

Postmodern Elements in the Cyberpunk Novel: A Study of *The Matrix*

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ABSTRACT

Postmodernism finds its best expression in fiction more specifically cyberpunk novel, rather than in any other literary form. Cyberpunk is a particular kind of science fiction set in futuristic societies and exploring the interface between humans and technology. The cyberpunk novel emerged as an important genre in the second half of the twentieth century, coinciding with the rise of postmodernism. The cyberpunk novel gained importance with the publication of *Neuromancer* in 1984. The cyberpunk novel emerged in response to the social theories and technological developments of the latter half of the twentieth century; therefore the new techno-social-economic environment created during this time forms the major concern of the cyberpunk novel. *The Matrix* is set around AD 2199, while the characters in it are made to believe that they live in 1999. Philosophy and cinema intersect when, in one of the opening scenes, Neo is shown holding a copy of Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, which reveals the film's central concept.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Cyberpunk, Techno-Social-Economic Environment, Postmodern Situation, Simulation, Hyper-Reality, Digital Humanities, Cyborgs, Post-Humanism, Scattered Subjectivities, Distorted Symbiosis.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the second half of the twentieth century, many theories at disciplinary intersections emerged, and they apply to literature and literary criticism because both draw on these interdisciplinary ideas. These interdisciplinary theories deconstructed the idea of wholeness and divine inspiration; rather, parts became more important than the whole, and texts were seen as material production rather than the production of divine inspiration. Most theories that emerged during this period opposed the grandness of all discourses, as Jean-François Lyotard, in his most influential work, *The Postmodern Condition*, propounds postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv). It rejects notions of universals and encourages fluid, multiple perspectives in all walks of life, including literature, art, and cinema.

Many theorists have observed that postmodernism finds its best expression in fiction rather than in any other literary form. During the 1960s, postmodern fiction that dealt with science fiction iconography and themes proliferated. A particular kind of science fiction set in futuristic societies and exploring the interface between humans and technology began to emerge during this time and was called cyberpunk. The cyberpunk novel emerged as an important genre in the second half of the twentieth century, coinciding with the rise of postmodernism. The cyberpunk novel gained importance with the publication of *Neuromancer* in 1984; renowned critics like Veronica Hollinger hailed *Neuromancer* as “the quintessential cyberpunk novel” (Hollinger 30). Another eminent critic, Bruce Sterling, in his “Preface from Mirrorshades”, suggests that cyberpunk emerged as a result of the rapid surge of technology into culture and compares cyberpunk with other popular science fiction of the time. According to Bruce Sterling, it mostly deals with the effects of techniques which are capable of “radically redefining the nature of humanity, the nature of the self” (Sterling 343). Veronica Hollinger, an eminent scholar, while reflecting on the emergence of the cyberpunk novel, foregrounds that it emerged as a part of a movement that explored “the technological ramifications of experience within late-capitalist, post-industrial, media-saturated Western society” and can be read as “an analysis of the postmodern identification of human and machine” (Hollinger 30).

The cyberpunk novel emerged in response to the social theories and technological developments of the latter half of the twentieth century therefore the new techno-social-economic environment created during this time forms the major concern of the cyberpunk novel as Larry McCaffrey foregrounds,

The far-reaching implications of the recent breakthroughs in cybernetic and genetic engineering, organ transplants, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence research; the equally significant developments involving information storage, and, in particular, the ways in which computerized data, microstorage, and data bank development are controlled and owned by multinationals. (McCaffrey: 8)

The desire to understand the postmodern situation: postmodern politics, postmodern economics, postmodern culture, postmodern technology, postmodern aspirations, and postmodern fears led to the publication of a large number of cyberpunk novels and the production of a large number of cyberpunk movies. Cyberpunk's possibilities have been explored as much in cinema as in literature. Certain science fiction films produced in the 1980s, like *Blade Runner* and *Terminator*, are often regarded as the beginning of cyberpunk in this field, though precursors can be spotted

even earlier. When *The Matrix*, a true representative cyberpunk film, was released in 1999, it was not only commercially successful but also critically acclaimed for its exploration of underlying philosophies. The Wachowskis directed the film, and Keanu Reeves, Carrie-Anne Moss, and Laurence Fishburne played the lead characters. Neo (Keanu Reeves), a skeptical tech wizard, leads a double life as a computer programmer at a reputed software company and as a cybercriminal. When a team of rebels calling themselves “the resistance,” led by Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), approaches him, he learns that the life he lives is not real. It is still a computer-generated simulation in a computer-generated world called “the Matrix”. Meanwhile, his real body is kept in a fluid-filled pod, along with numerous others, all connected to electrical wires that use the bodily energy, or bioelectric power, of the humans inside to run a complex artificial intelligence system that rules the world. Morpheus further reveals that Neo is “the One,” who is supposed to free all human beings from the Matrix. The film follows their battle with the system and its protectors, called the Sentinels.

The film is set around AD 2199, while the characters in the Matrix are made to believe they live in 1999. The philosophy and cinema art intersect and even overlap each other when, in one of the opening scenes, Neo is shown holding a copy of Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation*, which reveals the film’s central concept. The life they believe they are living in 1999 is actually in the Matrix, a simulation which, in its dimensions, resembles Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation*,

Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.... It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real. (Baudrillard: 166)

This idea of simulation of a hyper-reality, where the signs of the real are taken for the real and the presence of a copy or a model without reality achieves dominance also forms the essence of *The Matrix*, when in the movie Morpheus explains the working of the Matrix to Neo, he says that what people in the Matrix believe to be their real body is not their real body but an appearance which they refer to as a “residual self-image” or “the mental projection of your digital self” (*The Matrix*), is an example of simulation achieved with the help of digital technologies in the age of postmodernism and this simulation is important not only in the artistic productions but also important in the real life. Donna Haraway, a scholar in feminism and digital humanities, foregrounds the impact of digital technologies on life and how they have become indispensable because the extensive use of digital technologies has rendered everyone a kind of cyborg that, according to her, is “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Haraway: 1).

In *The Matrix*, the characters inside the Matrix are not even cyborgs but mere simulations; however, their actual beings are true cyborgs since it is obvious that they were not born but cloned, even though they bore a resemblance to actual human beings in form. They were kept inside chambers or pods which performed the function of a womb, providing them, through tubes connected to their body, with what might be necessary to keep them alive. They also had permanent portals in their heads that, when connected to specific wired systems and accompanied by enough computer programs, took them into the matrix. These technological augmentations are depicted so that a clear-cut distinction between human and machine is nearly impossible; the autonomy of human beings in the universe is questioned.

Theorists like Katherine Hayles call these machine-dependent humans post-humans. She argues that the post-human is just another step in human evolution, since technology has integrated so fully into human lives that human consciousness has extended into the realm of the computer mainframe. She expands this by suggesting that in the post-human, there are “no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals” (Hayles 3).

These theories blur the distinction between human and non-human and shift human beings from center to periphery. Although writers have explored post-humanism through political agendas, cyberpunk post-humanism is driven by technology. According to Hollinger, “It is often discussed that the modernist predicament of individual alienation found its equivalent in postmodernism in the form of dispersed subjectivity” (Hollinger 36).

In *The Matrix*, this question of subjectivity takes center stage. When the truth about the Matrix is revealed to Neo, he falls into a dilemma of disbelief and hesitation. This is because the subject position that he had attributed to himself got shattered. Here, the superiority and privilege experienced by the human form is questioned and is destined only to become merely one choice among many available choices. Hollinger foregrounds that conventional attributes of “human nature determined by a physical essence of the human” lost its reliability and “metaphysical systems grounded on faith in an inner self begin to waver” (Hollinger 35). The film’s occasional symbolic use of mirrors and glasses distinguishes between these scattered subjectivities.

The writer deals with the process of scattering of subjectivities especially when they are inside the matrix through the use mirrored sunglasses in such a way as to keep themselves detached from the unreal self: “since mirror images are virtual, uncannily reversed counterparts of the objects they reflect”, “the mirror images being the form in which the characters exist inside the matrix and the counterparts their form in the real world” (Cavallaro 32).

The movie *The Matrix* at one level is a cyberpunk novel that deals with the use of digital technologies and their impact on the human life however these digital technologies does not exist in vacuum, in the real world they are part of the postmodern economic models where all the digital technologies and digital platforms are directly in the hands

of the multi-national companies and all aspects of human life are directly or indirectly controlled by these companies. If these companies do not want to, they can render people friendless because people have more online friends than real-life friends; they can also make a person penniless because they process all financial transactions. It is a classic example of technological capitalism's domination as Fredric Jameson pointed out, cyberpunk is "fully as much an expression of transnational corporate realities as it is of global paranoia itself" (Jameson 38).

Information, in this case, those concerning the Matrix and the real world and those required to fight the technology that controls the Matrix, is the most important commodity here. Moreover, in the post-industrial world the film portrays, corporate hegemony favors not capitalist human beings, but technology itself. They enforce this hierarchy inside the Matrix through the sentinel programs the resistance fights. Even when the film ends, the protagonist can destroy only a single sentinel by breaking up its program, leaving the hegemony untouched. The sequels to *The Matrix*, namely *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*, address this question. Thus, this film presents a scenario wherein everything, even the human body, which has been believed to be the source of all progress in the world, is commodified to such an extent that a demarcation between real experiences and simulations has become impossible.

In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale draws a close parallel between postmodern science fiction and postmodern fiction more broadly. The tendencies he identifies in postmodern science fiction also appear in different forms in the cyberpunk film *The Matrix*, when he says postmodern fiction has a "poetics dominated by ontological issues" and that "the dominant of postmodern fiction is ontological" (McHale 30).

According to him, this explains the presence of multiple or parallel worlds. This is validated in cyberpunk, since one of its major defining factors is the coexistence of many possible worlds, like the human world and the machine world, the real world and the simulated world, the world of past and future, and so on. In *The Matrix*, for example, an amalgamation of all these worlds can be spotted in plain sight. In fact, the indecisive nature of the world makes Neo to question it and eventually makes him come to terms with the real world. In most of the cyberpunk works, the dominant setting is a virtual world or cyberspace where humans or post-humans strive to exist in a machine-controlled world.

An important feature of postmodernist fiction is the hybridization of forms, or the overlapping of genres, which cyberpunk also embraces. At first glance, *The Matrix* is a science fiction film driven by artificial intelligence, hacking, and cloning. It also falls under the category of film noir because of its dark mood. Occasional rain, dark green and blue lighting, and the protagonist's struggle to find the truth in a corrupt, unsympathetic world unmistakably make it a noir film. Cyberpunk novels are not always pure science fiction rather they use all the possible means including technological and mythological tropes to draw attention to various small as well as big challenges faced by people or to be faced by people in future. According to Dani Cavallaro puts it, cyberpunk involves the development of "an ambivalent mythopoeia in which new forms of life are seen to emerge from technology, and at the same time, the digital universe is permeated by mysticism and occultism" (Cavallaro 53).

The same is explicit in *The Matrix*; though the events are basically technology-driven, it also features an artificial mythical setting and a savior figure meant to set things straight.

The film also uses quotations and references from various literary and religious works, as well as other movies. Referring to Neo as "the One", which is also an anagram of the name, alludes to a Biblical reference. The interrogation scene in which the Sentinels distort Neo's mouth is often considered Kafkaesque, with its disorientation and illogically complex, surreal portrayal. Zion, the name of the only human inhabiting the city, is also Biblical, as it is the name of the hill upon which Jerusalem was built. Not only does the film show a copy of *Simulacra and Simulation*, but Morpheus also quotes the phrase "desert of the real" from it. The scene in which Neo is taken to the Oracle parallels Dorothy meeting the wizard in *The Wizard of Oz*. Cipher even explicitly refers to *The Wizard of Oz*, saying, "Buckle your seat belt, Dorothy, cause Kansas is going bye-bye." Another obvious reference is to *Alice in Wonderland*, when Neo is told to "follow the white rabbit." The cat and the déjà vu in the film also allude to *Alice in Wonderland*. Furthermore, some shooting scenes resemble scenes from another cyberpunk movie, *Terminator*. The fading of the spider's red eye after Neo pulls it out also resembles the fading of cyborg eyes in *Terminator (The Matrix)*. These allusions and references point to the film's pastiche nature, another notable feature of postmodernism.

The Matrix's treatment of time aligns with postmodern temporality. As pointed out about postmodern writing, it has "preferred to adapt science fiction's motifs of temporal displacement rather than its spatial displacements, projecting worlds of the future rather than worlds in distant galaxies" (McHale 66).

Though the living environments portrayed in *The Matrix* suggest entirely different planets or galaxies, it is revealed that they are temporal variations of the same planet across about two hundred years, even though one is entirely simulated. Although it is an imaginary, computer-generated simulation, the model they relied on was from 1999, while the actual time is around 2199. Therefore, when Neo enquires about what place he was in, Morpheus replies, "More important than what is when" before explaining the whole concept of the Matrix (*The Matrix*). This confirms cyberpunk's reliance on temporal displacement rather than spatial displacement. Comparing cyberpunk with other hard science fiction, many theorists have attempted to deconstruct the grand narrative that the latter tries to substantiate: that human beings, as the omnipotent center, are always capable of undermining the ill effects of

technology.

In science fiction therefore an amalgamation of the opposition between natural and artificial or human and machine takes place as a result of which a solution is attained which places human beings at the privileged centre. Therefore, as Hollinger says, “cyberpunk is about the breakdown of these oppositions” (Hollinger 30).

In *The Matrix*, when Morpheus explains to Neo why the Matrix exists, he says that humans triumphed in creating artificial intelligence. However, it eventually led to a revolt between the two. However, he does not hide the fact that both parties are equally responsible for the present plight, and no one can be blamed entirely. None of the major characters are born but cloned by the technological system; they are thus indebted to it for their very existence.

Earlier works of science fiction, such as *Frankenstein*, held an antagonistic view towards technology. However, in cyberpunk, the view is more symbiotic. While Neo is trained to fight the system, the resistance uses the same computer programs the system used to control and fix him in the Matrix to teach him combat. Ironically, when Tank amuses about Neo’s ability to tirelessly take in the programs for combat training he goes to the extent of making a remark on Neo that “He is a machine” (*The Matrix*).

Cyberpunk can also be differentiated from other science fiction works by means of the level of mind invasion. In cyberpunk, technology is no longer a lesser opponent to human beings. The concept of the Matrix was introduced in earlier science fiction works to mean a virtual realm, or an endless space of abstract data where the human mind can move freely. For instance in *Neuromancer*, the Matrix was described as a “consensual hallucination” and as a “graphic representation of data” (Gibson 69).

It is designed for humans, and even though the distinction between humans and machines is vague and thin, it still exists. However, in *The Matrix*, the level of mind invasion is pushed into an even more complex state. In the film, human beings no longer control the Matrix. The system controls not only their bodies but also their minds, using the Matrix as a tool. Those with their minds in the Matrix are not even aware that they are living a life that does not exist in reality. Human beings have no agency here; they are not allowed to choose whether to be in or out of the Matrix, except for the resistance, who rebelled against it. As Morpheus explains, the Matrix is “a computer-generated dream world built to keep us under control” (*The Matrix*). So it has developed from a choice to a trap, taking mind invasion to an absolute level. Here again, the question of human autonomy arises. Though the mind appears free to make choices, the choices are designed and offered by the Matrix or the machine. A distorted symbiosis exists between humans and machines: the system, through its innumerable machines, extracts human bioelectric power to function, while the human mind is fed by computer-generated simulation and given an illusion of life. All that remains real are the human bodies kept in pods whose existence they are totally unaware of. Here, the poem also emphasizes man’s need to depend on technology for survival. The cyborg image here suggests this dependency and insists on adapting to a technologically advanced environment to survive. In other words, a co-existence is necessary. Here again, the film questions human autonomy and the metanarrative of human rationality as supreme.

Overall, *The Matrix* offers several instances that validate its allegiance to postmodernism. The most crucial is its questioning of the supremacy of human rationality and its broader skepticism. The film’s setting in a hyperreal simulation, or computer-generated world, reinforces this allegiance. It depicts a dream world where it is almost impossible to trust whether the reality experienced is credible. The film also explores technology’s impact on human beings and suggests the need for coexistence. The use of temporal displacement also brings it closer to postmodernism. Further, it includes a number of references and allusions, as well as overlapping forms and genres. The focus on the ontological dominant and the presence of parallel worlds, along with the existence of cyborgs and post-humans, all support this claim. There is a crisis of subjectivity and a blurring of distinction between the real and the non-real, human and machine, natural and artificial, and so on. It also emphasizes corporate hegemony and the commodification of information. *The Matrix*, as a cyberpunk film, thus proves that cyberpunk is a representative genre of postmodernism. The film voices and addresses the questions and concerns of postmodernism, and by extension, cyberpunk. Hence, among the various works produced as part of postmodernism, cyberpunk stands out as a strong representative genre.

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