

**The Analysis of the Design Concepts of the Movie
"The Matrix"**

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Introduction

The movie Matrix has made a deep impact on a wide area of people including philosophers and art critics as a product of pop culture when it was first in theatres in 1999. The creation of such a debatable field by the movie is an indicator for the close relation of the high culture and pop culture in contemporary world of ours. Besides, the act of production design used in the movie and as a necessity for the art of cinema, the movies content open to lots of philosophical references allows a reading and interpretation from this aspect.

As the well known Slovak thinker Slavoj Žižek¹ mentioned in a humorous way; “*the movie Matrix is the Rorschach Test of the philosophers*”. Movie is full of philosophical connections and ideological reference as every thinker is able to construct. At this point even this savour itself is enough to be a pattern and content for the art of post-modern era. As I will discuss in detail later based on the production design Matrix itself is totally an example of post modern cinema.

What I will try to do in this article is to clarify the references of philosophy, sociology and psychoanalyses which are lying in the basis of the story, montage and dialogues in the context of architectural, artistic and design characteristics rather than examining these in detail. To clarify these relations will definitely enable us to see the connections between the design languages used in the movie and current style and trends.

Plot

It should be explanatory to give a detailed plot of the whole movie firstly. Computer programmer Thomas A. Anderson leads a secret life as a hacker under the alias "Neo". He wishes to learn the answer to the question: "What is the Matrix?" Cryptic messages appearing on his computer monitor and an encounter with several sinister agents leads him to a group led by the mysterious (outlaw) Morpheus, a man who offers him the chance to learn the truth about the Matrix. Neo accepts by swallowing an offered red pill, and abruptly wakes up naked in a red liquid-filled pod, his body connected by wires to a vast mechanical tower covered with identical pods. The connections are severed and he is rescued by Morpheus and taken aboard his hovercraft, the Nebuchadnezzar. Neo's neglected physical body is restored, and Morpheus explains the situation.

The year is estimated to be around 2199, and humanity is fighting a war against intelligent machines created in the early 21st century. The sky is covered in thick black clouds created by the humans in an attempt to cut off the machines' supply of solar power. The machines responded by using human beings as their energy source, growing countless people in pods and harvesting their bioelectrical energy and body heat. The world which Neo has inhabited since birth is the Matrix, an illusory simulated reality construct of the world of 1999, developed by the machines to keep the human population docile. Morpheus and his crew are a group of free humans who "unplug" others from the Matrix and recruit them to their resistance against the machines. Within the Matrix they are able to use their understanding of its nature to bend the laws of physics within the simulation, giving them superhuman abilities.

¹ Slavoj Žižek (born 21 March 1949) is a Slovene sociologist, philosopher, and cultural critic. Žižek is well known for his use of the works of 20th century French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in a new reading of popular culture. He writes on many topics including the Iraq War, fundamentalism, capitalism, tolerance, political correctness, globalization, subjectivity, human rights, Lenin, myth, cyberspace, postmodernism, multiculturalism, post-Marxism, etc.

Morpheus believes that Neo is "the One", a man prophesied to end the war through his limitless control over the Matrix.

Neo is trained to become a member of the group. A socket in the back of Neo's skull, formerly used to connect him to the Matrix, allows knowledge to be uploaded directly into his mind. He learns numerous martial arts disciplines, and demonstrates his 'kung fu' skills by sparring with Morpheus in a virtual reality "construct" environment similar to the Matrix, impressing the crew with his speed. Further training introduces Neo to the key dangers in the Matrix itself. Injuries suffered there are reflected in the real world; if he is killed in the Matrix, his physical body will also die. He is warned of the presence of Agents, powerful and fast sentient programs with the ability to take over the virtual body of anyone still connected to the system, whose purpose is to seek out and eliminate any threats to the simulation. Yet Morpheus predicts that once Neo fully understands his own abilities as "the One" they will be no match for him.

The group enters the Matrix and takes Neo to the apartment of the Oracle, the woman who has predicted the eventual emergence of the One. She tells Neo that he has "the gift", but that he is waiting for something, perhaps the next life. Neo interprets from this that he is not "the One". She adds that Morpheus believes in Neo so blindly that he will sacrifice his life to save him. Returning to the hacked telephone line which serves as a safe "exit" from the Matrix, the group is ambushed by Agents and SWAT, Morpheus is captured as Neo and the others escape. The group was betrayed by a member of their crew, Cypher. Cypher preferred living his old life in ignorance of the real world's hardships, and made a deal with the Agents to give them Morpheus in exchange for a permanent return to the Matrix. The betrayal leads to the deaths of all crew-members except Neo, Trinity, Tank, and Morpheus, who is imprisoned in a government building within the Matrix. The Agents attempt to gain information from him regarding access codes to the mainframe of Zion, the humans' last refuge which is deep underground. Neo and Trinity return to the Matrix and storm the building, rescuing their leader. Neo becomes more confident and familiar with manipulating the Matrix, ultimately dodging bullets fired at him by an Agent. Morpheus and Trinity use a subway station telephone to exit the Matrix, but before Neo can leave, he is ambushed by Agent Smith. He stands his ground and eventually defeats Smith, but flees when the Agent possesses another body.

As Neo runs through the city towards another telephone exit, he is pursued by the Agents while "Sentinel" machines converge on the Nebuchadnezzar's position in the real world. Neo reaches an exit, but he is shot dead by the pursuing Agent Smith. Back onboard the Nebuchadnezzar, in the real world, Trinity whispers to Neo that she was told by the Oracle that she would fall in love with "the One", implying that Neo is "the One". She refuses to accept his death and kisses him. Neo's heart beats again, and within the Matrix he stands up; the Agents shoot at him, but he raises his palm and stops their bullets in mid-air. Neo sees the Matrix as it really is: lines of streaming green code; he finally becomes "the One". Agent Smith makes a final attempt to attack him, but his punches are effortlessly blocked, and Neo destroys him. The other two Agents flee, and Neo returns to the real world just in time for the ship's EMP weapon to destroy the Sentinels that had already breached the hull of the ship. A short epilogue shows Neo back in the Matrix, making a telephone call promising that he will demonstrate to the people imprisoned in the Matrix that "anything is possible." He hangs up the phone and flies into the sky.

Thoughts on the Movie

Matrix throws light to the tense nature of the soul state of contemporary societies by not only with the layered philosophical reference and questions but also with a wide range of selections (although controversial sometimes) within itself. From this point of view, the distinction between the modernity of the 20th century (pic.2) and the new state we are in as we enter the 21st (pic.3) century has been constructed in the basis of the movie and inversely connoted as a separation between the real world (pic.3) and the dream world. (pic.2)



(Picture 2)



(Picture 3)

The texts of the early Marx which are put forward in the 60s by the structuralist Marxist thinkers such as Althusser² and the ones about alienation theory which are purified from the ideology are moved into the movie and the content of these text are also useful to explain today's late capitalism. The basic problem of the era that is named as today's late capitalism is globalized capital and the fact of excessive consumption habit expand into the bottom. This

² French philosopher, whose two collections of essays, Pour Marx (1965) and Lire de Capital (1965), deeply influenced Marxist thought in the West. When Marx's early writings inspired a number of New Left thinkers especially his analysis of alienation in capitalist society.

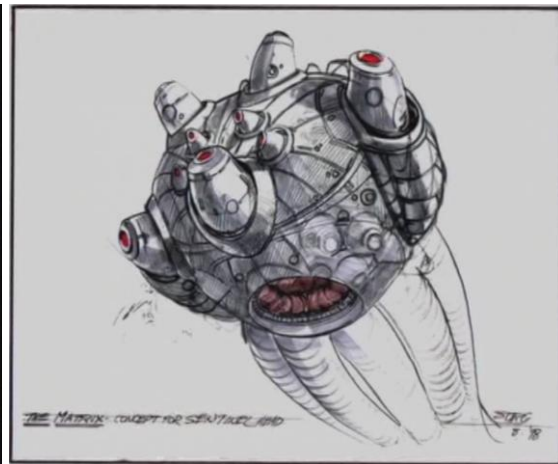
³ "Late capitalism" is a term sometimes used to refer to capitalism of the second half of the 20th century, generally with the implication that it is historically limited, and will eventually end. Late capitalism is also an important component of Fredric Jameson's influential cultural analysis of postmodernism.

fact is supported with the development of communication technologies and with the help of culture industries it has been made to adopt by the individuals of the society as a superego. Thinkers like Baudrillard (who is clearly referred in one of the scenes in the beginning of the Matrix by a close shot to one of his books) emphasized that these consumer societies depended on excessive information is alienated from the reality to an extent they can not escape.

From this essence, there are clear differences between the products, producers and creators of the capitalist countries of the first half of 20th century and with the ones of the second half of the century. In its basics Matrix finds an expression in the simulation⁴ idea borrowed from Baudrillard with a science-fiction story told above. While the plot tells a story of a dark future of two centuries later where the World is dominated by artificial intelligence and people became slaves, the history gap of these two centuries (1999 - 2199) is matched with the differentiation between the real world and the dream world (Matrix). If this match is to be told explicitly the real time world in the movie (app. 2199) is expressed a fictionist futuristic design. (pic.4 - 5) This compulsory design language approaches to the design language of the post-modern era (organic design, high-tech, space age) and as it is sometimes approaches to minimalist design language as it will be examined in detail later.



(Picture 4)



(Picture 5)

Except from the greener colour filter that is used for the inside of the Matrix, the international modernist and rational style of the 30s, 40s and 50s (which comes up until today) comes forward and used consistently in such an urban plan.(pic.6) From this point of view, Matrix (the dream world in the movie – the field of simulation) refers to the old days' paradigm in a nostalgic way but at the same time gains the expression of the capitalist modern era in which paradoxically which alienates from time to time and effecting the reality sense in the viewer. In some spaces of the Matrix this ready to be monotone language tried to be broken by using

⁴ The Matrix makes explicit reference to the work of Baudrillard, especially the 1983 essay "Simulacra and Simulations". Baudrillard assumes the proliferation of images in advanced capitalism, with the expansion of commodities and the relentless advance of technologies of visualization and simulation. In the essay, Baudrillard describes a movement from "representation" (of something real) to "simulation" (with no secure reference to reality). This movement from representation to simulation changes the relation between sign and referent, so that we lose the connection, once presumed to exist, between sign or image and the reality to which both were thought to refer.

⁵ The term Victorian architecture can refer to one of a number of architectural styles predominantly in the Victorian era. In the late Victorian period the Arts and Crafts movement, the aesthetic movement, Anglo-Japanese style, and Art Nouveau style have their beginnings.

armchairs similar to the style of the old 19th Century American Victorian⁵ style which separates from this simple and un-ornamented modern style. (pic.7) Thus, it made us to feel the background and class based layers which this simple language is born as a reaction which assumes any kind of ornamentation that modernity gained later is a sin by showing the historical and class based layers. Knight and McKnight (2003) states as:

“Many movies have used the idea of the world of sensations is a deception; the difference of the Matrix is developing this idea as drawing a virtual world which is programmed to be experienced by the cocooned people. This virtual world is no different than our modern world in which our existence is very similar –from the soulless mega companies to the leather jacket night club culture, from the difference of wealth between the rich urbaneness to the poor suburban are people - emphasizing these cold facts.”



(Picture 6)



(Picture 7)

From this point, Matrix seems to have aimed to gain a strong cinema language by emphasizing the modern style of the 30s, 40s and 50s by strengthen it with this theory of modern socio-economics. The critics of Danahay and Rieder (2003) about the movie is similar from this point:

“Matrix successfully dramatizes the tragedy of the middle class American worker in the world of America between the end of the twentieth century and twenty-first century. Movie refers to many social and economic themes that can be found in the books of Karl Marx.”

What is the clearest one is the “commodity fetishism” theory which in certain scenes used in a loud and clear expression. The clearest emphasis is of course the costume designs of the movie which admired by most. One of the distinctive commodities of our world is of course fashion design and industry. From this point, our heroes equipped with mostly leather, black long suits, tight black shirts and trousers and again black sun glasses in the metropolis they entered. These costumes that reminds the cold New Yorker style (pic.8-9) (black from head to feet) has been broken with gloomy green neck ties and accessories reminding us that they are in the Matrix.



(Picture 8)



(Picture 9)

This clear reference to commodity fetishism actually consists the basis of the movie. This fact finds its expression in the first announcers of the logic of the capitalist culture Guy Debord’s work called “Society of the Spectacle” before coming to the ideas of Baudrillard spoken above:

“In the societies dominated by the modern production conditions all life presented itself as a cumulative spectacle. What is lived as directly in the past has been moved to the world of

representations. Images from all over the places of life joined into a stream where this life can not be repeated again. Reality is though as a representation object which is unfolded in its so called-world as its common unity.”

Scenes, Designs and Connections

As it is mentioned in the beginning Matrix is a movie that has two differentiated expression in two separate fields. General definitions basically defines this differentiation has been given. However, these styles only considered within their historical framework can sit to an open space.

First of all, the simple modern language especially present its effect in the first half of the 20th century born as a result of a reaction movement against the neo-classical trend in 18th and 19th century which are called ‘Arts and Crafts’, ‘Japonism’ movements. These movements consider ornamentation as crime and define themselves in the social ground. Modern producers realize the language of a new way of life in which the social transformation can be leaded by design within the movements like Futurism, Dadaism, Constructivism and the School of Bauhaus.

Although this simple language erases the symbolic capital from the architecture and design the most qualified products produced in this period are acquired by the high rank income group and become the symbols of privilege.

One of the first scenes of the Matrix is the scene from the work office of the main character. (pic.10) In this scene our protagonist is one of the white collar worker in one of the highest building of one of a respected software company of the modern era capital group. (pic.11) In this scene while he has been rebuked by his boss because he does not obey to the work hours, the windows of the high building has been cleaning by some workers. (pic.12) The emphasis here refers to the simplicity and the modernity expression of the building but at the same time the feeling of sanitation. As it can be understood from the next scene our protagonist has been into some illegal event in the system and has to be cleaned from these.



(Picture 10)



(Picture 11)

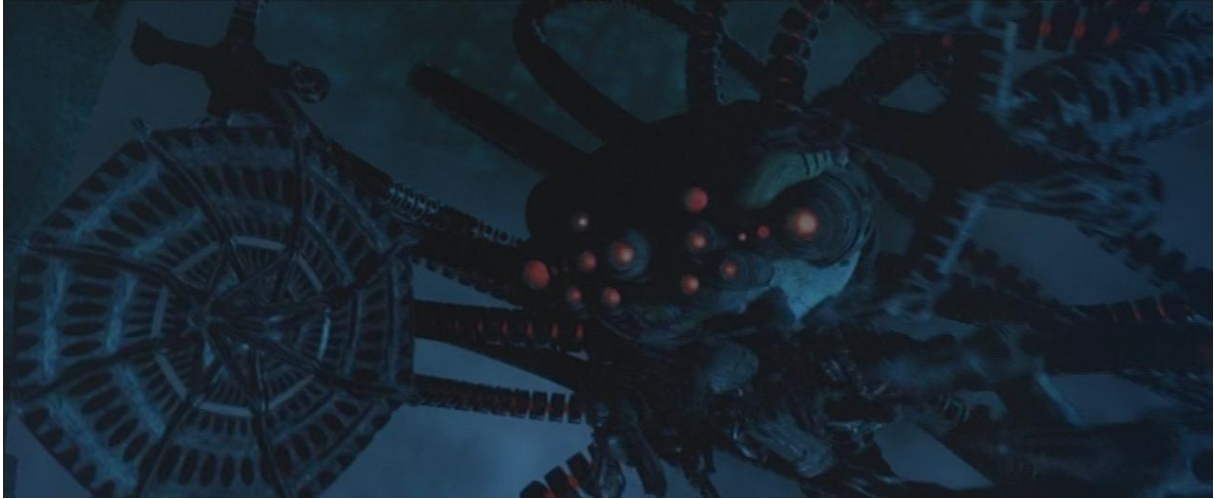


(Picture 12)

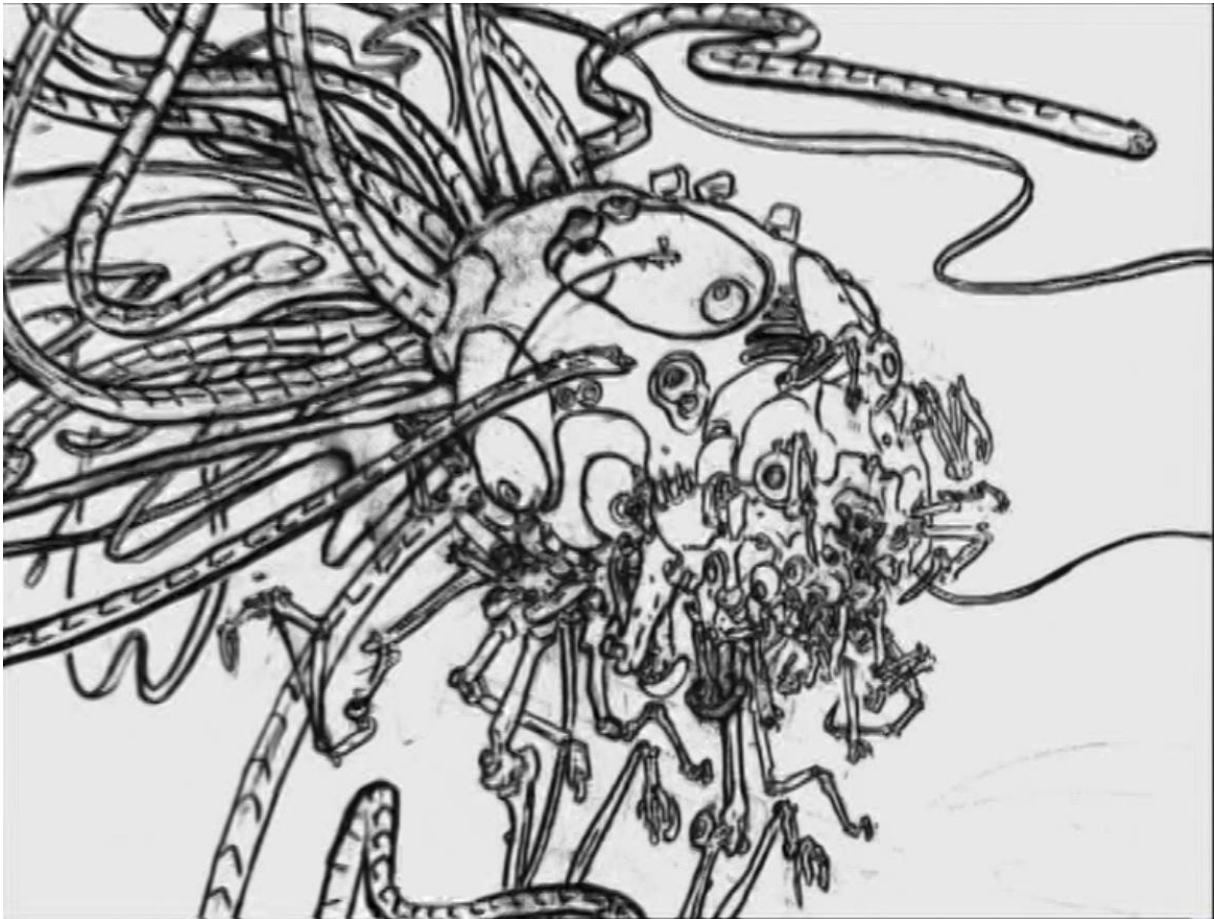
From this point half-open office system and people with the same hair cut and suits coincides with the simple and modern language of the building. In this movie Matrix will be criticized by defining the general lines which enslave the human being. On the other hand, the things you see after the curtains of the post-modern reality are drawn from the eyes are nothing but the nightmare itself: “Welcome to the desert of the real.”

In the movie the material world of the real time is by design develops a recognizable machine age futurism. This design language is borrowed from the “organic design” language which can be defined as the opposite of the modern geometrical design. This language refers to neurotic creatures where the machines are look like bugs, flies and etc. (pic.13-14) Movie makes a post-modern Kafkaest⁶ presentment and expresses the opposite between the dream world and the real world as again a horrifying nightmare. It is presented as the nature forms which refers to the sub-consciousness of the man (man eating giant plants, spider like robots) as possessed the babies of human kind and tried to strengthen the meaning.

⁶ Kafkaesque" is an auctorial descriptive which is used to describe concepts, situations, and ideas which are reminiscent of the literary work of Prague writer Franz Kafka, particularly his novels *The Trial* and *The Metamorphosis*. The adjective refers to anything suggestive of Kafka, especially his nightmarish type of narration, in which characters lack a clear course of action, the ability to see beyond immediate events, and the possibility of escape. The term's meaning has transcended the literary realm to apply to real-life occurrences and situations that are incomprehensibly complex, bizarre, or illogical.



(Picture 13)



(Picture 14)

In the real time scenes again produced in a futuristic style (2199) people live in very simple conditions wearing rotten clothes and living by eating a simple flake. From this point, story makes an inversion movement and matches the reality field of the anti-thesis of the consumer world with the images of hair styles and clothes that refers to Buddhist priests. Especially at this point costume designs definitely refers to minimalism.

To sum up

As it is mentioned in the beginning Matrix is definitely a post-modern movie. At this point I am using post-modern as a name for the cultural products of the today's societies' reality. In a wider scope, I evaluate this as a strong artistic reference with an innovative futurism comparison where the language of the predecessor of itself (modernist language) is taken as a reference within the post-modern culture production. Of course it is possible to evaluate the movie based on the views it is so called to be contained from feminism to nihilism, epistemology to ontology or Christianity to Buddhism and via from different perspectives of philosophy, politics and social theories. It must be admitted that movie can not always presents consistent and competent answers within itself. On the other hand as a “main stream” movie it provides a satisfactory view from the point of visual arts. Especially the points briefly discussed above on the description of the inside of Matrix, and the language of space and design gives a tasteful background in the traces of the competent styles of 20th century.

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