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Identity Dissolutions in the Context of the Reality-Dream-Hyperreality Relationship in *Vanilla Sky*, *The Truman Show* and *The Matrix*

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the way we interpret the relationship established between reality, dreams and hyper-reality in three cinematic productions that tackle this subject: *Vanilla Sky*, *The Truman Show*, and *The Matrix*. In this context, we are discussing both the plots of the movie scripts and the role of the spectator in negotiating hierarchies of reality at work in the afore mentioned movies. Also, the author was interested in stressing the challenges brought by these types of fictions, working with meanings of the real, the surreal, the realer than real.

KEYWORDS

Reality; Illusion; Lucid Dreaming; *Vanilla Sky*; *The Truman Show*; *The Matrix*.

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Humankind cannot bear very much
reality.

T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

We live and we feel just as well, in both our dreams and in our awakesness, and we are both one and the other. It is a privilege for man to dream and to be aware that he is dreaming, one we have not rightfully put to use so far. A dream is a life that, added to the rest of our existence, becomes what we call human life. In the state of awakesness, the dreams get lost little by little; it is hard to tell when a man's awakesness begins.¹

Georg Cristoph Lichtenberg

In Buddhism, *pure Reality* is blocked by a veil, and this veil is the maya. The origin of this concept, in the writings of Mircea Eliade,² representing illusion, non-reality, non-being, is closely connected with the idea of change, of "a cosmic order alteration." The maya is, of course, destruction, but, at an even subtler level, conversion of the conversion. In the *Rig Veda* it designates demonic alternations, magical transformations, the trickster attribute of this Evil Genius. But the maya also assumes attributes of divine creativity, in the context



that, later on, “the cosmos itself will become, in the *Vedana*, an illusory transformation (...), a system of changes that lack reality,” where the *maya* will be “assimilated with ignorance (*avidya*) and compared with dream,” in the sense that “the multi-shaped realities of the exterior world are just as illusory as the contents of the dream.”³ In the context in which the “leitmotif” of the Hindu way of thinking is the “highlighting of pain as a law of existence” and “a sine qua non condition of liberation,” any form of awakening also involves the annulment of the plurality of objects that belong to the perverted web of masked fabrication into the authentic, the real. It also “hides and reveals at the same time,” playing the role of a frame, of an encasement that, once out-moded, accounts for leveling and even hierarchizing reality.

The seemingly positive hypostasis of the veil appears in myths that approach illusion as an attribute of art. In *Scurtă istorie a umbrei (A Brief History of Shadows)*, Victor Ieronim Stoichiță recounts a paradigmatic legend told by Pliny the Elder in *Natural History*, a text that ambitiously certifies the fact that “painting was born when man’s shadow was inscribed in lines for the very first time”: a girl, in love with a young man that was about to leave his home town and, implicitly, exist no more as a reality perceivable draws the contour of her lover’s shadow, projected by the light of a candle, on a wall. This “birth in the negative” of the brushwork will forever ensure its status as an artwork that “appeared under the sign of an absence/ a presence (the absence of the body, the presence of its projection),” thus justifying its affiliation and, furthermore, its complicity in future contemplations and developments circumscribed in this dichotomous relation. Stoichiță adds, practically, “art history is checkpointed by the dialectics of this bond.”⁴ I would further notice how

the act of representation does not have the will to be, in the context of this legend, “a result of a direct observation of the human body, but the interception of the projection of this body.”⁵ What the girl kept was not so much an image that was accessible to the unloving eye, but a symbolic substitute of the one she cared for.

“The representation of a representation (an image of the shadow), the first painting was nothing more than the copy of a copy.” Beyond the Platonist views of Pliny’s text, we discover, in relation to the topic, a continuance: the girl wanted to keep her absent lover’s shadow in order to weave a limitless illusory story around her. We once again find ourselves within the orbit of a vicious circle, circumscribed in the limits of illusion and desire. The compromise of this trajectory lies, most often, in a fall back on image. An image amplified by its “meta-destructive” structure. Having the thing itself turned into a simple representation, we also are suggested that it is missing from the reality we are referring to. What is to happen if, as we dispose of the custom of certitudes, we conclude that, in fact, the thing itself, the thing that became an image, never belonged to us, or, even worse, never even existed, in the way we saw it or we experienced it? A most terminologically and eloquently adequate solution to turn to is the correlation of our doubtful situation suspended between the verbs of desire and those of frustration with the area fraught by the full solemnity of dangerous phantasms and, also, by the sarcasm of irreconcilable paradoxes, of simulation. The idea of the other reality, fabricated in the logic of a compensatory mechanism, is best high-lighted in the dream domain.

The endless possibilities that today’s copy culture, characterized (according to Hillel Schwartz) by a fascination with doubles and exact reproductions has to offer are powered not only by the phantasms of an



unwanted twinning, but also by the actual hypostasis of a doppelganger in oneiric contexts. The other (like in Jorge Luis Borges' story, "Borges and I") lives more intensely, more authentically, closer to the essence. Heraclitus asked himself "for what purpose does everyone have their own particular universe in their dreams, whereas all people have a common one in reality when awake,"⁶ and his question remains one of those issues that survives, through highlighting, in all the stages of philosophical thinking. Albert Béguin wrote in *The Romantic Soul and Dream*, an ample essay dealing with the oneiric fascination characterizing German romantic poetry, that "every age of human thinking could be defined, with enough profoundness, through the relationships established between the state of dreaming and that of awakening,"⁷ finding that the manner in which we can access these two different realities, often incapable to tell them apart, is both food for thought and a subject of anxiety referring to our limits in pinpointing reality. "Without a doubt," Béguin notes, "it is puzzling how we can live with two parallel existences, one hidden in the other, without being able to reach a perfect correspondence between them". So it happens that "sooner or later, with more or less clarity, continuity, and particularly haste," every being ends up asking himself with a rather unsettling insistence: "am I the one dreaming?"⁸. This dilemma is at stake in countless fables of dreamers and dreamed ones. This is, or so the Swiss explorer believes, "one of the three or four questions that you are not free to answer satisfyingly to feed your abstract thinking solely, departing from the problems of existence and elementary angst". Béguin explains his affirmation through the idea that "these questions are not asked by us, and not rely on our autonomous thinking, but seem rather as if they have been thrown at us by an undefined reality, one

broader than us, which we depend on to such an extent that we simply cannot refuse this dialog without condemning ourselves to a diminished reality." Whichever answer should we provide for the name dilemma, it will be reducing to an option regarding inner potential, knowledge and a choice: whether to ignore it or dwell on it.

As mentioned before this paper focuses on the way we interpret the net of relationships woven between reality, dreams, and hyper-reality in three cinematic productions that tackle this subject: *Vanilla Sky*, *The Truman Show* and *The Matrix*. In this context, we are discussing both the plots of the movie scripts and the role of the spectator in dealing with the multi-surfaced concept of reality they offer. We also are interested in the challenges brought by these types of fictions, whose central obsession keeps resurfacing in contemporary poetry, publicity and in the lyrics of music hits even, as a constant cultural reference. In *The Matrix*, in *Vanilla Sky* and, later, at the level of the underlying premises, in *Inception*, dream is the most adequate transformative ground for understanding the limits and the challenges associated with the hyper-real regime. Artists use lucid dreaming as a mimicry of postmodern reality. We have gotten used to quoting, to false optimism or authentic dread, in recurrent lines such as: *I am living the dream, It feels like a dream*. Dream is also a metaphor for man's ignorance in mistaking it for reality, while it is, in fact, a web of illusions. An example is Peter Weimar's film, *The Truman Show*.

This gliding between dream and reality also involves the transgression of certain limitations imposed by our very means of accessing mundane reality, thus framing the act of dreaming as one would symbolically frame a painting within a painting. In this respect, our interpretation intersects the observations of Victor Ieronim Stoichiță



regarding the function of the frame as a dividing line between image and all that is non-image. As Stoichiță says, “that which was framed is a signified world, standing in front of what seems to be outside of the frame.”⁹ In these films, the idea of a frame is an abstract one: we know that we are dealing with two realms of existence, but what separates them “is not yet an image and is no longer a simple object of the surrounding space”: it does not belong to the ideal world of image, but “it makes it possible.”¹⁰

The theme of life as a dream, iconic for the baroque period and programmatically rediscovered in Romanticism, is here revived in a profoundly dystopian vein, with the once serene act of dreaming turned into a leitmotif of anti-utopian awareness. The solution that dream is a product of the subconscious is not satisfying, because

Even when introspection or the science of psychology teaches me to follow the mechanism in which the images of dream become intertwined with those of conscious experience, I will still have no reason to feel calm. I can find out the path images follow until the last moment of their infinite journey, but I will always ignore their origin; they did actually speak to me in a language that touches me through its quality and its apparent allusion to something very important, which I feel close to me. But no explanation will ever enlighten me on the nature of this language, or on the truthfulness of these allusions.¹¹

Dream becomes, thus, a constant language of consciousness: “Night dreams and the even more mysterious dreams that follow me throughout the day, so close to the surface that they appear at the slightest shock, here lies an existence whose

permanent and fertile presence manifests itself through other signs.”¹² A common theme is the distant memory activated while dreaming, that “something” acknowledged as coming “from somewhere further than me, from an ancestral memoir or from a realm which is not that of my individual being.” Béguin observes the kinship of these oneiric tropes in the production of mythologies and fairytales, reaching the conclusion that “the collective imagination, in its spontaneous creations and its individual imagination, freed by certain exceptional moments, seem to refer to the same universe.” In other words, “the resulting images have this ability to trigger an emotion in my interior dream, to call it up to surface and to project it on the things that surround me,” generating the feeling that “things cease to be outside of me and, at last called by their true magical name, come to life to enter a new relationship with me.”¹³

The essence of psychoanalysis, in Béguin’s view, is opposite to the essence of romanticism because, while it admits the constant exchange of contents between consciousness and unconsciousness, “the cycle formed by these two halves of our ego is a closed one, of a purely individual nature (even if the survival of some primordial images are added to it).” On the other hand, the romantics “all admit that obscure life is that of continuous communication with another reality, vaster, prior and superior to the individual life.”¹⁴ Psychoanalysis assumes, at the same time, an adjusting role, healing diseases that infect both the mind and the body.

Regardless of this aspect, Romanticism will search for a way to the most unknown realms of the soul in images, even in the most morbid of them. It will do so not out of curiosity, not to purge them and make them more fertile for human life, but to find here the



secret of all that, in time and space, and through other subjective extends us beyond ourselves and makes states,” descending into our- our actual existence a simple point on selves, we unite with that an infinite destiny line. The opposition that separates psychoanalysis from mysticism, and from romanticism, forbids any real understanding of what could not be more to it than a certified case of psychosis.”¹⁵

For the poet and for the reader of poetry, images exist just as they are, but for the psychoanalyst, they are documents and symptoms, “external to the quality and the efficiency of the poem.” Even though modern science overestimates “the quality” of our interior adventures, a “forgetting of our belonging, (...) of the ignorance in which we continue to remain in terms of our true belonging.”¹⁶

Highlighting the considerable importance that all rationalist thinkers of the 18th century bestow on sleep phenomena, Béguin notices that “since around the year 1750, books about dreams and magazines that assign a partial or a regular column to this subject have increased in number,”¹⁷ without there being a psychological discourse to actually certify the importance of the matters. At the same time, he points out the prophetic dream histories and even a trope of this type of dream recurring in both memoirs of the period and modern contexts he invokes.¹⁸ Dream “has an irritating and a somewhat paradoxical attraction: it represents (...) a privileged place of mystery, a gate opening to superstitions, prophecies, dubious metaphysical temptations or, even worse, mystical ones.” Hence, “to reduce it to the proportions of a natural phenomenon, explainable through the same mechanism used to define any other vital manifestation, is, for the philosopher, the ultimate triumph, the supreme test of his sovereign operation.”¹⁹ On the other hand, the romantics discovered that “only just through the dream

part of us that is “more us” than our conscious. According to their perception, the only authentic form of knowledge is “that of the leap into the inner abyss, the tuning of our personal rhythm with the universal rhythm: analogical knowledge of a Real that is not an exterior given,” and use as a proof the thesis that connotes dream as an “im- perfect and blurry form of the conscious in normal state”, caving in to the idea that, honoring the imagination, it will give a positive note to “oneiric scenarios.”

In the context of hyper-reality, dream becomes the equivalent of a space created after the image and likeness of a now revolute reality. The dreamer is a copy of himself and, in the context of speaking about lucid, extensive dreams, which replace an unsatisfying reality, a simulacrum, but also a sign of a present-absent dichotomy, as well as a copy, an image, a fantasy. In *Vanilla Sky*, the lucid dream of David Aames copies an early revolute reality: the oneiric paradise created in accordance to the subject’s unconscious perception and/or personal definition of happiness generates an experience that will seem to last for a few months only. The happiness as a loop of careless day to day perfection is not unlike that depicted in the Romanian fairytale of *Youth Everlasting and Life without End*. David Aames is trapped in a utopia of his own unconscious creation for over 150 physical years, allowing his damaged body to heal and prepare for an advanced surgical procedure. The solution is as ingenious as it is unfocused: only an error makes the ego realize (without accepting and invoking madness or temporary alienation) “the frame” of fiction in which it is captive as if trapped in amber. The film is the Hollywood remake of Alejandro Amenabar’s movie, *Abre los Ojos* (1997). Its narrative plot is



relatively simple. The tragic circumstances of an accident that disfigures David Aames

makes him resort to the “lucid dream” solution in which he would live forever according to expectations he had the day prior to the accident, when he meets Sofia (whose name reminds one of the gnostic concept of wisdom). Even if the two will never get the chance to consume their relationship in real time, David’s induced dream will generate a tragic scenario, with only one way out: David’s option to ending the “harmonious” story played on in this parallel and simulated plan. The impact technology has on the development of this simulated existential plan could be defined as a contribution to depicting that “terminal identity” mentioned by Scott Bukatman.²⁰ His experience in the hyper-real dimension is conditioned by maintaining his body in a latent state (an idea also exploited in *The Matrix Trilogy*). Beyond this, however, despite the pragmatically articulate and technologized environment, that which remains alive is desire, continuing its path unaffected by the flaws originating in the lack of coordination/synchronization between David and the environment that, unknowingly, he rules, building a system of memories as coherent and functional as possible. The main character’s reaction towards his own lack of reality is not one of discouragement, but rather gentleness. He does not establish a distance between himself and what turns out to be an illusion. We could say, paraphrasing the lyrics of T.S. Eliot, that he realizes ecstasy can be real, even though those who experience it have lost their reality.²¹

The problem that arises is that of ethical dimensioning the paradigms these characters represent in what I would call “an ethical” manner. Is this predisposition to contaminate our living experiences with images so clear and eloquent that they are capable of suspending both meaning and

limitation in our own reality? And, if not, can such a parallel moral actually be created in order to support their intrusion?

In *The Postmodern Scene*, Arthur Kroker and David Cook analyze Rene Magritte’s “disembodied eye” as an axiomatic symbol for a society contaminated with media signs. Their immersion infests the “private life” domain, exposing and disjointing it. There is a desiring eye that sees, undresses and judges each and every slice of life. The anxiety of living “under a magnifying glass” implies a histrionic dimension which, tempting as it may be, is yet insufficiently reinforced to become a constant. Jean Baudrillard writes about the reality TV vogue focusing on the case of the Loud family, who, in 1971, became subjects, protagonists, stars in “seven months of non-stop filming, three hundred hours of live coverage, no script or scenario,” circumscribing “the odyssey of a family, their drama, their joys, their adventures, non-stop” as a phenomenon of the “ideology of living.” The effort of “exhuming the real in its basic platitude, in its radical authenticity” is a symptom²² for the hyperreal. The Loud family has been destroyed (or deconstructed) by the invasion of the cameras. They have seen themselves realer than they thought themselves to be and hated the magnified obviousness of their dysfunctionality. Baudrillard regards “the fantasy of filming the Loud family as if the television was not there” and the triumph of the producer who would have then been able to say “They lived as though we were not there,” as even more interesting than a possible answer to the question “what would have happened if the television was not there?”. He also finds this “what if” negotiation “absurd and paradoxical—neither true or false: utopic,” whereas “this ‘as if we were not there’ is equal to ‘as if you were not there’, and “this utopia, this paradox fascinated twenty million viewers, more than any ‘perverse’ pleasure of violating an



intimacy.” The pleasure is not born from the beggar). The moment in experience of uncensored truth. It comes which they meet overlaps from “a sort of frisson of the real or an with a crisis tied to a fantasy

esthetic of the hyper-real, a frisson of vertiginous and phony exactitude, a frisson of simultaneous zooming in and out, of distortion of the scale, of an excessive transparency.” In a reality show “the unimportant is exalted by the camera.” We are made aware of the fact that “this real never existed (but it was ‘as if you were there’), without the distance that makes the outlook space and our profound view (but is ‘more true than the natural’) possible.

In Baudrillard’s opinion, this family “was already hyperreal by the very nature of its selection,” “its statistic perfection” leading to its destruction.²³ Once under the limelight, television did nothing more but investing this family with the stigmata of truth (a cardboard truth nonetheless).

It is that which, at some paroxysmal level tries Peter Weier in his cult movie, *The Truman Show*. Truman, brilliantly played by a complex and versatile Jim Carrey lives in the biggest TV set in the world, an artificial environment that offers him protection (one that generates a form of inexplicable anxiety of which he will only become aware of at the symbolic age of thirty-three). Truman Burbank is the only authentic character in his life. His parents, his wife, his friends, his colleagues are all actors hired to create the permanently broadcasted scenario of Truman’s life. The home he lives in resembles stage props, his whole world-view was swallowed up in an eternal virtual hyper-real repetition. Every gesture and every decision was influenced by the public’s request. Even coincidences were staged, and so were the misfortunes or traumas (the best example in this respect is the death of his father, who had to be removed from the set and who blows up the apparent mundane harmony of Truman’s privileged life when the same actor is hired to impersonate a

about an extra in the set. The dystopian scenario of her inexplicable disappearance (with the fragile motivation of her fake move to the Fiji Islands) becomes an obsession for Truman, one that can only be forgotten if embarking on a trip against the show’s “prescriptions.” Truman has all the symptoms of a being that is satisfied with the environment it is offered, incapable of questioning its limits and resorts. Desire unbalances and turns against this constant stability. Paradoxically, Truman, who is authentic without being authentic (although honest in his choices, he is indirectly manipulated by the staged moves of characters and extras that surround him), offers his viewers the illusion of a reality which they are or might be missing. Baudrillard’s idea of a slogan is “You are not the ones watching TV, it is the TV that is watching you (living)” because “switching from a panoptic surveillance device to a dissuasive system, in which the distinction between passive and active is broken” works completely in the case imagined by Peter Weier. Truman embodies “the next stage of the social relation, ours, which is no longer that of persuasion (publishing era), but that of dissuasion.” Practically, due to this change, “it becomes impossible to find an instance of the model, of the power, of the viewing, of the environment itself” because “there is no more subject, no more focal point, no more center, no periphery: just ‘information’, secret virulence, chain reaction, slow implosion and simulations of spaces where the real effect comes to play.”²⁴ The spectacular itself is gone. Truman’s environment becomes one “indistinguishable, diffuse and diffracted into the real,” and its interference dooms its viewers to similar faith: subdued “not to irruption, pressure, violence and blackmail of the environments and models,



but to their induction, their infiltration, their illegible violence.”²⁵

The ending is set to be a happy one: Truman discovers that his world is a décor and chooses to leave it. The implication that the real world he enters has no more authenticity than the set lingers on, like an echo. The truths are not studio truths, “greenhouse truths,” that is why their guarantees may seem more fragile than a superficial comparison would allow it.

Furthermore, Truman’s life was up to that point, a directed dream based on clues originating in rating numbers or in the director’s notes. In his case too, the female character is the antagonistic guide that sends desperate messages from the reality realm.

The Matrix converges two themes which circumscribe acceptations that the Baudrillardian concept of simulacra both attacks and appropriates: for once we have the human civilization under the threat of the machines and potential existence in a computer based simulation. Thus, is challenges and questions both the notions at stake in *Vanilla Sky* (authentic, unauthentic, imaginary turned real and palpable, the idea of personal truth opposed to historical truth), and the issue of the experiment and the annulment of free will in *The Truman Show*.

Jean Baudrillard,²⁶ famous on account of his pessimistic outlook on the future, has described the way in which imitations or reproductions of reality acquire and stock a greater legitimization, a greater value and power than the originals themselves, resorting, for this purpose, to a term that will follow a glorious (and thus contestable) path: that of hyperreality. In a theoretical determination of the space in which the pre-established distinctions between representation and its original cease to exist, what Baudrillard has in mind is, in fact, the way in which all sorts of commodities suspend

their Marxist use-value content in the favor of an “abstract” sense, closer to the one Saussure gave signs. A mutation that, he will further insist, is in no way devoid of consequences: the most obvious one consists in the ways in which the postmodern condition “is guilty” of erasing all signs that were naturally associated to a referent, creating chaos, confusion and a feeling of creative freedom, not unlike the divine creative energies posit by the maya. A risqué idea, with productive results, nonetheless: it gives way for other speculations that will prove inherent to a complete analysis of the *ingrate* age of postmodernism.

The aforementioned mutation, along with the net of obsessions surrounding the myths of our postindustrial society, becomes the main crucible of new inter-conceptual connections. The insertion of technological supports makes the splitting between the facts of reality and those of non-reality more efficient, justifying mirrored images of simulacra in their poetic and political hypostasis.

In “The Precession of Simulacra,” Baudrillard establishes a few of the “essential” facts for understanding the efficiency of a new constitutive reality characterizing the postmodern existence: “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..” With things having fulfilled an evolutionary course, the simulation no longer designated a coexistence of maps and territories like in Borges’s fable. We are faced with “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal”. In these conditions, “the territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it,” because it is “the map that precedes the territory, (...) that engenders the territory (...)” in such a manner that “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 persist here the real and the imaginary, and there in the deserts that are no longer leaving room only for the those of the Empire, but ours. The desert of orbital recurrence of models the real itself.”²⁷

“The raw material” of the hyperreality concept/frame is represented by paradigms or simulations that have lost their capacity to relate to reality and whose survival is ensured by series and series of replicas lacking any historical meaning. This break from the past or, should we say, *this invalidation of chronology* will justify the observations on the new nihilism and the renowned acceptions that Nietzsche’s view upon the “eternal recursion” acquires on the unstable post-modernist terrain (an idea also found in the writings of Gilles Deleuze). Simulations, in Baudrillard’s view, provoke objectivity, truth, and reality in one way solely: by faking their existence. The reality re-produced within the limits of the hyperreal seems more real, more tangible and more credible than reality itself. Simulacra’s discourse is violent and virulent, it involves an imminent awakening, in the turmoil of a reality lacking foundations other than those which eventually turned out to be illusions. “In this passing from a space that no longer bends the real, nor the truth, the era of the simulation opens, through a liquidation of all that is referential – worse: through their artificial revival in the sign systems.”²⁸ What is taking place is in fact, a “replacement of the real with the signs of the real” or, in other words, “an operation of dissuasion of any real process by his operational double (...) that offers all the signs of the real, short circuiting all of its mishaps.” In these conditions, Baudrillard believes, the real will not get the chance to take place, for “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.” All that is left is a “a hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between

and for the simulated generation of differences.”²⁹

An attempt to further write about *The Matrix* involves skimming a bibliography both diverse and problematic. The trilogy is a correlative of all the interests that exceed the borders of the academic niche (sic!) and enter the sub-layers of underground cultures, of conspiracy theories and mass philosophy. The “academic” success that the Wachowski brothers’ trilogy has had also residues in the tenderer way in which it mounts key postmodernism concepts, such as intertextuality and meta-textuality. The allegory of the machines that get their energy from human bodies and humans “narratively” trapped in a past historical time, now fictional, a reference point year before the apocalypse, doubled, at what I would call the level of discourse, by an abundance of quotes and references that color and give shape to the idea of the real, feed the curiosity of researchers in many fields and further explains the movie’s ever growing success and the way it intruded even academic curricula. One could say that the logic of iconic references such as Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*,³⁰ Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz* (the film’s chromatic inevitably reminds of the Emerald City), Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulation and Simulacra*, all very handy, very transparent, countless inventoried and commented in Matrix Dictionaries and Compediums, is, in the context in which we find them inscribed like carvings, formulas, key phrases of the “awakened,” “conscious” characters, mere attempts of recovering the signs of a natural human inclination towards escapism, the kind that fiction solely has enough resources to offer. Recruited out of the panoply of universal culture that the new world order brackets into oblivion, they become potential



apocryphal gospels, explanations meant to outline the post-human philosophy of the “real” present or, if one is strictly referring to *The Matrix*, references for the *trompe l’oeil* that is the city of Zion as a narrative assuming the function of pure Reality, an island of the authentic in a sea of fake history fabricated through artificial intelligence means.

I see this tension between the real – more real – true real in the Matrix trilogy similar to what Victor Ieronim Stoichiță designates as “meta-painting,” a technique that proliferated in the 16th and 17th centuries and which consists of the simultaneous presence, in the same tableau, of two indirectly linked scenes, whose overlapping cannot be ignored. The viewer is put in the position of opting for one of the representations to the detriment of the other (he will either choose to see as real the crease in the *trompe l’oeil*, the curtain or the window, or the actual narrative unfolding beyond these borders). The *trompe l’oeil* thus invests the spectator with the possibility of experiencing deception at a more profound level than the eye allows: he becomes witness to the unfolding of a ranking of Reality (conventionally perceived as such, since, regardless of the adjustment efforts of the matter in which the *trompe l’oeil* technique is engaged, the educated eye is truly aware that what it sees is nothing but a figment, a part of the fictional order). Preoccupied by “the role played by the inter-textual mechanisms in the emergence of still life as an independent genre,” Stoichiță insists on the oxymoron encapsulated in the phrase “still life,” questioning the paradox: “How can nature, whose main quality is life, be dead?”³¹ This example originates in Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*, where we can read a whole chapter on tableaus that approached minor themes, vulgar ones, painted by a certain Piraikos. Pliny describes these works as

“extremely pleasant,” and stresses their fame as residing on their “deceptive, illusionary” character, which he regards as a source of delight for the eye. After all, the programs responsible for the reconstruction of reality that maintains the human batteries alive generates the same type of pleasure/ delight filtering the most derisory, dirty, miserable realities.” “Pliny’s Passage,” the art historian concludes, “confirms the birth of still life as a necessity based on the contrast between the unimportant, futile, character of the subject and the illusionary value of the representation” able to generate a “conflicting nucleus.” (*It asked for a lesser mind*, says the Architect in *The Matrix*, referring to the final produce of computer program generating the 1999 simulated world. We are suggested that, in its initial versions, based on utopic norms, the Matrix did not apply to human nature – a situation that *The Truman Show* exploits in the context of late 20th-century cult-cinema). Still life, as a new painting genre, appears “starting with three fundamental facts, connected to different motivations, although convergent: the illusionary representation (*trompe l’oeil*); the idea of the waste of things; the meta-painting character of the representation.”³² Another example is Sosos of Pergamon’s mosaic, presenting in a well-mastered *trompe l’oeil* of the leftovers of a feast. “The Mosaic,” as Victor Ieronim Stoichiță observes, “must obviously trick the viewer, making him believe that the scraps (fish bones, spitted seeds, etc.) were left by guests.” The same illusionary character is found in the still lives mentioned by Philostratus in his *Images*, that had, this time “a fictive painting frame (crease, hole in the wall).”³³ This type of illusionism also works on the level of filmic narrative. *The Matrix* is iconic, thus, for the movie “fashion,” in which the conventional-reality-of-a-character is, metaphorically speaking, just the painting carved/dug in a wall.



“The placement of still life in a crease reality being that of the re- is a topos of the genre,” explained “through verse still life: and this hap- the fact that the crease offers a limited tri- pens in *The Matrix* too.

dimensional space, in which objects can be placed, forever referencing to the surface of the representation.” In other words, “images function as an opening in the wall,” and the niche “becomes the sole compromise in reconciling the surface of representation with a more profound impression. Using the wall behind the niche as reference point, the objects appear to be flooding the real space.”³⁴ The manner of combining two levels of space in the interior of a single representation through the “creases” and objects that are painted as if placed in them, in niches or frames, implies, in the opinion of Victor Ieronim Stoichiță, “an obvious illusionism.” Referring for example to the *Adoration of the Magi*, a 16th century painting by Englebert Nassau, he remarks the way in which the “still life” framework, contextually turned tri-dimensional, since “the central image belongs to a space of a totally different quality: the lost horizon of the landscape evokes an unlimited depth.” He argues this option by opposing the frame and the painting: if the first belongs to a world we rather call our own, to the mundane, to the earthly pleasures, the image appears as an “opening to another reality.” A specialized version of these *images within an image*, no strangers to comparisons to chinese boxes or matrioska dolls, is represented by “the images behind the image”: a painting painted on the reverse of the painting itself becomes a subversive means to create a counter-image and to supplement the sense that the central one posits. They can thus only be understood “by acknowledging their oppositional role in relation to the image on the back of the painting. They form the reverse of the image, the reverse of the painting. They offer a different representation, an anti-picture, an anti-painting.”³⁵

When the diptych was closed, the portrait became invisible, the only pictorial

When the characters are not connected to the program that allows them to enter the simulation, they become invisible, unseen for the viewer/spectator, and they only exist in the Zion. This permanent double shifting and double contextualization of characters allows the spectator to detect the actual fictional character of the world in general. The Zion is a realm in which the visceral predominates. It comes to redeem the disturbed existence, mystified by the “maya veil” that it places on the eyes of the machine slaves, the immense simulation in which they live and move “as if” or “as it were” the year 1999. There won’t be any disasters in 1999: they already happened in a time when history was unmystified. Artificial Intelligence will always be an hypothesis close to Science Fiction even more than empiric realizations, and this, according to Nick Bostrom’s works that seriously address the simulation theory and even consider it a provable truth, it is the first hint that we are indeed living in a unrealistic regime, in a computerized program, not at all different from games like Sims or Second Life.

In Zion, bodies are alive, triumphal, hyper-sexualized. The tribal allure parties appear as programmed realizations of the pre-eminence of reality, veridical to the carnality, to a tangible connection between mind and body, in the face of the illusion which allows both connection and control. Their purpose is also ritualistic: living people, freed from the guardianship of the machines, form a community, and explore the limits of this freedom. This interface comes as a rebellion in the face of vanity: in Zion, death is, by default, real, bloody, gorey even. Reprising the parallelism with the reality-fiction game in meta-pictorial contexts, these descriptions and raids into



death remind, on a narrative level, of the purpose of skulls and other such metaphors of the “vanitas” as seen on the back of the diptychs and triptychs Stoichiță mentions in his work on metapainting. The post-apocalyptic space of Zion thus plays the role “of absolute negativity of objects,” an inverse projection of the sumptuous shiny world, that the ones captive in simulation can access. “The skull,” as Victor Ieronim Stoichiță writes, “is the portrait’s negative.” In these representations, the trompe l’oeil, the metapictorial, the vanitas structures problematize the image – anti-image dichotomy, as well as the report between what is credited as being real or rejected as illusionary, are converged.”

Beyond the narration’s organizational problems, the film is a true composing rack for the informed preoccupations with the obsession of the double, the copy and the chorus. This is how the character Smith is analyzed. Double “monster,” doppelganger, a program created to annihilate the self-conscious aberration that is Neo, evil twin, Smith has attributes that surpass the question of the copy and the double.³⁶ The enigma solved by the Oracle makes one automatically think of the taboo theme of the inseparable twins, “the ones who merge, with common flesh and a just as common death.”³⁷

Another scene that is relevant for the way in which *The Matrix* script resolves the problem of the copy is the scene that shows Neo meeting the Architect. We are faced here with a copy of the former real world hypostasis generated by the Artificial Intelligence devices, but not in terms of telling, but in terms of a museal showing, an unsettling exhibition: the walls of the key-room are filled with TV portraits of Neo, suggesting that the scene of this meeting took place in countless versions and channeling the myth of the Eternal Return. On an imaginary and meta-physical level, we are

faced with the meanings that the old world generated by the Machine gains as an “art of memory”: the year 1999, seen as a climax of human evolution, is built according to many classification criteria, and the room with screens is a form of relique, not unlike those Curiosity Cabinets of the 17th century. We are referring to a closed series (in the words of Stoichiță): to the collection/the gathering of Neos as an exercise of both exhibiting a memory, but also as a metaphorical representation of the closed system that made it possible. The Architect explains this spectacle of “the same” through the specific nature of all the failures he keeps track of: each of these Neos failed in his own way. The “simulated” insectarium, the collection of “vivant paintings” that it portrays captures reactions that imply the logic of a selection, of certain combinations³⁸ of this system of images, of this fictional product that *The Matrix* actually is. In this scene, we are dealing with both a contextual relation between the exhibits of a collection (these Neos, system failures, inherent anomalies), and an inter-textual one, one of a self-consciousness of the image system, that is *The Matrix*, as a fictional product.

The solutions of the real – lucid or induced dream dichotomies are paradoxical, tangible only at the simulated level. Mentioning the maya (the concept of illusion in Hinduism) –, in the beginning of this paper is not coincidental. While some researchers are interested in the problem of cyberpunk and dystopian cronotopes in *The Matrix*, correlating them to the “catastrophic” postmodern imaginary, others exploit its links to religious beliefs preoccupied by the question of reality. Frances Flannery-Dailey and Rachel Wagner published in the fifth number of the *Religion and Film Journal*, in 2001, an article entitled “Wake up! Gnosticism and Buddhism in *The Matrix*,” being mainly interested in the interstition zones between the philosophical substrate of the



Wachowski brothers' 1999 trilogy and a original movie, *Abre los Ojos*. sum of religious traditions, the most prom- Its meaning is once again inent ones being gnostic Christianity and magnified by the presence

Buddhism, "that like the movie question humanity's fundamental problem in terms of ignorance and enlightenment." "Wake up" is the phrase that encapsulates the film's plot: we are dealing with a character confronted with the problem of inadequacy to the material world. He intuits that the world as he knows it is damaged, wrong, a mere simulation generated by a program created in the near future, dominated by the Artificial Intelligence. The material reality as a means of enslavement of humanity by perpetuating ignorance under the form of illusionary perception called "the matrix," a matrix that perfectly overleaps the multi-layered significations of the gnostic reality concept, on one hand, and the Buddhist one, on the other. The Christian and Buddhist gnosis is based on initiation scenarios that imply the existence of a saving being, a guide or bodhisattva that enters the prison that is this world with the sole purpose to share freeing knowledge to the captive ones, helping who ever understands to escape. In the movie, this function is Neo's, an anagram for The One, The Chosen One. "Due to the ignorance," as Frances Flannery-Dailey and Rachel Wagner write, "people see the material world as the ultimate reality, being able to wake up from this illusionary dream with the help of a guide that takes on the function of teaching them about their true nature."³⁹ The beginning of the film is marked by the insistence of the mysterious message that appears on Neo's computer screen (Neo, the one, is Thomas Anderson's alias, a name that, the two suggest, is a reference to the gospel of Thomas on one hand, to the idea of Son of Man, justifying thus the intrusion of Christian and gnostic mythology elements in the plot of the film).

"Open your eyes" is a key phrase in *Vanilla Sky* too, being the title of Amenabar's

of Sofia, whose name clearly refers to the female principle of knowledge, according to the gnostic gospels. We can say that beyond the hyper-real (lucid dream) realization claims of an accomplished real world, this film also takes on the subjects of freedom from illusion and access to an authentic truth, whose facts had been distorted.

In *The World as a Labyrinth*, Gustav Rene Hocke talks about the "unusual myths" that inspire the imagination of the materialists. The 17th century discovered an Antiquity of strangeness and myths like those presented in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or in Horus Apollo's *Hieroglyphica*, the result of this focus shift being that "the myth loses its archetype character, of archetypal sign, to become an ideal abstract model, in which (...) contemporary problems can be embroidered." The equivocal figures of the mythologies (featuring rather obscure characters of the Old Testament included) become favored and end up "being preferred by the late romantic literatures also."⁴⁰ Hocke motivates this interest towards the sources of the extraordinary, the fabulous, the irrational that these rewritten narrations (advertised as "books with pictures of the abnormal," "based on images of the irrational"),⁴¹ highlighting the contribution that they bring as images ("as metaphorical structures that can be filled (...) like a cosmic cabinet of curiosities with wondrous disguises, like unreal intersection points between space and time, between pause and movement"). For the mannerists, myth means defeat, annihilation, despair. Its background is, as Hocke suggests, that of Monsu Desidorio's painting of the Trojan horse: an Antiquity of collapse, an Antiquity "mythically drowned," where figures of the paria, the non-adapted and the animal symbols of wickedness solely survive. "The sculptural metaphors,"



the man-statue motif are themes that obsessed the 18th century, by virtue of the fascination with the game established by the natural-artificial dichotomy in the context of the curiosity cabinets, whose vogue marked the cultural landscape of the era. Descartes described the human body as a statue or an earthly machine (horologe),⁴² seeing it as a “mimetic device”⁴³ of the soul⁴⁴ (a notion that he implied without actually naming it) or a poetic extension. In the context that, as Victor Ieronim Stoichiță observes, “The Enlightenment Age was sooner inclined to destroy the myths than to cultivate them,”⁴⁵ the direct interest for Pygmalion’s figure is a point of tension, translated with the arrogance (“intellectual defiance,” as Stoichiță calls it) of moving the act of creating life from God to man. The artist who gives life to his creation is gaining, thus, a paradigmatic value for what humans are able to make. The narrative processing of this fantasy possesses a value marked by the *hybris*: man can measure up to God with a price that he is not prepared to pay. In the end, the Platonic conception concerning the copy lacking a referent as a hypostasis of the monstrous and the harmful still stands under these auspices. I would tie these elements to the conclusion of my paper, stating that the dissolution of the subject in the fabricated is the ultimate consequence of the image of simulation. From here on, it is either the desert of cyberspace that begins, or some different form of handling the facts of the multiplicative reality. The texts and the pretexts of this restless challenge remain, without a doubt, open. Looking back to the static poses of the absent image, we consider the distinction that Roland Barthes made between film and photography adequate, postulating that “as in the real world, the filmic world is sustained by the presumption that experience will continue to run constantly, in the same way,” whereas “photography is futureless.”⁴⁶

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Notes

¹ Cf. Albert Béguin, *Sufletul romantic și visul*, București, Univers, 1998.

² Mircea Eliade, *Istoria credințelor și ideilor religioase*, București, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1981.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 265.

⁴ Victor Ieronim Stoichiță, *Scurtă istorie a umbrei*, București, Humanitas, 2008, p. 5.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

⁶ “For Heraclitus, the difference between waking and sleeping served as a very powerful illustration to the way most people live. Most people live like they are asleep. When you dream, no one else can see what you see. You experience things in your own mind. This is not the way the waking world is. In the waking world, everyone experiences the same reality. The truth is common to all – not in the sense that all know it, but in the sense that all experience and all should be able to recognize the truth. But the many do not recognize the things that they experience, just like a waking man forgets what he did while he was sleeping. Even so, many live as if they are asleep – they turn aside to their own world. Sleep also serves as an intermediate step between life and death. Life and death are not properly called contraries on Heraclitus’ picture. Heraclitus uses this intermediate state to prove that life and death are two ends of one continuum – a person can be in-between life and death. It appears that this claim plays a role in his harmony of opposites doctrine”, cf. <http://www.heraclitusfragments.com/categories/waking.html>

⁷ Albert Béguin, *op. cit.*, p. 21.



⁸ *Ibidem.*

⁹ Stoichiță, *Scurtă istorie*, p. 47.

¹⁰ *Ibidem.*

¹¹ Albert Béguin, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

¹² *Ibidem.*

¹³ *Ibidem.*, p. 22.

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*, pp. 30-31.

¹⁵ *Ibidem.*, p. 31.

¹⁶ *Ibidem.*

¹⁷ *Ibidem.*, p. 35

¹⁸ “[N]ot only in the pietist circles, but also in the most enlightened ones, people loved stories about hunches coming true, the ones about deadly accidents or blows of fate announced through prophetic dreams, and sleep walking was interesting for the most arant sceptics, the way anything slightly magical and occult was appealing to them.” Cf. Béguin, *op. cit.*, 1998, p. 35.

¹⁹ Albert Béguin, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

²⁰ See Bukatman, Scott, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*, Duke University Press, 1993.

²¹ It’s not that I’m afraid of being hurt again:/ Nothing again can either hurt or heal./ I have thought at moments that the ecstasy is real/ Although those who experience it may have no reality. (T.S. Eliot, excerpt from “The Cocktail Party”).

²² Jean Baudrillard, *Simulation and Simulacra*, University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 4

²³ *Ibidem.*, p. 25.

²⁴ *Ibidem.*, p.26.

²⁵ *Ibidem.*, p. 27.

²⁶ Baudrillard rejects the link between his philosophical system and what the Wachowski brothers’ trilogy is all about in his interview with Aude Lancelin, “The Matrix Decoded: Le Nouvel Observateur Interview With Jean Baudrillard.” [*Le Nouvel Observateur*: “Your reflections on reality and the virtual are some of the key references used by the makers of *The Matrix*. The first episode

explicitly referred to you as the viewer clearly saw the cover of *Simulacra and Simulation*. Were you surprised by this?”

Jean Baudrillard: “Certainly there have been misinterpretations, which is why I have been hesitant until now to speak about *The Matrix*. The staff of the Wachowski brothers contacted me at various times following the release of the first episode in order to get me involved with the following ones, but this wasn’t really conceivable (laughter). Basically, a similar misunderstanding occurred in the 1980s when New York-based Simulationist artists contacted me. They took the hypothesis of the virtual for an irrefutable fact and transformed it into a visible phantasm. But it is precisely that we can no longer employ categories of the real in order to discuss the characteristics of the virtual.”²⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulation and Simulacra*.

²⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulation and Simulacra*, p. 3 [“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 combinatory algebra. 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, 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 shortcircuits 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.”]

²⁹ Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulation and Simulacra*, University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 4

³⁰ The most obvious reference is the recurrence of Trinity’s line: Follow the White Rabbit, but also the scene in which Morpheus offers the solution to the Matrix enigma by turning to the choosing between the two pills (they can be interpreted as present hypostatizes of the two springs from Hell: Lethe and Mnemosyne).

³¹ Victor Ieronim Stoichiță, *Instaurarea tabloului. Metapictura în zorii Timpurilor Moderne*, Bucharest, Meridiane Publishing, 1999.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 33.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ “Inseparable twins – *Terata didyama*, *Dopplemissgeburten* – have a long history as monsters, from the Latin *monstrum*, divine portent. Twofold Peruvian skeletons have been dated to 7000 B.C.; glyphs of conjoined figures were drawn throughout Copper Age Europe as images of natural abundance or as deities with the power of two. Crossing over the archaic world, however, double-bodied oracles have spoken less of Nature than of the unnatural. Companionate, heavenly twins turn ugly once they are bound together on earth. In our era, they have become archetypes of the unreasonable facsimile: images of ourselves that arouse consternation; omens of the perils of relentless copying.” cf. Hillel Schwartz, *The Culture of the Copy. Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimiles*, New York, Zone Books, 2014, p. 43.

³⁷ Schwartz, *op. cit.*, p. 43. Twins there are who will not vanish, whose flesh is your flesh, whose death is your death.

³⁸ “The classification criteria can suffer modifications, but cannot disappear without destroying the collection as it is. Whatever these criteria are, they generate a serial game in which every element reports to the whole that contains and defines it”, Stoichiță, *Instaurarea tabloului*, p. 127.

³⁹ Flannery-Dailey, Frances, Wagner, Rachel “Wake up! Gnosticism and Buddhism in The Matrix,” *Journal of Religion and Film*, No. 5/2001 [In *The Matrix*, a 1999 film by the Wachowski brothers, a black-clad computer hacker known as Neo falls asleep in front of his computer. A mysterious message appears on the screen: “Wake up, Neo.” This succinct phrase encapsulates the plot of the film, as Neo struggles with the problem of being imprisoned in a “material” world that is actually a computer simulation program created in the distant future by Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) as a means of enslaving humanity, by perpetuating ignorance in the form of an illusory perception called “the matrix.” In part, the film crafts its ultimate view of reality by alluding to numerous religious traditions that advance the idea that the fundamental problem which humanity faces is ignorance and the solution is knowledge or awakening. Two religious traditions on which the film draws heavily are Gnostic Christianity and Buddhism. Although these traditions differ in important ways, they agree in maintaining that the problem of ignorance can be solved through an individual’s reorientation of perspective concerning the material realm. Gnostic Christianity and Buddhism also both envision a guide who helps those still trapped in the limiting world of illusion, a Gnostic redeemer figure or a bodhisattva, who willingly enters that world in order to share



liberating knowledge, facilitating escape for anyone able to understand. In the film, this figure is Neo, whose name is also an anagram for “the One.”]

⁴⁰ *Ibidem.*

⁴¹ See pp. 164-165.

⁴² “I presume the body is nothing more than a statue or an machine made of earth that God created on purpose, just to make it as similar to us as possible; in this way not only did he give it the exterior color and shape of all our limbs, but he placed all the pieces inside to make it walk, eat, breathe, and in the end mimic all our functions that can be imagined as coming from matter and that solely depend on the disposition of organs. We see clocks, artificial fountains, mills and other such machines that, being man made, always have the force to move

on their own and in many ways: and I think I won’t be able to imagine” cf. Victor Ieronim Stoichiță, *Efectul Pygmalion. De la Ovidiu la Hitchcock*, Iași, Polirom Publishing, 2011, p. 153, my translation.

⁴³ Victor Ieronim Stoichiță, *Efectul Pygmalion. De la Ovidiu la Hitchcock*, Iași, Polirom Publishing, 2011, p. 152.

⁴⁴ Stoichiță interprets this dichotomy on which the “Cartesian model of the man-half statue, half clock” model is based as an “extreme extension of ancient conceptions regarding the relation between soul and body, that are still in harmony with the old iconographic and literary glosses over the motif of the simulacra,” *Efectul Pygmalion*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2011 p. 153.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem.*

⁴⁶ Barthes, Roland, *Camera obscură*, Cluj Napoca, Ideea Publishing, 2005, p. 81.