

Postmodern Motifs and Ambience in Cyberpunk Films

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...on the Example of the Wachowski Brothers' *The Matrix*.

In his *Postmodernism for Beginners*, Richard Appignanesi suggests that postmodernism is something unavoidable, stating that "modern is always historically at war with what comes immediately before it" (1995 : 19) and, therefore, "is always post-something" (1995 : 19). Consequentially, postmodernism is modernism that was taken to its extremes and became its own contradiction. This necessity of modernism to become its own negation in order to be reborn in a new form derives from the fact that any kind of art "can only progress towards its own self-annihilation" (Appignanesi, 1995 : 45). As it is a constant tendency of the mankind to always progress toward modernity, it must have become an unceasing tendency as well to annihilate the modern and shaping the postmodern of what was left, the cultural remains.

No wonder that postmodernism, which probably has its roots in architecture, had made literature its home and soon started invading different genres and sub-genres, as well as "infecting" other arts and, finally, became so widespread that it is almost ubiquitous.

A sub-genre of science-fiction, cyberpunk is an exceptional example of postmodern literature, as it was, though perhaps unintentionally, postmodern from its very beginning. Film art, on the other hand, though far from being postmodern in its origins, easily adopted postmodernity, as the make-believe nature of film art allows blending conventions and playing with images to present to spectators pictures of credibility unknown to readers of postmodern literature.

A fusion of cyberpunk and film seems to be unavoidable. Yet, only few cyberpunk films have been made so far. Among them, the most famous and spectacular - perhaps the only cyberpunk film known outside the science fiction ghetto - and yet the most postmodern is the Wachowski Brothers' *The Matrix*.

If anything can be learned from postmodernity - apart from being engaged in its game played with a reader or a spectator, that is - its message will be not to trust what can be seen, to question everything - a message that, apart from informing, still plays a dirty trick on its recipient.

This is exactly the message of *The Matrix*. The whole idea of the film is an assault not only on spectators' senses, but on their common sense as well. Leaving the cinema, one may think about being so fortunate and living in the reality of the 1990s, and not in the monstrous future depicted on the big screen. Yet, after a moment, one realizes that the characters in the film also think that they live in the relatively peaceful 1990s. According to a French philosopher, Jean-François Lyotard, the condition of postmodernism is "scepticism towards all metanarratives" (Appignanesi, 1995 : 103). The postmodern ambience of the film makes spectators question yet another metanarrative - this of the time they live in - and of what they perceive as reality.

In the film itself this reality is nothing more than Jean Baudrillard's postmodern simulacrum : an image that originated from a reflection of the reality (here, the world at the end of the 20th century) only to become, through masking the absence of the reality, an independently existing simulacrum that has no relation to any reality (Appignanesi, 1995 : 130-132). Appignanesi denotes that the people of today "are living what has

already been lived and reproduced with no reality anymore but that of the cannibalized image" (1995 : 49). In *The Matrix* the future people live something even worse : a simulation of that cannibalized image. The reference to Baudrillard's ideas is not a coincidence, as the protagonist of the story, Neo, is shown hiding illegal software in Baudrillard's book *Simulacra & Simulation*, just as gunfighters in classic western films used to hide their weapons in the Bible. Moreover, the French philosopher is quoted throughout the film.

The above mentioned borrowing from westerns is not the only one. *The Matrix*, as a good postmodern work, plays with conventions and motifs and, therefore, quotes all the time. The directors play with viewers, making them guess the original sources - and those are numerous. From the Kafkaesque scene of Neo's interrogation to the shooting scene that resembles of Arnold Schwarzenegger entering the police station in the first *Terminator*. From antagonists in a form of mysterious agents, resembling of a modern myth of Men In Black, to Neo playing Superman in the final scene. Or from the Alien-like scene of debugging Neo to the reversed version of the *Snow White*. Not to mention quoting *Through the looking Glass* and *The Wizard of Oz*. But probably the most important citations are those from the Bible. The anagram of the main character's name is One and he is often, though not directly, referred to as the Messiah. Other biblical images, as the one of Zion, continuously reappear throughout the film. And all of that is served in the sauce of mixed and blended conventions : of science fiction film, of action movie, even of romance and horror - and all of that with ever-present touch of humor.

The general concept of *The Matrix* - of the virtual replacing the real - enables one to treat the "not-really-real" reality presented in the film as text and, therefore, allows textualization of the whole story - and of the character's lives - to a degree not possible in any conventional setting. What we used to consider real is said to be nothing more than simulation. What we used to consider fantasy is now a frightening reality - that of machines taking over the world. But the future people mostly live within the text, within the fantasy created by the machines - within the matrix. Most of them are only readers, taking this simulated reality "as is". But the initiates can shape it to their will, just as creative readers can reinterpret the text. The most vicious antagonists, sinister agents, are neither people not even real beings, but merely computer programs. The agents exist only within the text, yet they can harm, even kill. Here, a play with conventions is also a play on words : those agents look like government officials working for a secret bureau, but an agent is also a computer program that automatically performs complex tasks.

Additionally, not only Neo, but many other names of characters have symbolic meaning as well. The man who wakes the human beings up from their seemingly endless sleep is Morpheus. The woman who completes the team of Neo and Morpheus is called Trinity. And, finally, the traitor's name is Cypher, bearing a suspicious resemblance to Lucypher.

Among the people who have seen *The Matrix*, there are those who may have liked its spectacular moments at first, but little by little grew disappointed with the film and, finally, started to disregard it, seeing it as nothing more but a series of kung-fu fights in science fiction setting. Many reviewers think that way. But people who like the film can watch it innumerable times, and every time they see it, they spot new elements and layers in this postmodern riddle.