Simulacra and Simulation: Baudrillard and \textit{The Matrix}

Richard Hanley

There is nothing new under the sun. With the death of the real, or rather with its (re)surrection, hyperreality both emerges and is already always reproducing itself. The dead are already dead; precisely more than the living which are yet alive. God himself has only ever been his own simulacrum; his own Disneyland…

To begin with it is no "objective" difference: the same type of demand. Formerly the discourse of crisis, negativity and crisis. It is pointless to laboriously interpret these films by their artificial resurrection in systems of signs, a more radical political exigency.
Jean Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra”

Philosophers can get pretty excited about \textit{The Matrix}. An apparent exception is Jean Baudrillard, the author of \textit{Simulacra and Simulation} (henceforth, S&S), the book that appears in the movie. Numerous sources report Baudrillard saying that the movie “stemmed mostly from misunderstandings” of his work. So a natural point of inquiry has been whether or not this is true. Yeffeth (2002) contains two essays both entitled “\textit{The Matrix}: Paradigm of post-modernism or intellectual poseur?”; one answering “the former” and the other “the latter,” and both apparently assuming the disjunction is exclusive. In this article I will point out some further interpretations, and (eventually) argue for one of them.

I. An analytic take on post-modernism

But first, let me lay my cards on the table. I am no fan of either Baudrillard or post-modernism. I am an analytic philosopher, and my focus is entirely upon what to make of Baudrillard and his connection to \textit{The Matrix}, from the analytic point of view.

I think there’s a consensus amongst analytic philosophers that post-modernism is largely self-indulgent, self-important bunk, that has rather inexplicably taken hold in many philosophy departments outside the English-speaking world, and in many non-philosophy departments inside it. The following would be a fairly typical assessment:

Philosophy is hard enough to read, anyway, but analytic writers strive to be clear, whereas post-modernists seem to strive to be as obscure as possible. And just to make things worse, when an exponent of Po-Mo occasionally makes a reasonably clear statement, taken literally it’s either trivially true, or obviously false. So the Principle of Charity (interpret others so that what they say has the best chance of being both true and interesting) suggests that we take them non-literally. But then what is the non-literal meaning?

There’s even a joke about it. What do you get if you cross a post-modernist with a Mafioso? Someone who’ll make you an offer you can’t understand!

But mostly, it’s no laughing matter. The more egregious the offense against clarity and good sense, the more influential and celebrated its perpetrator. They are elevated to cultish, pop-star status, with an almost religious devotion to their writings. But many of the “must-read” essays in Po-Mo circles would earn even an undergraduate a poor grade in an analytic school—it’s more like the unedited guff circulating on the internet, where any nut with a theory can hold forth. What post-modernists are doing is not really philosophy at all, and they give the discipline a bad name amongst other academics, take jobs that could and should go to more sensible folks, and
present dangerous falsehoods to the general public.

I confess to some sympathy with this line, perhaps tinged with some professional jealousy. And if Baudrillard can’t be understood, then he can’t be mis understood, either. On the other hand, though, an undergraduate in a philosophy program inhabited by post-modernists can get a perfectly decent education in logic and the history of philosophy, so it can’t be true that post-modernists are just not doing philosophy. Rather, they have a very different conception of what is possible for contemporary philosophy.

A start towards understanding their view is to consider our ordinary use of fiction. A novel (or movie, or whatever) can provoke all manner of thoughts in us, and we often ask what it means, whether or not it was realistic, and what we can learn from it. The fiction represents a (part of a) world, and part of our normal interest is in how closely it resembles the real world. But what are we really comparing the fiction to? Isn’t it the way we think the real world is? And that’s just another representation of the real world, a mental story “about” it, not the real world itself.

Analytic philosophers are well aware of this potential regression in representation, and there is an ongoing debate over what it and related considerations might show. For instance, some think that all our observations of the real world are “theory-laden,” and debate whether or not this is a bad thing. Others think we have more direct access to the real world. But the touchstone in all the analytic views on this subject is that representation—language, say—is aimed at the real world: for instance, on one very common view, names often refer to real individuals, and predicates often apply to real properties. Truth is a matter of the predicates used applying to the individuals referred to.

Post-modernists tend to have a fundamentally different view of language and other representation, a view inherited from structuralism in linguistics. Representations, they say, only ever refer or apply to other representations, so that language (and thought) is literally cut off from the real world. No matter how hard you try to refer to the non-representational, you can’t do it.

If this is correct, then whither philosophy? Well, there’s still the possibility of objective inquiry, but it’s a matter of studying the representations and the relations between them—the system of “signs.” A sign is made up of a “signifier” and a “signified”: e.g. the word “horse” is a signifier, and signifies the concept horse (and never, as we analytics would often have it, real horses.) Now this pursuit—semiotics, or semiology—has its limits, though it’s not as limited as you might think, since post-modernists tend to radically expand the domain of things that count as representations (e.g. to include all artifacts). Moreover, some even suggest that semiotics is not objective, anyway. So in post-modernist circles there is a shift toward what I would call aesthetic aspects of representation. Philosophy becomes after all an art-form, where presentation is as important (maybe more so) than representation. The point becomes to be playful, to fill one’s writings with double-meanings, puns, scare-quotes, irony, metaphors, capitalizations, and so on. For instance, in a post-modernist’s hands, the first sentence of this paragraph might be:

If this is “correct,” then w(h)ither Philosophy?

Baudrillard is entirely typical in this regard:

The form of my language is almost more important than what I have to say within it. Language has to be synchronous with the fragmentary nature of reality. With its viral, fractal quality, that’s the essence of the thing! It’s not a question of ideas – there are already too many ideas!”

This quote is from Philosophers, a book of photo-portraits by Steve Pyke, accompanied by each philosopher’s answer to the question: “What does philosophy mean to you?” Baudrillard did not answer the question directly, and instead asked one of his English-speaking commentators to provide a suitable quote from his writings. Look up “synchronous” and “fractal” in dictionary, and it seems clear these words are chosen for some effect other than their actual,
or even metaphorical, meanings. (“Viral,” on the other hand, at least makes sense as a metaphor applied to language, as in Kripke’s metaphor of the “contagion of meaning.”)

*Philosophers* also contains the answer from an analytic philosopher, Sir Geoffrey Warnock, to the question, “What does philosophy mean to you?”:

To be clear-headed rather than confused; lucid rather than obscure; rational rather than otherwise; sure of things than is justifiable by argument or evidence. That is worth trying for.

Post-modernists reject this sort of answer as a quaint artifact from the “modernist” past, a demand for clarity and objectivity that cannot (now) be had. We analytics, modernist throwbacks that we are, should bear this in mind when we examine Baudrillard’s writings, and particularly since we usually are reading in translation.

II. Simulacra and Simulation

The first chapter of *S&S*, “The Precession of Simulacra” begins:

*The simulacrum is never what hides the truth—it is truth that hides the fact that there is none.*

*Ecclesiastes*

If once we were able to view the Borges fable in which the cartographers of the Empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up covering the territory exactly (the decline of the Empire witnesses the fraying of this map, little by little, and fall into ruins, though some shreds are still discernible in the deserts—the metaphysical beauty of this ruined abstraction testifying to a pride equal to the Empire and rotting like a carcass, returning to the substance of the soil, a bit as the double ends by being confused with the real through aging)—as the most beautiful allegory of simulation, this fable has now come full circle for us, and possesses nothing but the discrete charm of second-order simulacra.

Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. 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. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—*precession of simulacra*—that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. *The desert of the real itself.*

In fact, even inverted, Borge’s fable is unusable. Only the allegory of the Empire, perhaps, remains. Because it is with this same imperialism that present-day simulators attempt to make the real, all of the real, coincide with their models of simulation. But it is no longer a question of either maps or territories. Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference, between one and the other, that constituted the charm of the abstraction. Because it is difference that constitutes the poetry of the map and the charm of the territory, the magic of the concept and the charm of the real. This imaginary of representation, which simultaneously culminates in and is engulfed by the cartographer’s mad project of the ideal coextensivity of map and territory, disappears in the simulation whose operation is nuclear and genetic, no longer at all specular or discursive. It is all of metaphysics that is lost. No more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept. No more imaginary coextensivity: it is genetic miniaturization that is the dimension of simulation. The real is produced from miniaturized cells, from matrices, and memory banks, models of control—and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these. It no longer needs to be rational, because it is no longer measures itself against either ideal or negative instance. It is no longer anything but operational. In fact, it is no longer real the real, because no imaginary envelopes it anymore. It is a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatorial models in a hyperspace without atmosphere.
By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials—worse: with their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs, a material more malleable than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalences, to all binary oppositions, to all combinatorial algebra. It is no longer a question of imitition, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have the chance to produce itself—such is the vital function of the model in a system of death, or rather of anticipated resurrection, that no longer even gives the event of death a chance. A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and for the simulated generation of differences.

Baudrillard apparently asserts that the post-modern condition is one of “simulation,” where reality has disappeared altogether. This historical process has been one of “precession of simulacra”: representation gives way to simulation, through the production and reproduction of images. He writes (p6):

These would be the successive phases of the image:

- it is the reflection of a profound reality.
- it masks and denatures a profound reality.
- it masks the absence of a profound reality.
- it has no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.

In the first case, the image is a good appearance—representation is of the sacramental order [i.e. not a simulacrum]. In the second, it is an evil appearance—it is of the order of malice. In the third, it plays at being an appearance—it is of the order of sorcery. In the fourth, it is no longer in the order of appearances, but of simulation.

Note that Baudrillard is here reacting to, amongst other things, Marxist thought. Marx’s historical materialism postulated the necessity of the overthrow of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat. Baudrillard claims instead that a different historical process is playing out—and the crucial factor is not the mode of production, but the mode of reproduction. Moreover, whereas Marx claimed that the masses suffered from false consciousness, Baudrillard writes that the masses are post-modernist, understanding that all consciousness is “false,” and hungrily consuming one “false” image after another.

The historical nature of these processes suggests that it is only in the post-modernist world—from the late twentieth century on—that truth and objectivity is impossible. (This might explain why post-modernists don’t depart radically from analytic philosophers on the topic of the history of philosophy.) In Baudrillard’s terms, it seems there once was a real world to be investigated. It used to be that our images were more or less true representations of reality, then they became false representations, then they became the false appearances of representation, then finally (in the condition of simulation) they no longer even appear to be representations.

However you take this (for instance, whether he’s saying that there’s no reality, or only that our images bear no relation to it), it’s pretty radical stuff. Of course, he might not really mean what he says. If we interpret him literally, the obvious question to ask is why we should believe a word of it. So perhaps it’s better to take him as presenting a cautionary tale of some sort—that we in some meaningful sense have lost touch with reality. But then, all the obscure prose seems just unnecessary.

In any case, there seem to be many connections between Baudrillard’s work and The Matrix, not least the question of whether or not The Matrix is a simulation of the sort envisaged. A “programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes,” even sounds like the Matrix.

The connections become more obvious when we consider Baudrillard’s update of Marx’s theory of
exchange value. Symbolic exchange is the key notion for Baudrillard, and ties in with the precession of simulacra. There is an unequal symbolic exchange when one object is a mere copy of an original (say a reproduction of a Queen Anne chair). In the next order of simulacra, the exchange is equal (say, mass-produced chairs which are only copies of each other). In the current order (simulation), objects are conceived in terms of equal-exchange reproducibility (chairs, of course, were not conceived in this way), in binary computer code. Again, The Matrix looks like a simulation, conceived entirely in computer code.

Moreover, Baudrillard is very taken with the miniaturization of code by means of the binary language of the computer chip; all those ones and zeroes. A common post-modernist theme is deconstruction, very roughly the process of exposing metaphysical problems, and especially contradictions, in theoretical language. If we understand “contradiction” in a loose sense, it is the assertion of both what is true and what is false, and it is common in logic to denote truth by the numeral “1,” falsehood by the numeral “0.” So perhaps we are to think that the Matrix necessarily contains the seeds of its own de(con)struction? After all, Neo is “the One,” and the name “Cypher” has amongst its meanings, “zero.”

Finally, S&S has a short disquisition (“On Nihilism”) on the necessity for terrorism and violence, and this may provide a justification of sorts for the mayhem that occurs in the movie. Even the electricity of human bodies turns up, by analogy, in Baudrillard’s In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities, but here human beings are the “ground,” absorbing the “energy” of images.

So at first blush, The Matrix is based heavily upon Baudrillard’s work, and seems relatively faithful to it. But let’s not leap to a conclusion. Post-modernists are not the only ones interested in the notion of simulation, which has some important applications in analytic philosophy. I’ll mention just two. First, we want to know when to attribute intentionality to other individuals. For instance, there’s a famous debate involving Alan Turing, John Searle and others, about the simulation of intelligence. (Searle argues against Turing’s claim that a digital computer that successfully simulates intelligence thereby counts as intelligent.) Second, global simulation of the sort we see in THE MATRIX seems to be a logical, physical and epistemic possibility, an observation that raises a host of well-known philosophical bugbears.

On the first issue, I am in the Turing camp, holding roughly that the best explanation of the ability of a computer to simulate the linguistic output of a normal human would be that the computer is intelligent. We might say that simulated intelligence can be real intelligence. 3Can we interpret Baudrillard as saying the same thing about reality: that simulated reality is real reality? Hardly. It seems better to interpret him as saying that simulation is not simulated reality, because it doesn’t even have the appearance of reality.

III. Misunderstandings?

So it seems that Baudrillard has some grounds for his complaint noted above. The Matrix is more faithful to traditional philosophical puzzles concerning global simulation, since there seems to be a profound reality outside the Matrix, and the folks in the Matrix falsely take their simulated condition to be reality. Of course, it might turn out when the trilogy is completed that even this appearance of reality is itself a simulation, but that’s not the point. THE MATRIX still has it that humans in or out of the Matrix can conceptualize the distinction between reality and mere simulation.

4Baudrillard has recently expanded his criticism in this direction:

What we have here is essentially the same misunderstanding as with the simulation artists in New York in the 80s. These people take the hypothesis of the virtual as a fact and carry it over to visible realms. But the primary characteristic of this universe lies precisely in the inability to use categories of the real to speak about it.

(Reported translation from an interview in Le Nouvel Observateur.)

There is a reflexive paradox here, of course. Baudrillard’s criticism seems to presuppose that we can conceptualize and communicate the difference between mere simulation and reality—else
could the movie could not give this impression—which flatly contradicts the claim that we can’t. From an analytic point of view, this alone shows Baudrillard (when taken literally) to be as mistaken as it’s possible to be, and drives us towards non-literal interpretations.

One possibility is that the Wachowski brothers were trying to be faithful to Baudrillard, but relied on a relatively superficial reading of S&S. After all, the “desert of the real” remark is one that Baudrillard immediately disavows, because it embraces the “impossible” conceptualization. The Wachowskis are easily forgiven for such an oversight—the first two paragraphs of S&S are actually pretty clear, but from then on, Baudrillard descends into murky prose that, if I may be permitted a complaint, has taken me weeks of my life to try to sort out. Frankly, if I was making a movie instead of writing this article, I simply wouldn’t bother.

At one point the script required Morpheus to tell Neo “You have been living inside Baudrillard’s vision, inside the map, not the territory.” (draft dated April 8, 1996) This again ignores Baudrillard’s disavowal, and the horrid misspelling tends to undermine any claim of serious scholarship.

The wonderful sequences involving the taste of food (Cypher and steak; Mouse, Tastee Wheat and chicken) seem in one sense to support Baudrillard’s view of the post-modern condition. Steak, Tastee Wheat and chicken no longer exist. Moreover, the humans raised in the Matrix never did taste the real thing, as Switch points out, so “the taste of Tastee Wheat” in the Matrix condition might for all anyone knows be entirely invented by the machines.

But, once again, this seems more in line with analytic concerns than with Baudrillard’s, since it presupposes the conceptual line between the real and the merely simulated. Indeed, consider the real import of the chicken remark. Mouse says:

“Take chicken, for example. Maybe they couldn’t figure out what to make chicken taste like, which is why chicken tastes like everything.”

The Wachowski brothers are here playfully evoking the old saw that in our world chicken tastes like everything, prompting us to wonder about the possibility of all this being a global simulation, again presupposing that we can conceptualize the difference.

The whole sequence also evokes the very analytic debate over how phenomenal content of a mental state (e.g. the subjective “what it’s like” of a certain taste), is to be specified. According to some views at least, even if the Matrix produces in a human being a mental state that plays the complete functional role of the taste of Tastee Wheat, that fact does not guarantee that the state has the appropriate phenomenal content.

IV. Paradigm of post-modernism and intellectual poseur?

There is a real irony in Baudrillard’s focus on simulation. When I first opened S&S and saw the epigraph attributed to Ecclesiastes, I smelled a rat, and a few minute’s investigation confirmed my suspicion that the attribution was false. Then as I read on, I presumed that Baudrillard was trying to give a concrete example of simulation. But I remain puzzled. On the one hand, it seems a remarkably poor attempt at simulation—no one even remotely familiar with Ecclesiastes would be taken in by it. But on the other hand, to judge from the plethora of Baudrillard pages on the World Wide Web, many of Baudrillard’s readers seem either to be fooled by the false attribution, or else not to care one way or the other. And maybe that’s Baudrillard’s point: that to the “masses,” Ecclesiastes is no more and no less than the author of the epigraph. More on this presently.

What makes the debate over “simulated intelligence” particularly interesting is that it’s possible in principle for a digital computer, suitably programmed, to simulate the linguistic output of a typical human being. But in practice it’s very difficult, in part because there are just so many things that might come out of a typical human being’s mouth.
There are, however, atypical linguistic outputs that are much easier to simulate. An early, eerily real-sounding program was Weizenbaum’s ELIZA, which simulated a Rogerian psychotherapist.

(Rogerians take a passive approach, which mostly involves taking what the patient has just said, and turning it into a question.) Another domain of discourse which seems ripe for simulation is professional sports-talk, which seems to consist largely in repeating the same clichés over and over, with 20/20 hindsight.

Curiously, the linguistic output of post-modernists likewise seems relatively easy to simulate, with reasonably successful actual attempts by both human beings and computers. For instance, NYU physicist Alan Sokal submitted a parody of post-modernist writing entitled “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity,” to the journal Social Text, only to have it published in their Spring 96 issue.

Analytic philosophers and their sympathizers reacted with glee, of course. Once the dust had settled a bit, most of the commentary on the Sokal affair focused, in high dudgeon, on the nature of the editors’ error. The editors admitted to not understanding a good deal of the article—the science and math parts—and to being underwhelmed by most of what they did understand—the post-modern parts. The diagnosis, then, has been that the editors inappropriately included the article on grounds unconnected to its actual content—political grounds, and particularly the fact that Sokal was an established scientist.

But perhaps the editors conceded error too readily. The fact that editors are unmoved by a view is by itself no reason not to publish it. And analytic philosophy is hardly free from political constraints—modern edited collections (and the relevant issue of Social Text was a themed collection) often contain articles chosen because they present a certain point of view, rather than on sheer philosophical merit. Moreover, it doesn’t seem unreasonable for non-technical journal to assume that an expert in science and math would take care to maintain accuracy in that respect.

But this line of defense assumes modernist standards of evaluation. Why not just reject them outright, as post-modernism would see to require? Baudrillard, for one, can embrace Sokal’s simulation positively, as analogous to his own “Ecclesiastes” effort. After all, for Baudrillard, a simulation cannot be a parody, because parody is impossible.

But post-modernists needn’t go to this extreme. The key question here is why modernists like Sokal think the success of the simulation is damaging to post-modernism. In a follow-up article, Sokal explains why and how he wrote the parodying article, and the implication is that he knows he wrote a parody because he intended it as such.

But (literal) post-modernists have a ready response: Sokal’s reasoning commits the intentional fallacy of supposing that a text means just what its author intended it to mean. Even analytic philosophers tend to accept that works of fiction can and do differ in meaning from that intended by the author, and the more post-modern you are, the less distinction you see between fiction and non-fiction. Indeed, post-modernists tend to reject the notion of a privileged interpretation, holding that if a text can be read a certain way, then that’s one of its many meanings. So a natural post-modernist response to Sokal is that he inadvertently produced a serious work. (One needn’t claim that it’s a good serious work.)

The same can be said of the many amusing computer simulations to be found on the World Wide Web. Clicking on the link just footnoted will produce a new “post-modern” essay in a matter of seconds. But the mere fact that it’s generated “randomly” doesn’t by itself settle whether or not it can be read meaningfully. Consider an accidental “work” of fiction—suppose it turned out that Of Mice and Men was, by a massive coincidence, actually produced by an army of monkeys typing away. This might diminish it in some ways, but the text could still be engaged with meaningfully.
Speaking of simulating the post-modern, it’s time for a confession: the epigraph at the head of this essay is not to be found in the works of Baudrillard. The first paragraph is my own attempted parody (for fun I included bits of the real Ecclesiastes), and the second is an excerpt from a computer simulation of Baudrillard, chosen only because it mentions films. Now I don’t claim either is a good simulation, but as with Baudrillard’s “Ecclesiastes” ruse, I bet they would fool a lot of people.

What should a modernist make of this? We needn’t press the point about authorial intentions applied to non-fiction. Instead, we should ask, what is the best explanation of relative ease of simulation of linguistic output? In the Rogerian psychotherapist and professional sports cases, it’s obvious: there is a very limited range of possible outputs. But that can’t fully explain the post-modern case. I suggest that we get the rest of the explanation by agreeing with the post-modernist. The post-modernist ought to regard simulated post-modernism as real post-modernism, and so should we. But, armed with the modernist distinction between mere simulated philosophy and real philosophy, we ought to conclude that post-modernism is (in large part) a simulacrum, in Baudrillard’s sense: either it masks the absence of a profound reality, or else it has no relation to any reality whatever, and is its own pure simulacrum. Take your pick.

The irony, then, is that the most promising exemplar of Baudrillard’s literal claims about the post-modern condition is post-modernism itself! Of course, I don’t expect that to concern him. But in case any post-modernists are concerned, I propose a sort of test-in-reverse. Take a term or expression that appears frequently in post-modernist writing, say “fetishize.” Despite my efforts, I don’t know what this term means, and if Sokal and others are right, it might not mean anything at all. Here’s the test: try to simulate an analytic philosopher, and explain what the term in question means, without resorting to (a) quotation, (b) paraphrase in terms equally obscure, or (c) non-literal language. The failure of the test for a decent number of post-modern expressions would provide some evidence of post-modernists being mere simulators of philosophy—intellectual poseurs.

V. The meaning of The Matrix

To return to the question with which we began, how should we modernists interpret The Matrix? As a more or less faithful homage to Baudrillard, or as a misguided homage? Or neither? I have already argued that the philosophical issues The Matrix plays with are better interpreted as traditional, modernist, analytic ones, than as post-modernist ones. But even if I’m wrong about that, it clearly can be interpreted that way, and by post-modernist lights, that’s enough. So perhaps it’s true that The Matrix is a paradigm of post-modernism, and not an intellectual poseur, and also true that The Matrix is an intellectual poseur, and not a paradigm of post-modernism.

A third interpretation is that The Matrix is solidly modernist—not a paradigm of post-modernism, and not (at least, not in this respect) an intellectual poseur. But what then are we to make of the apparent references to Baudrillard and his work? I suggest that they are playful, ironic references. In real life, S&S is a slim volume, in the movie it is rather thick. But not because it has more content—if anything, it has less content than in real life. The last chapter, “On Nihilism” has only the first page, and the rest of the book is hollowed out, a hiding place for contraband software. And what is the purpose of the software? It is an opiate for the masses. The message is either that S&S is only good for hiding stuff in, or, at a deeper layer of subtlety, that the real S&S is a simulation, in reality only containing brain-numbing escapism. Neo really escapes—rescued from the whole business by waking up to the cold, sobering reality. S&S represents the post-modern condition, a condition only post-modernists themselves are trapped in, a condition where everyone is a drone or an addict (where’s that red pill when you need it?); and, as far as the rest of us are concerned, entirely expendable. Of course, this is likely not what the Wachowski brothers intended. If it were, then their reported insistence that Keanu Reeves read S&S, in preparation for the role, borders on cruelty.
To the extent that the Matrix corresponds to Baudrillard’s vision of our condition, *The Matrix* rejects the pessimistic notion that the real has no chance. Just as escape from the Matrix is possible, so we could escape from the post-modernist condition of simulation, even were it our present lot. And that’s nice to know.

Richard Hanley

**Footnotes**


2. There’s no doubt that post-modernists vary in the extent to which the criticisms can be leveled at them. But there’s also no doubt that Baudrillard is representative of what we analytics regard as the worst of it.

3. The language of the debate is apt to mislead here. Every simulation captures some features of the thing simulated, otherwise it would not do as a simulation. An analytic philosopher will say (a) that any simulation is as real as anything else (i.e. if it exists, it exists), (b) calling something a simulation only means that some of the features it appears to have are not really had, and (c) if the computer really is intelligent, then its intelligence is *not* simulated, but real. The Turing camp would say that a computer can *demonstrate* real intelligence by simulating a human being.

4. This seems so, even if in fact it’s simulation “all the way down”: say, if somehow there is only layer upon layer of simulations, in an infinite regress. The denizens of the Matrix still seem able to conceptualize that which is *not* a simulation.

5. See Sokal’s website: http://www.physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal/ , for the article, and a large collection of responses and commentaries.


7. E.g. http://www.elsewhere.org/cgi-bin/postmodern


9. Again, there are post-modernists and post-modernists. The reluctance to really bite the bullet over the Sokal affair suggests to me that at least a lot of American proponents are really more modernist than they like to let on.