Changing cyberspaces: dystopia and technological excess


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Emerging from the literary form in the 1980s, the images and stereotypes of cyberpunk have been developed in film as producers attempted to incorporate cyberpunk into a visual form. It is arguably the cinematic version of cyberpunk that has persisted in linking the genre to heterosexual, male stereotypes whilst the literary version explored more complex ideas from inception. As an articulation of the technoscientific imagination and the informational subject, cyberpunk has been most influential in its attempts to articulate cyberspace. Whilst this is a familiar and well-developed trope in the literary form, as we shall see below, the visualisation of cyberspace in a cinematic form has proved challenging. Dystopic images of the urban imagination of late capitalism are a familiar film reference but the promise of alternatives to be experienced through virtual space have proved difficult to visualise.

Previous attempts by both cyberpunk ‘insiders’ such as Larry McCaffery, Steven Levy, Bruce Sterling, and the sub-cultural literature of the ‘new edge’ to define cyberpunk as masculine, heterosexual and temporal ignored both the deployment of cyberpunk by female writers, and cyberpunk as a feminist and queer form of
expression. Feminist critics from Joan Gordon (1991) to Claudia Springer (1999b) have also contributed to this heterosexualised male image by reifying a masculinised version of both technology and cyberpunk. Whilst white, heterosexual male anxieties and dreams are played out in sub-cultural media, novels and films of cyberpunk, a parallel universe of feminist science fiction also explored ideas about cyberspace, artificial intelligence and bioengineering to a different effect. Although Kathy Acker and Pat Cadigan are the only female authors of fiction mentioned in Storming the Reality Studio, this collection links Acker to the centre of cyberpunk, infusing it with a sense of queercore. Another, different kind of feminist interjection is Marge Piercy’s Body of Glass (1991) where actions in cyberspace are imagined whilst a careful attention is paid to the means of production and conditions that enable use of virtual technologies. Care and effort is required to prepare for engagement with virtual space in Piercy’s version. The protagonists are injured and need rest after engaging; the production of an avatar requires creativity and effort. Labour, the means of production and temporal and spatial specificity do not simply disappear. In Trouble and Her Friends (1994) Melissa Scott directly correlates engagement in virtual space as related to the conditions of queer embodiment. In Neuromancer, conversely, engagement with cyberspace is a process of jacking-in, escaping from the ‘meat’ and navigating a glittery cyberspace, leaving the body behind and lacking an account of the means by which such engagement could be imagined to take place. The political economy of popular film requires a more consolidated target market than that of textual forms so it is not surprising that previous films that could be attributed to cyberpunk, for example TRON (1982), WarGames (1983) and Lawnmower Man (1992), reflect the transcendent, male-dominated, hard technology themes of cyberpunk for the boys.

By the time The Matrix (1999) came into production feminist and queer forms and arguments had accrued some visibility and queer interventions into film, like Dandy Dust (1998), had seen the light of the screen, albeit in ‘niche’ markets only. Mary Flanagan and Austin Booth articulate this challenge in their introduction to Reload: Rethinking Women and Cyberculture: ‘We wished to show students that our techno-culture, imagined so creatively by writers such as William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Rudy Rucker and Neal Stephenson (and re-imagined by popular Hollywood cinema), is actively being reshaped by women’s voices’ (2002:1). The Matrix trilogy can be read as part of this process of ‘re-imagination’ by popular Hollywood cinema as the trilogy does not engage with the feminist and queer interventions that renders literary cyberfiction a more complex form.¹ In this context, the Matrix films represent a regressive vision of cyberculture; a cinematic representation of the works of the canonical male cyberpunk authors. That said, in re-working cyberspace through a visual medium, the films have a significant impact on the representation of cyberspace and the terms of cyberpunk in significant ways, particularly through a rendering of cyberspace as the grounds for subjectivity, as technological excess and in re-working technologised culture. The

¹
extra-textual social context of *The Matrix* is the post-web context of cyberculture, where, as a trope, cyberspace has moved from sub-cultural, to popular, to the critical, and is currently being absorbed into everyday life. Thomas Foster, in this volume, describes this context of ubiquity as ‘third generation’. In this latter phase cyberspace disappears altogether, subsumed as a subcultural effect into the embedded everyday reality of the commercial and ubiquitous world wide web. *The Matrix* simultaneously re-popularises cyberculture whilst rendering it as a product of this technological excess. It symbolises the return of the modern re-packaged in a postmodern aesthetic and represents a resurrection of dualism over the materialism of the web. The changing representations of cyberculture and the tensions of dystopia and excess in a popular context are explored here, firstly through a discussion of prior representations of cyberspace and a review of the cultural context of cyberculture; secondly, through an analysis of the figuration of technology, the body and the social in the *Matrix* films which points to the conservative effects of the text and its production of the subject through a technological ontology.

**PRIOR REPRESENTATIONS**

Representations of cyberspace in science fiction films have been largely distinct from the cyberspace of the virtual reality (VR) Matrix construct in the *Matrix* films. Avoiding the effects issue, some films have not graphically figured cyberspace at all. *WarGames*, for example, dealt with computer space as an imagined arena, which had effects that could be seen on-screen within the film. However, since these were directly impacting on the ‘actual world’ of the film, the effects were enough to imply an imagined realm where action and agency occurred without ever representing it visually. As with other films an emergent AI is translated into an audio effect, a voice, which is then used as an aural cue to signify the existence of ‘others’ in a cyberspatial domain. *TRON* and, ten years later at a very different cost, *Lawnmower Man* addressed the issue by using a visual ‘dipped in digital’ look where cyberspace is symbolised by an immersive digital aesthetic that appears to ‘coat’ the protagonists. Thus, cyberspace as represented through an aesthetic of realism signals a new departure in filmic representation. The problematic of rendering cyberspace on-screen has been dealt with in a variety of other ways including devices such as memory and vision, usually mediated by a screen. The suspension of disbelief required to be convinced by a cinematic cyberspace when rendered through effects has proved problematic. Cyberspace has arguably been most successfully rendered in the novel form and Gibson’s version of cyberspace is compelling precisely because it must be imagined. Graphic visualisation requires belief in the image rather than driving the imagination to conjure up visions in the mind. Gibson goes part of the way toward explaining this when he uses Case to relate cyberspace to the ‘nonspace’ of the mind (1984:67). Cyberspace can work as an imagined trope; can it work as a visual image?
Other visual media forms such as animation, VR, games development and digital installation work have often rendered cyberspace more successfully than film. VR is largely immersive and is the experiential event through which cyberspace exists. Animation, digital art and installation can be used to evoke the fantastic and imagined to a greater effect sometimes than film, which has historically been imbued with the pervasive aesthetic of photorealism (Manovich 2001: 202). These other forms also represent the same technologies through which cyberspace can be imagined to enter into cultural experience. Blue screen, digital effects, animation and digital installation; it is through art, aesthetics and technologies that cyberspace is in any case spatially realised. However, as Len Manovich as well as Andrew Darley have argued, the history of film is also the history of illusion; the visual realisation of the spectacular and fantastic. Darley traces how spectacle and illusion sit alongside the developments of realism and narrative that came to dominate the cinematic form. He argues that current developments in visual digital culture can be seen as a re-awakening of the nineteenth-century spectacular forms: ‘Broadly what these latest forms share with their earlier counterparts is their primary concern with procuring and possessing the eyes, with exciting, shocking or charging the senses. Technique and skill is central to producing such an effect’ (2001: 56). Conjoined with science fiction – the genre of possible futures – film has ranged through the representation of robots, automata, aliens, other worlds and space exploration to contemporary concerns with cybernetics, biotechnology and the network society.\(^2\) *Terminator* (1984), *Robocop* (1987) and *Hardware* (1990) revolve around a human/machine continuum that combines the machine with the flesh and an idea of spirit. These figures inhabit a social world in these films and appear as an excess or interruption into a culture still founded on a nature/artefact binary. Earlier realisations of cyberspace such as *TRON* and *Lawnmower Man* also maintain a cyberspace/actual space divide, which separates out a technologised space from a ‘natural’ social space and use spectacle and illusion to represent this. The cyberspace of *TRON* is imagined to be inside the computer game and in *Lawnmower Man* it stems from a high-tech scientific apparatus.

However, as communication networks have come to saturate contemporary experiences of culture, the need to represent virtual space as embedded in, and part of, the fabric of everyday life, has become a more acute problem for science fiction genres. The *Matrix* films meet the challenge to represent the saturation of technology in the present and also represent a future in which technology has become both invisible and omnipresent. They re-create the spectacular and move away from realist narrative into spectacular montage and effect. However, the apparatus of film is used to stand in for the apparatus of cyberspace so that the fantastic freedoms that cyberspace is imagined to offer can be realised within its own terms, rather than trying to draw an audience in through another ‘wall’ in the diachronic image. The apparatus of film is used to create illusions that distract from the impossibility of cyberspace to convey the virtual through visceral effect. The effect of this representation of cyberspace through an
aesthetic realism is the political assertion of a technoscientific ontology. The subjects of *The Matrix* cannot move beyond technology but only reflect it back, as it is no longer distinct but ontological. This technological ubiquity of the present is thus dealt with by the virtual becoming the ground of existence.

**CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE**

Cyberpunk in cinema continues to both express and critique the capitalist, computer- and information-dominated cultures of the present. Like other science fiction forms it is ‘not so much an image of the future, but the metaphorical evocation of life in the present’ (Fitting 1991: 299). As a genre it takes the technologies of the present and builds a narrative fiction around the possibilities and dangers that these technologies appear to offer. It also has an effect in the development of these technologies by generating public awareness, anxieties and enthusiasm, and it feeds into cyberecultures. Fiction and social practice are recursive in specific ways; most obviously the same language is used for both. In Neal Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* (1992), the term ‘avatar’ was initially claimed as an original deployment, although post-publication he noted that this term had been in use in actual cyberspatial practice for some years. Likewise Gibson’s use of the term ‘cyberspace’ was used as the title of Michael Benedikt’s collection on virtual reality, artificial intelligence, artificial life and the internet: *Cyberspace: First Steps* (1991). Thus, the social imaginary of cyberspace discursively feeds into the social practices of computer-mediated communication and concepts of cyberculture, and vice versa. The concept of cyberspace structures the imagined space mediated through the internet, game space, virtual reality, mobile telephony, radio and television. This cultural space is also constructed through the imagined as well as through communication practices. The term ‘cyberspace’ has many limitations and evokes determinism and hyperbole, and a further issue of using the term is the spatiality implied by the metaphor. However, although communication technologies do not constitute a space, it is through spatial metaphors that they have been configured (website, cyberspace, and so on). The social construction of these media has occurred through the discursive use of space, place, domain and site descriptors. They intervene with the spatial: the computer is on (and configured as) the desktop, mobile telephony accompanies the body, and games and television are nested into domestic spaces.

As well as cyberspace, the themes of biotechnology, genetic engineering and bio-engineering are dominant in cyberpunk and cyberfiction. So too are the information and media industries which are firmly intertwined through computer-generated media, conflating media with information. These themes are central to the imagination of cyberspace but they are also endemic features of the societies depicted in these novels and films and of the cultures from which these texts emerge. Information is central to these texts – within cyberspace and external to it – and the media is always
an essential or imposed feature of the fictional social life of the genre. These elements also intrude into the personal spheres of all these texts, articulating societies in which there is no clear boundary between either public/private or media/society. Cyberpunk critiques the notion of the private nuclear family and points to the intrusion of a public capitalism into individual lives, bodies and psyches. In the social world of the Matrix films this intrusion becomes totality. However, it is not only the shape of contemporary or future technology which are the concerns of cyberpunk. Also central is the way in which we imagine or perceive these technologies and how they relate to the ways in which we think about ontology and epistemology. A primary point of departure for redefining these are the boundaries, interfaces and relationships between human and machine. The Matrix trilogy engages with modes of connection to cyberspace, the existence of artificial intelligences and bioengineering. These are the areas in which actuality as well as imagination traverses these boundaries.

TECHNOLOGIES OF CYBERSPACE

Methods for representing cyberspace vary in fiction and several different forms have been tried in film. In Gibson’s matrix, the characters are jacked-in directly through a cyberspace deck. Through the creation of a visual representation of this framework, the Matrix films map directly onto this formulation in literary cyberpunk and the significant contribution that the trilogy makes is that it creates a visual anchor for this conceptualisation. Significantly The Matrix inverses the ‘body as prison and matrix as freedom’ equation found in Gibson’s novels and represents the Matrix as the prison and the experience of the body as an existential, if not physical, locus of freedom. There are alternative visions of cyberspace in fictions such as Stephenson’s Snow Crash in which cyberspace, as the Metaverse, is a parallel domain. Connection is more traditional in the sense that it is similar to actual virtual reality interfaces. It is not wired into the body and in the narrative of Snow Crash, there is no direct physical connection. Actions in cyberspace have little direct relevance to actions in actuality. If an avatar is destroyed in cyberspace the person will merely be disconnected from the Metaverse. One of the key components of Snow Crash, however, is the virus of the title, which can be contracted through cyberspace. Thus, although there is initially no direct connection between cyberspace and actuality, developments in the narrative lead to an eventual continuum between them. This has echoes in the VR construct of The Matrix where VR death means bodily death and Agent Smith, another virus, develops to traverse the virtual/actual space boundary in the second and third films of the trilogy. Thus the significance of The Matrix is in translating the fictional cyberspace of novelistic cyberpunk into a mainstream cinematic realisation.

Earlier attempts to realise cyberspace on screen drew on the ‘strange and stylish’ (Green 2001:150) VR headgear theme and the films Lawnmower Man and Strange Days (1995) provide very different examples of this. An aesthetic problem with this...
structure is that on-screen images have yet to successfully render other screens as sites of action with which to propel the plot. In the same way that an image of the television screen is rarely used in television narrative, so a VR screen or visor is difficult to get into an appropriate camera angle. In the *Matrix* films we see only a few instances of the characters’ actual bodies when they are ‘jacked-in’ precisely because there is nothing to watch. The narrative can only be propelled through the construction of the audience as witness to that which the characters experience in VR; not by watching them physically experience VR. *The Matrix* is concerned with the experience of actual bodies and this is reflected in the reconfiguration of Gibson’s cyberspace as a prison, which is conversely the role of the body in *Neuromancer*. The *Matrix* trilogy represents cyberspace as the ultimate panopticon. In the films the ‘mass’ of human bodies are inert, suspended unconsciously in tanks. Milked for its energy by the dominant machines, the body is fed a vision of life, a virtual subjectivity, through cyberspace to ensure its somatic state. Like the panopticon, these bodies are surveyed without knowledge of their surveyors in a centralised system of power. However, the illumination of literal light in the nineteenth-century panopticon is displaced by the light of virtual reality which is shone upon these bodies to blind them to the presence of both their oppressors and state of oppression. Thus we see in the cyberfictions of the 1990s, epitomised in *The Matrix* through the valorisation of the humans who can break out of the VR Matrix construct, a return to the material body. It is not incidental that this has occurred simultaneously with the movement of cyberpunk into mainstream culture through film. However, even in the 1980s writers were destabilising cyberpunk by releasing it from both the assumptions of Platonic dualism and those of heteronormativity, and through constructing posthuman identities, which reconfigure the patterns of heterosexual desire by deconstructing the binaries of identity. Thus, although the *Matrix* trilogy is a reactive return to a heterosexual, male-dominated, immaterial technoculture, there are spaces both in the text and the discursive context of cyberculture to allow for alternative readings.

**HUMANS, MACHINES AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY**

*The Matrix*, like its contemporary, *eXistenZ*(1999) has a very different approach to the problem of on-screen cyberspace. The virtual space of cyberspace is rendered through an aesthetic of spectacular realism. Instead of being asked to believe that a digital aesthetic or a screen should signify cyberspace, the audience is asked to collude in the imagining of cyberspace as somewhere that looks no different and is ‘virtually’ impossible to distinguish from actual and physical space. The problematic of ‘where’ cyberspace exists, is also solved by having the plot begin within cyberspace; with the presence of the actual world gradually emerging as the film develops. Technology is revealed as the infrastructure, and virtual and actual spaces exist in different domains within this absolute encapsulation. A dystopic horror is mobilised through the films
of the *Matrix* trilogy by the use of digital technology to represent humanity’s terrible, excessive, monstrous other. Technology is excess in these films, it exceeds everything and pushes out into all of the known space of the film and dominates the *mise-en-scène*. Even when it is not visually realised through such props as the machines, the ships, the jack-in devices, the battery farms or the screens of code, it exists through everything. In the Matrix scenes where there are few technological artefacts (except phones), the audience is asked to imagine that everything is a digital image, without physical actuality. Thus the technological excess of the Matrix construct is signed through a lack of obvious technology. At this point the world is so saturated with it that technology disappears from sight. Ubiquity renders the digital invisible, the unmarked default that can no longer be apprehended. Outside of the Matrix scenes, conversely, the audience is constantly reminded of its prevalence and omnipresence through the display of technologised artefacts and effects.

In the aesthetics of the films technology exceeds; the screen literally drips technology, the streams of code drop down through the cinema screen. Technology seeps into every field of vision, except within the Matrix construct. The metropolis of the VR Matrix is dark, dystopian, chaotic, crowded, deserted and, at the end, beautiful as the dawn. Aurora and Valhalla share the final curtain in the third film, after Christian mythology, oracles, prophets, trinity, the dreamer and the saviour of humanity have had their turn. Amongst this pantheon, code provides the backdrop, framework and wallpaper. When this marker of the technology is absent, the plot is in the ‘illusion’ mode when the characters are in the VR Matrix. Conversely, Zion is marked by a lack of digital technology. Here is the mechanical, mechanised, what you see is what you get, home-grown tools, proper to the properly human. The digital marks the bad; those animalistic machines, such as the sentinels that swarm and flock with a-life features in a post-mechanical machine world. However, even these are less malicious, more indifferent, than the software agents of the VR Matrix such as the Merovingian and Agent Smith which simulate the human body and appear to exercise a malicious and sadistic intent. The lack of the digital marks the human ideal in both the filmic ‘actual’ of Zion and the filmic ‘virtual’ of the VR Matrix. The digital signals the call to the real, from the unreal, when moving from the VR Matrix to the machine/human world, and it signals the return, the passage through liminal space from ‘being jacked-in’, to returning to Zion.

The *Matrix* trilogy is used to symbolise a return of the repressed: modernity in postmodernity or humanism in posthumanism. If modernism is conceived as anxiety for a loss of the authentic and postmodernism subverts this loss into celebration of surface then *The Matrix* reproduces the modernist anxiety over loss of the authentic through its obsession over concepts of the real (for example, Tasty Wheat). Where humanism locates the human subject as supreme, posthumanism acknowledges other actors in the network. The *Matrix* films try to evacuate these other actors and reproduce the human as central. A determination to reassert the human over the machine and put
those cyborgs, programs, agents and viruses back into their artefactual boxes, can be read into the trilogy. The narrative and effects combine to re-package some archetypal values of Christian modernism. A sense of decline from a golden age (humanism) through the fall (war with the machines); decay and loss of ‘values’, as humans are commodified as ‘batteries’; and nostalgia for ‘reality’ and ‘authenticity’ are all central to the film. As Neo finally wins a reprieve for the whole of humanity at the end of the third film, his body ascends into a heaven bathed in golden light. These modernist anxieties about re-centering the human and the real are also propelled through the highly naturalised and heterosexually plot and characterisation. Heterosexual love and the hero win through in the end. Mapping on to chivalric quests, heroic narratives and epic myths, the storyline of trilogy draws on a range of traditional archetypes, characters and plot elements. Neo appears as ‘the One’ who saves humanity. The one hero, the one god, the epic questing knight; the range of archetypes is limited but very familiar. Digital technology and the machines are initially combined in one monster/alien formation. At the end of the third film, and also in the Animatrix shorts (2003) the machines are differentiated from software agents. Agent Smith, the software agent, who is also Neo’s other, or zero to Neo’s one, in the binary code mythology of the film, becomes the excessive other of the machines.

Within the plot the machines of the films originate as mechanised robots, automatons and computers created and thus subject to human agency. The machines gain the ascendant and enslave the humans when the creators neglect their responsibility toward the machines. In a bid to shut down the machines that depend on light for power, the humans detonate nuclear devices to propel the planet into a nuclear winter without sunlight. The machines promptly change power sources and use human bodies instead. The machines create the VR Matrix construct to keep the human ‘batteries’ alive but asleep. In the VR construct the software agents start to exceed the machines and Agent Smith threatens another excessive ascendancy. Neo joins up with the machines and bargains for a temporary peace based on the eradication of the new machine other; humanity and mechanisation prevail over the viral and the digital.

SPACE AND TECHNOLOGY

In the cinematically imagined world of the Matrix films, technology has become the spatial totality of the known world because it encapsulates the planet. The only prior ontological status is technological, prior to human in the temporal specificity of Neo’s experience. The machine world outside of the VR Matrix is a layer of armature with bubbles of human space contained within it. There is thus no space ‘outside’ of the technologised infrastructures that contain and constrain the human bodies. There are two types of interior space: firstly the inner world of the Matrix, which is the only spatial domain that allows freedom of movement – this domain also simultaneously creates the illusion of a less technologised world, a metropolis space mapping onto
the audiences' concept of the world outside of the film text; secondly, a kind of space is that immediate to the human body – technology contains the human bodies within the battery farms and within the tunnels, ships and Zion space. This latter body space is in short supply and the humans exist in a claustrophobic hive environment within the earth. These body spaces are analogous to Michael Bull’s concept of aural ‘shells’ which allow walkman users to reconfigure urban spaces (2001:244); like the ships in the Matrix films, such spaces allow gestures toward resistance. However, like Dante’s typology of the cosmos these are hierarchies of containment; the technologised hell of the battery farms and the inner earth space of Zion are subsets of the world of the machines. The non-material space, which allows freedom of movement and a virtual ‘outside’ to the embrace of technology, exists only in the Matrix construct, echoing Margaret Wertheim’s argument that cyberspace emerges as a ‘soul space’, a way of representing another space beyond the physical universe in a worldview where nothing except the physical can be understood as real (2000:253).

In the films, technology has overwhelmed the world to the extent that there is no ‘outside’. The only glimpse of an outside space is when Neo and Trinity are momentarily propelled above the cloud layer of radioactive waste that covers the earth in the third film. All the other scenes in the films are in the dark claustrophobic interior spaces of the machine world. Technology has become the enclosure of everything diegetically known. Although knowledge is an ambiguous concept in these films it is not an intellectual knowledge that is appealed to here. The visceral experience of life, the ontological ground of existence is the category of technology. In this imaginary, technology has literally displaced humanity at many levels. At the level of the space of the plot, the machines have taken over the world and enslaved the humans or driven them underground. Human action and agency is thus displaced from the space of the world to small pockets or somatic conditions. Technology has displaced the human in terms of agency; the promise of the re-ascendancy of human agency and intervention into the machine world is the salvation narrative propelled and temporarily resolved by Neo. The ‘other’ of the human has grown so monstrously uncontainable that it drives the human out of existence and only allows it to return in the dream world of the Matrix.

Technology is the excess that has broken the bounds of containment and knows no boundaries. It inserts itself into the micro-structures of the physical body and the dream space of the mind. It also encapsulates and regulates the physical and non-material spaces of the world at the macro level. It is both within and without, structuring all, into a dystopic nightmare of slavery and control. Technology has a similar functionality in the Matrix trilogy as the plot devices of horror and science fiction films; it is the invader, the contagion and the alien. The authentic human hero wakes up to find that the invasion has already happened, and true to cold war mythologies, the enemy was always within. Technology has a doubled function, however, compared to the alien invaders of other films. It represents the enemy within as the invader that
can ‘pass’ but is also portrayed as a direct result and creation of human agency. A familiar narrative is evoked where human agency develops technologies and then these artefacts in turn develop agency and reproduction. Thus the agency of the human is displaced by the more powerful agency of the machine. Mapping onto myths such as Pandora’s box, the Matrix films are a projection of the consequence of humans failing to control, emotionally, physically and psychically. Human agency remains the determining factor of the dystopia of the Matrix films because humans are seen as actively causal through the back-story where they destroyed the ecology of the planet to try and defeat the machines. The ‘present’ dystopia of films is a technoscientific totality where there is no space except the virtual and no hope except temporary reprieve. However, the causal history of human intervention remains an important mythology in the plot as human actors constantly struggle to regain an ability to act in the world. It is this history that gives them agential hope. When Morpheus relates the history of the Matrix to Neo this becomes a narrative of historical agency, which therefore allows future possibility. This storytelling conversely renders the world of the Matrix even more dystopic to the audience as the ultimate futility of human life becomes unveiled and this narrative of hope is reduced to a delusional myth.

**CHANGING CYBERCULTURES**

The imagined world of the Matrix films achieves a representation and communication of a particular cultural moment in the US. It simultaneously reloads into cyberpunk a different imaginary and paradoxically it also heavily reinforces existing tropes. In terms of changing cybercultures, the popularisation of the hacker as hero is at its most effective in this film; this male figure finally transformed from bedroom geek or cyber-terrorist into the hero of humanism and the saviour of the known world. Simultaneously there is an inversion of the aesthetics of cyberspace from a digital effect into the naturalised environment as cyberspace becomes the familiar; what and where we are already. The Matrix trilogy provides a visual representation of the spatial re-configuration of the universe, already constructed in cyberpunk novels, postmodern criticism and conceptualisations of cyberspace. A further change to visual cyberpunk is the intensification of artefactual and organic relations. Where cyborgs and cyber-spaces have been separated from the human in previous films, in the films the human/machine continuum is strengthened to a point beyond mutual imbrication into a total immersion in a technologised world. This completes the shift from a view that there is nothing outside the cultural/social; to a paradigm where there is no ‘outside’ to the technological. This commentary on the present puts the social and the human very claustrophobically, ‘always already’ inside the digital net. Technology does not merely saturate everyday life but transforms the conditions of reality. Like Donna Haraway’s more utopic figuration of the cyborg, any human ‘we’ is always already in ‘the belly of the beast’ (Wyatt 2001: 77). The cyborg represented the transformation of individual
subjectivity; the Matrix films promise the total transformation of the conditions of reality.

Like other hi-tech visions such as Blade Runner (1982) the present in the Matrix films is a dystopic hell encapsulated by an unfeeling global machine alliance that partially is indifferent to the life of the human and seeks to eliminate human agency entirely. In this context, the end of The Matrix Revolutions (2003) is radical in terms of the film’s own imaginary because the machine world acknowledges human agency in the meeting with Neo. The faceless corporation morphs into the representation of a face and admits a need that Neo can meet. Contemporary concerns about human agency in the face of global capitalism and the authenticity of human apprehension the face of a media-saturated society are mirrored in these films and resolution is temporarily granted. These are the traditional areas of cyberpunk and in many ways the most significant change that the Matrix trilogy brings to the genre is a visualisation of William Gibson’s cyberspace. The plausibility and coherence of the cinematic world is strongest in the first film which breaks new ground in the visualisation of cyberculture. It does this in a way that the final two films of the trilogy can no longer maintain, as they necessarily act as a continuum to the first. The changing cybercultures represented by the cinematic displays of these films echo the fears and paranoia both inculcated and resisted through contemporary communication technologies. These fears about the saturation of digital technologies into everyday life clearly evoke questions about reality, and the value of life in the face of potential extinction through self-induced wars and ecological disaster. What occurs in the films is a visual exploration of subjectivities that can navigate the cyberspaces of the technoculture. What such an exploration reveals is that when such a world is visualised and such subjectivities inhabit the cinematic framework, the totalising power of technoscience appears to be complete. The Matrix is a dystopic trilogy in the sense that there is no other ground to that of technology, no alternative paradigm to that of information. Thus, no other position can be gained and no other subjectivity can be produced. The rendering of the real through cyberspace in these films, whilst an aesthetic leap forward, simultaneously manifests a regressive politics in the production of a paranoid sense of totality and closure where technoscience is all.

NOTES

1 As well as marking substantial differences from previous cyberpunk films, the trilogy also contains many continuities. The cyberculture of the Matrix films is a conventionally male-dominated space with women largely represented as archetypes and/or stereotypes, whether it be as the heterosexual love interest (for example, Trinity), keeping the home fires burning (the women and children as the heroes of the siege of Zion), or as the instinctive (the Oracle).

2 For a greater elaboration of these contemporary social concerns see Manuel Castells’ The

For example, War of the Worlds (1953), Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956) or The Stepford Wives (1975).