there is nothing that is outside the text," then the players are truly caught in the world of the hyperreal (Lavery, 2001, p. 156).

One could argue that *Inception* (2010), starring Leonardo DiCaprio, also falls into this category despite being a movie about the dream state and a recursion of dreams within dreams. While the dream world is not a computer-created simulation of reality, it is a simulation. The variable factor here is that when things happen in the "real" world, they have ripple effects that travel into the dream world.

Though none of the research indicated any such connection with Baudrillard's work.

Baudrillard's work is related to and popular among the cyberpunk sub-genre—often considered to be popularized by the works of author Philip K. Dick (which inspired the Hollywood films based off his writings: *Blade Runner*, *Total Recall*, *Minority Report*, *Paycheck*, *Replicant*, *Through a Scanner Darkly*, and more). A common theme among Dick's work is that nothing and no one is as it or they seem. For example, in *Blade Runner* (Riddley Scott, 1982), the Tyrell Corporation's motto for its line of replicants is, "More human than human." These replicants, or artificial people, are so lifelike that a special device and a series of questions are required in order to distinguish them from everyday humans. *Minority Report* is one of the films that treats "the growing indistinction between the real and the virtual" (Clarke, 2010).

"As Baudrillard (2005c, 92) avers, 'we are still iconoclasts: we destroy images by overloading them with signification; we kill images with meaning'. Consequently, the image no longer belongs to the privileged realm of 'dreaming or the imaginary' (Baudrillard 1987b, 20)" (Clarke, 2010, p. 30). Baudrillard claims that it is ultimately "'seduction which draw[s] us beyond the reality principle.' (Baudrillard 1988, 58)" (Clarke, 2010, p. 30).

Baudrillard further states that it is this seduction which is "at the heart of the cinematic myth" (Clarke, 2010, p. 32). "'Illusion is not the opposite of reality, but another more subtle reality which enwraps the former kind in the sign of its disappearance.' (Baudrillard, 1999, 131)" (Clarke, 2010, p. 32).

Clarke states that the image attains power by the process of "subtracting dimensions from the world" (p. 33) but its power "lies in its intensity, and 'The degree of intensity of the image matches the degree of its denial of the real, its invention of another scene' (ibid. 130)" (p. 34).

In *The Matrix*, Neo's journey from the Matrix into the "real" happens in front of a mirror, which becomes his portal out—not unlike the looking glass of Lewis Carroll fame. This scene, as shown reflecting in the mirror, is intense and not only subtracts dimensions from the world but Neo with it.

The mirror has become more than a reflection of "reality", it has become a medium.

Kenneth Rufo (2003) believes the mirror is "more than cinematic license; instead, the change in the mirror reflects a change in the theoretical appreciation and articulation of subjectivity due to alterations in media ecology" (p. 118). He further states "Neo's merging with/emergence from the mirror...obvious linkage to Jacques Lacan and his theory of the 'mirror stage,' a link also highlighted by Thomas Frentz and Janice Hocker Rushing (2002). In both artifacts the mirror makes possible the formation of the subject, and in *The Matrix* the mirror provides the gateway between the bondage of simulation and the advent of real subjectivity" (p. 118).

Frentz & Rushing (2002) defines *The Matrix* as spectacle (p. 65) because "intensified affect is rolled into technological effect." "It was only during the third or fourth viewing that we were able to shake off the tranquilizing effects of high Hollywood enough to notice some of the geeky ways this film might be profound" (p. 66).

Gender, Identity, and Effects Research

Like his namesake, Neo begins the story as a neophyte, "sleeping in the womb of a false mother, unaware of his complete dependence and unable to relate to anyone outside himself" (Frentz & Rushing, 2002, p. 66). In this sense, technology is presented as mother. "Whenever technology is imagined as feminine, we should look at the way it usurps biological feminine functions" (Frentz & Rushing, 2002, p. 70).

As science-fiction often does, the Wachowskis' films raise questions of gender and identity. This research also looks at how those messages cause effect among the audience. Through identity, we look at who we are—both how we view ourselves and how we are viewed by others. Sometimes to identify oneself, one must open one's mind.

Morpheus: "I'm trying to free your mind, Neo. But I can only show you the door. You're the one who has to walk through it" (Wachowski Brothers, 1999).

Even the Oracle tells Neo, "Know thyself" and "Being the One is just like being in love. No one can tell you you're in love. You just know it, through and through, balls to bones" (Wachowski Brothers, 1999).

In traditional Hollywood cinema, gender issues have also been related to a phenomenon known as "male gaze." This theory was popularized by Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). In her essay, she noted that Hollywood utilizes a patriarchal language: "Woman is represented as 'other', as an object rather than a subject, materializing man's unconscious" (Sassatelli, 2011, p. 124).

Mulvey also wrote about the paradox of phallocentrism, where "the TV camera's gaze is co-extensive with the male gaze, which depends on the image of 'the castrated woman' in order to make sense of the world" (Sassatelli, 2011, p. 124). Through the male gaze, a woman-object is created to which fantasy can be projected as voyeuristic or fetishist.

In *The Matrix*, love-interest Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss) first appears to Neo at a nightclub wearing a strapless top. Although she "may invite the audience's gaze, it is she who again watches Neo, not the other way around. While this reverses the male gaze, we have seen how woman as object of desire is erased from the surface of films like *The Matrix*" (Frentz & Rushing, 2002, p.78).

Not only is Trinity the love interest of the film but she and other lead female characters, like Jupiter Jones from the Wachowskis' *Jupiter Ascending*, are aggressive and attractive female protagonists. Though Jupiter Jones does not start out the story in an aggressive role, she eventually grows into that character out of necessity.

In a 2011 study by Laramie D. Taylor and Tiffany Setters, 122 undergraduates took part to determine "the impact of exposure to media representations of aggressive, attractive, female protagonists on audiences' gender role expectations for women" (p. 35).

Several interesting results were found in that study. "Exposure to an attractive female protagonist resulted in increased endorsement of stereotypically feminine gender role expectations for

women. This effect was moderated, however, by protagonist aggression; viewing the attractive, aggressive, female protagonist produced an increase in endorsement of stereotypically feminine GRE for women." (Taylor & Setters, 2011, p. 42). "Watching a female protagonist behave aggressively was found to activate stereotypically masculine gender role expectations for women, but only when the protagonist was stereotypically physically attractive" (p. 43). "Attractiveness played a key role in predicting whether a protagonist was considered an appropriate role model for women. This is consistent with the notion that physical beauty signals a host of desirable traits or characteristics (Asch 1946; Dion et al. 1972; Eagly et al. 1991)" (p. 43). "Aggressive protagonists were also considered better role models than less aggressive role models. This was true regardless of the physical attractiveness of the characters, and is therefore not merely a case of interpreting questionable moral behavior in a positive light due to a halo effect" (p. 43).

Research Questions

Reviewing the literature, it would seem there is some need to see how the influence of a transgendered film director might affect the message of a given film. Creative works are often inspired by the author's own experiences so it is fair to say that Lana Wachowski's transgender experience would result in some effect. In the texts, there seems to be evidence in this theory's favor.

RQ1: Does being a transgender film director have any bearing on the message told and how is the message different than that told by those who fit into the classic hegemonic order?

While it is often mentioned that Trinity is a "kick-ass heroine" (Lavery, 2001, p. 156) throughout the texts, as are many of the Wachowskis' other female protagonists, are they more than eye candy for the male gaze? Research has already been done on how these type of female characters affect the audience's view regarding stereotypes. Female screenwriters are already a somewhat marginalized group within Hollywood, which would lead one to believe that a transgender director would be quite marginalized.

RQ2: Do female characters written by a transgender female have the same strength as those written by a hegemonic female writer/director and is the male gaze avoided in cinema, as a result?

T. Rob Brown, 2015

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