

Born to Be On-line: Cyberpunk, Cyborgs and the Matrix Trilogy

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Abstract

Films of science fiction, such as *The Matrix* (1999), and its sequels *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) and *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003), are often categorized as cyberpunk which is a subgenre of contemporary science fiction. As typical examples of this type of science fiction, *The Matrix* and its sequels illustrate the concern of cyberpunk to envision a near future world where information technologies reign supreme, and shape the lives and affairs of societies including the lives and the very existence of individuals. More specifically, *The Matrix* trilogy depicts a future world that is populated with cyborgs, or posthumans, and run by a globally networked artificial intelligence called the matrix. In this respect these films do not only speculate on a highly technological near future but also on mankind's changed existence in this environment. Especially, the image of the cyborg serves as a means to address the issue of the human and machine interface in these films. More importantly, the cyborg, or the post-human, in *The Matrix* and its sequels is not only emblematic of the human and machine interface but also of man's very dependence on this technology as a means to survive in a highly mechanized environment. This paper argues that *The Matrix* and its sequels subvert the man vs. technology dichotomy and speculate on the altered existence of humans by envisioning and affirming the coexistence of man and the machine in the near future.

Key words: science fiction, cyberpunk, cyborgs, *The Matrix*, *The Matrix Reloaded*, *The Matrix Revolutions*

Özet

The Matrix (1999) ve serisi *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) ve *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003) gibi bilim kurgu filmleri genelde çağdaş bilim kurgunun bir alt türü olan "siberpunk" olarak sınıflandırılır. *Matrix* serisi yakın gelecekte bilgi teknolojisinin toplumsal hayatı, bireylerin yaşamını ve varoluşunu nasıl şekillendirdiğini öngörmesi açısından siberpunk türünün tipik örneklerindedir. Diğer bir deyişle *Matrix* üçlemesi, içinde siborgların, yada "insan ötesi" olarak da tanımlanan, yarı makineleşmiş insanların yaşadığı ve matrix olarak adlandırılan küresel bir bilgisayar şebekesine bağlı bir yapay zeka tarafından yönetilen bir dünyayı kurgulamaktadır. Bu açıdan incelendiğinde, *Matrix* serisi yakın gelecekteki ileri teknolojik ortamı irdelemekle kalmayıp aynı zamanda insanın bu ortamda değişen varoluşunu da ele almaktadır. Özellikle siborg imgesi, bu filmlerdeki insan ve makine birleşimini temsil eden önemli bir unsurdur. Daha

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önemlisi, *Matrix* üçlemesinde ele alınan siborg sadece insan ve makine bileşimini temsil etmekle kalmayıp aynı zamanda insanın ileri derecede mekanikleşmiş bir çevrede varlığını sürdürebilmesi için teknolojiye olan bağımlılığını da ifade etmektedir. Bu makale *Matrix* serisinin, insan ve makine zıtlığını ortadan kaldırdığını, insan ile makinenin bir arada var oluşunu gerekli kıldığı bir yakın gelecek kurguladığını, ve bu yolla insanın değişen varoluşunu irdelediğini savunmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: bilim kurgu, siberpunk, siborg, *The Matrix*, *The Matrix Reloaded*, *The Matrix Revolutions*

According to some social critics like Scott Bukatman, the technological developments of the post-industrial era have created a social environment in which “technology and the human are no longer so dichotomous” (1993:5). Indeed, scientific developments such as genetic engineering, cosmetic surgery, or the internet, and experimentations with virtual reality and artificial intelligence seem to prove that the distinction between the artificial and the real, and man and the machine are already getting blurred. Moreover, the technological alterations of the present era have also brought along a number ontological questions regarding the status and power of man (1993:5). Such questions are generally posed and explored in the realm of contemporary science fiction. Especially, Cyberpunk, as a sub-genre of science fiction, is concerned with examining man’s changed existence in a rapidly “dehumanizing” world. As recent works of cyberpunk, *The Matrix* (1999), and its sequels *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) and *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003), aim to envision a near future when the human and machine interface has reached its peak and altered man’s physical nature. More importantly, the cyborg, or the post-human, in *The Matrix* and its sequels is not only emblematic of the human and machine interface but also of man’s very dependence on this technology as a means to survive in a highly mechanized environment. Thus, *The Matrix* and its sequels subvert the traditional concept of man vs. technology by envisioning and affirming the coexistence of man and the machine.

In an article featured in “The Cyberpunk Project” web site it is mentioned that cyberpunk¹ is a genre of science fiction literature that emphasizes, to a greater or lesser degree, the attributes of post-humanism and post-industrialism (2003:1). In a similar study Larry McCaffery mentions that the origin and development of cyberpunk can be related to the technological and social developments of the post-industrial era.

¹ More specifically, cyberpunk refers to the works of science fiction writers like William Gibson (*Neuromancer*,1984), Bruce Sterling, (*Schismatrix*,1984), Greg Bear (*Blood Music*,1985), Lewis Shiner (*Frontera*,1984) or Pat Cadigan (*Synners*,1991). These writers were the first generation who were not only steeped in modern technology but also in the modern counterculture associated with the drug culture, punk rock, video games or MTV. Therefore, cyberpunk can also be described as a new form of science fiction that combines the realm of high tech with the concerns and values of the relevant counterculture. Although the definitions of cyberpunk may vary, critics in general agree that cyberpunk is essentially concerned with envisioning the impact of information technologies and medical sciences on the near future society and environment.

According to McCaffery, the technological advancements of the recent decades:

have introduced a broad range of new “high-tech” products into postmodern society, such as sophisticated offensive and defensive military weaponry and surveillance to protect the resources and markets of the multinationals; increasingly complex (and expensive) medical equipment and supplies, including a new array of prosthetic devices; and a whole host of consumer products, from automobiles to chain saws, cellular phones, trash compactors, microwave ovens, and so forth. (1991:4).

Furthermore, the post-industrial age has brought along the accelerated development of information and electronic technologies such as VCRs, CDs, computers and the internet which in turn have caused the expansion of advertising, information and media industries. Specifically information has become the primary commodity of the post-industrial age and has generated “the rapid proliferation of technologically mass-produced “products” that are essentially *reproductions* or *abstractions*-images, advertising, information, memories, styles, simulated experiences, and copies of original experiences” (McCaffery 1991:4). In McCaffery’s view, the post-industrial era has introduced to the society a wide range of technologies that have eventually become vital components of daily life.

More importantly, McCaffery argues that the accelerated technological change of the recent decades has also influenced the culture of the postmodern era and altered long held paradigms and assumptions concerning human thought and experience. As a matter of fact, the very integration of information and electronic technologies, such as computers, the world wide web, or virtual reality games; as well as advanced medical sciences and technologies, including organ transplants, prosthetic devices or implants, into our daily lives have increasingly blurred the boundaries of categorical oppositions like organic/inorganic, reality/nonreality and human /inhuman. Indeed, the breakdown of epistemological and ontological boundaries such as reality and nonreality, human and machine have also been addressed and debated by cultural theorists like Jean Baudrillard, Donna Haraway and Katherine Hayles. To mention briefly, Baudrillard has theorized that the development of the media industry in the postmodern era had rendered the discrepancy between the simulated and the real obsolete and had subordinated the real to the simulated experience. Haraway and Hayles have been more specifically concerned with how the scientific and technological advancements of the late 20th century have altered the ontology of humanity. Both argue that the technological augmentation of the human body (through contact lenses, pace makers, prosthetic limbs or similar devices) has increasingly blurred the distinctions between humans and machines and challenged traditional concepts regarding the human body. Yet, whereas Haraway uses the term “cyborg,” Hayles prefers to use the term “posthuman” to refer

to the new condition of humans. Harraway states in her “A Manifesto For Cyborgs” (1985) that the term cyborg represents a breakdown of boundaries between human and machine as “late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self- developing and externally designed” (2000:52). Thinking positive about the hybridization of man and machine, she argues that the boundary-blurring status of the cyborg can eventually lead to a larger breakdown of other traditional binary oppositions such as nature/culture, self/other, or male /female. “Cyborg imagery can suggest,” Harraway states, “a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves ... it means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, space stories” (2000:57). As Harraway suggests, the image of the cyborg may provide a new impetus for societies to reconsider their relationship with technology, and to recast gender, class, and sexuality. Different from Harraway, Hayles refutes conventional notions regarding the human body by arguing that in the posthuman view “embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life” (1999:2). Due to the rapid integration of computer and information technologies into our lives, our consciousness is no longer confined to the limits of the body but has instead extended into the realm of the computer mainframe. In Hayles opinion, the posthuman view sees the body as the original prosthesis which can be subjected to technological augmentation. Thus, the posthuman condition is just another step in the process of man’s evolution. “By these and other means,” Hayles states:

“the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals” (1999:3).

Consequently, theories such as those by Baudrillard, Harraway and Hayles have been developed out of the need to interrogate and investigate the state of technology and man in the post-industrial era. While Baudrillard’s theory brings into focus the diminishing boundary between the real and the artificial, Hayle’s and Harraway’s theories bring into focus the blurring of the boundary between the human and the non-human.

In relation to the technological changes and social theories of the late twentieth century Larry McCaffery mentions that cyberpunk, as a vein of science fiction, is the literary response to these developments. As McCaffery explains:

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 ... (and) the social, psychic, political and behavioral impact resulting from the shift away from the older industrial technologies to the newer information and cybernetic ones (1991:8).

are some of the main issues cyberpunk² is concerned with. Most of the works of cyberpunk generally depict a post-industrial world where information technologies are highly developed. Different nations seem to have mingled into a single human race, and the world is often run by giant multinational technology corporations. The most valuable commodity is information. Moreover, one of the main concerns of cyberpunk is cyberspace, the computer generated world which is connected to a global network called the matrix. In addition to this, cyberpunk fiction abounds with posthumans who are both human beings and machines. Human beings are usually donated with artificial limbs, implanted circuitry or similar devices that make the human and machine interface possible and enhance their abilities. Machines, on the other hand, are donated with artificial intelligence and can act and think like humans. For example, popular works of cyberpunk such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), Pat Cadigan's *Synners* (1991), or Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix* (1986) display most of these features of cyberpunk. Their works introduce the reader to a highly technological near future world where information reigns supreme, and depict a cast of characters who have been technologically augmented and embark on a series of adventures in cyberspace. On the whole, works of cyberpunk tend to anticipate a near future world which "is populated by a range of (post-)human forms" (Peters 2000:1) and ruled by a globalized technological system that has penetrated every aspect of society.

Most of these features of cyberpunk fiction are also evident in *The Matrix* and its sequels. The Matrix series take place in a near future metropolitan city which is run by a globally networked Artificial Intelligence. The films deal with the struggles of a group of cyber-rebels, led by Neo, Morpheus and Trinity to save the human race from imprisonment by the machines led by an artificial intelligence. The first sequel titled *The Matrix* is about Neo's own initiation into the reality concerning the world he lives in before he is converted into a hero who saves the world. At the beginning of the film, Neo is presented as an ordinary citizen who works for a giant software company in a seemingly ordinary world. Yet Neo's routine life is turned upside down once he gets

² Similar to McCaffery, Bruce Sterling argues that cyberpunk is concerned with certain themes such as "the theme of body invasion: prosthetic limbs, implanted circuitry, cosmetic surgery, genetic alteration" and "the even more powerful theme of mind invasion: brain-computer interfaces, artificial intelligence, neurochemistry – techniques radically redefining the nature of humanity, the nature of self" (1991: 346). Furthermore, Sterling adds, "the tools of global integration – the satellite media net, the multinational corporation – fascinate the cyberpunks and figure constantly in their work." (1991: 347).

into contact with Morpheus. Morpheus informs him that the world he lives in does not exist. It is actually a form of virtual reality, an artificial world called the matrix and designed to convince human beings that they live in this world. In reality, humans are cloned in womb-like containers and kept there while their consciousness is wired into the matrix to create the illusion that they live in an ordinary world. The matrix is, as Morpheus says, “the wool that has been pulled over your eyes...that you are a slave.” (Wachowski 1999). Then Neo is urged to find out the truth for himself and is given a drug which unplugs him from the computer generated world, and causes his awakening into the real world. Once transformed into the real world, Morpheus convinces Neo that as long as the matrix exists mankind will never be free. Neo decides to join the rebels and embarks on a series of adventures to fight against the Agents, who are actually sentient programs designed to protect the matrix. On the whole, the *The Matrix* and its two sequels, *the Matrix Reloaded* and *the Matrix Revolutions*, deal mainly with the efforts of Neo and his crew to save mankind from the machines that have enslaved them.

Although *The Matrix* series addresses also issues such as the importance of information as the primary commodity, or the environmental destruction caused by technological progress, the focus of these films tend to be primarily on the effects of technological change in relation to the existence of humanity and the very existence of the human body. As a work of cyberpunk *The Matrix* trilogy displays an intimate concern for the interconnection between man and technology, and aims to blur the boundaries between the real and the artificial, the human and the machine. As a matter of fact, the theme of the human and machine interface becomes a major issue in these films as they concentrate on the struggle of the survival of a new type of humanity within a highly technologized environment. Especially *The Matrix*, introduces the audience to a near future world which is populated with cyborgs (or posthumans as K. Hayles would prefer to call it). For example, the scene when Neo awakens into the real world and discovers the truth about himself and his environment is quite significant. Neo discovers to his dismay that the real world is a lifeless wasteland, which is run by a huge machine network. The metal tub in which he finds himself resembles to a womb and his body is attached to various cables extending from the machine. Obviously, Neo was not born in natural ways. He was cloned and given life by the machines. When Neo looks around, he sees that there are also other human beings who are kept in containers and wired to the matrix. Neo’s escape from the artificial womb is suggestive of his rebirth (or rather birth) as a human being, which occurs by his being drained down a waste disposal canal. After his escape from his imprisonment, Neo is subjected to a series of medical treatments to restore the function of his physical body that was never used before. However, the implanted bioport, that enables him to wire his

consciousness into the simulated world of the matrix, remains as a sign that Neo will never reclaim a truly natural human identity. Likewise, other rebels as Morpheus and Trinity are donated with bioports implanted in their necks through which they can access into the matrix and fight against the enemy in the virtual realm. Thus, the film introduces a different type of humans that have evolved into cyborgs, neither truly human nor machine.

More specifically, these films depict how technologically enhanced human beings make use of their transformed bodies in an attempt to regain control over the machines. In one scene, Morpheus mentions that he finds it ironic that for so many centuries, mankind has been dependent on machines to continue their existence. “Now” he says, “humans are fighting the machines to survive.” (Wachowski 1999). Yet, Morpheus fails to realize that the survival of his generation depends on the very use of the technology created by these machines. After all, it is the virtual realm where the rebels receive their combat training and fight against the agents of the Matrix. This means that rebels such as Neo, Trinity and Morpheus have to transcend the limitations of the human body and to wire their consciousness into the virtual realm through the implanted bioports in their necks. Once in cyberspace, they have to rely on their digital embodiment in the computer generated world to be successful in the combat against the matrix. In the virtual realm, Neo learns how to control and manipulate his virtual image so as to be influential in the course of the events that take place in the matrix. For instance, towards the end of *The Matrix*, Neo manages to destroy Agent Smith by getting inside of his virtual enemy and decoding the program of his virtual image. In this respect, Neo as well as the rest of his crew have only little resemblance to ordinary heroes who must rely on the strength of their muscles to overcome the enemy. On the contrary, they have to go beyond the limits of the natural body and rely on the skills and abilities that have been provided for them by their technologically modified bodies. The Matrix trilogy thereby strengthens the image of the human and machine symbiosis, and privileges the technologically enhanced body over the natural body as the only means of survival.

The human and machine interface is also evident in *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*. This time, outside of the matrix, armies of machines, guided by artificial intelligence, threaten the city of Zion, the last fortress of the human race. In both sequels humans are depicted sitting inside of giant anthropomorphic machines, to defend Zion against the mechanic army sent by the matrix. The human-like form of the machines that contain true human beings in their mechanic bodies is suggestive of another form of human and machine symbiosis. Moreover, in the *Matrix Reloaded* it turns out that Agent Smith has actually survived the final combat with Neo, which had taken place in the finale of *The Matrix*. As a sentient program Agent Smith demonstrates

how machines can acquire human qualities and emulate humans not only in physical appearance but also in thought and behavior. In both, *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*, Agent Smith demonstrates how a sentient program can develop a hatred for the entire human race and the ambition to destroy humanity including Neo, from whom he seeks to avenge himself for his previous defeat. To reach his aims Agent Smith eventually succeeds to copy himself into the brain of Bane just as he is about to exit from the matrix and get unplugged from the machine system that has connected his brain to the computer system. Bane, who is actually another cyber rebel on his way to join Neo's crew back in the real world, is now under the control of Agent Smith, and has extended Smith's powers beyond the virtual world. Thus, Agent Smith/Bane becomes another form of the human and machine integration. Yet, once inside of Bane's body Agent Smith displays his hatred for humanity by slicing Bane's hand and giving harm to his body. For Agent Smith/Bane his new cyborg existence becomes a source of misery. Unlike Agent Smith/Bane, Neo is able to make use of his cyborg existence in a more meaningful manner. For instance, near the end of *The Matrix Revolutions* when he is back in Zion, Neo eventually manages to apply part of his powers also outside of the matrix. Having developed an analogy between himself and the machines, Neo develops the ability to produce a self-generated EMP that disables the functioning of the sentinels³, when they attack Neo and his crew after bombing the crew's ship Nebuchadnezzar. *The Matrix* series therefore, does not only introduce the viewers to a variety of cyborgs but also invokes the idea that the cyborgization process can become an important advantage for humans in their fight against the machines.

The Matrix Reloaded and *The Matrix Revolutions* are particularly significant in that they enable Neo to develop a new perspective concerning the relationship between human beings and machines. Back in Zion, in *The Matrix Reloaded*, where the human population prepares for the great war with the machines, Neo becomes acquainted with Councillor Hamman who is one of the elders of the council of the city. Councillor Hamman leads Neo to the engineering department of the city and the conversation that instantly occurs provides for Neo's recognition that humanity and technology are actually interdependent:

Hamman: I like to be reminded this city survives because of these machines. These machines are keeping us alive while other machines are coming to kill us...Sometimes I think about those people still plugged into the matrix...and when I think about these machines...I can't help thinking that, in a way, we are plugged into them.

³ The sentinels are small flying machines which look like a swarm of bees or flies when they attack a target. These machines are programmed to detect and attack cyber rebels and their ships outside of the matrix.

Neo: If we wanted, we could shut these machines down.

Hamman: Of course. That's it. You hit it. That's control, isn't it? If we wanted, we could smash them to bits. Although if we did, we'd have to consider what could happen to our lights...our heat, our air.

Neo: So we need the machines and they need us. Is that your point councillor?

Hamman: No. No point. Old men like me don't bother with making points. There is no point.

Neo: Is that why there are no young men in the council?

Hamman: Good point. (Wachowski 2003).

Neo's recognition of the interdependency of humans and machines becomes the intrinsic knowledge he eventually makes use of as a means to end the great war near the end of *The Matrix Revolutions*. Indeed, *The Matrix Revolutions* focuses mainly on the war and depicts humans seated in anthropomorphic machines fighting back the swarm of sentinels which have come to terminate Zion. In the meantime, Neo and his crew keep raiding the computer generated world to reach the Oracle⁴ and get her assistance to end the war. Near the end of the last sequel, the Oracle eventually sends Neo to the machine city to end the war that is taking place. The machine city is the place where "the source," the artificial intelligence, of the matrix dwells. In the film, the machine city is depicted as a devastated mechanical city which is the very site where human beings are cloned and kept in womb-like containers while their conscience is wired into the matrix. By now, Neo knows that the war will not end and wipe out the human race of Zion unless he can negotiate a peace with the machines. Neo is aware of the fact that Zion is about to be destroyed and the matrix itself is under the threat of a system crash since Agent Smith has turned into a dangerous virus program that damages and modifies every program in the matrix into another copy of himself. Neo offers the source to go back to the matrix to clear off the system from the agents/viruses who have turned against the system itself. In return, he gets the promise that Zion will be saved. Back in the matrix, Neo challenges Agent Smith for a last fight that will decide the outcome of the war. In the end of the ensuing fight Neo allows Agent Smith to overtake his body and to turn him into another Agent Smith. Yet, the very next moment, Agent Smith/Neo's body emanates a white light that tears the new agent's body into pieces and causes the termination of all other Agent Smith replicants. The programs of which Agent Smith had taken possession of are left free again and the matrix is saved from a system crash. The final scene of the battle suggests that Neo's own virtual body, which

⁴ The Oracle is another form of a sentient program which was designed by the matrix. Yet, the Oracle has chosen to side with human beings and to assist them in their struggle for the existence of humanity. Through out the entire trilogy the Oracle functions as a guide to Neo who has helped him to discover his powers, and guided him in his efforts to save humanity.

is actually another form of a program in the virtual realm, finally evolves into an alternative program that decodes and destroys the program Agent Smith when both of them merge. Yet, this process has required Neo's final merger with the machine system which has costed him his physical life. Back in the machine city, Neo's dead body is unplugged from the system and carried away by the machines. The source keeps its promise and calls back the mechanical army that was sent to terminate Zion. Thus, Zion is saved but the machines are still intact. Obviously, the end of *The Matrix Revolutions* suggests no definite victory for either side. Instead of that *The Matrix* serials emphasizes the interdependency between humans and the machines which affirms the notion of a coexistence of man and technology.

Although the Matrix trilogy deals with a rather conventional theme that depicts humanity under the threat of machines, the serial does not repudiate technology as it is usually expected. On the contrary, the Matrix serial emphasizes the human and machine interface and the interdependence of humanity and technology. This is partly due to the fact that they are usually categorized as cyberpunk. Though cyberpunk is not necessarily either technophilic nor technophobic, it nevertheless "embraces technology" so as to "go along for the ride" (Maddox, 1992:43). As opposed to cyberpunk, earlier or more conventional works of science fiction, such as *Metropolis* (1928), *Frankenstein* (1934), *Westworld* (1973), or *Eve of Destruction* (1991), generally tend to display a fear of technology and imply the message that technology will victimize humanity unless technological progress is restricted. Yet, in the case of *The Matrix* and its sequels, man's need and dependence on technology is emphasized over other concerns. What sets films such as *The Matrix* series apart from mainstream science fiction is that these films neither affirm the superiority of man over technology nor the restriction of technological progress. On the contrary, the cyborg image in the Matrix trilogy implies that human beings are required to adapt to the technologically progressed environment to be able to continue their existence. This provides for a coexistence of humans and technology. This notion is actually derived from the technological progress that occurs in the contemporary era. Films like the Matrix trilogy aim to envision how the development of today's technology will reshape the human civilization and the very existence of man.

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