



12

Digital Virtualities and Sober Realities

There is thunder outside. In an old mansion, hacker and IT expert Neo meets the charismatic rebel Morpheus for the first time. The latter announces that he will tell Neo the truth about the world.

“What truth?” asks Neo.

“That you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else, you were born into bondage. Born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. A prison for your mind.”

Neo looks at Morpheus in amazement. What Morpheus is about to reveal to him in the next few minutes of the film will radically change his life. The world in which Neo thought he lived until now, Morpheus explains to him, is nothing more than an illusion, a world simulated by software programs to which his brain is connected.

In reality his body—like millions of other bodies—lies in a kind of digital honeycomb, where he is being kept alive via tubes tubes. Instead of having real sensory perception, he has only electronically simulated perceptions that make him believe he is living in New York at the end of the twentieth century. The computer program called “Matrix” was invented by machines so in order to keep humans at bay while using their body heat as energy supply.

“Welcome to the desert of the real!” Morpheus says to Neo and begins to show him that the real world is, in fact, a grey, gloomy desert.

The question of how we can know whether what we see, feel, hear, smell, and taste is, in fact, real is not new. Starting with René Descartes and his question of whether it is possible that a malicious demon is only faking our

perceptions, there have repeatedly been thought experiments on this question.¹ In modern philosophy, Hilary Putnam developed the thought experiment of the “brain-in-a-vat.”² It is the idea of a brain floating in a tank of nutrient fluids and connected to electrodes making the person belonging to that brain believe she is living together with its body in a real world. It can be assumed that the filmmakers, who studied philosophy themselves, knew about this thought experiment and were inspired by it for their film. The background for this thought experiment is the critique of realism and objectivity, led by postmodern philosophers and cultural critics, first in France and since the 1980s also in the USA. Starting from Derrida’s attack on logocentrism, many postmodern theorists believed to be responsible for the patriarchy and a despotic universalism that does not take into account the differences of individuals, reality was replaced by the idea of narratives, which not only significantly influence and shape our perception of the world but also allow nothing beyond. Postmodernism rejects the Enlightenment and its idea of an autonomous self that is able and should attempt to distinguish true from false. Based on the findings of the South American biologist Humberto Maturana,³ the movement of so-called radical constructivism emerged additionally. This develops the thesis that reality is not accessible to us and is merely constructed in our brain.

The new possibilities of constructing so-called virtual realities with the help of digital technologies play a special role in the ideology of postmodernism. The decisive argument in this context is that there is no categorical difference between supposedly real and virtual experiences. Just as we can move through a virtual building with VR (Virtual Reality) glasses,⁴ we construct what we call reality based on sensory stimuli.

“What is real?” Morpheus asks Neo. “How do you define ‘real’? If you are talking about what you can feel, smell, taste and see, then real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain.” But Morpheus is only trying to provoke Neo. He knows the value of real knowledge, which is why he tries to convince others to step outside the Matrix in order to find out what is really real.

¹ Sci-fi author Stanisław Lem was also convinced that in the future various techniques would be used to connect people to so-called “phantasmatic machines” that would convey the world to people in the form of electrical impulses. Cf. Lem (2013).

² Cf. Putnam (1981).

³ Maturana (1988).

⁴ Virtual reality glasses use sophisticated optics to fool the eyes and brain into thinking they are in a world of their own.

“You know, I know this steak doesn’t exist,” the traitor Cypher says to Agent Smith as he sits across from him in a fancy restaurant in the Matrix. “I know that when I put it in my mouth, the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious. After nine years, you know what I realize?” Cypher puts a large piece of meat in his mouth and breathes a sigh of relief. “Ignorance is bliss!”

At that moment, we hear a harpist in the restaurant sliding her fingers down the strings. Quasi-spherical and angelic sounds can be heard. This can be read as a kind of sarcastic commentary, since there is nothing angelic neither about Cypher (whose name leads us right to Lucifer, the devil) nor his concept of bliss. On the contrary. The film makes it quite clear at this point that those who know reality and willfully turn away from it are devilish sinners.

As realists, we assume that there is indeed a categorical difference between the “virtual” and the everyday reality that determines the human form of life. This categorical difference cannot be made to disappear even by the most elaborate technologies of virtual reality. It is part of a person’s rationality to distinguish between reality and virtuality, even in the digital age. Anyone who does not succeed in doing so must ultimately be diagnosed with psychosis.

In one of the last scenes of the first part of the Matrix trilogy, Neo fights in a rundown subway shaft against his arch-enemy Agent Smith, a computer program whose task is to protect the machine system and to ensure that people continue to stay in their “honeycombs” and live their virtual lives in the virtual world of the Matrix. At first, it does not look good for Neo. He is brutally knocked down by Agent Smith, who consistently addresses him as “Mr Anderson,” Neo’s original name he has in the Matrix, and held down on the track while a subway train is approaching. In the last moment, however, Neo pulls himself together and gets up again. “My name is Neo!” he says proudly just seconds before Smith himself is run over.

By reclaiming his name, Neo is asserting his claim to a real, not virtual life. He is not merely a function of a fascist machine power but a human being who wants to take responsibility for a (real) life in which his (real) actions also have (real) consequences and allow him (real) freedom.

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