

What Did Baudrillard Think of The Matrix?

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Contents

Introduction	3
Further Reading	9
Notes	10

Introduction

Jean Baudrillard is one of the most influential thinkers of the late 20th century. He is known for having a hard-to-pronounce name, my pronunciation of which people will never stop complaining about, so from here on I'll make things easier and refer to him by his first name - Jean. Besides that, Jean is best known for his analysis of postmodern society. His works on mass media, communicative technologies, simulations, and pop culture, written in a provocative and uncompromising style have earned him the title of "the high priest of postmodernism". But there's no doubt that the most popular pop cultural product associated with his name is the 1999 movie *The Matrix*.

His influence on the movie is hard to overlook. Not just because the film explores similar themes and references Jean's works, his most popular book '*Simulacra and Simulation*' is actually shown in the movie, and was even listed as required reading for the movie's actors.

Because so much of Jean's writings were about pop culture and mainstream media, a Hollywood blockbuster that directly engages with his works offered a rare and extremely useful object of analysis. However, to the surprise of many, Jean forcefully distanced himself from the film, harshly criticizing its tackling of philosophical problems and saying that it had nothing to do with his works. Not only that, he was later invited to work on the movie's sequels, but declined. So, what happened? That's the question this video seeks to answer.

First, I will talk about the themes shared both by *The Matrix* and Jean's mature works, looking at the references the movie makes to them. Once that's established, I will talk about the ways in which it deviates from Jean's theories, and what Jean found so distasteful in it. In the best-case scenario, the educational value of this will be three-fold: teaching us something about *The Matrix*, teaching us something about Baudrillard, and teaching us something about the relationship between the two – the adaptation of the theory into the movie.

I will try to explain everything accessibly enough for those who are not yet familiar with Baudrillard's work. But as a preliminary introduction, I also recommend watching my older video on *American Psycho*, Baudrillard and the Postmodern Condition, which introduces some of his ideas with reference to another movie.

Let's start with the scene that reveals the protagonist of the film – Neo. The themes are immediately present. Neo's computer is on, processing something, actively blasting information at Neo's face. His headphones are in, playing music. Yet through all this, Neo is sleeping. It's not common to introduce the main character of a movie in a state of sleep, so it's clear that this choice was not an accident. Although it's likely also a

reference to Descartes' remark about the difficulty of differentiating between dream and reality, the technological context is important. Jean saw postmodern society as consisting of sensory and informational overload, an overload that makes us passive. When everything is transparent, available a click away, and continuously bombarding you, there is no place left for activity. There is so much disjointed information that even the activity of organizing it into something meaningful becomes impossible. So this introductory scene, purely through images, already encapsulates one of the themes of Baudrillard's late works: passivity caused by sensory overload.

Notice too how clearly the light from the computer screen is reflected on Neo's face. This is no accident either. Baudrillard said that in postmodern society, each person becomes a "pure screen", a "terminal", "a pure surface of absorption". Things are constantly projected onto us, from computers, mobile phones, TVs, billboards, magazines, to the point where we become mere screens whose sole purpose is to absorb.

Later on in the scene, Neo begins receiving cryptic messages. The last one says "knock, knock", right before Neo actually receives a knock on his apartment door. This implies some kind of coded determinism: in the Matrix, events are determined in advance by a code. They are predictable.

"The code" is a term that appears quite often in Baudrillard's works in the 70s. He never explicitly defines what "the code" is, but seems to view it as a system of signs that structures and determines every aspect of society. Marx famously called money the "universal equivalent", in that it can be used to compare the exchange-value of completely different items, anything from a phone to a human life. Baudrillard views the sign as the "universal equivalent" of the code. No matter what a sign represents, it can be compared and exchanged with other signs. What this refers to in more concrete terms is the way in which there is no longer anything in society that cannot be surveyed, simulated, integrated into larger structures. Because nothing can escape the code – the system of signs, everything is reduced to mere signs. And because each sign is interchangeable, everything becomes disposable; the very notion of "value" begins to disintegrate. Of course, the image of the code becomes even more explicit later in the movie – one of the most famous visual motifs in the movie is the code that represents The Matrix.

The people who knock on Neo's door want to buy some illegal disks from him, perhaps some kind of simulation software. Neo goes to his shelf to get the disks, and what do you know, he picks up "Simulacra & Simulation". As he opens the book, it turns out to be hollowed out to store things inside it. This too is a Baudrillardian theme: that there is no longer anything behind surface appearances.

A great deal of modern theory was about finding some kind of hidden depth, some great truth that lies behind the appearances. For example, the will to power for Nietzsche, the unconscious for Freud, or economic conditions for Marx. According to Baudrillard, such a task is no longer possible in a postmodern society. Appearances are hollowed out, just like the book.

We also see that the chapter the book opens up to is the one titled “On Nihilism”. In truth, this chapter appears only at the very end of the book, yet here we see it in the middle, so the creators must have made a conscious decision to emphasize this chapter. Perhaps it’s because of how explicitly the chapter proclaims: “The universe, and all of us, have entered live into simulation.”

And the topic of simulation brings us to the great revelation that Neo eventually experiences: that the life he was living all this time was merely a simulation, a program developed to keep his mind alive while his body energy is harvested by robots.

Of course, “Simulation” is one half of the title of Baudrillard’s most famous book. For Baudrillard, we have entered into simulation both in the sense that there is nothing that cannot be simulated, and in the sense that everything is always simulating something else.

I once read that American pilots in the Persian Gulf War were incredibly detached from their missions during bombing raids, because they had already completed the same mission a number of times in simulations under training. The actual mission ended up seeming like just an extension of the simulations – a simulation of the simulations. The Pentagon even nicknamed these troops “Nintendo soldiers”. In other words, it became meaningless in the experience of these troops to even distinguish between simulation and reality.

But it’s not just actual training simulations that illustrate Baudrillard’s point. Think of a teenager who, during their first kiss, is simulating all the romance movies they’ve seen, or, a person having sex for the first time by merely simulating pornography, which itself is a kind of simulation. What’s special about Jean’s understanding of simulation, is not just that it’s indistinguishable from the real, but it destroys the very distinction between the simulated and the real. If when meeting someone for the first time, I am simulating how I present myself on my Facebook profile, where would we even draw the line between the real and the simulated? We are surrounded by simulations, by images, by copies without originals – in other words, what Baudrillard calls “simulacra”. The very notions of “authenticity”, “genuineness” and “reality” become simulations, something to be used by advertisers or politicians to make themselves more appealing. The very question of “is this real or simulated?” loses meaning.

All of this ties back into what was said earlier about the code. After all, simulation is impossible without a code that determines it, it involves the acting out of a script.

It’s also not insignificant that while Neo is in the simulation, his body is harvested, turned into a battery, a merely passive object. This corresponds to what Jean called “the triumph of the object over the subject”.

Modern philosophy starting with Descartes placed the subject at its center: the thinking, acting, active subject who is able to make use of reason to make sense of and conquer the world of objects. Under postmodernity, the relationship has been reversed. The technology that once promised the triumph of the subject, spins out of control and expands until the subject is its victim, controlled by forces one cannot manage or

understand – everything from global markets to viral media content to climate change. It is now the world of objects that rules over the subject.

Finally, in the scene where Morpheus explains to Neo what The Matrix is, and shows him how the real world is now just an apocalyptic wasteland, he says “welcome to the desert of the Real”, probably the most explicit reference to Baudrillard besides the book cover itself, as “desert of the real” is a phrase that Jean uses in “Simulacra & Simulation”. The earlier script even included Morpheus explicitly referencing Baudrillard’s name in his explanation, which I’m glad they removed. Really the only thing less subtle would be if Jean literally burst through the cinema screen and said, “This movie was influenced by my work”.

In “Simulations & Simulacra”, Baudrillard recounts a short story by the surrealist writer Jorge Luis Borges, in which an empire develops such an exact science of cartography, that their map of the empire becomes as big and as detailed as the empire itself, perfectly covering the entire territory. In this short story, as the empire declines, the map begins fraying and falling into ruins. Baudrillard says that the appropriate analogy today is that it is the empire that is falling into ruins, while the map triumphs, the map of course representing simulation.

Jean goes on to write:

“Today ... [s]imulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory - precession of simulacra - that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. The desert of the real itself.”

If everything is eaten up by simulation, a simulation that’s not just realistic, but more realistic than the real, in other words, hyperreal, then all that is left of reality is a wasteland, a desert that everyone tries to escape.

So, we’re not much more than a quarter into the movie and we already see a wealth of references to Baudrillard’s theories. So what is it that led him to proclaim that the movie has nothing to do with his work?

In 2004, Baudrillard did an interview with the French magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur*, where he was asked about The Matrix, and he gave a pretty harsh response.

The most important point for our purposes is this:

“...already there have been other films that treat the growing indistinction between the real and the virtual: The Truman Show, Minority Report, or even Mulholland Drive, the masterpiece of David Lynch. The Matrix’s value is chiefly as a synthesis of all that. But there the set-up is cruder and does not truly evoke the problem. The actors are in the matrix, that is, in the digitized system of things; or, they are radically outside it, such as in Zion, the city of resistors. But what would be interesting is to show what happens when these two worlds collide. The most embarrassing part of the

film is that the new problem posed by simulation is confused with its classical, Platonic treatment.”

See, the main problem with *The Matrix* is that the line between the simulated world and the real world is extremely clear, in fact the entire movie is built on this distinction, but it’s precisely this distinction that Baudrillard believes we can no longer make. There’s never any uncertainty about whether someone is in the matrix or not, whether what they’re experiencing is simulated or not. But it’s precisely such uncertainty that defines the postmodern condition according to Baudrillard. This is why he says that, “what would be interesting is to show what happens when these two worlds collide.”

Baudrillard speaks of *The Matrix* confusing the new problem of simulation with its classical, Platonic treatment. This is a reference to one of the other great philosophical influences on the movie: the famous allegory of Plato’s cave, which everyone learns about in their first year philosophy class.

Just to recap, in Plato’s great work *The Republic*, Socrates recounts an allegory in which people live in a cave, chained in a way that only allows them to see one of the cave’s walls. Behind them there are people holding different shapes in front of a fire, so that it generates shadows on the wall of the cave. All their lives, the prisoners see nothing but these shadows and believe that they are the true reality. But if they were to ever unchain themselves and leave the cave, they would see the Sun, the true source of light, and realize that this whole time they were living in a distorted reality, looking at mere shadows of what is real.

This story was used as an analogy to describe the distorted nature of what we perceive in our daily lives. It is the philosopher who is able to see through it and realize that our senses only give us shadows of something much greater.

This idea is extremely ingrained in the history of Western philosophy. It is also present in Christianity: we typically experience only the vain, evil, material world. But if we live a spiritual life, we will be able to see how it’s merely a shadow, and insignificant when compared to the kingdom of God.

It is really the format of this allegory that *The Matrix* follows. Neo is initially in *The Matrix*, that is, the cave, seeing nothing but shadows, and when he is rescued, he finally sees what reality really is, and realizes that all his life he was living in a cave. This is why Baudrillard says in *The Matrix*, “the new problem posed by simulation is confused with its classical, Platonic treatment”. But the allegory of Plato’s cave no longer works, no longer describes our predicament.

In “*Simulacra & Simulation*”, the chapter titled “*Simulacra and Science Fiction*” Baudrillard speaks about the gap between the real and the imaginary. In the ancient world, this gap was vast and clear, allowing people to imagine a world radically different from the real one – a perfect utopia, made in the image of God. It is this imagination that the allegory of Plato’s cave reflects, because it depends on this gap between the real and the ideal worlds.

Then, in the industrial revolution, the gap between the real and the imaginary shrinks. The mystical utopias of the ancient world are replaced by science fiction. We

no longer imagine a world radically different from the real one, but rather, a world that's a mere expansion of the real world: we imagine what it would be like if our technology was much more developed, if our ability to travel extended to unexplored regions in space, if our sciences revealed even more than they currently do.

Finally, in the postmodern society, the gap between the real and the imaginary disappears completely, and we are no longer capable of ideal projections, of imagining new worlds. We can only imagine mere reconfigurations of our world, or simply relive the ideal projections of past times. Thus, in this 3rd stage, we are a long distance away from Plato's cave.

And it is this that forms the main philosophical tension in the movie. Plato's cave on the one hand, and Baudrillard's postmodernity on the other – two radically distinct perspectives.

In the early edition of the script, when Morpheus reveals the truth to Neo, he says to him, referencing the story of the territory and the map: "You have been living inside a dreamworld, Neo. As in Baudrillard's vision, your whole life has been spent inside the map, not the territory."

But this reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of Baudrillard's vision. In fact, in "Simulacra & Simulation", right after recounting the story of the territory and the map, Baudrillard says that even inverted, this story is no longer usable. He writes, "...it is no longer a question of either maps or territories. Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference, between one and the other."

Thus, while The Matrix envisions a scenario in which we one day see through the simulation, wake up from it, and begin to live in the real world, Baudrillard did not believe in such a possibility, he was a lot more cynical than the writers behind The Matrix. We can no longer distinguish between the map and the territory, between the simulated and the real, between the copy and the original, between the Cave and the outside. We can't escape the simulation because we wouldn't know what to escape from in the first place.

In "Symbolic Exchange and Death", Baudrillard writes about the way in which systems sustain themselves through binary oppositions.

"...every unitary system, if it wants to survive, has to evolve a *binary* system of *regulation*. This changes nothing in the essence of monopoly; on the contrary, power is only absolute if it knows how to diffract itself in equivalent variations; that is, if it knows how to redouble itself through doubling. This goes for brands of detergent as much as for "peaceful coexistence." You need two superpowers to maintain a universe under control; a single empire collapses under its own weight. ... This regulated opposition can be ramified into more complex scenarios, but the matrix remains binary."

There's no better example today than the binary opposition between the Republican and the Democrat parties, an opposition that portrays itself as fierce and of the utmost importance, despite both sides of it serving the same monopoly, the same unitary system. Today everything is marked by this fetishization of binary choice: the choice between coke and Pepsi.

I wonder then if the writers of The Matrix were aware of the irony in that one of the most central and famous scenes in the movie involves Neo being given a binary choice: the red pill or the blue pill?

So let's say we're going to the cinema in 1999. Will we see The Matrix: an anti-authoritarian movie about rebelling against a system and waking up from our illusions, or say, The World is Not Enough, a movie in the James Bond franchise which is essentially an ideological defense of American hegemony?

We might even see this choice as being of the utmost importance, and define ourselves by it. But the way Baudrillard sees it, The Matrix presents a world in which there is nothing negative, nothing dangerous, nothing illusory, that cannot be seen for what it truly is and overcome by the subject. And thus, it takes up the same position with regards to the dominant system, to the simulation, that James Bond movies do. This is at the basis of, in my opinion, the most harsh remark Baudrillard makes about the film:

"The radical illusion of the world is a problem faced by all great cultures, which they have solved through art and symbolization. What we have invented, in order to support this suffering, is a simulated real, which henceforth supplants the real and is its final solution, a virtual universe from which everything dangerous and negative has been expelled. And The Matrix is undeniably part of that. Everything belonging to the order of dream, utopia and phantasm is given expression, "realized." We are in the uncut transparency. The Matrix is surely the kind of film about the matrix that the matrix would have been able to produce."

Further Reading

My other video on Baudrillard: American Psycho, Baudrillard and the Postm...

Some more good introductory videos on Baudrillard:

Rick Roderick: Rick Roderick on Baudrillard - Fatal Strat...

theory pleeb: Baudrillard: Postmodern Consumer Society... Then & Now: An Introduction to Baudrillard

Baudrillard interview on The Matrix: postmoderndays.blogspot.com/2005/04/matrix-decoded-le-nouvel-observateur.html

Baudrillard's "Simulacra & Simulation": e-reading.club/bookreader.php/144970/Simulacra_and_Simulation.pdf

Baudrillard's "Symbolic Exchange & Death": after1968.org/app/webroot/uploads/01SymbolicExchangeDeathLow.pdf

Texts on the relation between The Matrix and Baudrillard: "Adapting Philosophy: Jean Baudrillard and "The Matrix Trilogy"" - jstor.org/stable/j.ctt155j5p5 "Did You Ever Eat Tasty Wheat?" - nottingham.ac.uk/scope/documents/2003/may-2003/mer-rin.pdf

Notes

Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) – French sociologist, philosopher, and cultural theorist.

In his early works, **Baudrillard** was analyzing commodities and culture within a **Marxist framework**. Being influenced by **structuralism**, he supplemented **Marx's** categories of **Value**, **exchange-value** and **use-value**¹ with **sign-value** – the value a product gains from what it signifies, such as social status or prestige.

He completely broke with **Marxism** in the early 70s. His 1973 book “**The Mirror of Production**” argued that **Marxism** was based on the very productivist assumptions that emerged out of capitalism (viewing society in terms of production, labor, and value). Thus, **Marxism** is merely a “mirror” of capitalism and can’t properly make sense of pre-capitalist societies, which were based on what he calls “**symbolic exchange**” (In this² respect he’s influenced³ by the anthropological theories of **Marcel Mauss**² and **Georges Bataille**³.) **Symbolic exchange** is exchange that is based not on accumulating wealth, exchange-values, or use-values, but rather a “useless” kind of exchange done entirely for symbolic (cultural, religious, social) reasons. **Baudrillard** opposes **symbolic exchange** to the productivist values that characterize both capitalism and **Marxism**.

It is in the 80s with books like “**Simulacra and Simulation**” (1981) that **Baudrillard** is seen as fully entering his postmodern period. **Baudrillard** doesn’t actually use the term “postmodernism” or “postmodernity” often (among other things, he uses the term “consumer society”), but postmodern society is widely established as being the object of his analysis. It is in this period that **Baudrillard** reaches his most cynical phase and abandons any kind of revolutionary project. It’s full of sweeping and provocative proclamations about the death of the real, death of the social, death of class, death of culture, and so on. He sees simulation absorbing everything, “the real” becoming a meaningless category, and society imploding. It is this period that mostly influenced *The Matrix*, and it is this period I mostly refer to in the video.

Some good videos on Baudrillard for beginners:

My older video on Baudrillard and American Psycho

Stream about Baudrillard with theory pleeb and The Dangerous Maybe Then & Now’s introduction to Baudrillard

Rick Roderick’s lecture on Baudrillard

¹ For Marx, use-value is the usefulness of an item. Value (with a capital V) is the amount of socially necessary labor-time embodied in a commodity. Exchange value is the “form of appearance” of Value – the basis of price. For a more in-depth explanation, see brendanmcooney’s YouTube video series on the Law of Value.

² Influential French anthropologist, most famous for his book “**The Gift**”. In it, he argues that in archaic societies, exchange was centered around reciprocating, in other words, gift-giving. He has influenced many French thinkers, including **Bataille**, **Derrida**, and **Baudrillard**.

³ French surrealist writer and theorist. I have made a video on him and Hellraiser. His anthropological work is “**The Accursed Share**”.

Introductory books and articles:

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy article on **Baudrillard** by **Douglas Kellner**.

“From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond” by **Douglas Kellner**.

The first piece of secondary literature on **Baudrillard** I read. Covers **Baudrillard’s** entire intellectual trajectory up to the late 80s.

An article from Critical Theory that introduces **Baudrillard** with the example of pumpkin spice lattes.

An article by **The Dangerous Maybe** on Band Kim Kardashian.

The Dangerous Maybe is also in the stream with **theory pleeb** linked above.

If you’re somewhat familiar with **Baudrillard** and looking for a more critical overview, **“Forget Baudrillard?”** is an anthology of papers by various theorists on Baudrillard coming from different perspectives and approaches, both critical and praise-ful.

Texts specifically on Baudrillard’s relation to The Matrix:

Le Nouvel Observateur’s interview with **Baudrillard** on The Matrix.

“Did You Ever Eat Tasty Wheat?” by **William Merrin**. A paper on The Matrix and philosophy.

“Adapting Philosophy” by **Catherine Constable**. A book on **Baudrillard**, The Matrix Trilogy, and the adaptation of theory into cinema. I can’t find a free copy online.

Sensory overload

Baudrillard describes postmodern society as being characterized by an obscene over-proximity and immediacy of all things. Everything is in-your-face and immediately available, making seduction almost impossible. Because every piece of media is competing for your attention, everything must be presented immediately and with instant gratification. You’re able to access the most violent and pornographic images with the click of a button. The music must be immediately catchy and full of hooks, the movies exciting and constantly entertaining, the food fast and sugary.

Such over-proximity and immediacy leads to sensory overload, and people unlearn how to wait for things, the value of patience and the pleasure of seduction. This state can even be seen in the quick dismissal people have of postmodern theory – many people are so used to immediate answers and instant gratification, that when they come across a text they do not immediately understand, they assume it’s because there’s nothing there to understand in the first place.

Baudrillard uses the “French” sense of **schizophrenia** to describe this cultural condition, which is explained in my video on BuzzFeed. Postmodern subjects live in a “a state of terror which is characteristic of the schizophrenic, an over-proximity of all things, a foul promiscuity of all things which beleaguer and penetrate him, meeting with no resistance, and no halo, no aura, not even the aura of his own body protects him. In spite of himself the schizophrenic is open to everything and lives in the most extreme confusion”.

Triumph of the object

Baudrillard begins to write of the “triumph of the object” in his 1983 text “**Fatal Strategies**”. He speaks of objects becoming out of control, exceeding themselves, accelerating, expanding and proliferating. We see this, for example, in technological development and global markets growing beyond human control, acting almost as if with a will of its own. Even faced with global climate catastrophe, we’re not able to wield the very objects we created to prevent it.

This triumph of the object makes the subject inert and exhausted, unable to control its own creations. So the juxtaposition in *The Matrix* of robots becoming self-aware and turning subjects into inert, passive entities maintained only for harvesting works very well in representing this theme.

The “fatal strategies” the book title refers to is the strategy **Baudrillard** suggests: in the war between object and subject, it’s better to take the side of the victors. **Baudrillard** advises submitting to the object’s victory, and allowing oneself to become more object-like, as the only way to cope with this situation.

The code

Although most of the video focuses on the **Baudrillard** of the 80s, it’s in the 70s, in “**Symbolic Exchange and Death**” that **Baudrillard** speaks of **the code** and the binary system of control.

Baudrillard never clearly defines “**the code**” in his works, but an entry by William Pawlett provides a helpful summary and interpretation. He says that

Baudrillard’s concept of the code is used in 2 senses:

1. “[T]o understand and critique consumer capitalism, suggesting that it is a system of control that functions by conferring illusory ‘freedoms’” and
2. “[T]o deconstruct modern critical theories - particularly **Marxism**, **feminism** and **psychoanalysis** .”

The aforementioned frameworks cannot challenge the consumer society because they are “structured, at a fundamental level, by the code; their arguments are easily assimilated because they do not question the system’s ‘logics of value’ - the interlocking network of use values, economic exchange values and sign exchange values that constitute the code”.

The binary

Baudrillard also speaks of how dominant systems exert their control through “doubling”, a binary reflection, such as the consumerist binary of

Cola/Pepsi or the political binary of republican/democrat. Such binaries provide the illusion of choice while both sides serve the same dominating system. At the time of writing, **Baudrillard** saw the opposition between the two superpowers – the USA and the Soviet Union, as such a binary. He even saw the Twin Towers as reflecting this ossification of binaries. Thus, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Twin Towers forced him to change some of his claims and ways of speaking. He wrote about the 9/11

attacks as a sacrifice that for the first time challenged the entire system, attacking it at its heart.

Baudrillard saw the new terrorist threat as a result of the collapse of the US/Soviet binary. This binary used to allow people to see the world as the simple binary of Good/Evil. After its collapse, “Evil”, rather than being concentrated in one side of the binary, started seeping through everything, became autonomous.

The 9/11 challenged the precedence of the map over the territory, because it was an event that could not be made sense of by existing models. He speaks about this in his 2003 work *“The Spirit of Terrorism”*.

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<[youtube.com/watch?v=bf9J35yzM3E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bf9J35yzM3E)>

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