FICTION AS A SKYLIGHT: SELF-REFERENCE, IRONY AND DISTANCE IN *THE MATRIX RESURRECTIONS* (LANA WACHOWSKI, 2021)*

JOSÉ ANTONIO PALAO ERRANDO**

1. INTRODUCTION: DIGITAL CULTURE AND FILMIC DISCOURSE

The 1990s marked a significant shift in the late-modern episteme, as cybernetics entered popular culture for the first time. IT systems were no longer the exclusive property of big corporations and the State (or of the expert hackers who infiltrated them), and the computer turned into simply another household item. By the 1980s, Apple had already begun marketing the world's first personal computer, the Macintosh, and to make the ad to publicise it they turned to none other than Ridley Scott, whose film *Blade Runner* (1982) was the most acclaimed work of cyberpunk up to that time (Palao Errando, García Catalán, 2014). But what really stabilised the presence of information technology in popular culture was the birth of the World Wide Web (Berners-Lee, Fischetti, 2000), which brought the internet within reach of the masses.

This first stage digital culture (Web 1.0) introduced two imaginaries that became deeply ingrained in science fiction and in popular culture in general. There was general agreement among the intellectuals in this period, whether they took an apocalyptic or an integrated view of mass culture (Eco, 1985), that the future of humanity would include widespread use of virtual reality. At the same time, the romantic imaginary of the hacker culture—which, as Ridley Scott's Apple ad makes perfectly clear, can be traced back to the 1980s—was established as the realm of cybernetic cowboys and mavericks, labelled with the term *cyberpunk*. Cyberspace was to be the setting for epistemic communism, the battle against the Establishment and the unmasking of government power.

We know, however, that this never happened. The immersive ideal of VR never entered the market as an object of mass consumption, and it was never established as a new mass medium. Instead,

since the beginning of the 21st century, screens have proliferated as interfaces (Català Doménech, 2010; Verhoeff, 2012; Pinotti, 2021), in what has come to be referred to as the visual turn or visual culture (Mitchell, 1994; Mirzoeff, 2003). First came the operating systems for personal computers, in the cases of both Apple and Microsoft, the latter under the explicit name of Windows, with obvious roots in Albertian perspective. Then came the so-called pervasive media (Dovey, Fleuriot, 2012), with structures and a potential reach of increasing complexity, whose features are tactile and interactive but not immersive. As I predicted some years ago (Palao Errando, 2004), Western (and, by extension, global) culture has proven quite incapable of giving up the *anisotopic* framing that is one of its greatest and most expressive achievements.

At the same time, the conception of the internet has changed substantially since the turn of the millennium and the old label of *cyberspace* has been replaced by various terms combined with the adjective "digital"—or directly by the term *cloud*—which in turn gave rise to the term *Internet of Things* (Sendler, 2017). It could be argued that virtual space is no longer conceived of

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THE ANTI-ERGODIC VARIETY OF THE MIND GAME FILM COULD BE CONSIDERED THE ONLY POSSIBLE KIND OF FILM NARRATIVE THAT COULD EXPAND TO OTHER SCREENS, MAINLY VIA STREAMING PLATFORMS. A FRACTURED PLOT IS BEYOND THE REACH OF INTERACTIVITY. THE MAIN DIFFERENCE OF THE FILMIC MEDIUM IN DIGITAL CULTURE IS THUS THE SPECIFIC NATURE OF ITS NARRATIVE POWER IN THE AGE OF NARRATIVES. POLITICAL NARRATIVE OR A VIDEO GAME IS NOT NECESSARILY A STORY, BUT A FILM NARRATIVE IS

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as an alternative to physical, material space, but has instead been categorised as a privileged gateway to that alternative space. The conception of an experience as a commodity or as a service (Grevtsova, Sibina, 2020) and its gamification still uses the concept of immersion, but now it is an immersion without extraction, an isolation from the environment without actually leaving the environment (Fisher, 2016).

In the area of cinematic discourse, the 1990s were also characterised by spectacle overload, the product of the vast visual potential of digital technology, which seemed to render traditional editing—and with it, the very laws of classical cinematographic syntax—irrelevant to some extent. This led some scholars to speculate about a possible renaissance of the cinema of attractions in post-classical filmmaking (Company, Marzal Felici, 1999; Strauven, 2006). From the second film in the Matrix trilogy Strauven took the adjective *reloaded*, which would prove useful in theoretical and philosophical approaches to this phenomenon. Visual effects based on digital technologies were so much a focus of attraction in this era that they gave rise to an audiovisual product which, like the video clip in the 1980s, would often be broadcast in the spaces between television programming at a time when information had become its core element: the "making-of". It might be argued that cinema found itself in a position to compete with all the other screens with which it was obliged to coexist by claiming the territory of pleasure, heart-racing experiences and adrenaline rushes, the strongest illusion of immersion and the *reality effect* (Oudart, 1971).

However, what has characterised filmic discourse since the first decade of this century is not just spectacle but disruption of the very texture of the narrative. Filmmakers became aware that merely ratcheting up the spectacle would not be enough to give cinema a competitive edge (as it had given the television screen), that the *ergodic* (Aarseth, 1997; Ryan, 2004) and interactive com-

ponent of digital screens offered an advantage that television lacked. The non-linear narrative is not so much the product of the influence of digital narratives as it is a strategy to outdo their inherent interactivity. The most conspicuous feature of post-classical cinema is the increasing complexity of narrative worlds (Loriguillo-López, 2018), which has led to the introduction of terms such as *puzzle films* and *mind-game films* (Buckland, 2009; Palao Errando, Loriguillo-López, Sorolla-Romero, 2018; Elsaesser, 2021; Sorolla-Romero, 2022). These films sometimes involve shocking twists in the plotlines that push the structures inherited from classical cinema to the limit without actually breaking them down altogether, as they depend on those structures as the only way of connecting with the spectator (Loriguillo-López; Sorolla-Romero, 2014; Palao Errando, 2008). The anti-ergodic variety of the mind game film could be considered the only possible kind of film narrative that could expand to other screens, mainly via streaming platforms. A fractured plot is beyond the reach of interactivity. The main difference of the filmic medium in digital culture is thus the specific nature of its narrative power in the age of narratives. Political narrative or a video game is not necessarily a story, but a film narrative is.

The aim of this article is to offer a comparative analysis of the film *The Matrix Resurrections* (Lana Wachowski, 2021) against the original trilogy (*The Matrix*, Lana & Lilly Wachowski, 1999; *The Matrix Reloaded*, Lana & Lilly Wachowski, 2003; and *The Matrix Revolutions*, Lana & Lilly Wachowski, 2003). The hypothesis to be tested is that while the basic theme of the first three films was immersion as simulacrum, the fourth opts instead to explore the aesthetic distance represented by the film screen. This distance is sustained by a parodic, self-reflexive approach that covers every aspect of the saga, including the circumstances of its production.

To this end, this article examines the immersive imaginary that informed early digital culture and explores how it has redefined the filmic in order to show how the film is positioned in favour of that redefinition and against the immersive. The method used is a textual analysis of the sequences in the film that sustain the metafictional and metafilmic discourse and that serve as the cornerstone of Lana Wachowski's production.

2. THE FILMIC DIFFERENTIAL

Why then has cinema chosen to become a screen medium rather than an immersive medium? On the one hand, there is a critical and historiographic consensus (Baudry, 2016; Bazin, 1990; Burch, 1996; Company-Ramón, 2014; Elsaesser, 2016; Oudart, 1971) that identifies three roots of cinema:

1. Various popular traditions, such as fairground attractions.
2. The integration of elements drawn from typically bourgeois modes of representation, such as the novel, realist painting and theatre, the Romantic tradition, Impressionism, etc.
3. The influence of the scientific and technological impulse to break down movement for its subsequent analysis, as for the positivist scientist it is necessary to see everything to be able to analyse it scientifically.

The consequence is the Frankensteinian dream of a total reproduction of reality (Burch, 1996). In Bazin's words (2004: 21), cinema was an "idealistic phenomenon" because its invention was inspired by the myth of an integral realism, of "a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time."

Once it had failed as a scientific instrument (Deleuze, 1984) and its value as a fairground attraction or simple popular diversion had been exhausted, the cinema turned to the narrative models of literature and theatre in order to become a respectable bourgeois art (Company-Ramón, 2014; Marzal Felici, 1998). But to do so, it also needed to

be faithful to the basic cinematographic apparatus, to use the terminology of Baudry and Oudart. As Mary-Laure Ryan (2004) points out, immersive attractions have always been viewed by academics as somewhat vulgar and could not have been chosen as an art form, although there obviously were approximations with what Thomas Elsaesser calls "Rube films" (Elsaesser, 2016; Jeong, 2012; Ng, 2021; Strauven, 2006) and those brought back in a way by interactive touch technologies (Ng, 2021; Strauven, 2021). Indeed, it could be argued that the fact that of all the different motion picture devices invented it would be the Lumières' cinematograph that would prove successful confirms the theory that the most suitable artistic choice was the model of projection for viewing by multiple spectators in a darkened room and not the small-scale individualised viewing offered by apparatuses such as Edison's kinetoscope, for example (Crary, 2001). Bourgeois art is necessarily autonomous (Bürger, 1987) and requires distance (Wolf, Bernhart, Mahler, 2013).

Clearly, this is not solely a bourgeois tradition but also a product of modernity with its roots in the new forms of storytelling and of visual representation that emerged since the Renaissance (Panofsky, 2003; Stoichita, 2000) in what Heidegger called the "age of the world picture" (Heidegger, 1995), whose *telos* was to make the entity (the world) available to the subject through a type of representation. It is thus hardly surprising that for the purposes of commercial distribution, late modern culture[1] would embrace anything that could be framed, shared and distributed on a screen. This seems to be key to explaining the shift towards screen transmediality (Zecca, 2012) rather than towards solipsistic immersion mechanisms. The filmic is always specifically framed on a screen, and contemporary variants of immersive experiences (theme parks, escape rooms, etc.) (Lukas, 2012; Williams, 2020) always end up being partial. It is curious that for neoliberal culture, immersion in an experience always involves

an element of escapism, and that video games, like television fiction or comic books, have had a hard time attracting scholarly attention, just as cinema did in its day.

3. *THE MATRIX* (LILY & LANA WACHOWSKI, 1999)

Most of the visual and plot references in *The Matrix Resurrections* (Lana Wachowski, 2021) are to the original film, *The Matrix*.[2] A few characters are taken from the first two sequels (such as Niobe, Sati, and the Merovingian) and there are references to some of their lines in those films (Rodríguez Torres, 2021). But clearly, this analysis requires a consideration of some of the premises established by the 1999 film.

First of all, after recovering from the shock of seeing Trinity in the first sequence running up the wall, we realise that what we are watching on the screen is an immersive video game experience, but with the sharpness and graininess of live-action footage. In the Darwinian process of media selection, *The Matrix* thus embraces the blockbuster style of the 1990s, spiced up with heavy doses of allusions to film history (Trinity's escape scene is an obvious nod to the opening sequence to Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* [1958], as a way of hinting that what we are watching is a visual trick), film theory (Neo uses a hollowed-out copy of Jean Baudrillard's book *Simulacra and Simulation* to stash the digital psychotropics he deals), literature (Lewis Carroll's rabbit) and much more. It clearly sets out to offer viewers a spectacle, and the famous "bullet time" effect is the trademark of the franchise. In fact, *The Matrix* was the first film to be released on VHS in a two-tape pack that included a "making-of" documentary (Crespo, Palao Errando, 2005).

The Matrix explicitly strives for an exceptional level of visual sharpness to point towards a digital realism that was not yet possible in 1999. This explains the preference for abandoned run-down

spaces and rubble. Neo and Trinity's attack on the government building offers the best example: a harmonious combination of choreographed acrobatics and material destruction. Equally noteworthy is the obsession in *The Matrix* with ancient sites, far from cybernetic—yet common in the visual virtuosity of video games, for example—where the atmosphere is embodied in more than the perfect geometric definition of the shapes. All of this is combined with the minimalist aesthetic of the empty space and Japanese architecture of the Dojo, where space is insubstantial lines, pure empty geometry.

The film's approach is also based on its capacity to invert the laws of Western framing, the centripetal force posited by Bazin (1990)[3] and the aesthetic of essential moments described by Jacques Aumont (1997) with reference to Lessing's *Laocoon*. It is this power, expressed in the defiance of gravity, that provides the foundation for the possibility of Neo being the Chosen One (Crespo, Palao Errando, 2005).

In short, *The Matrix* constructs a coherent textuality that conveys the spirit of an age marked by political, narrative and personal disorientation. All the ingredients of the post-Cold War world of the 1990s are there: the proposition of the end of history (Fukuyama, 1992), the doubt over self-identity and destiny,[4] the recourse to various arts of divination, the need to know the future, and the absence of an identifiable enemy who could be blamed for our malaise—at least until 11 September 2001.

And all of this is offered in an aesthetic and intellectual package that manages to combine video games, kung-fu choreography, Socrates, Plato and Baudrillard, to cite but a few examples. The film thus of course attracted a huge cohort of fans as well as a great number of academics, for the most part philosophers, led by Slavoj Žižek. Judeo-Christian theology is interwoven with Orientalism and New Age concepts to glorify a Messiah who is both a hacker and a trained hero, the product of coaching, Fordist responsibility and the faith of others. A solemn epic cycle is set up in opposition not to relativism but to the absolute absence of effective motivation for moral behaviour, as reflected in the figure of Cypher, the Judas on the crew. The neoliberal episteme has serious difficulties substantiating any choice of freedom if it has to come up against pleasure. This is what Mark Fisher (2016) would classify 15 years later with the paradoxical label "depressive hedonia", an inevitable correlative of the "reflexive impotence" that his teenage students suffered from.

4. THE MATRIX RESURRECTIONS (LANA WACHOWSKI, 2021)

4.1 The two universes

In *The Matrix Resurrections*, life in the virtual world goes on while those living there are completely unaware of the events that occurred 60 chronological years earlier in the physical world. The first inhabitants we meet are the crew members of a hovercraft named the *Mnemosyne*, heir to the legendary *Nebuchadnezzar* captained by Morpheus. As will be discussed below, the name of the ship is highly significant. Neo and Trinity's story is unknown to those inside the Matrix and physical "exile" (there is a virtual exile as well) has preserved it in the form of a legend in an epic cycle. The new rebels are above all adherents to the Neo and Trinity cult.

In the Matrix, things are operating differently. For reasons initially unknown, Neo and Trinity have been resurrected. Under his old name of Thomas Anderson, Neo has acquired the identity of a video game designer acclaimed for a game he designed called the Matrix (obviously). While the old (or rather, young) Thomas Anderson worked for a company called Metacortex, this current version of Mr. Anderson is a partner in the significantly named Deus Machina, but he works on the orders of a so-called "boss"—the friend with whom he founded the company. Anderson's psycholog-

Image 1. Larry and Lana

ical condition is clearly unstable: he has attempted suicide and suffers from bouts of delirium, for which he meets regularly with a therapist. He is also fascinated with a housewife and mother (what in the United States might be described as a "soccer mom") named Tiffany who frequents the same coffee shop he goes to—fittingly named Simulatte (Partearroyo, 2021)—and whom we can all see is in fact Trinity. Evidently, irony and coarse humour have replaced the solemnity of the original trilogy. The plural form of "resurrection" in the title is also significant, evoking the idea of a legion of zombies more than a Messiah. All of this is perfectly logical if we consider that in 1998, the Wachowskis were a pair of stocky, brainy nerds with existential issues, while in 2021 Lana is a trans woman in her fifties with an extraordinary ability to enjoy and laugh at life. Just take a look at any picture of the brooding Larry of 20 years ago and compare it with a photo of the beaming Lana (Image 1).

The rest of the story tells us how Captain Bugs manages to extract Neo with the help of a "synthient" Morpheus reboot (obviously, in 2021, "machine" is politically incorrect, as Bugs explains: "They are synthients. It's a word they prefer to 'machines'"), and how they overcome the opposi-

tion of Niobe, who is now the supreme leader of the new city of Io. The city has prospered in peace with the empire thanks to Neo and Trinity's sacrifice, and Niobe seeks to protect that peace at all costs.

In short, the film is a self-reflexive exercise depicting the conversion of an emancipatory experience into an epic cycle, and from there into a legend, and finally into a video game and a filmic universe in an extremely ironic approach that navigates its way between action blockbuster and romantic comedy.

4.2 The enunciation

This section examines the film's textual structure, because it is its narrative and its mise-en-scene that modulates its meaning, over a framework of self-reference and self-deconstruction. The first sign marking the difference from the original trilogy is a subtle paratextual element (Genette, 1989: *passim*). In *The Matrix*, the greenish tone of the Warner and Village Road Show logos match the greenish tone of the Matrix itself, but in *The Matrix Resurrections* the two logos are preceded by a trademark image of Warner Brothers: an aerial view of the studios displaying a lush landscape with saturated colours and the bright blue company logo on the emblematic water tower. In this case or in any other, it would not seem outrageous to interpret a brand logo as a sign suggestive of the *implied author* (Booth, 1974; Kindt, Müller, 2006), considering the importance explicitly given to Warner in the film as a promoter of this fourth film in the franchise, which Neo did not want to know about, given that blue is the symbolic colour of power in the Matrix, representing the *machine-like* coldness of certain characters.

This is immediately followed by a *meganarratorial* gesture (Gaudreault. Jost, 1995). The differ-

ence from the previous nod is that this one occurs within the text itself, shown on the screen as belonging to the film's diegetic world. Bugs and Seq (an abbreviation of Sequoia, giving the name a computerised touch) are guarding the Matrix when they are surprised to find themselves viewing what is in fact the opening scene to *The Matrix* (the attempt by the police to arrest Trinity) being performed before their eyes. This is not a *déjà vu* but a kind of circuit running in the real version of the Matrix by means of a *modal*, a program that can run old software and turn a film sequence into a loop—an idea that inevitably brings to mind the famous Machinima, whose YouTube rights were acquired by Warner in 2017 (Ng, 2013). We thus begin to realise that effectively there is nothing outside the text (*Il n'y a pas de hors texte*) (Derrida, 1986). And the two characters watching Trinity's escape are not present merely in voice-overs or reverse shots; they are visually inside the frame. The period between the first trilogy and this film, in the *architext* (Genette, 1989) of the Matrix, has been marked not only by the change of gender and writing position of it director, insofar as *gender* is a *locus enuntiationis* (Ribeiro, 2020), but also by the production of *Sense8* (J. Michael Straczynski, Lana Wachowski, Lilly Wachowski, 2015–2018) (Rodríguez Torres, 2021), where the different variants of this multi-location editing and pacing procedure were tested out and explored. The fact that many cast members from *Sense8* appear in *The Matrix Resurrections* (for example, the entire crew of the *Mnemosyne* is made up of actors who worked on the series) thus constitutes a clear authorial stamp.

But I classify this effect as *meganarratorial* because it perfectly embodies the classical enunciative structure by marking the pattern of focalisation. It serves to identify Bugs' perspective with that of the fan of the trilogy who knows every detail of the plot, allowing her to be designated as the film's model spectator (enunciator). This is a spectator located in a clear position of superiori-

ty over Neo, as she knows what has been erased from his own life story.[5]

What the designers of the Matrix are doing is reformulating history to erase the legend entirely, as in this version Trinity does not manage to escape but is captured by the *bots*. Bugs decides to follow the police, but is discovered and saved at the last minute by an agent who identifies himself as Smith, but who will ultimately be revealed to be Morpheus (the new Morpheus in the video game). Smith quickly identifies himself as one of the rebels and takes Bugs to an abandoned room that is in fact the key shop from *The Matrix Reloaded*. When they flee the scene after discovering the archaeological remains of the first Neo in a cubicle resembling his old desk at Metacortex, they get out through a door of the building that turns out to be the door into a cinema. The film being shown there is *Root of All Evil* starring Lito Rodríguez, the character played by Miguel Ángel Silvestre in *Sense8*. They finally escape by jumping out a window (the space of the Matrix is *Escherian* and multidimensional) and as they fall they turn into green code on a computer screen.

The allusion here is obvious: the escape from oppressive immersion can be found through the door of a cinema. And the Matrix is no longer a simulacrum but a portion of an authorial universe. It could even be described as a (n im)possible world, i.e., a heteronomous universe that is no longer interpretable without reference to the empirical world. It is thus metaphorical and no longer allegorical, self-contained and isolated from the world outside. The referential dimension, the way of alluding to and representing the world, has changed completely.

4.3 Neo's life in the Matrix: irony, parody, malaise

The screen displaying the characters' fall turns into Neo's computer screen. The camera zooms out to reveal Thomas Anderson, besieged by boredom. A pan across the room reveals a trophy

for "Extraordinary Interactive Game Design". It is soon made clear that in Anderson's world, the Matrix is a video game that he designed, which earned him huge profits and global recognition. From a high angle, almost an aerial shot, we are shown his work desk with six different computer screens and a large bay window offering a view of the city skyline. He is surrounded by all kinds of video game merchandise, notably including a figurine of Trinity firing two guns, which has fallen onto the floor (Image 2).

Having been called to a meeting by his boss, he decides to go first for a coffee with Jude at Simulatte. The sequences that follow serve to set up the story, but they are also of great discursive importance because they bring Neo up to speed with many details that the spectator is also unaware of. For example, for the first time we will be shown, albeit fleetingly, the reflection of an aged Neo on the table in the coffee shop. It is also here that we see him encounter Tiffany, to whom he reacts with the utmost shyness. Neo's undefined malaise in *The Matrix* here becomes a sadness whose cause is unconscious but very precisely specified: his nostalgic longing for Trinity. Later, when the new Morpheus takes him to the Dojo to revive him after his extraction, this point becomes perfectly clear in the words he chooses to challenge Neo to fight: "You gotta fight for your goddamn life if you want to see Trinity again. Come on, Neo! Fight for her!"[6]

The lighting in the coffee shop is explicitly warm, but when he meets his boss at the office, the tones are much colder. We will soon discover that this "boss" is none other than Smith in one of his many guises. This scene clearly and irrevocably introduces parody and irony into the film's text. When Neo enters, the boss, standing in front of the window, quotes a recognisable line from *The Matrix,* spoken by Smith at the window of his office: "Billions of people just living out their lives... oblivious. I always loved that line. You wrote that one, yeah?"

We are thus made aware that the video game, having become the object of a fandom, has been textualised, converted into a fossilised sequence of signs. The boss has called Neo to tell him of the company's intentions to bring out a fourth version of the video game. "Things have changed," he says. "The market's tough. I'm sure you can understand why our beloved parent company, Warner Bros., has decided to make a sequel to the trilogy."

Image 2. Trinity as merchandising

Their whole conversation is peppered with little distractions and micro-flashes in Neo's mind that he attributes to his troubled mental condition, but which the spectator knows are flashbacks to his encounter with Smith in the first film. And thus from here we are taken to the office of the Analyst, a character who will end up being of much greater importance than we initially suspect. The establishment shot shows the location of the office on a hill with a very clear view of the Golden Gate Bridge. The sun is setting over San Francisco, the technology capital of the world. The Analyst has a cat named Déjà vu, in an obvious reference to a sequence from the first film. To the knowledgeable spectator, it is a clear sign that the code is being manipulated. Neo tells him about the flashes he experienced during the conversation with his boss. The Analyst reminds him that they are merely an invention of his mind and writes him a prescription.

4.4 Neo's extraction: the mirrors

The subsequent sequence is a collage of shots depicting Thomas Anderson's daily life. We see him in a meeting at Deus Machina discussing the MIV marketing strategy, working out at the gym, and standing at his bathroom sink at home with the drugs prescribed by the Analyst reflected in the mirror in a cold light. When he swallows the pill, we see his true aged image in the mirror, although we do not know what it means. There is a curious enunciative split, as the spectator's epistemic superiority over Neo is hinted at from the start, because we know that his memories and perceptions are false and we can see what is being concealed from him.

After this, in a public bathroom, while faced with the threat of attack, he meets Morpheus, who, in a clear parody of the original film, quotes lines from the video game:

Morpheus: At last. Ah. I wasn't too sure about the callback, but, you know, it was hard to resist.
Neo: What?
Morpheus: Morpheus Uno. Reveal at the window. Lightning, thunder and theatre. At last. All these years later, here's me, strolling out of a toilet stall. Tragedy or farce?
Neo: I know you.
Morpheus: Not every day you meet your maker.
Neo: This can't be happening.
Morpheus: Oh, most definitely is.
Neo: You can't be a character I coded.

Although in this first meeting they fail to resurrect Neo, the encounter with Morpheus and Bugs represents the beginning of his awakening and extraction, his ascent on the scale of knowledge and narrative focalisation. At the moment of extraction, Seq guides them out: from the rooftop of the Deus Machina building to a train bound for Tokyo. Neo does not remember this part of the video game. Bugs replies: "We don't have to run to phone booths anymore, either."

4.5 The theatre scene

Next come the three sequences that most explicitly explain the film's high level of self-referentiality. When they go through the door shown to them by Seq, they pass through an opening that resembles a vagina... or the entrance to Plato's Cave. But it is neither one nor the other: it is a curtain that leads onto the stage of a theatre. Foo-

Todo se trata de la actitud y del entorno.

tage from *The Matrix* is being projected onto the curtain (Image 3) while the new Morpheus begins to speak:

> Morpheus: Set and setting, right?
>
> Neo: Oh, no.
>
> Morpheus: It's all about set and setting.
>
> Bugs: After our first contact went so badly, we thought elements from your past might help ease you into the present.
>
> Morpheus: Nothing comforts anxiety like a little nostalgia.
>
> Bugs: This is footage from your game.
>
> Morpheus: Time is always against us, etcetera, etcetera. No one can be told what the Matrix is, blah, blah, blah. You gotta see it to believe it. Time to fly.

Solemnity has found its degree zero—if not its negative—in parody. The explicit allusion here to cinema and theatre as spectacle is obvious: verisimilitude, belief, identification. This metafictional self-reference to cinema through a theatrical declamation modulates the whole film's verbal and narrative enunciation from that moment on. And at once, all the hypotheses that underpin the story are put forward.

> Thomas: Wait. If this is real, if I haven't lost my mind, does that mean this happened? But if it did… then we died.
>
> Bugs: Obviously not. Why the Machines kept you alive and why they went to such lengths to hide you are questions we don't have answers to.
>
> Neo: Hide me? I've been at a company making a game called The Matrix. Doesn't seem like they were trying to hide anything.
>
> Bugs: We've been tracking that company for years. We screened every Thomas Anderson we found. What we didn't understand was that they could alter your DSI" (Digital Self-Image).

This is the moment when Neo sees his *real* image in the mirror for the first time, distorted by the Matrix to prevent him from realising that his hallucinations are really memories. The DSI is what others see, which tends to be confused with the true, real image. It seems a powerful algorith-
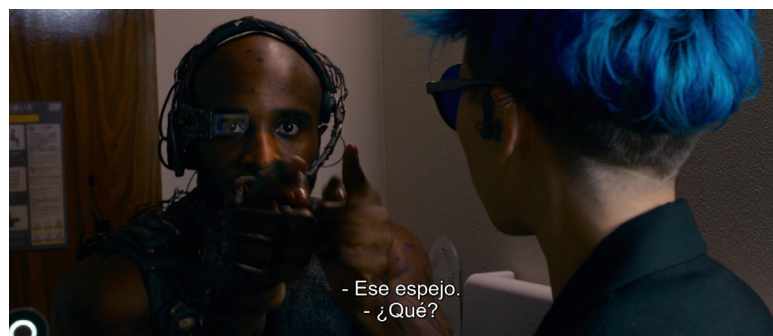

Image 4. Perspective

mic deconstruction of Lacan's "mirror stage". Because it is all about mirrors now.

It has always been common knowledge that perspective framing in reality plays a trick on our eyes. This is why the *mise en abyme* (Palao Errando, 2015), the artifice of the frame itself, was an inherent part of the use of perspective practically from the outset. Like the modern novel and theatre, the basic cinematographic apparatus knowingly lied to us. Or if did not lie to us, it at least tricked us. Since its creation, the basic apparatus, the dispositive that Oudart and Baudry began analysing from this perspective in the 1970s, has itself been a site of artful strategies that open up its internal space. This can be seen in works ranging from *The Arnolfini Portrait* (Jan van Eyck, 1434) to *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* and *Las Meninas* (Diego Velázquez, 1618, 1656 and 1655-1660, respectively), and including the self-portraits painted by all the big names of Renaissance and Baroque painting in Europe. From Durer to Rembrandt, the mirror was the way that the perspective image revealed itself to be a fiction and not a faithful representation of reality or an autonomous universe. It could be argued that perspective is modern realism and that modern realism has never been the realism of immersion, given that *anisotopic* framing, i.e., distance from the observer, is its unavoidable symbolic requirement. Cinema inherited this quality from mirrors (Company-Ramón, 2014) as a Mannerist feature for staging the artifice and rendering it explicit, a

form of diegetically integrated *ostranenie* (van den Oever, 2010).

From this moment in the film, the duplication of the image and its confinement to the surface of the mirror becomes the main motif of *The Matrix Resurrections*. When Morpheus offers Neo the red pill, we see the same act projected on the curtain, supposedly having occurred 60 years earlier between Neo and the historical Morpheus. But as soon as he tries to swallow the pill, the Analyst appears in a mirror and tries to stop him from crossing this mirror and leaving the Matrix. Moreover, when they try to flee, we know that they can only do so through the surfaces of mirrors. The only mirror that Seq can find is a tiny one in the train lavatory. When the crew complain about the size of their escape route, Seq's response is significant:

> Seq: I got a hack in the bathroom. Hurry!
>
> Bugs: Seq, where?
>
> Seq: That mirror.
>
> Bugs: What? We'll never fit.
>
> Seq: You gotta fit, 'cause I don't have another way off this train.
>
> Neo: Whoa, whoa, whoa.
>
> Morpheus: No, no, no.
>
> Seq: Think "perspective". Closer you are, bigger it gets.
>
> Seq: Okay, come on.

As noted above, it is Morpheus who has to respond to Neo's difficulties once he is extracted by challenging him in the Dojo. When he finally wakes up, this is the first conversation he has with the ship's captain:

> Neo: If this plug is actually real, that means they took my life... and turned it into a video game. How am I doing? I don't know. I don't even know how to know.
>
> Bugs: That's it, isn't it? If we don't know what's real... we can't resist. They took your story, something that meant so much to people like me, and turned it into something trivial. That's what the Matrix does. It weaponizes every idea. Every dream. Everything that's important to us. Where

better to bury truth than inside something as ordinary as a video game?

4.6. The fight and the Merovingian

Leaping forward to the moment when the crew return to the Matrix to help Neo free Trinity, after an aerial view of San Francisco Bay at dawn, we see Seq looking at her screen, covered in code as usual, when Neo recognises Trinity speeding across the Golden Gate Bridge on her motorbike. They can see that she is pure "blue code", meaning that she has no apparent inclination whatsoever to rebel against her (virtual) reality. From this point, the process depicted in *The Matrix* will unfold in the opposite direction: Trinity is the one who will undergo a process of transformation that leads her to assume her identity and give up Tiffany and her circumstances, thereby ultimately taking possession of her own *agency* (or autonomy). We were already informed that the current status quo is the result of a war between the machines. This conflict led to purges and cleansings in the Matrix, especially among the synthients, who were consequently marginalised and exiled inside the Matrix itself, forced to live in extremely precarious conditions. When Smith calls up "the exiles", we find among them the Merovingian, a key character in the original trilogy. His appearance is a hybrid of a homeless man (San Francisco is, of course, a city with a massive homeless population) and a caveman, and his peculiar speech is quite entertaining:

> Merovingian: You? Oh! It is you! All these years. I can't believe it. Oh, God. You stole my life!
>
> [...]
>
> Smith: What the Merv is trying to say is that their situation is a little bit like mine. To have their lives back, yours has to end. Kill him!
>
> Merovingian: You ruined every suck-my-silky-ass thing! We had grace. We had style! We had conversation! Not this... beep, beep, beep. Art, films, books were all better. Originality mattered! You gave us Face-Zucker-suck and Cock-me-climatey-Wiki-piss-and-shit!

Clearly, for this resentful inhabitant of the old Matrix, there is nothing in Digital Web 2.0 that is worth saving. And when they are forced to flee after the fight, he offers an apocalyptic prophesy: "This is not over yet! Our sequel franchise spinoff!"

4.7. The Analyst and bullet time

The final sequence studied here focuses on the internal plot of *The Matrix,* and specifically on the deaths of Neo and Trinity. Neo goes in search of his partner at the workshop where she engages in her favourite hobby, to convince her to leave the Matrix with him. The lighting is completely warm in the Matrix, now serving to suggest the authenticity of pre-apocalyptic industrial iconography. Trinity is welding with the skill of a trained blacksmith. All of a sudden, we hear a tinkling coming from Déjà vu, the black cat. Trinity then suddenly *fluidifies,* as we previously saw Morpheus do in Io (they call this an exomorphic particle codex) and is reconstituted as the Analyst, who has appeared here to revel in his dominance over Neo. The Analyst controls time and can inflict pain on Neo, who is unable to stop the bullet aimed at Trinity, which ends up hitting an apple: "Bullet time. I know. Kind of ironic, using the power that defined you to control you."

The Analyst's monologue, while he plays with time and with the bullet that will reach Trinity, operates on multiple levels: metafilm, authorial self-reference, and narrative self-reference. Bullet time is an invention of the Wachowskis and a reference to the saga itself (Crespo, Palao Errando, 2005). And then we get the story of why and how life was restored to Neo (and to Trinity) with images that presumably illustrate the process. The speech thus shifts into philosophical anthropology, but also a political philosophy.

> The Analyst: I was there when you died. I said to myself: "Here is the anomaly of anomalies." What an extraordinary opportunity. First, I had to convince the Suits to let me rebuild the two of you. Why her? Getting there. And don't worry, she can't

hear me. Resurrecting you both was crazy expensive. Like renovating a house. Took twice as long, cost twice as much. I thought you'd be happy to be alive again. So wrong. Did you know hope and despair are nearly identical in code? We worked for years, trying to activate your source code. I was about to give up, when I realized.

Neo: Trinity.

The Analyst: It was never just you. Alone, neither of you is of any particular value. Like acids and bases, you're dangerous when mixed together. Every sim where you two bonded... Let's just say bad things happened.

Trinity: Neo!

The Analyst: However, as long as I managed to keep you close, but not too close, I discovered something incredible. Now, my predecessor loved precision. His Matrix was all fussy facts and equations. He hated the human mind. So he never bothered to realize that you don't give a shit about facts. It's all about fiction. The only world that matters is the one in here. And you people believe the craziest shit. Why? What validates and makes your fictions real? Feelings. [...]. You ever wonder why you have nightmares? Why your own brain tortures you? It's actually us, maximizing your output. It works just like this. Oh, no! Can you stop the bullet? If only you could move faster. Here's the thing about feelings. They're so much easier to control than facts. Turns out, in my Matrix, the worse we treat you, the more we manipulate you, the more energy you produce. It's nuts. I've been setting productivity records every year since I took over. And, the best part, zero resistance. People stay in their pods, happier than pigs in shit. The key to it all? You. And her. Quietly yearning for what you don't have, while dreading losing what you do. For 99.9% of your race, that is the definition of reality. Desire and fear, baby. Just give the people what they want, right? She's the only home you have, Thomas. Come home before something terrible happens.

Images 5, 6 and 7 (from top to bottom). Bullet Time: Trinity and the bullet, the bullet and the apple, the bullet reaches its target

CONCLUSIONS

It is impossible to read the quotation above without considering its political dimension. What the Analyst describes is all of the assumptions that underpin what has come to be known as "populism", which appears to be the origin of the post-truth era. Human beings, the Analyst asserts, have no interest in facts; they are only interested in fictions and what validates those fictions are "feelings". And feelings, he says, are much easier to control than facts. Why? Perhaps because they represent a continuum with no barriers or

gaps, a projection of the nervous system that connects to reality without the trouble of having to resort to the symbol, i.e., to lack and *castration* (Lacan, YEAR), *différance* (Derrida, YEAR), or *Parrhesia* (Foucault, YEAR). Could there a better way of depicting *immersion*? It is quite true that *there is nothing outside the text* (Derrida, 1986) but that does not mean that absolutely everything is included in the text, or in any semiotic space. On the contrary, the text is possible only if there is meaning, and for there to be meaning, the articulation of *discrete* units is necessary. There can only be meaning where there is difference, and difference, the hiatus between discrete units, is necessarily an *outside meaning* that a subject has to stitch together. This is why this masterful sequence in which bullet time involves disrupting the continuity of time is so effective. It is Zeno's paradox of the infinitesimal. Lana Wachowski offers us a sequence where time has been excavated by desire, which is something beyond the body. If *The Matrix Resurrections* is a trans metaphor, this is the sense in which it is.

The Matrix trilogy was a quintessential example of the culture of hybridisation that has governed film production and digital culture over the past few decades, which has given rise to the phenomena of fandom and transmedia storytelling (Bolter, Grusin, 2000; Jenkins, 2008; Scolari, 2013). The problem of immersion is the problem of meaning, and more specifically, the problem of reference. An immersive universe is necessarily asymbolic; it extracts from the world but says nothing about it. *The Matrix Resurrections* is therefore a text: an artistic text whose aim is not to duplicate or replace the world with a fake imitation, but to offer a metaphor for the world. This is what cinema was when it became an art form: a medium of representation whose hegemonic paradigm (the IMR) also became a way of modelling and manipulating, because all art is a *secondary modelling system* (Lotman, 1982). *The Matrix* fuses the post-apocalyptic genre with immersive dig-

ital technology. In that image there is information on its meaning. Its resurrection is therefore constructed as an ironic metafilm, rather than a *reloaded metaverse* whose epic solemnity would have been inevitably trite. ∎

NOTES

1. I have been careful to avoid the term "post-modern" as it is a concept that has been severely distorted and would require an explanation of its correlations that is beyond the scope of this article.

2. For a much more detailed exploration, see Palao Errando, Crespo, 2005.

3. I once ventured to reformulate this concept, foregrounding the idea that what the film screen did was to expose the imaginary nature of the two properties of perspective framing, i.e., that the world was not amenable to its representation (Palao Errando, 2004).

4. "Twenty-five years and my life is still / Trying to get up that great big hill / of hope for a destination" sang 4 Non Blondes in 1993. "What's Up" is a veritable anthem of a generation whose full meaning would be appropriated by the Wachowskis in *Sense8* fifteen years later.

5. It is worth noting that the unreliable narrator and amnesiac hero are two key figures in post-classical cinema (Sorolla-Romero, 2022; Sorolla-Romero, Palao Errando, Marzal Felici, 2020).

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FICTION AS A SKYLIGHT: SELF-REFERENCE, IRONY AND DISTANCE IN *THE MATRIX RESURRECTIONS* (LANA WACHOWSKI, 2021)

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to offer a comparative analysis of the film *The Matrix Resurrections* (Lana Wachowski, 2021) and the original trilogy of films that preceded it, with the aim of showing while the basic theme of the first three films was immersion as a simulacrum, in this film Lana Wachowski make use of the aesthetic distance represented by the film screen. This distance is expressed in a parodic and self-reflexive approach that covers all aspects of the saga, including the circumstances of its production process. To this end, this article examines the immersive imaginary that informed early digital culture and explores how it has redefined the filmic in order to show how the film is positioned in favour of that redefinition and against the immersive. The method used is a textual analysis of the sequences in the film that sustain the metafictional and metafilmic discourse and that serve as the cornerstone of Lana Wachowski's production.

Author

José Antonio Palao Errando is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Communication Sciences at Universitat Jaume I de Castelló. Previously, he worked as a Documentalist Technician at the IVAC from 1991 to 2007. His publications include the books *La profecía de la Imagen-Mundo: para una genealogía del Paradigma Informativo* (IVAC, Valencia, 2004), *Guía para ver y analizar Matrix*. (Valencia: Octaedro / Nau Llibres, 2005 (in collaboration with Rebeca Crespo)) and *Cuando la televisión lo podía todo: Quién Sabe Dónde en la cumbre del Modelo Difusión* (Madrid: New Library, 2009), as well as articles on cinema, television and image in various journals and collective works. Contact: errando@uji.es.

LA FICCIÓN COMO LUCERNA: AUTORREFERENCIA, IRONÍA Y DISTANCIA EN *THE MATRIX RESURRECTIONS* (LANA WACHOWSKI, 2021)

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es examinar la película *The Matrix Resurrections* (Lana Wachowski, 2021) en comparación con la trilogía original. La tesis que anima el artículo es que, si bien el tema fundamental de las tres primeras entregas eran la inmersión como simulacro, en esta se opta por apostar por la distancia estética representada por el encuadre fílmico. Esta distancia se sustancia en un abordaje paródico y autorreflexivo que abarca todos los aspectos de la saga, incluidos los avatares de su producción. Con ese fin, el artículo recoge el imaginario inmersivo que auspició la primera cultura digital e indaga en la redefinición de lo fílmico que ésta suscitó para ver cómo el film se posiciona de lado de ese componente frente a él. La metodología empleada es el análisis textual de aquellos pasajes del film que sostienen el discurso metaficcional y metafílmico y que son la auténtica piedra angular de la propuesta de Lana Wachowski.

Autor

José Antonio Palao Errando es Profesor titular en el Departamento de Ciencias de la Comunicación de la Universitat Jaume I de Castelló. Previamente, ejerció como Técnico Documentalista en el IVAC, desde 1991 hasta 2007. Ha publicado, entre otros, los libros *La profecía de la Imagen-Mundo: para una genealogía del Paradigma Informativo* (IVAC, Valencia, 2004) *Guía para ver y analizar Matrix*. (Valencia: Octaedro / Nau Llibres, 2005 (en colaboración con Rebeca Crespo)) y *Cuando la televisión lo podía todo: Quién Sabe Dónde en la cumbre del Modelo Difusión* (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2009), así como artículos sobre cine, televisión e imagen en las para múltiples revistas y libros colectivos. Contacto: errando@uji.es.