

# **BULLET-TIME, TWO BIG BANGS, & TWO BAD SEQUELS**

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## THE END

Everything that has a beginning, has an end. — movie poster for *Matrix Revolutions*

To all *Matrix* cultists and critics: *The Matrix* trilogy reached its end and the two sequels were bad, very bad, perhaps even brilliantly bad. But, to simply praise them or pan them it is to miss the philosophical point! That the sequels are bad is perhaps less an indictment of the Wachowskis intellectual cinema than it is an indication of the world's intellectual climate. The bad sequels reflect the existential conditions of postmodern culture, both good and bad, and very bad.

Perhaps we should not be surprised that the sequels are inferior to “the original” *Matrix* film, for never has humanity been so obsessed with reproduction of all things past, all the while yearning for a return to authenticity and spirituality. Over \$300 million dollars was lavished on the production of two movies, both offering stunning technological accomplishments in cinematography, and yet were unable to imagine any themes that had not been filmed before. The technologies of reproduction are being deployed on a global scale, creating a culture of copies in which we cannot imagine any sequels that are original. Apparently, what ever comes after modernity, it will have already happened before.

To illustrate this point requires not that we retrace the labyrinth of plotlines in the trilogy, or decode every line uttered by the heroes and villains. Rather, we can simply critique the key visual icons in the film and correlate those with a few lines of philosophical dialogue. The key icons are the openings of the three films, Bullet-time, rooms of white light (the construct, the architect, the subway), dark sunglasses, and the ending of *Revolutions*. The lines of dialogue are “the desert of the real” of Morpheus, “causality” by the Merovingian, and “existence without purpose” by Agent Smith. As we connect icon with idea, we will see that the trilogy echoes the dominant dystopian themes of digital culture while confronting the expanding universe by collapsing into the void between blind causality and blind faith. Bullet-time is more than digital wizardry, for the slow-motion special effect is symbolic of the desperate moves being deployed around the world in seeking resist the ever-accelerating territories of the hyperreal. In the end, the Wachowski brothers took the blue pill in trying to overcome the Big Bang with Bullet-time.

## BIG BANG 1 – THE BEGINNING OF EVERYTHING

There is very little doubt that the Universe as we know it did emerge from a superhot, super dense state: the Big Bang. — John Gribben

In the opening scenes of *The Matrix*, we were shown vertical columns of numbers across the screen, green and glowing against the black background, ever-changing and cascading like a waterfall down a computer monitor. The various numeric fonts suggest many languages around the world, from roman numerals to pictographs. The film title — THE MATRIX — emerged from the cascading numbers. In the next scene, we see a flashing green cursor, succeeded by even more columns of ever-changing green numbers, though they are now pulsing as they flood down the screen in a digital downpour. Slowly the camera zooms in on a single digit — a zero — and viewers are propelled through the zero, to the realm of pure virtuality, into the simulated world of “the matrix.”

In this vivid opening scenario, *The Matrix* reinterpreted a longstanding dystopian icon — the vision of a great flood, beneath (or beyond) which the world is destroyed or disappears. The Wachowski brothers situated *The Matrix* on the trajectory of utopian and dystopian theory than spans the millennia, from Plato's Atlantis and passing through many dystopian films of the twentieth century. But, *The Matrix* trilogy is more than mere digital dystopia, for the first film and the bad sequels are embodiments of how most of humanity has dealt with the two Big Bangs.

That this is the case is indicated in the opening scenes of *Matrix Reloaded*. Again, we were shown a digital flood, beyond which the real world had disappeared. After being thrust through the “O” in “Reloaded,” we see fractal patterns shaped like complex networks of spiral galaxies, all receding away from us at accelerating velocity, toward a single point. When I first saw *Reloaded*, I was enchanted by the fractal patterns and overlooked the connection to the Big Bang. This oversight was also due to the

fact that after the galaxies receded away, the green digits transformed into spinning gears and rotating cogs, not unlike the famed opening scene in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926) in which images of gears and cogs illustrated the mechanized power of the industrial utopia.

The flood metaphor is appropriate, for the real philosophical issue is representation overwhelming reality, the void between image and existence, and the Big Bang meeting Bullet-time. In the openings for *The Matrix* and *Matrix Reloaded*, we passed through a zero and the letter "O", both metaphors for the void that exists between pure representation and pure reality, between of the world as it seems and the world as it is. The void is slim, but it runs very deep, and Wachowskis seem to sense this in various ways in the films. Passing through the zero and the "O" took viewers into the void, that void between the virtual matrix and the empirical real world. Or, it may be that the ephemeral nature of virtuality is itself the void, the seeming absence of matter in the pure presence that is electronic representation, be it on television or in cyberspace. There is only one book in the three films and it is Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), which, when opened by Neo, is shown to be hollowed out to contain contraband computer disks. Of course, it is Baudrillard's theory of simulation and the "hyperreal" that is metaphorically dramatized in *The Matrix*. As we will see, Baudrillard's hyperreal is a postmodern version of the Big Bang, the existential and intellectual condition upon which *Revolutions* collapsed into the void.

In the opening scenes of *Matrix Revolutions*, we pass through, not a zero or O, but rather through the bottom arc of the "U" in "Revolutions." Why are we thrust through the U and not the O as before? One guess might be suggested by the imagery that appeared after we passed through the arc of the U. Upon entering the glowing green of digital bits, we suddenly see a cosmic explosion in orange-yellowish patterns of light, looking very much like an exploding universe, with the emerging spiral-fractal patterns suggesting galaxies expanding outward. The explosion only lasts a brief few seconds. My immediate response to myself was: "Wow, the Big Bang!" After seeing the film a second time (mainly to see the beginning and ending again), the only plausible interpretation of the imagery is the Big Bang, and this is reinforced in the conclusion of the film, and the opening of *Reloaded*. Perhaps the U stands for "the universe," or is the symbol for "you," as in *your* origin and fate in the universe of the Big Bang.

According to the theory of the Big Bang, sometime around 15 billion years ago the Universe began an extremely rapid and massive phase of expansion, apparently from a single point to the vast cosmos that we know today (Gribben 2000, 98-111). Cosmologists know the universe is expanding because of the "redshift" in the light waves given off by the galaxies as they move away from our telescopes. If the galaxies were moving toward the telescopes, the light waves would be in a "blueshift." The redshift is not random, for it is directly proportional to the galaxy's distance away from us. As Stephen Hawking stated, "the further away a galaxy is, the faster it is moving away" (1988, 41).

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, cosmologists had little clue to the size of the universe. The telescopes could not look beyond the stars of the Milky Way, the known universe at the time. Using the Hooker telescope (the largest in the world during the 1920s) at Mt. Wilson in California, astronomer Edwin Hubble began to realize that there were several galaxies beyond the Milky Way and that they were moving away from each other. The theory of the Big Bang began with Hubble's discoveries in the 1920s and 1930s. As telescopes improved and computers emerged to aid scientists, the Big Bang has been confirmed and size of the known universe has amplified by many orders of magnitude. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Hawking estimated the known universe to contain at least 100 billion galaxies, each with 100 billion stars (1988, 38). Our own Milky Way has almost 200 billion stars, and is 100,000 light years across. The scale of distances in the known universe is so vast it is almost incomprehensible, reaching billions of light years across (one light year equals 300,000 km/second).

It would easy to say that our solar system is insignificant in the universe. However, there is another way to imagine our place in the universe, one that is both poetic and appropriate for the existential conditions of our hyper-mediated culture, as symbolized in *Reloaded*.

Near the end of *Reloaded*, Morpheus and Neo are on the quest to find "the source" inside the matrix. The Keymaker has given Neo a key to enter a special door. Upon unlocking the door, Neo is engulfed

by bright light, literally disappearing into the brightness, which then quickly receded into a single point of light in the vast cosmos of deep space. As we gaze upon this stretch of deep space, it too receded away from us very quickly, precisely as our visual perspective passed through a pixelated computer or TV screen. Conceptually, we have passed, backwards in a sense, into the room of the Architect. The scene of deep space is now present on a curvilinear wall of identical screens, perhaps suggesting the curvilinear borders of the expanding universe. Each galaxy was but a point of light, effectively reduced to a single pixel on the screens.

We could think of the universe as existing in that virtual realm beyond the screens, but so vast we are only capable of representing it via the screens. Outer space represented in cyberspace — the only other infinite and expanding realm capable of representing the expanding universe. The universe of 100 billion galaxies represented as light pixels glowing on a vast computer screen, with location and brightness indicated by the strings of 1s and 0s in the computer. As a galaxy, the Milky Way is a pixel, among billions of pixels. Our sun is one of the 200 billion pixels within the pixel of the Milky Way. Thus, our Earth is basking in the glow of a pixel, within a pixel, among billions of pixels, all existing in an ever-expanding cyberspace and represented on the computer screen.

Should this correlation seem silly or strange? After all, human understanding of the universe comes from telescopes connected to computers, upon which cosmologists map the universe. Without the increasing power of the electronic computer and the transparent screen, the scientific understanding of the universe would most likely be much less. As computers can hold evermore cyberspace, they can map evermore of the universe. Edwin Hubble first discovered the expanding universe in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the same era when the first images were being transmitted on a electronic screen to create television. Surely, computers have origins in electricity and radio technology, but it was the television screen that first signaled the emergence of significant power for the electronic representation of reality. Naturally, the first video game was set in outer space, but it was played in cyberspace. “Space War” was created in 1962 at MIT and was played crude on a pixelated screen, attached to an \$8 million dollar mainframe used to calculate missile trajectories. It spread from MIT to computer labs at other universities via Arpanet, the forerunner of the internet. The roots of the video game influence on *The Matrix* trilogy do run very deep and are far from trivial.

It is important to notice I said that cyberspace is “expanding.” The representation of the universe in cyberspace is not pixels expanding in cyberspace, but rather cyberspace expanding and spreading the pixels as it expands. According to Big Bang theorists, the galaxies are not expanding in space, but rather space is expanding and it is taking the galaxies along. As space expands, the galaxies recede from all the other galaxies. Everything is receding from everything (Gribben 100-1). The cyberspace of the universe is expanding and the pixels are spreading with it; as the pixels expand, they recede from each other. In other words, the universe is receding from our representations of it. If the universe is all of reality as we know it, then virtually all of reality is receding from representation, with the void expanding as the distance between pixels expand. Such are the existential conditions in *Reloaded* and *Revolutions*. (Imagined this way, Marshall McLuhan’s electronic global village may collapse space and time to offer instant connectivity, but the void between points may still be expanding).

## **BIG BANG 2 – THE SIMULATION OF EVERYTHING**

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 ... — Jean Baudrillard

If reality is receding from representation, then this is quite similar to the hyperreality theorized by Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation*, the hollowed book possessed by Neo in *The Matrix*. Morpheus was the hacker-philosopher who explained the conditions of the hyperreal to Neo. Before the explanation, Morpheus offered Neo the choice of the “blue pill” or “red pill.” If Neo swallowed the blue pill, he would wake up in his apartment, return to the life he has known, and not remember meeting

Trinity or Morpheus. However, if he swallowed the red pill, he would discover the matrix, as it really was, however painful that discovery may be. In other words, the blue pill represented “ignorance is bliss”, while the red pill meant “the truth hurts.” However, the conclusion to *Revolutions* suggested that the red pill is more like a redshift, with the discovery that reality and truth are moving ever further away. Even the light Neo sees at the end of *Revolutions* seemed to be slightly tinted with orangeish/reddish color.

In *The Matrix*, after Neo took the red pill and was liberated from the pod, Morpheus related the story of the matrix. The simulated world inside the matrix masked the fact that the “real world” had been destroyed in an apocalyptic battle with artificial intelligence. Morpheus said to Neo:

What is real? How do you define real? (...) This is the world you know, the world as it was at the end of the 20th century. It exists now only as part of a neural interactive simulation that we call the matrix. You've been living in a dream world, Neo. Welcome to the desert of the real.

As Morpheus spoke, he pushed the button on a remote control to activate a television, a Fifties-style set encased in a wooden shell, with the brand name “Deep Image.” The images described by Morpheus played on the TV screen for Neo. The images for the “dream world” were of the typical modern metropolis, gleaming skyscrapers and flowing highways, all simulated inside the matrix. The images for the “desert of the real” were of a dead and corroded metropolis, with Morpheus and Neo now surrounded by a dark and rocky desertscape. The realm of the matrix and the realm of the destroyed reality were separated by a Deep Image television, surely suggesting a new era for representation and reality.

If the first Big Bang was the beginning of everything, then the second Big Bang was the simulation of everything.

Humans have long been fascinated with copying or simulating things from the past, as illustrated by much of Renaissance architecture, which sought to reproduce the buildings and styles of Ancient Greece. The 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago was a world’s fair and a vast simulation of neoclassical architecture (itself a copy), offering a European model of city planning and building that influenced the design of many American cities well into the twentieth century — copies of copies of copies. With the invention of motion pictures and television, the ability to simulate became more ephemeral and virtual, which Walt Disney took into three-dimensional hyperreality at Disneyland. Disney’s theme park was merely the extension of movies and television into reality, from virtual to real, or at least the simulation of the real (as first represented on television). Digital wizards fascinated by virtual reality inside a computer seem to have overlooked that virtual reality has already been built in reality — Disneyland and Las Vegas, real virtualities, the capitol cities of the hyperreal.

The essential technologies of the hyperreal are screens, computers, networks, architecture, and theme parks. The models that once guided mass production in factories are now objects of mass reproduction in the electronic media, with authenticity and originality having long disappeared beyond the horizons of simulation. It is as if we are driving down the highway toward the world of simulation, and authenticity can only be seen in the rearview mirror, disappearing beyond the horizons behind us. The information superhighway is heading across the desert of the real, straight in Las Vegas and Disneyland.

Baudrillard viewed Disneyland as the utopian (at least for its creators and visitors) expression of the new hyperreality, the order of pure simulation, more real than real, more true than true (1994, 108). As the purely imaginary world of America, Disneyland conceals the fact that the “real” is no longer authentically real. The surrounding “real world” is comprised of multiple layers of simulacra born of models and mass production. Disneyland rescues the reality principle, by functioning as a “cover” for the fact that the reality surrounding Disneyland is also bound in models and simulations. Baudrillard wrote:

Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the “real” country, all of “real” America that is Disneyland. (...) Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all

of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation (1994, 12-13).

For Baudrillard, Disneyland encapsulates all the entanglements of the postmodern world, where the real and the fictional are no longer dualities, but rather cloned models in an endless series of reproduction. The law of the old machine has been supplanted by the code of the new media. The hyperreality of the postmodern world is brimming with multiple layers of simulacra — copies absent originals — each reliant upon the others as they replicate, like a virus, in a world of endless symbolic consumption and simulated individuality. In Baudrillard's eyes, the standardized generic human has been replaced by the digitalized genetic human, whose freedom is mere simulation under cybernetic control, diffused across the spectral borders of the global village. The map (media) and territory (reality) are now indistinguishable, except in “the desert of the real,” where the fraying edges of the maps appear in the emptiness of our natural and cultural deserts. In seeking to dramatize these existential conditions, *The Matrix* fulfilled these conditions!

Though *The Matrix* had philosophical depth (Irwin 2002), it was mostly *non-original*, for all the themes in the high fashion hacker film were mere derivatives of previous cinematic dystopias. The essential themes of the digital dystopia are surveillance, simulation, the lost (or disappearing) real world, and domination by artificial intelligence, from which a few heroes seek a desperate exit — all with origins in Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* (1965), the first postmodern digital dystopian film. The themes and imagery in *Alphaville* have been copied and recast in numerous films, including *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick 1968), *Colossus the Forbin Project* (Joseph Sargent, 1971), *THX-1138* (George Lucas, 1971), *Westworld* (Michael Crichton, 1973), *Tron* (Steve Lisberger, 1982), *Blade Runner* (1982), *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984), *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1997). To recount the themes in these films would be very repetitive, despite the variations and mutations offered by the famous directors. Readers interested in viewing these films should try to screen them in historical order, either forward or reverse, thus making the thematic repetition much more apparent.

*Reloaded* and *Revolutions* not only were derivatives of the digital dystopias, but the films further fulfilled these conditions, becoming degenerative simulacra of *The Matrix*, itself not an original. This condition is illustrated by the fate of Morpheus, wonderfully portrayed by Laurence Fishburne in *The Matrix*. A synthesis of Jean Baudrillard and Bruce Lee, Morpheus was the coolest anarchist philosopher and media theorist ever to grace the screen. Perhaps the only one! In *Reloaded*, Morpheus became just another screaming leader of the savior-seeking masses, while in *Revolutions* his great intellect was hardly displayed. The last line for Morpheus in *Revolutions* was “Is this real?” By the time *Revolutions* concluded, any of the philosophical depth of *The Matrix* had been emptied in favor of screaming warriors, fortune tellers (the Merovingian's description of the Oracle), and clueless council leaders. In other words, the political world of *Revolutions* looked a lot like the political world of today.

So much for any “Revolution,” which was utterly absent from *Revolutions*. Of course, *Reloaded* was just that, reloaded, except the new bullets were blanks, programs of simulacra without referents to any original. *The Matrix* trilogy is itself part of the desert of the real.

## THE ILLUSION OF THE END

For hyperreality rules out the very occurrence of the Last judgment or the Apocalypse or the Revolution — Jean Baudrillard

Inside the matrix, the pace of things tended to move very fast, often accelerating to high speed chases, whether on foot or in cars. The battles were rapid-fire martial arts moves or machine gun blasts. Inside, the hackers must move quickly, and think even faster. Outside the matrix, the pace of life moved much slower, especially in Zion. People walked slower, talked slower. Some people seemed to think slower, as evidenced by the brain-dead banality of “the council” in Zion, perhaps the only group that could make a university tenure committee seem like exciting gang of free-thinkers! The men in Zion offered little

more than pseudo-macho scowls, digitally-enhanced biceps, and mindless military orders. The only persons who seemed to possess any sense of individual identity and actually thought for themselves were Niobe, the clever and crafty pilot, and Trinity, one of the original hackers.

There was an existential duality in *The Matrix* trilogy, the gravity of matter under assault by the acceleration of the virtual — reality versus its representation. Inside the matrix, there is a world of high speed circulation, best illustrated near the end of *Revolutions*, when Neo sees the virtual city beneath him as vast fiber-optic cosmos of pure circulation. In *Reloaded*, we learn Agent Smith can apparently replicate himself in unlimited quantities, as illustrated by the “burly brawl” scene. After the spiral galaxies in the beginning of *Reloaded*, we were shown green and glowing bits of data, formed into spinning and rotating digital gears, an obvious metaphor for the virtuality that had overtaken the mechanized society of industrial modernity. In *Matrix Revolutions*, the warriors of Zion were defending machines against virtuality, or mechanization against viral swarms, as symbolized by the sentinels and Agent Smith.

This duality was foreshadowed in *The Matrix*, when Morpheus introduced Neo to “the desert of the real,” they are shown in a large dark crevice, accompanied only by a TV. From above, the camera zooms in on them, and then comes to a halt. We feel as if the world is entropic or static, approaching heat death due to the apocalyptic battle with the AI inside the matrix.

Though *The Matrix* explicitly referenced *Simulacra and Simulation*, the metaphysical conditions of the film trilogy also expressed the ideas in Jean Baudrillard’s *The Illusion of the End* (1994). The contrast between the lightness of pure representation and the gravity of dense matter inspired Baudrillard to see a new model of history. Traditional history, especially millennial utopian history, has seen human culture moving in a linear manner toward an eventual end, or a final state of things. The glory of this final end was freedom, immortality, and salvation. This was the end suggested in *Matrix Revolutions*.

For Baudrillard, this final end was now an illusion, rendered impossible by the pure acceleration of postindustrial media. In effect, the Big Bang of pure simulation has generated a bifurcation point for matter and information, where dense matter seems to be “slowing down” and intense information is approaching “escape velocity.” Movement after this Big Bang bifurcation now expresses two attractions — the stable attraction toward density and mass and the strange attraction toward the periphery and void. In the trilogy, there is bifurcation of matter and information, one decelerating toward density, the other orbital as pure acceleration. This was symbolized by Neo and Agent Smith flying in the matrix.

Baudrillard saw linear history, based in empirical matter, as vanishing in the void of the cybernetic media (i.e., the matrix). History now folds in on itself, with the event and its mediated image becoming ever closer in time, so close that they are often indistinguishable. Real history is replaced by hyperreal history, where events and images endlessly circulate and retain meaning only to the extent they can be replicated via the media. Salvation is exchanged for representation, identity is exchanged for virtuality, the control of matter is exchanged for the control of data, and freedom is exchanged for the symbols of freedom (opinion polls, democratic voting, consumer advertising, controlled tourism), all of which are propelled by the global information networks. Baudrillard saw a dystopian climax for Western history, where the Big Bang bifurcation of matter and information signals cultural “chaos” on a global scale.

## **BULLET-TIME**

(T)here must have been a state of infinite density in the past, the big bang, which would have been beginning of time. Similarly, if the whole universe recollapses, there must be another state of infinite density in the future, the big crunch. — Stephen Hawking

Similar cultural conditions are depicted in *The Matrix* trilogy. For example, Agent Smith is the product of artificial intelligence, but is also an example of unlimited reproduction in the infinite realm cyberspace and mass media. Agent Smith is the computer virus, or the meme, or that image or event which is capable of unlimited and viral reproduction. The only way Neo and the hackers can thwart the Agent Smiths or other villains inside the matrix is to enter “Bullet-time.” During Bullet-time, Neo and the hackers moved to a higher (or more focused) level of consciousness, and literally are able to slow down

the data in the matrix. The term Bullet-time refers to the famous scene in which Neo is able to dodge bullets in the matrix by slowing down the data. Later, in the penultimate expression of Bullet-time in *The Matrix*, Neo is able to see the matrix as it is — Platonic forms of pure data in perpetual circulation.

What is perhaps more revealing is the way the Bullet-time effect is achieved. To film Neo dodging the bullets in slow motion, he was surrounded by 122 still cameras, which were triggered to fire in sequence (Silberman 2003). In effect, Neo was placed under total surveillance, with his motions reduced to still images captured on film. Speed was arrested by surveillance and simulation, as total representation.

In many ways, the plot conflict of *The Matrix* trilogy — accelerating replication of information and virtuality leading to apocalypse and technological catastrophe — echoed the dystopian fears of Paul Virilio (2002). Virilio sees in acceleration and globalization a dystopian aesthetic, expressed in the increasing rate and scale of industrial accidents and technological catastrophes around the world, from Bhopal to Chernobyl, Mir to Challenger, the Gulf War to September 11. Virilio feared that the global expansion and integration of information technologies may indeed create a radically different kind of catastrophe — a postindustrial “accident of knowledge.” (2002, 7-8). *The Matrix* trilogy is a fictional account of the “accident of knowledge.”

If matter and information are bifurcating, and acceleration poses apocalypse around the world, then could information and matter be united in a global clock to decelerate utopia, to re-unite representation and reality in overcoming the metaphysic of the information age? Perhaps, at least as imagined by digital Disney gurus, who have built the *slowest* computer in the world and intend to have it function as clock for the world (Brand 1999). Call it Bullet-time for the global village.

Completed in 1999, the same year as the release of *The Matrix*, the first prototype for the Clock of the Long Now began ticking on December 31<sup>st</sup>. The new cosmic chronograph counts ever so slowly, not ticking again until another year had passed. Designed by Disney Imagineer Danny Hillis, the Clock of the Long Now has analog hands that tick but once a year, and "century hand" that advanced once every 100 years. The cuckoo will emerge for each of the next ten millennia. The ten millennia symbolize the time frame from the year 2000, back to the invention of the first technologies around ten thousand years ago — the time span of technology in a single clock. Though the final version will be located in the American desert, the first prototype is now on display at The Science Museum in London. Clones of the Clock will stand in cities around the world. Poetically named by avant-garde rocker Brian Eno, the purpose for the Clock of the Long Now is to slow down tomorrow, giving humanity more time to contemplate the ultimate destination for culture in a world of ceaseless innovation and perpetual acceleration.

The Clock of the Long Now will stand in the Great Basin National Park in Nevada, north of Las Vegas, on a limestone-crested mountain populated with 4000-year-old bristlecone pine trees. Ironically, once completed, the Clock of the Long Now will not escape the split between matter and representation, between desert and desert of the real, for it too will be secured away in the past, while numerous copies stand in cities around the world. Designed to be much larger than the prototype, the Clock will stand in a cavernous chamber, carved into a limestone cliff in the high desert. This site was chosen to provide safety from the corrosive effects of nature and culture. Inside the chamber, the Clock will be secured away from the modern world, a chronographic cave dweller of the future.

But, this move toward slowing down the world is not limited to movies in theatres and clocks in caves. For the Futurists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, speed and mechanization promised a utopian aesthetic destined to sweep aside the ancient traditions. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the “Slow Cities” movement began to emerge in Italy, which had given birth to the Futurists. Seeking to resist American-style globalization, typified by fast food for fast cities, Slow Cities is dramatically lowering the speed limit for the automotive and automated pace of life. The movement also aims to restore older areas of cities, preserve local culture, increase green spaces, protect the practices of local artisans, encourage the consumption of natural foods, and create car-free zones for a pedestrian-friendly urban fabric. The Slow Cities movement had their first meeting in 1999, coinciding with Bullet-time in *The Matrix*. With over 30 Slow Cities and 300 chapters in

Italy, and 110 chapters in other countries, the Slow Cities movement is, ironically, fast spreading around the world (Natanson 2001).

“Tomorrow” has even slowed down, entering Bullet-time at the *new* Tomorrowland in 1998. Actually, tomorrow may have slowed down so much, it has entered a time warp. Walt Disney's original vision of tomorrow was a modern world cast in steel and white surfaces, the streamlined style derived from Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus. With the swirling atom as a logo, Tomorrowland celebrated atomic power for nuclear families. In the new Tomorrowland, Bauhaus and Le Corbusier are supplanted by a synthesis of Leonardo da Vinci and Jules Verne, with the bright white and cool steel now replaced by warm and gilded Victorian colors. The clockwork cosmos has been turned back to one of Leonardo's sketches of the solar system, which serves as the new cosmic model for the Astro-Orbiter ride. Trees and avocado plants abound, signs for the mythical Garden of Eden explicitly sought by Disney Imagineers. Libertarians trumpeted this as a triumph for the dynamics of market processes and commercial culture, viewing Disney as a profit-seeking corporation smartly responding to consumer demand for a different kind of future (Postrel 1998). However, there is a deeper meaning in the new Tomorrowland. The future is warped into the past, and the past is simulated as the "new" future. Indeed, tomorrow becomes yesterday, and the future disappears into the past!

### NO EXIT FROM BAD SEQUELS?

There is no escape from the nature of the universe. — The Merovingian  
Can't you see? The lights are on. — Valet in *No Exit*

So, is there to be no exit from bad sequels? In *The Matrix*, when Morpheus explained to Neo the nature of the matrix, he first took him to “the construct,” a virtual place of pure light where training programs were loaded. In *Reloaded*, the Architect's room in the matrix was all screens on the wall, with a white glowing floor. Even the architect had white hair and beard, and a white three-piece suit. Recall, it is here we realized that the entire cosmos was virtualized. In *Revolutions*, Neo was temporarily trapped in the “subway station,” which was tiled in radiant white. Why is it the case that when Neo was soon to be philosophically enlightened, he entered a room of bright light? The obvious answer would be the light symbolized “enlightenment” or “truth,” as is usually the case in many films. Or, are the rooms of light emblematic of *no exit* from the digital dystopia and a future of bad sequels.

Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* premiered in Paris, in May 1944 — the first play produced in Paris after the liberation of the city from the Nazi regime. *No Exit* remains a landmark in existentialist literature and theatre, offering a powerful synthesis of Sartre's views on being and existence, freedom and responsibility. In the play, three characters are locked in a room, always illuminated and the characters are unable to close their eyes. We learn they are in hell, not as a counter to heaven, but as an existential condition located between freedom and fate, and from which there is “no exit.” Ironically, Sartre's play was produced as the first two electronic computers were being completed outside London. Named “Colossus,” the first computer became operational in January 1944, while the second was working by June 1944. When Sartre's *No Exit* is read in light of these emerging technological conditions, the play not only offers insight into existence and freedom, but also prefigures many dilemmas regarding the nature of human existence and identity in a fated realm of total light, total surveillance, total spectacle. Since the publication of *No Exit*, all the major media dystopias require an exit from light.

George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* referred to “the place where there is no darkness” (1983, 24), inside the Ministry of Truth, a towering white pyramid, where Winston was held captive in a room that was perpetually illuminated. The Alpha 60 computer in *Alphaville* flashed bright light when talking and zapped the hero with bright light as he sought to escape. In *2001*, the spaceship was always illuminated, with interior and exterior being bright white. In *THX 1138*, the hero is tortured in a room of pure white light and everyone dressed in white uniforms. In *Westworld*, the hero is unable to escape surveillance in the desert sunlight. In *Tron*, the bright light inside provides the power of individual autonomy within the

regime of surveillance and digital identity. In *The Truman Show*, Truman must exit the bright artificial light of the domed city, eventually exiting from his own universe through the door on the fake horizon.

Why the bright light in so many digital dystopias? Perhaps Marshall McLuhan offered some insight, for he viewed electric light as “pure information,” a medium that is “totally radical, pervasive, and decentralized” (1964, 23-25). With digitalization and electronic media, we have entered the realm of infinite and total representation, always on, always glowing, even as reality and originality (or authenticity) seem to recede further away. The Big Bang gave birth to everything in a burst of light, while the second Big Bang gives copies of everything in the circulation of light. Historians may conclude that the three most significant scientific accomplishments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century will be the discovery of the Big Bang, the first maps of the human genome, and the creation of the internet.

Succeeding the Copernican and Darwinian Revolutions, the Big Bang and has blown the biggest big hole in the mythologies of divine creation and a human-centered universe. Dreams of Gardens of Eden and Promised Lands are utopian myths, yet function to provide simplistic answers to complex questions about the origins of life and the nature of the universe. For most people, dreams of deities promising destinies inspires their quest for spirituality and immortality in an indifferent and expanding universe. This is no less true in *Reloaded* and *Revolutions*, where it became clear that Neo was the mystical savior for the masses enslaved by technology. Thus, it is no surprise that many fans see the film trilogy see it as a religious quest, the journey of the true believer.

Philosophy and science, so bent upon academic jargon and hyper-specialized inquiry, have largely failed in providing spiritual meaning for modern living. Too often abused by totalitarian and democratic states, science has not fulfilled the utopian quest of the modern project — enlightenment for human existence. After all, the overwhelming majority of humans on Earth believe in a divine creator or cosmic deity of some kind. Though most people accept the benefits of technology, they shrink from the deeper existential questions raised by modern science. The average person cares little or nothing about science, such as the Big Bang, evolution, relativity, quantum mechanics, chaos theory, and so on. Apparently better left ignored, the masses view such topics as just too complex to understand, with implications too profound to imagine. In an expanding and evolving universe of uncertainty, it is much easier to land your spiritual spaceship at the cathedral or church or mosque, those spaces of mystical certainty where the simplicity of the past answers the complexity of today. Unable to chart their own autonomous and/or authentic destinies, this mass of people retreat into collective myth as cosmic map, where superstition fills the voids of science and mortality is overcome by visions of eternal existence. These are people who seek saviors and salvation, as was illustrated in *Reloaded* and *Revolutions*, unlike the anarchist-individualist theory espoused by Neo at the end of *The Matrix*.

This is a not a Tomorrowland designed by Frank Lloyd Wright or Buckminster Fuller, whose architecture expressed the futuristic themes for the modern utopian home during the 1950s. Entering the millennium, the citizens of Tomorrowland have also entered Bullet-time, living in the homes of New Urbanism furnished with the interiors of Martha Stewart. Other citizens of Tomorrowland hoped to enter Bullet-time and go further into the past, as expressed by the intellectual fundamentalism of Creationists, the ecological fundamentalism of the Unabomber, and the theocratic fundamentalism of the Taliban. Somewhere in between the new urbanites, non-darwinists, noble savages, and nothing-but-theocracy patriarchs, we have slow clocks for slow cities and the rest of the world. Time has even stopped in Las Vegas, where the hotels “Paris, Las Vegas” and “New York-New York” offer simulations of the present. Science and technology, unable to imagine any new futures, seem now content to copy and clone all things past and present, thus insuring we are destined for never-ending bad sequels.

As the voice of scientific determinism in *Reloaded* and *Revolutions*, the Merovingian stated to Morpheus and Trinity that “there is no escape from the nature of the universe” — meaning there is no exit from pure causality. For the Merovingian, human freedom is but an illusion, where fate and causality are disguised as choice and chance. Later, in the climatic battle, Agent Smith asked Neo why humans seek to “justify an existence without meaning or purpose.” Recall the openings of *Reloaded* and *Revolutions*,

where the Big Bang was symbolized, and the scene in *Reloaded* with the Architect, where we see Neo as a mere pixel in a pixel in a cosmos of pixels. If we do live on a planet revolving around a pixel within a pixel, among hundreds of billions of pixels in the vast and expanding universe, then what meaning can we make of life, our individual lives, on Earth? Of course, this is a complex topic and cannot be resolved here. However, since the Wachowski brother spent \$300 million on exploring such issues, we can at least decode the resolutions in *Reloaded* and *Revolutions*.

In *Reloaded* and *Revolutions*, science and technology provide two dilemmas — an indifferent and expanding universe matched by an infinite and expanding realm of models and reproductions. Unable to chart the individual destinies favored by Neo at the end of *The Matrix*, the enslaved and endangered masses need a leader and savior, in the form of a blind prophet. By the end of *Revolutions*, the trilogy is astride the abysses between blind causality and blind faith, the Big Bangs and Bullet-time.

In his conversation with Architect, Neo learned he was an “anomaly” in the system. Of course, in one sense, anomaly means something strange, different, or difficult to classify. In an astronomical sense, an anomaly is “the angle between a planet’s position, the Sun, and the point in the planet’s orbit when it is closest to the Sun” (Encarta 1999, 68). As suggested by the conclusion to *Revolutions*, Neo is the point of the angle between life on Earth and the light of the Sun, or between Zion underground and the light above, or between the object and its representation in a condition of total media in the matrix.

At the end of *Revolutions*, Neo was blinded in a battle, yet he could “see” better than ever. And what he saw was blinding “light.” Flying above the pod city with Trinity, Neo exclaimed: “It’s unbelievable Trinity, light everywhere, like the whole thing is built of light.” What Neo saw below was the “real” city as it was, explosions of light, the spectacular flow of light, the pure circulation of light in a chaotic and massive fiber optic network. Even the world outside the matrix was comprised of light, exploding and circulating, suggesting the world was starbursts first produced by the cosmic Big Bang or that all of reality was part of the matrix produced by the mediated Big Bang. Apparently, the hackers wore those ever-so-stylish sunglasses inside the matrix to neutralize the blinding light.

As Trinity flew the vehicle through a swarm of sentinels, Neo used Bullet-time to halt and explode them, until there were simply too many and the sentinels killed Trinity. Neo then plugged back into the matrix to do battle with Agent Smith. The flood metaphor reappeared as they waged battle in an urban metropolis during a torrential downpour, including an exploding of wall of water. At the climax of the battle, blasting beams of light exploded from behind their sunglasses, and then Neo and Smith exploded into beams light. Neo was then unplugged from the matrix and, leaning back in a reclining mode, then floated upward, toward a blinding light in the sky. Much brighter than the sun, the light engulfed Neo (as it did when he opened the Architect’s door) as the oratorical music soared, and he then disappeared into expanding light, into the Big Bang. We then see the matrix restructuring itself as “reality,” and a gleaming metropolis is shown in the distance, rising above a forest, beneath an extremely bright sun. In the final dialogue, we learn that the Oracle did not “know” but she “believed” and that the Architect will free the enslaved. Fade out on the utopia of the virtual metropolis under the glaring light.

Without doubt, the Wachowski brothers deserve credit for the multicultural landscapes and intellectual ambitions in making a philosophical action film. That said, at the end of spending \$300 million, the Wachowski brothers took the blue pill. For the philosophical finale, the best they can come up with is a blind prophet floating into the sky (real or virtual, it doesn’t matter), where blind belief is hurled toward the Big Bangs, and scientific knowledge combines pure causality (the Merovingian) with intelligent design (the Architect). Neo’s hero journey ends up being a zero journey. As such, the trilogy illustrates the intellectual void in postmodern culture.

We can embrace science and postmodern theory without a commitment to naïve empiricism or empty nihilism. Like the human species and the universe, scientific and philosophical knowledge are always evolving, with new theories accounting for new conditions (Kuhn 1962). Some of these theories prove to be true over time, such as gravity, evolution, and relativity, while others are proven false, such as geocentrism, the flat earth, and steady-state universe. That theory evolves is its virtue, and need not

imply utter relativism (Popper 1982, 131-162). Just because we are not gods does not mean we are fools, yet when philosophy and science gives way to pure relativism, superstition will offer a world of certainties for a society of fools. The Big Bang and Baudrillard can complement each other in helping to understand the natural and media universes.

Science and technology deliver empirical miracles in expanding human thought, while the masses seek spiritual miracles in arresting the Big Bangs of the expanding universe and unlimited reproductions. After all the grand intellectual ambitions, *The Matrix* trilogy collapsed into mythology and theology. *Revolutions* was not revolutionary, it was reactionary, offering blind belief and superstitious salvation as the ultimate exit strategy. When \$300 million of philosophical art and technology is deployed only to collapse in service to superstition, there is no doubt we can expect a flat-earth future of bad sequels.

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