THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS:
THE *MATRIX* FRANCHISE AND INTERPRETATION

By
Russ Kale

A thesis
submitted to the Victoria University of Wellington
in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts
in Film

Victoria University of Wellington

2014

Thesis Abstract

This thesis analyses the reception of the *Matrix* trilogy by paying close attention to the work of film reviewers, and academic commentators who interpret the films from a religious perspective. The methodology of the project involves using a historical reception studies approach based on the work of Janet Staiger. The film reviews display an interest in the trilogy's action sequences and its numerous cultural references. As the trilogy proceeds, the reviewers become increasingly concerned about the emphasis on spectacle. I argue that these interests can be understood in terms of debates in Film Studies around the 'cinema of attractions' and the tensions between narrative and spectacle in contemporary Hollywood cinema. The Christian, Buddhist and Gnostic religious academic commentaries all utilise an allegorical approach to the trilogy. As a result, they interpret the films through the prism of good versus evil. They also stress the importance of the acquisition of knowledge. In my opinion, the film reviews and religious interpretations share an interest in unity or singularity. This parallels the narrative of the trilogy, specifically the quest for 'the One'.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	iv
INTRODUCTION: “This is the Construct”	1
CHAPTER ONE: “Terrific Stunts and a Stunted Script”	13
Characterisation of Reception	23
Analysis of Reception	38
CHAPTER TWO: “My Own Personal Jesus Christ”	53
Characterisation of Reception	58
Analysis of Reception	77
CONCLUSION: “Everything That Has a Beginning Has an End”	97
APPENDIX A: Franchises and Narratives	107
APPENDIX B: Franchises and Timelines	113
WORKS CITED	115
MEDIA TEXTS CITED	124

Acknowledgments

This thesis was helped into print by a small rebel army of friends, supporters and assistants. Thanks must be paid to all of them, but especially Bryn Jones, Alex Cass, Elizabeth Haynes, Mel Duncan, Sara Bryan, and Daniel Atkins, who provided moral support when it was most needed. Additional gratitude goes to my Oracle, Sharon Renfro, who, as Morpheus says, “told me exactly what I needed to hear; nothing more”. This project would barely have begun without the continuing support of my supervisor, Dr. Tim Groves, who somehow knew when I needed to be pushed further, and when I needed to be left to find the path myself. Finally, I am forever grateful to my parents, Ann and Alan, and my partner, Caleb, who all suggested they could still be proud of me even if I didn’t complete this project. Well, I guess now we don’t need to test that theory.

INTRODUCTION

“This is the Construct”

In a pivotal scene halfway through *The Matrix* (1999), Neo (Keanu Reeves) has a conversation with his eventual betrayer, Cypher (Joe Pantoliano), while Cypher is monitoring the Matrix. Surveying the screens filled with trickling green code, Neo asks “Do you always look at it encoded?” Cypher responds, “Well, you have to. [...] There’s way too much information to decode the Matrix.” Highlighting the abilities that come from nine years of this job, he matter-of-factly continues, “You know, I don’t even see the code. All I see is blonde, brunette, redhead...” This scene focuses on Cypher’s efforts to reinforce Neo’s doubts that he may be ‘the One’, the prophesied saviour of mankind. However, this exchange is also reminiscent of the ways in which various theorists and writers have interpreted the *Matrix* franchise. When confronted with the size, complexity and detail of the franchise, interpreters have often resorted to seeking out familiar patterns. Thus, they sculpt the apparently endless flow of cinematic, literary, cultural and religious references and allusions present in the franchise into recognisable shapes.

This thesis will investigate the reception of the *Matrix* trilogy by examining the work of film critics and academic commentators. In order to proceed, it is first necessary to discuss the shape of the *Matrix* franchise. The first film in the trilogy, *The Matrix* (Wachowski siblings), was released in 1999 and grossed nearly half a billion dollars at the box office worldwide.¹ The film made a deep impression on

¹ *The Matrix* was the fourth-highest-grossing film of 1999, beaten only by *Toy Story 2*, *The Sixth Sense*, and *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (Box Office Mojo).

the cinema landscape, causing Jeff Gordinier to describe it as “the future of movies” (‘The Year’). The film’s highly anticipated sequel, *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski siblings), was released in 2003. Despite receiving reviews that ranged from mediocre to abysmal, *Reloaded* achieved higher box office returns for its opening weekend than any other film released in 2003. The third instalment in the trilogy, *The Matrix: Revolutions* (Wachowski siblings), followed later that year. With the release dates of the sequels falling so close together, both Warner Brothers (the films’ distributors) and *Newsweek* declared that 2003 was “the year of ‘*The Matrix*’” (Gillis, 1; Gordon).

In order to experience the full breadth of the *Matrix* franchise, however, a consumer would have to engage with much more than the feature film trilogy. The franchise grew over time, with more texts expanding the world of *The Matrix*. These texts included nine short films released under the collected title *The Animatrix* and the video game *Enter the Matrix*, among others (Jenkins, *Convergence*, 104-5). In total, the franchise consists of forty-five texts across a range of media, including the aforementioned video games, feature and short films, but also tie-in comic books and online roleplaying games (MMORPGs).² All the component texts of the franchise were either directed or overseen by the Wachowskis, and as a result they form part of an ‘official’ textual universe. At times, these texts also provided narrative information that was only alluded to in the feature films. As expressed in the appendices to this thesis, for example, there is a gap in the narrative between *The Matrix* and *Reloaded*, in which a parcel of information is delivered to the ship *Nebuchadnezzar*. Although this event is only

² Further exploration of the component texts of the franchise can be found in the appendices and bibliography.

briefly referred to in *Reloaded*, parts of this event are explicitly shown in *Final Flight of the Osiris* and *Enter the Matrix*. Jenkins suggests that these connections might be seen as ‘gaps’ or ‘excesses’, depending on how the audience consumes the franchise, and that these features of the narrative might “confuse the spectator” (105-6). Jenkins proposes that, rather than employing redundancy as many other films might, the *Matrix* franchise is part of a “new Hollywood” form that rewards close attention (106). Jenkins argues that the *Matrix* franchise’s texts work together to create a “transmedia experience” (104). By this he means that a spectator can trace a story arc across a number of different texts and media. In the case of the *Matrix* franchise, the experience of the trilogy is enhanced by the consumption of other texts. “The consumer who has played the game or watched the shorts will get a different experience” (104). However, some of the other franchise texts appear to complicate this story arc. These texts, such as *World Record* and the *Comics* story ‘Butterfly’, have no direct connection to the characters or plot of the feature film trilogy. Instead, they serve to expand the world of the films.

The complexity of the transmedia narrative qualities of the *Matrix* franchise has a parallel in the extensive intertextuality that can be found in the *Matrix* corpus. Each text in the franchise contains its own specific cultural allusions. The *Comics* story ‘Burning Hope’, for example, makes several references to the myth of ‘Saint George and the Dragon’ (a reference that does not appear explicitly elsewhere in the franchise), as well as the works of Lewis Carroll (which do). Mike Milford characterises the franchise as an example of “postmodern allegory, replete with diverse ideological images and references”

(19). I will return to Milford's argument below. Some writers have noted a strong tendency towards pastiche in the first film. David Edelstein refers to *The Matrix* as "a mishmash of Hong Kong sword-fighting ghost epics, Kafkaesque virtual reality fantasies, Cronenbergian visions of cybernetically enhanced flesh [...] and portentous lumpen-Zen posturing" ('Altman's Gold'). In the academic literature, Goonan refers to the references in the film as coming from sources as diverse as "philosophy, Zen Buddhism, literature, old cartoons, comics, Jung, gaming, Rastafarianism, hacker culture, Goth, animé, Hong Kong kung fu movies, myth, Gnosticism, Judaism, visual movie and art quotes" (100).

The franchise's intertextuality has a corollary in the publication of numerous interpretations. Stacy Gillis claimed that, "The films have had more material published on and about them since the release of the first film than any other film in the same length of time" (1). The majority of the academic literature has focused on the feature film trilogy.³ This has resulted in a wide array of often competing views. There are interpretations of *The Matrix* from Christian, Buddhist, Taoist and Gnostic perspectives. Joshua Clover undertook a Marxist interpretation of *The Matrix*, commenting on the technocratic societies presented in the film. Aylish Wood explored the film's motif of collapsing spaces, considering how the text blurred the lines between technology and humanity, and illusion and reality. The articles collected by Christopher Grau in *Philosophers Explore The Matrix* include titles such as 'Morpheus and Berkeley on Reality', '*The Matrix* as Metaphysics', 'Artificial Ethics', and 'Plato's Cave and *The Matrix*'. Particular philosophical concerns about the nature of reality make frequent appearances in the critical literature. In Grau's collection alone, Plato's

³ See the bibliography of this thesis for an abbreviated list of the academic literature.

allegory of the cave and Berkeley's theories of reality are both discussed in three separate articles.⁴ Elsewhere, theorists interpreted the films using the work of Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard himself weighed in on the debate in an interview with *Le Nouvel Observateur*, arguing that *The Matrix* had misapplied his theories. The debate was later explored by Catherine Constable.

This reception study of the *Matrix* trilogy will concentrate on a range of film reviews in the first chapter and a selection of academic interpretations in the following chapter. I will attempt to identify trends in the literature, and then analyse the potential significance of them. In doing so, I will be employing a 'reception studies' framework that relies on the work of Janet Staiger.⁵ The focus of reception studies is not the text itself, but rather the 'event' of the encounter between spectators and texts. Staiger's framework does not seek to follow the paths of many existing theories of spectatorship. Much of the academic work on the role of the spectator seeks to explain the activities a viewer undertakes during the act of watching a film. Staiger discusses several examples of this tendency in the discipline, such as the work of Stuart Hall (*Media* 78-82). In 'Encoding/decoding', Hall theorised that spectators might read a text in a number of different ways. The "dominant-hegemonic" reading, for example, implied that the spectator reads the text in the way the maker has intended. The viewer "decodes the meaning [...] full and straight, and [thus] decodes the message" in a way appropriate to the encoding method (136). In the "negotiated" reading, the

⁴ For discussions of Plato, see Dreyfus and Dreyfus 84, Hanley 116, and Partridge 237-57. Berkeley is discussed in Mawson 29-39, Chalmers 135-6, and Warwick 201-3.

⁵ Staiger's key works in this area are *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* and *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*. Some of the underlying considerations of this approach are expanded on in *Media Reception Studies*.

spectator “operates with exceptions to the rule”, by acknowledging the overall intended meaning, but also constructing their own particular meanings within it (137). Finally, Hall theorises the “oppositional code”, in which a spectator wilfully disregards the intended meaning of a text, and instead applies his or her own framework (138). Staiger states that this particular model of categorising readings “has become fraught with problems”, partly due to the way in which this type of model can only deal with readers in abstract terms (*Media* 83). Staiger’s later work suggests instead that “context is more significant than textual features” in understanding particular interpretations (30). Her methods focus on how a work is received, the historical contexts in which it circulates, and how these encounters with texts might be interpreted.

Staiger’s approach emphasises the use of ‘traces’ – these are records of spectators’ interactions or ‘encounters’ with texts. Reception studies often adopts an ethnographical approach which entails interviewing people. Staiger has revised this method by using printed traces in order to conduct analyses of film reception in cases where interviews are no longer a viable option. The traces that form the basis of her analyses in what she calls ‘historical reception studies’ are comprised of materials such as film reviews, newspaper articles and letters. This particular approach will serve well for the discussion of the film reviews of the *Matrix* trilogy. However, it is necessary to modify Staiger’s approach in order to apply it to the academic interpretations because her work has not employed this type of material as traces. Furthermore, the definition of an event as ‘an encounter with a text’ may need to be expanded in order to apply a reception studies analysis to an entire franchise. I discuss these issues in chapter two.

The volume of texts in the *Matrix* franchise present a potential problem for a reception study in terms of feasibility because the analysis of the reception of forty-five texts across a number of different media is beyond the scope of a Master's thesis. This is particularly true considering the significant differences in the size of the reception for various texts. For example, there are hundreds of film reviews of each of the *Matrix* feature films in established publications. Taken by themselves, the reviews of the films are of a formidable number. Although reviews for the other component texts are more scarce and tend to be from niche publications, they add a significant amount to the body of critical writing.⁶ Similarly, there are more than 250 academic articles devoted to at least one film in the *Matrix* trilogy. However, these interpretations only occasionally draw supporting examples from the video game *Enter the Matrix*, and very rarely from other franchise texts such as the *Animatrix* short films.⁷ No article could be found that took a text outside the feature film trilogy as its primary focus of interpretation. Because the majority of the academic literature draws only on the *Matrix* trilogy, this project will limit its analysis of the critical literature to the trilogy as well. This should facilitate comparison between the two receptions. The size of the sample in each case study has been determined by the principles outlined in Staiger's work.

⁶ At the time of writing, the Internet Movie Database (IMDB) listed 291 "critic reviews" of *The Matrix*, 257 of *Reloaded*, and 236 of *Revolutions*. A significant number of these were reviews of showings of the films or of DVD releases, and were published in mainstream publications.

⁷ Of the fifteen articles in Grau's *Philosophers Explore The Matrix*, for example, only Rachel Wagner and Frances Flannery-Dailey's 'Wake Up!' refers to *Enter the Matrix* and *The Animatrix*. Both these texts are mentioned only once within the article.

There is a third body of reception that could be analysed here: that of fandom. There are significant difficulties associated with studying fandom reception, however, particularly in the age of the Internet. Fandom, as Henry Jenkins and others have argued, frequently involves the creation of unofficial texts, in the form of fanfiction, fanvids and fanart.⁸ “Fans construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images”, Jenkins writes (*Textual Poachers*, 23). These activities have the effect of expanding the textual universe of a franchise like the *Matrix* considerably. In turn, this presents a significant problem in terms of demarcating the limits of an event for the purposes of a reception study. The continuing construction of fan material makes it difficult to determine at what point ‘an engagement with a text’ ends. Furthermore, the methods of publishing and disseminating fan texts have diversified, making it far more complex to construct a representative sample of fan reception. Despite the formation of several specific websites for the collecting and fostering of fanfiction, for example, the sheer volume of smaller competing sites, as well as the growth of individual fan blogs, makes it practically impossible to collate all the textual evidence on the reception of a given franchise. In 2009, Karen Hellekson wrote on the rapidly proliferating forms of fan activity on the Internet, mentioning that personal and concrete forms of dissemination such as zines and conventions are still common. However, Hellekson notes that fans have embraced multiple Internet sources, including online blogging sites such as LiveJournal, “listservs and Yahoo! Groups” (‘Fan Studies’ 6). We are no longer purely in the age of photocopied fanzines and subscriptions to newsletters. This is particularly true in the case of the *Matrix* franchise; a text that is obsessed with both textual diversity and the idea of

⁸ Jenkins writes about fan-created *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* material in *Convergence Culture* (153-64; 178-86). Matt Hills’ *Fan Cultures* also explores the creation of fan material in an in-depth manner.

virtuality. Its online fandom is not particularly large, but this too makes ethnographic studies difficult. The Internet has indeed allowed fans to connect with each other, but locating them, or clearly delineating their presence, has become more difficult. A study of the online fandom of *Buffy, The Vampire Slayer*, for example, considered the postings on four message boards, having discarded the vast majority of a shortlist of forty-five candidates, and “thousands” of private boards (Kirby-Diaz 30-1). Kirby-Diaz acknowledges that the study focused on a “microscopic” fraction of the number of boards that existed at the time, and that even “a study of the top 100 boards” was far beyond the scope of the project (32). The difficulty of obtaining a representative sample of fan activity is even more difficult in smaller fandoms, such as that of the *Matrix* franchise, where much of the material may be impossible to even locate.

The first chapter of this thesis will focus on the reviews of the three feature films through a historical reception study. The target of this study will be a sample of reviews of the feature film trilogy. This representative sample will consist of eleven reviews of each of the films in the trilogy, and I will identify significant trends in this sample. One of the traits in these reviews is an emphasis on what might be termed the ‘spectacular’ elements of the films. This category would specifically include the trilogy’s martial arts sequences and, to a lesser extent, the use of computer generated imagery (CGI). I argue that this aspect of the trilogy’s reception can be understood in terms of recent debates in Film Studies about the function and potential decline of narrative and the associated increased importance of spectacle in contemporary Hollywood cinema. Accordingly, I draw on the work of Geoff King, Michelle Pierson and Scott Bukatman, who have written on the

relationship between narrative and spectacle. While Pierson and Bukatman argue that narrative becomes subordinated to spectacle in these sequences, King suggests that the relationship between the two is much more symbiotic.⁹ Another way of considering this use of ‘spectacular’ elements is through Tom Gunning’s concept of the ‘cinema of attractions’. This theory refers to a form of cinema that is argued to have been common before what Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger would refer to as the classical era of cinema. The cinema of attractions is notable for its “confrontational” mode of address, and breaking the illusion of a seamless cinematic world (*Perverse*, 13). It has been argued by several theorists, particularly Wanda Strauven, that this form has made a significant reappearance in some contemporary cinema. In fact, *The Matrix* has frequently been referred to by these theorists as a core example of this resurgence.¹⁰ The arguments that these spectacular elements are somehow ‘non-classical’, however, have also been refuted by David Bordwell, who writes that these spectacular elements are still narrative events, and still function as particular elements of classical filmmaking (*The Way*, 180).

Chapter two moves from the analysis of film reviews to academic literature. As I have indicated, there have been a range of academic interpretations of the trilogy. The reception study will concentrate on religious approaches. Within this sample, there are notable similarities between Christian interpretations and those based on Gnostic and Buddhist traditions. As a result, I will both employ and extend Mike Milford’s work on *The Matrix* and allegory. As Milford points

⁹ For more information on these authors and a more exhaustive list of the arguments I will cite, the reader is invited to consult the bibliography of this thesis.

¹⁰ See, for example, the cited works from Strauven’s *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*.

out, the traditional approach to allegory regards the text as “a vehicle for a fixed ideological message” (18). By contrast, a postmodern approach assumes that meaning is both flexible and diversified and that therefore “multiple interpretations can be embraced” (17). In Milford’s view, the *Matrix* franchise is clearly an example of postmodern allegory. However, Christian commentators interpret the films through the lens of traditional allegory (19). Traditional allegory involves “imbuing [the text] with an ideological power via a pretext” (20). Christian-oriented interpretations compare aspects of the *Matrix* trilogy to the Biblical narrative of the life of Jesus. Milford regards this (perhaps counterintuitive) return to traditional allegory as a form of ‘secondary allegory’. He writes that secondary allegory “retells the allegory while inserting a clear pretext” (23). That is, it reduces the postmodern text to a singular meaning by relating it to a single framework, rather than many. This process enables a reader to view a postmodern text as conveying a clear singular message. As well as furthering Milford’s exploration of the Christian interpretations, I will argue that Gnostic and Buddhist commentators also engage in secondary allegory.

The conclusion to this thesis will attempt to link the analyses performed in chapters one and two. These two analyses may appear on the surface to have little in common. They take different types of text as their object, and the tools of analysis employed for each of them are quite different. However, I shall argue that these two types of reception share an important trait. The critical reception discussed in chapter one can be understood, at least in part, in terms of a desire for balance. That is to say, these readings appear to value moments where narrative and spectacle work together. As Bordwell points out, this is a feature of the unified

classical text (*The Way* 106). In chapter two, I will suggest that the main religious approaches that commentators used to interpret the *Matrix* trilogy employ secondary allegory. Secondary allegory is, in a sense, a return to the certainty provided by traditional allegory. Moreover, those that employ secondary allegory assume a strong correspondence between the text that is being read and the pretext that they insert. This kind of approach tends to result in interpretations that unify two narratives, and which argue that the texts are the same to a high degree. Both the critical and academic receptions, then, are about singular meanings and unities within the texts they engage with. This thesis takes as its hypothesis that the reception of the *Matrix* trilogy is about the search for ‘the One’.

CHAPTER ONE

“Terrific Stunts and a Stunted Script”

The aim of this opening chapter is to investigate the critical literature surrounding the release of the *Matrix* franchise. This literature consists of a collection of reviews from various publications, and focuses on the three feature films in the trilogy: *The Matrix* (1999), *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), and *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003). The recurring traits in this literature will be identified and analysed in order to explore some of the pretexts and underlying assumptions that may be present. In particular, the notion that these films are read as somehow ‘unbalanced’ will be analysed in the context of two larger debates: that of the relationship between narrative and spectacle in contemporary Hollywood cinema, and the documented function of the *Matrix* trilogy as a return of the ‘cinema of attractions’.

Conceptual Framework

In order to identify recurring traits that may be present in the critical literature, an appropriate framework must be employed that focuses on the processes of interpretation. This project is not engaged in interpreting the films as textual objects; as a result, constructing an interpretation of the trilogy is not the intention of this chapter. Rather, the focus is on how these films are perceived by readers. A useful form of analysis in this regard is historical reception studies, especially the form employed by Janet Staiger in her work on film spectators. In her analysis of the reception of the Jonathan Demme film *The Silence of the*

Lambs, Staiger lays out several hypotheses that inform her work. These hypotheses are drawn from the foundations of reception studies. Taken by themselves, they form a basic overview of the preoccupations of reception studies. I will expand upon these assumptions here.

In Staiger's version of historical reception studies, the focus is not on a specific text directly, but on the engagement between a text and a reader, or group of readers. A particular text may be polyvocal: that is, it may have the potential to be read in many ways. However, what reception studies is concerned with is the reading of "the interactions between real readers and texts, actual spectators and films" (Staiger, *Interpreting* 8). Although it may at times explore paths of interpretation that were not taken, its function in these cases is to explore why such interpretations were not launched. Overall, however, reception studies is "meant to attend to the actual history of a text's social functioning", rather than a potential history (King, 'Hermeneutics' 217).

The first of Staiger's hypotheses is that "[i]mmanent meaning in a text is denied" (*Perverse* 162). In considering the construction of meaning within a text, it is possible to highlight three locations that meaning may present itself in: the producer (or production) of the text, the text itself, and the individual reader. Theories that hold that texts have an inherent meaning stress the relationship between the production and the text (*Interpreting* 8). Staiger identifies this tendency in the works of Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco and Noël Burch, among others (*Media* 9-12). These semiotic and linguistic theories are linked to structuralism, which Staiger suggests "offers not only a textual method but an

anthropological and philosophical theory about its speakers and listeners” (12). These theories would, by necessity, imply that the measure of a text’s accomplishment is the degree to which the meaning of it can be gleaned by a reader. A feature of models such as these might be the championing of a single ‘correct’ meaning, in which all other interpretations are ‘misreadings’. Reception studies partially seeks to shift the location of meaning within this triangular structure to accommodate the activity of the reader, who has the potential to ‘misread’ a text in productive or interesting ways. At the very least, it seeks to suggest that knowing the relationship between production and text is not a “necessary or sufficient condition for ascertaining meaning” (*Interpreting* 8). A spectator may engage in a process of determining meaning even without knowing the conditions in which a film was made, or the directorial intent behind it. The process of interpretation is not unbounded or entirely open, however, but rather relies on the mapping of certain elements of the text, which could enable a reader to interpret a text through close analysis. These traits vary from text to text, but within a given text there are a number of fixed points to be analysed. As Staiger explains, a text is not constructed entirely of polysemic elements, which forecloses on the possibility of an entirely open text (*Media* 2). However, she does not consider these textual traits to be the only source of meaning, or even the primary one.

The second of Staiger’s hypotheses, that “[f]ree readers do not exist either”, explains further why all potential readings are not equally plausible (*Perverse* 162). The concept of the ‘free reader’ implies an ahistorical reader who comes to a text without any preconceived reading strategies, or with strategies

‘appropriate’ to their class or gender. This enables the author to transmit an intended message through the text. In this framework, the free reader is placed into an inactive or passive role of reception, in that they do not ‘uncover’ meaning so much as ‘receive’ it directly. The concept of the free reader is criticised by Staiger for this precise reason, as shall be noted shortly. In contrast to the idea of the passive reader, evidence has been collected that suggests that alternative forms of spectatorship, and thus interpretations, can be mounted. For example, Staiger describes the two forms of spectatorship proposed by Tom Gunning: that of the engaged and confrontational ‘popular’ audience (heavily linked to the working class), and that of the passive and attentive ‘bourgeois’ audience (Staiger, *Perverse* 13). Staiger provides anecdotal evidence that suggests that these audiences would at least occasionally step into modes of engagement that were “the wrong behaviours for their respective classes” (*Perverse* 19). It is significant that Gunning’s binary construction of spectator engagement does not always work in practice. Staiger suggests that theories that are based around the idea of the free reader may attempt to ‘absorb’ these counterexamples into a greater scheme, or dismiss them as extraneous (or, as in Staiger’s title, ‘perverse’). What reception studies does, however, is to suggest that what is important in these instances is the context in which readings appear, rather than attempting to subordinate and justify them.

In Staiger’s view, spectators are influenced by their particular circumstances. Each reader brings to a text a different collection of preconceptions and experiences, which may foreground certain potential readings, or cause them to adopt certain modes of viewing. A change in experience may cause a single

viewer to make alternative meanings on different occasions, or two groups viewing the same text at different times to draw quite contrasting conclusions about the ‘meaning’ of the text. For Staiger’s analysis, context and identity are crucial (*Perverse* 39). Reception studies is interested in identifying these preconceptions and experiences, and drawing conclusions about the intents of the readers in constructing meanings. Staiger proposes several questions that these analyses tend to ask: “*How* does a text mean? For whom? In what circumstances? With what changing values over time?” (*Media* 2, emphasis in original). As a result of her first two hypotheses, Staiger states a third, that “the interpretative strategies and affective responses of readers” are facilitated to a large degree by “social formations and constructed identities” – the individual context each spectator brings (*Perverse* 162).

Reception studies is somewhat more restrictive than text-based interpretation, but it is with good reason. As has already been indicated, interpretations of films that are based significantly on textual analysis draw conclusions about spectators as a whole, positing meaning as “an essence to be extracted by an insightful critic” (*Media* 2). Reception studies, on the other hand, acknowledges the subjectivity of the reader (3). As a result, it tends to draw on more clearly defined examples of engagement with a text, often using smaller groups of readers. Analyses that are based around all forms of engagement with a text are rare, as detailing all existing encounters is very difficult. Such specific examples are found across the literature. In one particular analysis, Henry Jenkins does not explore all forms of engagement with *Star Trek*, or all engagement undertaken by fans of the show: he limits his analysis to encounters with the series

by the writers of ‘slash’ fanfiction (*Textual Poachers* 185-222). Staiger’s analysis of *The Silence of the Lambs* draws attention to the encounters particular reviewers had with the film, specifically relating to the ‘outing’ of Jodie Foster, the film’s lead actress (*Perverse* 161-78). In the majority of analyses, a group of readers is selected whose members are considered to share certain similarities in their reading perspectives. This enables the theorist to attempt to identify commonalities between them, which can then be attributed to the historical conditions surrounding this particular experience of reading. However, this is not without its pitfalls. In ‘new historicism’, for example, readers are “segmented into smaller categorical groups” (*Interpreting* 13). Such a process “still universalizes audiences and experiences”, assuming that an audience that shares one contextual feature is likely to share others (13). The problem with this approach is that individual audience members could adopt a viewing mode in contrast to the rest of the group. Alternatively, an audience member may be part of more than one group (and, indeed, is likely to be part of many), and these groups may have conflicting modes of viewing.

This potential difficulty is eased by the methods of collecting and analysing data proposed by Staiger. In attempting to “understand why distinct interpretative and affective experiences circulate historically”, it is necessary to undertake case studies of particular encounters (*Perverse* 163). The bulk of this chapter will largely follow the guidelines that Staiger sets down in her research on *The Silence of the Lambs*. First, the ‘event’ to be analysed is determined. This event is “not a text: [...] it is a set of interpretations” of a text, produced by readers in a particular social situation (*Perverse* 163). Such an event leaves ‘traces’ – records of the

encounter between viewer and text. Many reception analyses use readers' oral accounts as traces, such as the studies referred to by Judith Mayne in her analysis of female cinema audiences (31-4). However, there are several potential problems with the use of oral sources: they may potentially be biased in favour of examples that the interviewer wants to hear, and may be affected by a subject's own interpretation of their experience, rather than the experience itself (*Media* 14). Likewise, attempting to uncover traces for textual encounters that occurred in the past may be difficult: audiences may have "left no material traces of their thoughts or feelings" (14). Even in the case of more recent encounters, audiences' recollections of the experience may be coloured by their present situation. In contrast to this ethnographic approach, Staiger uses printed traces for many of her analyses, in the form of "reviews, news articles, letters to newspapers, advertisements, illustrations and publicity" (*Perverse* 163).

Staiger appears to be engaged in a slightly different form of analysis than those who study audience ethnographically. She notes in the epilogue to *Interpreting Films* that the studies she undertakes are not intended or able to represent the average cinema spectator, who would have no means to publish their viewpoints (211). This approach is not without its critics. Kevin J. Corbett, for example, notes that several of the films Staiger discusses were recent enough for an ethnographic study of audiences to be viable. Corbett contends that such a study could "reveal more about the event than does its popular press coverage" (37). Staiger does not justify her choice of printed traces explicitly, but her conception of a reception event seems to be different from Corbett's understanding. Staiger's analyses tend to focus on film reception by commentators and critics, rather than

immediate audience reception. The use of printed material also appears to address some of the problems inherent in the use of oral traces. For example, a review provides direct evidence of an encounter between text and spectator. It is often published a short period after the encounter, and is in many cases archived, allowing for access long after its original publication. A writer undertaking a historical reception study first identifies these traces, and then analyses them, attempting to identify the “causal processes” that may result in such interpretations (*Perverse* 163). They also try to establish the social and historical circumstances that may have facilitated them (163). Here, too, the use of printed traces allows the interpreter access to a large array of encounters. In particular, an analysis may try to identify trends within the traces. These trends, if present, may speak to the circumstances that underpin particular interpretations – they may be the signal present in the ‘noise’ created by the collecting of individual experiences. This chapter will attempt to apply this method to a particular event, in order to determine whether such a signal can be identified.

The Event

As already stated, this chapter’s focus is on the critical reception of the three feature films that make up the *Matrix* trilogy: *The Matrix*, *Reloaded*, and *Revolutions*. For the purposes of this chapter, these will be analysed as an ‘event’. In a technical sense, this analysis extends beyond the approach that Janet Staiger has taken in several of her analyses of film reception events. Commonly, Staiger’s event is the reception surrounding a single film, such as Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* or Demme’s *The Silence of the Lambs*. In one sense, the analysis that will be undertaken here is in keeping with Staiger’s approach, merely substituting a

single event for three linked events. For several reasons, however, it may also be possible to consider the reception of the trilogy as a single event in itself. Firstly, the readings that Staiger constructs of various films draw on a range of traces that are, by necessity, published and collected over a period of time. It is impossible to deny that the collected reviews of the film trilogy could be read as traces of separate events. Despite this, their value as traces may extend beyond the individual films to which they refer. In other words, reviews of the earlier films may suggest certain assumptions are at work, and these hypotheses can be tested against the reviews of the sequels. Likewise, the reviews of the later films may refer back to the first, and enhance understanding of the expectations and approaches that were made at the time. The second reason is related to the purpose of this chapter. As well as identifying and analysing the traits and assumptions central to these reviews, it should also be possible to identify whether these assumptions change over the course of the event. As such, the focus of this chapter can also be considered as a single, long-term event. In order to read the reception of the trilogy as rigorously as possible, this chapter will consider this reception both as a series of three connected events. However, it will also highlight particular points in which an understanding of the relationship between the texts can be expanded by considering them in conjunction with each other.

The Traces

This chapter will draw on Staiger's approach of using printed traces by exploring trends present in thirty-two reviews of the *Matrix* trilogy. These reviews of the feature films were published between 1999 and 2003. The majority of Staiger's work that draws on printed traces does not offer explicit justification for

the grouping of texts that it uses. For example, her description of the set of traces in her analysis of *The Silence of the Lambs* refers only to the number of traces, and their formats (*Perverse* 163). A footnote in the text lists them by name, but does not explain the rationale behind the grouping (175). In the case of this chapter's analysis, certain practical obligations have played a part in the grouping of reviews that will be employed. Rather than collecting only the reviews of specific authors, this set of traces has been selected based on publication. That is, I have limited the reviews considered to high-profile and reputable publications that have written on all three films, regardless of which individual reviewers were involved. This chapter makes no distinction between publications based on their medium: traces include newspaper reviews (*Chicago Sun-Times*, *Village Voice*), magazine reviews (*Rolling Stone*, *Empire Magazine*), and reviews from television (*BBC Films*) and the Internet (*Salon*, *The Onion AV Club*). Although the films under discussion were released less than fifteen years ago, many reviews of the films are no longer easily accessible. This has influenced some of the selections. For example, although Andrew O'Hehir's reviews of *Reloaded* and *Revolutions* for *Salon* are still available online, his review of *The Matrix* is no longer available through *Salon's* website. Aside from this omission, the reviews are evenly split between the three films in the trilogy. These measures, taken together, mean that the set of traces being studied is representative of a broader critical reception than it might otherwise be.

In approximately half of these traces, all three films have been reviewed by the same author. These authors are Todd McCarthy (*Variety*), Peter Travers (*Rolling Stone*), Roger Ebert (*Chicago Sun-Times*), David Edelstein (*Slate*), and

Nev Pierce (*BBC Films*). These reviews will potentially enable me to identify differences between the perspectives of various publications in regard to the three films. These reviews may also be contrasted against the other traces, in which films may have been responded to by different reviewers. This is the case in the reviews for the *Village Voice* (Dennis Lim and J. Hoberman), *The Onion AV Club* (K. Phipps and N. Rabin), *Entertainment Weekly* (Lisa Schwarzbaum and Owen Gleiberman), *The Chicago Reader* (Jonathan Rosenbaum and J.R. Jones) and *Empire Magazine* (Ian Nathan, Colin Kennedy, and an unknown reviewer for *Revolutions*). The contrast between these subgroups is included in order to determine whether a change in perspective between films is particular to individuals who reviewed all three films, or representative of a broader trend across the general literature.

Characterisation of Reception

At first glance, the ten reviews of *The Matrix* discussed in this section do not seem to agree about very much. They draw different conclusions about the overall effectiveness and level of accomplishment of the film. While some reviewers described it as “one of the more lyrical sci-fi action thrillers ever made” (Edelstein, ‘Altman’s Gold’), others criticised the film as “incoherent” (McCarthy, ‘*The Matrix*’) and “convoluted” (Schwarzbaum, ‘*The Matrix*’). Upon closer analysis, however, these diverse conclusions actually stem from the same categories of observation within the reviews. Specifically, these reviewers draw attention to the presence of both ‘spectacular’ sequences of the film, and the film’s many allusions.

The first category that these reviews focus on is the central role that action sequences appear to take within the films. These action sequences are comprised of assorted computer-generated imagery, and also the live-action fight scenes choreographed by Yuen Wo Ping, “the mentor of Jackie Chan and Jet Li” (Travers, ‘*The Matrix*’). Taken together, these action-fuelled sequences are responsible for much of the visual impact of the films, and this impact is examined in the majority of the reviews. The computer-generated effects, which Roger Ebert describes as “great-looking” and “flawlessly integrated”, are given due praise (‘*The Matrix*’). Phipps writes that, while other films might be weighed down by the special effects, “*The Matrix* integrates them beautifully” (‘*The Matrix*’). Special mention is reserved for the “groundbreaking ‘bullet time’ photography” (Pierce, ‘*The Matrix*’). The technique is explained in several of the reviews, although the details of these explanations differ slightly. For Ebert, the technique allows characters to “hang in the air long enough to deliver karate kicks” (‘*The Matrix*’). According to McCarthy, it “allows for altering the speed and trajectory of people and objects” in a similar way to a “Japanese anime film” (‘*The Matrix*’). Despite the largely computer-animated creation of these effects however, McCarthy states that the end result “looks amazingly real” (‘*The Matrix*’). This technique, as well as the “wire-stunt” training that was used in the fight scenes (Travers, ‘*The Matrix*’), results in the film’s “surreal visual highs” (Nathan, ‘*The Matrix*’).

While some reviews complimented these combined techniques as “truly deliver[ing] something new to the sci-fi action lexicon” (McCarthy, ‘*The Matrix*’), not all the reviewers were convinced of their value in the film. For Dennis Lim, the

computer-generated effects (and “especially” the ‘Bullet Time’ effects) are “impressive, but the movie’s overall style is wearing” (‘Grand Allusions’). In other words, the visual style of the film becomes too overblown. Schwarzbaum identifies these types of special-effects “cinematic advances” in *Independence Day* and suggests that they have been seen too many times before (‘*The Matrix*’). Rather than supplement the overall visual style of the film, these visual effects “diminish the impact of [the] elegant stunt work” (‘*The Matrix*’). Schwarzbaum also believes that the contemporary audience is too “inured to spectacle” for these techniques to have the impact that they seem to have for many other reviewers (‘*The Matrix*’).

Several reviewers praised the film’s martial arts sequences. According to McCarthy, this aspect of the film’s composition is “on a level perhaps unsurpassed in an American film” (‘*The Matrix*’). Much is made of the fact that Yuen Wo Ping actually trained the actors themselves to perform the martial arts scenes. Travers says that the cast have been turned into “high-flying kung-fu krazies” (‘*The Matrix*’), while elsewhere Nathan highlights the “months” spent perfecting the sequences (‘*The Matrix*’). Again, though, not all the reviewers are convinced of the overall worth of this effort. Dennis Lim’s largely negative review of the film notes that the core of the action sequence in the film are marked by “John Woo-on-speed shoot-outs and martial-arts tomfoolery”, and he suggests that the two are “similarly histrionic” (‘Grand Allusions’). Ebert’s review of the film strikes a similar chord. Rather than disappointment with the stunt work, however, he is dissatisfied that the film’s use of fight sequences usurps what he perceives to be the “intriguing” set-up of the film (‘*The Matrix*’).

This ‘set-up’ is part of the other category of traits these reviewers explore in *The Matrix*. Discussions of the film’s narrative structure tended to be limited to interest in the script’s myriad references to other works. In the opinion of the majority of these reviewers, the employment of a vast array of cultural allusions is less effective than the visual effects. Peter Travers suggests that the script is “stunted” and “muddled” (*The Matrix*), while Jonathan Rosenbaum posits that “the movie becomes overwhelmed by its many sources” and becomes “bloated” as a result (*The Matrix*). In Rosenbaum’s review, the allusions he identifies are all cinematic, and are largely drawn from key science-fiction texts such as *Blade Runner*, *Star Wars* and *Alien*. Other reviewers, however, identify other symbolic inputs: Dennis Lim highlights the appearance of Neo (Keanu Reeves) as a kind of Christian Messiah, and states that the “screenplay is composed mostly of mile-a-minute gobbledygook and mystic hogwash”, which is likely the result of the inclusion of so many sources (‘Grand Allusions’). This is the case, too, for Todd McCarthy, who adds to the Christian references “half-baked Eastern philosophy, Lewis Carroll refs, [...] time travel, creatures capable of rebirth and, all importantly, [...] the Chosen One” (*The Matrix*). In his opinion, this “pretentious mumbo-jumbo of undergraduate mythology, religious mysticism and technobabble” results in the film’s script being “utterly indigestible” (*The Matrix*).

Other reviewers also picked up on the synthesis of allusions, but in kinder terms. Although David Edelstein describes the “lumpen-Zen posturing” in *The Matrix* to be “portentous”, his review mostly suggests that the “mishmash” of

sources adds to the lyricism of the film ('Altman's Gold'). Nev Pierce describes the story of the film as "a potent mix of buddhism [sic], Greek mythology, and – predominantly – the Christian gospel" ('*The Matrix*'). He writes that "beneath the sheen" of the visual style, "there's substance" ('*The Matrix*'). This substance takes the form, in other reviews, of "a million masterstrokes all at once" (Nathan, '*The Matrix*'). Nathan identifies the influences of *Blade Runner* and various spiritual approaches, and also adds "chopsocky, John Woo hardware" and "William Gibson's cyberpunk ethos" to the mix ('*The Matrix*'). During the film, at least, this "potentially confusing plot" is kept "intelligible, intelligent, and suspenseful" for these reviewers (Phipps, '*The Matrix*'). This synthesis of elements, however, might collapse into incoherence after "three minutes of post-movie deliberation" (Nathan, '*The Matrix*').

For some reviewers, then, this film seems to be a complex collage of allusions attached to a thin narrative structure. In several of these reviews, it is suggested that this structure, as well as the allusions, has been appropriated from other texts. Three of the reviews under discussion liken the film to *Dark City*. Dennis Lim states that the two films stem from the same post-millennial anxiety ('Grand Allusions'). Keith Phipps suggests that the story of *The Matrix* resembles that of the Proyas film "in both concept and content" ('*The Matrix*'). Roger Ebert draws this connection even closer by suggesting that *The Matrix* directly recycles *Dark City*'s premise ('*The Matrix*'). Ebert extends this evaluation of the film's source material, stating that *The Matrix* borrows the story structure of "dozens if not hundreds" of other films ('*The Matrix*'). Ebert suggests that the trading of the potential metaphysical revelations for "one of those obligatory climaxes with

automatic weapons fire” is the film’s main weakness (*‘The Matrix’*). For Lisa Schwarzbaum, the film’s “rudimentary” story is rendered “convoluted” by the application of the film’s many cultural allusions (*‘The Matrix’*). These reviews see *The Matrix* as being a sort of decoupage: the “grafting on [of] surplus ideas” to a basic structure (McCarthy, *‘The Matrix’*). Where they differ is in their evaluation of the success of this process. In the reviews for the sequels, though, there tends to be more agreement in their overall opinions.

The reviews of *The Matrix Reloaded* still discuss spectacle and allusion, but these reviews consider the film’s use of these elements to be less impressive, and certainly less surprising, than its predecessor. J. Hoberman writes “[w]hat was novel in *The Matrix* is now comfortingly familiar” (*‘Use Your Illusions’*). When discussing *Reloaded*’s fight sequences, Edelstein echoes this sentiment: “The fighting is twice as complicated [...] but because it’s essentially the same thing all over again, it has about a hundredth of the impact” (*‘Neo Con’*). Although Edelstein observes the similarity between the type of martial arts sequences in *The Matrix* and *Reloaded*, he does acknowledge that *Reloaded*’s choreographed scenes are more complicated than those in the first film. Even as the sequel’s live-action fight sequences surpass the complexity of those in *The Matrix*, these critics are divided as to the effectiveness of it all. Jonathan Rosenbaum suggests that the majority of “the martial arts choreography is neither graceful nor exciting – it’s worthy of a video game” (*‘Reloaded’*).

What is notable about these comments is that, in several instances in *Reloaded*, these sequences are no longer performed by the actors. Rather, they are

entirely computer-generated. While the visual effects team may have gone into “overdrive” in creating these sequences, the end result is that these sequences become “monotonous” (Pierce, ‘*Reloaded*’). This reliance on virtual imagery seems to have limited the novelty of both the fights and the visual effects. In the opinions of Pierce and Edelstein, the movie’s insistence on computer-generated imagery in creating the hyperkinetic ‘Burly Brawl’ sequence entirely virtually has resulted in a scene that no longer feels exciting or genuine. In this sequence, Neo is attacked by an increasing number of replications of Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving). However, rather than employing physical stuntwork, as was regularly done in *The Matrix*, the images of Neo and Smith in this sequence are entirely virtual. Pierce writes that “Neo often – ironically – appears computer-generated” (‘*Reloaded*’). Edelstein asserts that this sequence lacks the “visceral kick” of its predecessor: “The Burly Brawl tastes fake [...] It makes you think “Let’s play again!” (‘Neo Con’). This feeling is also present for Edelstein in the opening sequence of the film, in which Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss) falls from a skyscraper window, firing revolvers towards the camera. “It should be amazing [...] But the shot has the disposable feel of a video game” (‘Neo Con’).

Although these reviews express disappointment in *Reloaded*’s computer-generated visual effects, this is not the only type of action being discussed. *Reloaded* also features several choreographed sequences that are not focused on martial arts. Discussions of these in the reviews, however, tend to focus on just one example: the freeway chase scene halfway through the film. Again, opinion is divided. For Edelstein, the “almost half-hour highway sequence [...] is just another noisy car chase [...] nowhere near as startlingly kinetic as the climax of *The Road*

Warrior” (‘Neo Con’). McCarthy also evokes the *Mad Max* sequel, but in his opinion “the sheer scale of this new speedfest dwarfs the previous competition” (‘*Reloaded*’). Nathan Rabin states that *Reloaded* outstrips *The Matrix* in terms of “pure spectacle” (‘Rabin, ‘*Reloaded*’). Owen Gleiberman writes that the “spectacular” chase culminates in “an extended moment of time-lapse delirium” (‘*Reloaded*’). For Colin Kennedy, the chase is “dazzling”, and one of the film’s many “five-star thrills,” all of which are related to the visual effects (‘*Reloaded*’). Kennedy admits that the Burly Brawl sequence is “not quite yet” photorealistic, but that the sequence is “far too much fun to quibble” with (‘*Reloaded*’). Hoberman identifies the freeway chase as “the most exciting sequence” of the film, stating that the scene delivers “video game shock and awe” to the audience (‘Use Your Illusions’). Roger Ebert, in contrast to the ‘disposable’ feel of the action sequences, states that the sequence is “gloriously choreographed”, and that the fact that “this scene logically takes place in cyberspace does not diminish its thrilling 14-minute fun ride” (‘*Reloaded*’).

Many of the reviews of *Reloaded* also discuss the philosophical and cultural references present in the film. These writers often recall the dense allusional qualities of *The Matrix* which, as noted earlier, sparked debate on their effectiveness. However, there is less disagreement on how successful the presentation of the allusions in *Reloaded* is. In their consideration of the philosophical influences in the film, the reviewers’ perspectives are mostly negative. O’Hehir, for instance, states that the “dense and intense geekdom [...] all has changed, changed utterly” (‘A Future’). For many of the reviewers, the film has become “often pretentious rather than profound” (Kennedy, ‘*Reloaded*’), to the

point of being “pseudo-mystical mumbo-jumbo” (Rabin, ‘*Reloaded*’). Pierce suggests that the “many philosophical diversions” of *Reloaded* “are somewhat portentous” (‘*Reloaded*’). This echoes Edelstein’s opinion of some of the allusions in *The Matrix*, as mentioned above. However, reviewers are more specific in their criticisms of *Reloaded*. Gleiberman comments on the “overall atmosphere of sodden, junky, faux-Kubrickian philosophizing” (‘*Reloaded*’). Hoberman complains of the “sludgy sediment of metaphysics” that pervades the film (‘Use Your Illusions’). The critical response suggests that the novelty of making so many allusions, and filling the dialogue with such philosophical density, has worn off for reviewers. Edelstein’s review suggests that *Reloaded*’s philosophical asides are at best “lugubrious”, even if they propose new questions to the viewer (‘Neo Con’). It is Roger Ebert, however, that provides the most damning analysis of the trend of allusion present in the film: here, the ‘pseudo-philosophical’ nature of this element that is described in other reviews here becomes “the smartest kid in Philosophy 101” (‘*Reloaded*’). The process of engaging with the film is, in a sense, “becoming an expert in the deep meaning of shallow pop mythology” (‘*Reloaded*’). What can be uncovered in the film is “not meaning, but the effect of meaning: It sure sounds like those guys are saying some profound things” (‘*Reloaded*’).

The Matrix Revolutions “isn’t a terrible movie”, according to O’Hehir’s review, “but it is a tremendous disappointment” (‘*Revolutions*’). As with *Reloaded*, the primary categories of special effects and philosophical dialogue are central to the reviewers’ judgments on the film. Despite the continuing presence of these two categories, however, reviews of *Revolutions* refer to them to with less

specificity than in the reviews of both *The Matrix* and *Reloaded*. This is mostly attributable to two factors: first, the reviews of *Revolutions* have tended to be significantly shorter than those of the other two feature films. Secondly, the reviewers seem comfortable with going beyond these two categories and focusing instead on the way in which the film itself works. From the reviews, it is clear that the slowly growing gulf between action and philosophy that was hinted at in the critical reception of *Reloaded* had become an insurmountable chasm by the time the reviewers encountered *Revolutions*.

There were a number of complaints about the action sequences of the trilogy by this point. While several reviewers pointed out that the fight scenes in *Reloaded* were growing “bloated”, this tendency became more pronounced in the reviews of *Revolutions* (Kennedy, ‘*Reloaded*’). For O’Hehir, “the shootout scenes [...] seem longer and slightly more pointless than before” (‘*Revolutions*’). Edelstein describes the action setpieces as “interminable” and reminiscent of “old World War II pictures but played at video-game velocity” (‘Regurgitated’). In particular, the final battle of the film is picked apart by McCarthy, who describes it as a parade of “wearying amounts of noise, carnage and chaos” (‘*Revolutions*’). Edelstein also criticises the final battle, describing it as “giant mechanical walkers spend[ing] five minutes, 10 minutes, 20 minutes shooting” at the enemy (‘Regurgitated’).

The characterisation of the final film as ‘chaotic’ resembles, in some respects, the review by Hoberman, who describes the ending of the franchise as “an exercise in spectacular mayhem” (‘Holy Trinity’). Hoberman underscores this

point by describing the final battle of the film in a stream-of-consciousness list of non-sequiturs. His process of taking notes, he writes, “began to resemble an undergraduate Burroughs imitation: BX cable squid spaghetti static electricity! [...] Infernal orange and blue orgone-light tentacle vortex!!!” (‘Holy Trinity’). Ebert says that the final battle “plays like [Fritz Lang’s] *Metropolis* on steroids” (‘*Revolutions*’). The reference to ‘steroids’ seems to imply a loss of control or elegance in *Revolutions* that was present in *The Matrix*. Phipps adds to this in his review, which appears to suggest that the overwhelming and extended spectacle is also missing most of its novelty. He describes how his hopes for *Revolutions* dwindle, from “hoping it will be better than *Reloaded*, then hoping it will at least make more sense than *Reloaded*, then hoping it will at least have a sequence as cool as the car chase in *Reloaded*” (‘*Revolutions*’). Unfortunately, in his view, “*Revolutions* fails on all counts, but comes closest to meeting the last one” (‘*Revolutions*’). Other critics also seem to see this action as derivative. Schwarzbaum’s review reduces the final battle to “a snazzy, “*Star Wars*”-y invasion of Zion” (‘*Revolutions*’). Nev Pierce goes even further, describing the scene as something “[r]eminiscent of Ray Harryhausen epics [...] heavily influenced by *Aliens* and *The Terminator*, without equalling either” (‘*Revolutions*’). The overall effect is summed up by Travers, who argues that in this film, “a classic shot of Neo’s fist connecting to Smith’s face feels like an echo” (‘*Revolutions*’). The once-dazzling effects no longer dazzle; they have become their own clichés.

The discussion of the computer-generated visual effects in *Revolutions* seems to have qualitatively changed in comparison to the reviews of previous

films. Where reviews of *The Matrix* and *Reloaded* discussed the effects in particular sequences, this specificity is missing from the literature on *Revolutions*. This might be connected to the fact that *Revolutions* often integrated computer-generated imagery and live-action footage in the same shot, making it difficult to clearly distinguish the two or discuss them separately. Despite this, a few reviewers do broach this subject. McCarthy writes that “the series continues to be a marvel” in this regard, although the settings are no longer as appealing as they were (*‘Revolutions’*). Ebert describes the effects as “awesome”, and says that the relationship between computer-generated visuals and live action is “about as good as these things get” (*‘Revolutions’*). There is, however, none of the precise detail in these statements as there was in *The Matrix*. It appears that these reviewers are characterising the visual effects as ‘more of the same’ rather than a groundbreaking change.

There has also been a shift in the tone of the reviews when evaluating the allusive qualities of *Revolutions*. To a large degree, the reviewers appear to consider the religious overtones of the film to be less subtle and more simplistic than in both *The Matrix* and *Reloaded*. Where the original film was considered to have crafted a combination of various religious tendencies, O’Hehir states that *Revolutions* jettisons every “epistemological or whateverological question” it originally proposed (*‘Revolutions’*). He contends that the film has “too much plot to untangle”, and it is no longer able to handle any kind of complexity (*‘Revolutions’*). Other reviewers have also commented on this reduction of the religious elements of the narrative. Travers writes that the film’s complexity has dwindled from “the Judeo-Christian ethic to Hollywood gloss” (*‘Revolutions’*).

Meanwhile, Schwarzbaum sees it as “more like a religious obligation than a triumphant revelation” (*Revolutions*). The central role that faith plays in the film is denigrated by Hoberman, who describes the film’s religious overtones as “the least explicable cosmology” and “ponderous, even inane” (*Holy Trinity*). Likewise, Edelstein compares the franchise’s theological questions to “a religious parable for 12-year-old boys” (*Regurgitated*). It is not only the religious elements that are criticised in this way. To a lesser extent, the philosophical notions expressed by the characters are considered to be less profound as well. The predictions of the Oracle (Gloria Foster), the source of many of the allusional qualities of the first film, are described by Ebert in *Revolutions* as “about what you’d pay 50 bucks for from a storefront Tarot reader” (*Revolutions*). According to McCarthy, what “converts” to the franchise’s worldview had “construed as profound has been increasingly exposed as flimsy and conventional” during the narrative of *Revolutions* (*Revolutions*).

Overall, the reviewers of the film are focused on what they perceive to be a meandering story flanked by an increasing reliance on action and special effects. The Wachowskis “can only deliver with a formula where spectacle and pretentiousness follow on from each other in steady succession. Gut thrills and intellectual stimulation are never integrated as one” (*Empire*, *Revolutions*). *Revolutions* had become an attempted synthesis of overblown and unconvincing action sequences that reduce the viewer to a state of “special-effects hypnosis” (Jones, *Revolutions*), and “rambling conversations and snoreful philosophical noodlings” (Pierce, *Revolutions*). No longer a soaring achievement in terms of

both style and substance, the *Matrix* franchise ended with “a whimper in bang’s clothing” that was best understood as a generic action film (Phipps, ‘*Revolutions*’).

This divide between the spectacular and the intellectual in the *Matrix* franchise is not the only divide to be found in this criticism. Although the reviews largely consider each film to be a discrete object that can be judged on its own terms, in some places the sequels are evaluated in terms of how they lived up to the promise of *The Matrix*. Interestingly, the reviewers’ opinions of *The Matrix* have sometimes been retrospectively reconsidered, in light of the encounters reviewers have with the sequels. The reviews of the critics who wrote on all three films in the trilogy largely agree on an overall progression. The majority of these reviewers believe that *The Matrix* provided audiences with an interesting concept and impressive stunts. *Reloaded* failed to live up to that concept, stalling it instead with “deep-dish speechifying” (Travers, ‘*Reloaded*’). *Revolutions* continued this trajectory, collapsing the franchise into what some considered to be incoherent spectacle and faux-meaningful dialogue. Some of the reviewers display a palpable sense of disappointment in this gradual decline. In 1999, Phipps declared *The Matrix* featured “a universe that deserves to be seen” (‘*The Matrix*’). Writing on *Revolutions*, however, he is forced to admit that “it’s hard to think of a film saga that’s wound down with such a profound anticlimax” (‘*Revolutions*’). Edelstein writes that the first film was “lyrical” (‘Altman’s Gold’), but that “[t]he final episode is a slam-bang, dreary mess” that has “gone from underpinnings to overloads” (‘Regurgitated’). The most drastic disapproval of the progress of the franchise, however, falls to Pierce. He praised the “potent mix” of religious and cultural allusions in the first film (‘*The Matrix*’). However, in his review of

Revolutions, he complains “I can’t believe we spent so much time and money on the pseudo-spiritual, dumb, videogame drooling of two guys who’ve read Derrida and think anime is profound” (‘*Revolutions*’). O’Hehir’s review of *Revolutions* sums up this critical tendency well. Maybe expanding *The Matrix* into a trilogy never had any promise at all, he writes; maybe “it was never more than a cool idea for a movie” (‘*Revolutions*’).

There is an interesting side effect of this perceived decline in quality over the course of the trilogy. The acknowledgement of this decline in standard comes from many of the critics, even those who were initially less positive in their reviews of *The Matrix*. Some reviewers who were underwhelmed by *The Matrix* revised their opinions of it when discussing the sequels. J.R. Jones states that, while his experience of *The Matrix* left him “bored stiff”, he developed a greater appreciation of it later, and was “more charitably disposed” to the franchise after exposure to the sequels (‘*Revolutions*’). Schwarzbaum awards both *The Matrix* and *Revolutions* the same grade, C+. In 1999, she considered *The Matrix* to be “gaudy chopsocky” severely lacking in “stylistic cohesiveness” (‘*The Matrix*’), but in 2003 the film had transformed in her opinion into a “hugely influential Big Bang” (‘*Revolutions*’). This tendency is even more pronounced in the reviews of Todd McCarthy. McCarthy praised *The Matrix*’s visual effects at length, but criticised the story at various points as “incoherent” and “a muddle of showdowns” and suggests that the allusions employed by the film were “so many [...] as to prove utterly indigestible” (‘*The Matrix*’). Four years later after the release of *Reloaded*, his opinion had been significantly revised. *The Matrix*, according to this review, had become an “artistic/commercial/cultural hat trick” with “intellectual/

philosophical/religious samplings that spawned a thousand Web sites”

(‘*Reloaded*’). McCarthy imagines that studio executives must be disappointed for not having imbued “kick-butt action with references to Buddha-via-Hesse and the Book of Daniel” before, but this is the very quality he rejected in his prior review (‘*Reloaded*’).

Analysis of Reception

The latter part of this chapter will involve a reading of this critical reception. In order to proceed, it is necessary to explore some of the tools this chapter will employ in making its interpretation of the literature. Staiger suggests that the traces under analysis in a historical reception study can be analysed “textually” (*Perverse* 163). By this, she means that they can be considered as a text to be analysed, using any of a large number of theories or reading positions. In *Media Reception Studies*, Staiger suggests a number of tools that could be employed in an analysis of reception. These “critical methods,” such as hermeneutics, semiotics and rhetorical analysis, “show up in every scholarly attempt to describe [...] an event of reception” (13). However, Staiger’s historical reception studies privilege context, and as a result tend to focus on historical and social circumstances surrounding an event. In this case, the discursive tools appropriate for this event can be drawn from Film Studies, particularly those writers concerned with narrative and spectacle.

One of the discursive tools that can be deployed to interpret the reception is Tom Gunning’s research on the ‘cinema of attractions’. According to Gunning, the cinema of attractions “directly addresses the spectator, acknowledging the

viewer's presence" ('Now You See It' 44). This is an early form of film in which the chief organising principle is an exhibitionist mode of presentation. It functions in direct contrast to the 'invisible' mode of address that is considered part of the structure of the narrative film. In the 'invisible' mode, the viewer takes the role of a voyeur, looking in on a self-contained world. The textual universe of narrative film is generally considered to be seamless. The cinema of attractions instead employs a mode of address to the spectator that is more exhibitionist. Gunning describes this as the product of the medium systematically testing its possibilities, attempting to display new sights and provide novel experiences ('Now You See It' 42). The end result of this mode is "a cinematic gesture of presenting for view, of displaying" or demonstrating (42). Staiger, discussing modes of reception in *Perverse Spectators*, also identifies the exhibitionist mode of address in this form of cinema, and highlights the "confrontational" aspect of the encounter between the spectator and the film (12-13). The experience of the 'attraction' in one of these early films is one of shock and surprise: the spectator is "astonished" rather than absorbed into a seamless filmic universe (*Perverse* 13). Gunning contends that the cinema of attractions was the preeminent film form before the rise and subsequent domination of causally-linked narrative. Although the rise of narrative cinema after 1906 was swift, he maintains that the cinema of attractions did "not disappear with the dominance of narrative, but rather [went] underground" ('Attraction[s]' 382). Staiger identifies its occasional resurgence in genres such as the musical, but also in "action-adventure pictures" (*Perverse* 12).

This resurgence is certainly noted in recent debates in Film Studies. The cinema of attractions has become the focus of renewed study, as evidenced by

works such as *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*. This anthology, edited by Wanda Strauven, expands upon the ideas presented by Gunning. It is particularly notable in regards to this argument because of the role that *The Matrix* plays in it. As well as providing inspiration for the title of the book, the *Matrix* trilogy also graces the book's cover, which depicts Trinity in midair, launching a martial arts kick at a police officer. Beyond this, the trilogy is also discussed frequently within these collected articles. In the introduction to the book, Strauven labels six particular texts as the anthology's "most cited 'attractions'" ('Introduction' 24). Five of these texts were released between 1901 and 1924; the sixth, the *Matrix* trilogy, was released nearly 75 years afterwards (24). Unsurprisingly, given the image of Trinity's kick on the cover, all these references are to the stunts and the visual style of the trilogy. These authors consider the franchise a good example of Gunning's concepts applied to contemporary cinema. The 'bullet time' effect is singled out for particular study: Røssaak uses an extended analysis of this effect to explore the wonder produced by the tension between still and moving images, relating the technical aspects of the effects back to Eadweard Muybridge's studies of motion (323-4). Strauven also makes this connection, stating that bullet time is "an improvement" on Muybridge's experiments ('Marvelous' 112). Both these writers point out the startling nature of the effect. Røssaak contends that in the moment of bullet time "the audience is transported from the familiar to the unfamiliar" (322). Whereas the original experience of cinema of attractions was of a single still image becoming the illusion of movement as the projector picked up speed, the effects of *The Matrix* reverse this experience, creating a sense of shock – it "takes us onto an uncanny ride from an illusion of movement to one of sculptural freeze and back again" (322-3). Strauven adds that this sequence "goes

against the dominant film grammar”, not only by slowing down the temporality of the film, but also violating the 180 degree rule and halting the progress of classical narration (‘Marvelous’ 112).

The experiences of shock that would typify the *Matrix* trilogy as an ‘attraction’ in Gunning’s sense of the word can be found within several of the reviews. McCarthy describes the first film’s fight sequences as “eye-popping” (‘*The Matrix*’). Edelstein writes that the action in that same film was “up to the minute,” and that “each action scene marked an ontological/metaphysical leap forward,” suggesting that the implications of the action constantly surprised him (‘Neo Con’). To a lesser extent, the sequels were able to provide this kind of action novelty. Gleiberman writes that the “fight scenes fly past the first film in terms of imaginative logistics” (‘*Reloaded*’). Rabin describes *Reloaded*’s freeway chase as “new artillery” that allows the film to “compete in a post-*Matrix* world” (‘*Reloaded*’). Hoberman distils this idea to its purest form by writing of the freeway sequence’s “video game shock and awe” (‘Use Your Illusions’). This novelty also appears in some unexpected places, such as the Yuen Wo Ping-choreographed sequences that Hoberman refers to (‘Use Your Illusions’). Even the ‘Zion rave’ sequence of *Reloaded* seems like “an ecstatic dance party the likes of which I’ve never seen on film before” (O’Hehir, ‘A Future’).

The exhibitionist nature of the visual style of the films is noted by the reviewers as well. Lim proposes that the cinematography “draws attention to itself more than what’s within the frame” (‘Grand Allusions’). The computer-generated effects of the film are often described by the reviewers in similar terms. McCarthy

states that *The Matrix* wields its special effects “in spades”, and that the “smorgasbord of effects [...] in some cases goes beyond what the sensation-seeking sci-fi audience has ever seen before” (*The Matrix*). The special effects are described as “groundbreaking” (Pierce, *The Matrix*). As mentioned earlier, the discussion of the ‘bullet time’ effects usually stressed the novel nature of the technique. This trend is also present in the academic literature: the regular mentions of the film in Strauven’s text consistently take the bullet time sequences as their examples of the ‘attraction’ in contemporary cinema.

Although the analyses of the franchise as examples of the cinema of attractions draw only from the visual effects and stunt sequences of the films, there is potentially another way the cinema of attractions might be applied to the elements of the films. The franchise, and *The Matrix* in particular, was interpreted as being rife with allusions and references. The facility with which the reviewers of the *Matrix* trilogy picked up on much of the allusional qualities of the films suggests that they considered it to be an overt part of the encounter with the film. This would align neatly with the exhibitionist nature of the cinema of attractions. In some reviews, the presentational quality of these allusions draws criticism: Lim, for example, highlights the Biblical allusion that can be found in the role of Neo as “a dopey, self-congratulatory smirk” (*Grand Allusions*). Even the title of his review draws attention to the significance that these allusions play within the film. Like several other reviews, his review of the narrative is superseded by a discussion of the potential sources. Edelstein’s review dispenses with the storyline entirely, and instead focuses on the “mishmash” of references the film makes (*Altman’s Gold*). Nathan also points to “the grungy noir of *Blade Runner*, the

hyperkinetic energies of chopsocky [...] and [the] grandiose spiritual overtones” of the films, suggesting they form a “new aesthetic” (*The Matrix*). The presentational nature of these allusions would suggest that they have some affinity with the role of the attraction. Both the allusions and the action sequences are marked by this mode of address. The allusions, however, also disturb the ‘classical’ mode of address in another way.

Gunning associates the early exhibition of cinema with a lack of concern for the creation of a “self-sufficient narrative world” in which early exhibitors supplemented the film with, among other things, “spoken commentary” (*‘Attraction[s]’* 383). The references to religion and literature could potentially be understood in much the same way. As Germain Lacasse discusses in his analysis of the role of the ‘lecturer’, the commentary and exhibition of the film was, in many ways, just as attractive to the audiences as the film itself (184). The spoken commentary often had an educational effect, if only to explain to the uninitiated spectator how to interpret the cinema (182). In the case of the *Matrix* franchise, these allusions are interpreted by the reviewers as performing a similar pedagogical role. Ebert, somewhat disparagingly, refers to the intellectual references as “Philosophy 101” (*‘Reloaded’*). However, other writers acknowledge that the films’ allusions “inspired undergraduates to crack open their Hegel, Schopenhauer and Heidegger” (McCarthy, *‘Reloaded’*). These references break out of the self-contained narrative to connect to something extratextual, whether it is spiritual, cinematic or literary. In this sense, they are ‘excessive’, just as the visual effects attractions are. This extratextual connection, when considered in conjunction with the presentational mode of address, seems to encourage the

spectator to consider the object referred to by the reference, rather than the progression of the narrative. This would make it consistent with Gunning's assessment of the cinema of attractions, in which "[t]heatrical display dominates over narrative absorption" ('Attraction[s]' 384). The immersion in the narrative of the *Matrix* franchise is temporarily broken by the overt display of a path leading out of the film.

The 'attraction' in the cinema of attractions is directly linked to the promise of something never seen before. According to Gunning, this consistent novelty is what enabled the cinema of attractions to draw viewers in the absence of narrative development. Part of this function, however, depends on the continued provision of new content. It could be reasonably argued from the reviews that part of the dissatisfaction with *Reloaded* and *Revolutions* stemmed from a lack of sufficient novelty. One of the noticeable trends within the reviews of the sequels is the highlighting of a lack of innovation. This development is more pronounced in the reviews of *Reloaded*. McCarthy, for instance, states that the action quotient of *Reloaded* is "no longer quite as fresh or surprising as it was the first time around" ('*Reloaded*'). This mention of 'surprise' is significant towards arguing the presence of attraction in the first film. As mentioned previously, Edelstein describes the opening action sequence of the sequel as "essentially the same thing all over again" ('Neo Con'), and Hoberman writes that "[w]hat was novel in *The Matrix* is now comfortably familiar" ('Use Your Illusions'). In Kennedy's review of the sequel, he underscores the importance of this novelty: for him, the film "thunders into town minus that *critical* element of surprise" ('*Reloaded*', emphasis added). The importance that these reviewers ascribe to the novel aspects of the

franchise is quite overtly displayed, along with the disappointment they feel in its absence. The characterisation of the allusions and references as “[o]verwritten exposition” also suggests an absence of what these reviewers deemed so exciting about *The Matrix* (Kennedy, ‘*Reloaded*’).

Although approaching the franchise’s reception from the perspective espoused by Gunning illuminates some unexpected aspects of the reviews, it is not the only approach that can be taken. While Gunning’s concept of the cinema of attractions applies largely to cinema before 1907, after this date he accepts that the narrative mode became dominant. The prominence of the narrative system as the dominant mode of cinema remained largely unchallenged until the end of the twentieth century (although, as has been mentioned, Staiger and Gunning argue that the cinema of attractions never disappeared entirely). With the release of the first blockbuster films, however, some theorists noted a trend towards an increased use of spectacular elements. These blockbusters tended to attract the audience with a series of explosions, fights and chases. For Scott Bukatman, the 1977 release of *Star Wars* “moved cinema into a revived realm of spectacular excess” (248). This was closely aligned with a vast improvement in the creation of special effects sequences. According to Geoff King, spectacular imagery tended “to be foregrounded especially during periods of innovation” (*Spectacular* 31). In particular, King’s argument is concerned with the period in the 1990s where computer-generated effects facilitated key films such as *Jurassic Park* in 1993.

At the same time as some commentators were noticing a rise in spectacular effects, other writers were seeing a related trend. Bukatman extended his argument

by suggesting that in the 1990s the “proliferation of special effects [...] was accompanied by a related reduction in narrative sophistication” (265). The combination of special-effects-laden films and a large-scale, immersive viewing experience seemed to highlight cinema’s spectacular potential. To these writers, such a potential could only come at the cost of narrative detail. The increasing use of CGI in 1990s blockbusters appears to support this argument. King’s analysis of *Jurassic Park* acknowledges that there are some sequences in the film in which narrative development appears to be arrested. In some cases, the narrative dimension of such films seemed almost to disappear, with the audience’s attention drawn by spectacle. Bukatman argued that the action-adventure films of the 1990s “became less narrative than they used to be [...] with their spectacles more compressed [...] but also more extended” (266). This ‘compression’ refers to the frequency of the spectacular sequences in a particular film, and the ‘extension’ to their duration. As a result of this, Bukatman writes, narrative development and depth is replaced by special-effects sequences “hammering across an entire two-hour-plus film with scarcely any let-up” (266). These new spectacle-ridden films were akin to theme park rides: a drawn-out series of spectacular events, in which causal narrative was devalued in favour of a parade of sensation.

It has been suggested that narrative development can be subsumed by spectacular imagery in another way. Michele Pierson writes that the experience of spectacle within films, and especially in contemporary action cinema, is often foregrounded by muting other filmic elements. *Terminator 2*, for instance, clears the way for the presentation of effects by temporarily halting or minimising narrative progress. In this way, “nothing is allowed to compete for their [the

audience's] attention" (Pierson 125). In the majority of cases, the reviews of the *Matrix* franchise evaluate the use of spectacle as being a dominant force within the films, but they also accept it as part of a self-contained world.

As I outlined earlier, reviews of each of the films often commented on their spectacular qualities. Consistently, the action sequences and special effects are lauded more highly by these reviewers than the allusions present in the films. Notable examples of this can be found in the reception of the bullet time sequences, as discussed earlier. In contrast to this, some writers were critical of the spectacular qualities of the films because they appeared to overwhelm or weaken the impact of the narrative. Travers' review of *The Matrix* draws attention to the "terrific stunts and [...] stunted script" ('*The Matrix*'). However, if the majority of reviewers were comfortable with the original film's synthesis of stunts, CGI and cultural references, it appeared that four years later in *Reloaded* "these elements [...] soon separate out" (Hoberman, 'Use Your Allusions'). Nev Pierce writes that because of their overwhelming presence, the action sequences become "monotonous" ('*Reloaded*'). Hoberman and Kennedy both complain that the narrative of *Reloaded* seems to operate as a mere pretext for the video game *Enter the Matrix*. Kennedy writes that the climax of *Reloaded* seems "rather rushed" and "confusing", implying that the narrative is underdeveloped ('*Reloaded*'). Schwarzbaum argues that *Revolutions* appears to privilege the "final volley" of "rigged explosions" over the original film's "storytelling fervor" ('*Revolutions*'). This tendency is perhaps most noticeable in the discussion of the freeway chase sequence in *Reloaded*. Ebert, Edelstein, Gleiberman, Hoberman and O'Hehir all remarked on the emphasis that the film placed on this sequence, and all drew

attention to the duration of the scene. The preponderance of spectacle in *Reloaded* and *Revolutions* in particular appeared to signal that in the trilogy “action” was at risk of being “severed from meaning” (Gleiberman, ‘*Reloaded*’).

The alleged dominance of spectacle over narrative in contemporary popular cinema is, however, a matter of some dispute. As Murray Smith puts it, in contemporary Hollywood “[n]arrative is still omnipresent. There may be less attention to detailed character motivation, greater emphasis on spectacle [...] but narrative has certainly not disappeared under a cloud of special effects” (13). This is a position borne out in Geoff King’s work in particular. King rejects Bukatman’s characterisation of blockbuster films as ‘theme park rides’ that dispense entirely with narrative development. King points out that neither the films nor the rides “surrender all investment in narrative” (*Spectacular*, 180). As a matter of fact, a theme park ride often has an “obvious story-narrative of its own” (181). His work examines several blockbuster films in detail, including *Titanic* and the aforementioned *Jurassic Park* (51, 63). He concludes from these analyses that only occasionally is narrative subordinated to spectacle. Rather, the two groups of elements tend to work in tandem: spectacle “continues to drive forward narrative events”, even in the most action-packed of films (166). In a complementary way, the narrative of these films provides a structure on which to ‘hang’ its action set-pieces. In addition to this, King suggests that narrative and spectacle are often interwoven to the point that it is difficult to distinguish them from each other. He cites *Gone with the Wind* (1939) as one example of a text that contains spectacular elements of destruction, but also features ‘spectacular’ “costume, production

design [...] and other elements of *mise-en-scene*” (*New Hollywood* 193). In this way, classical Hollywood cinema combines these elements in tandem.

This particular discursive approach to the relationship between narrative and spectacle in cinema can also be discerned in the reviews of the *Matrix* trilogy. As previously mentioned, Ebert, Phipps and Pierce all draw attention in their reviews to the way the special effects are integrated into the narrative of the films. Several of the reviews of *The Matrix* commented on the balance between apparently disparate elements. Nathan goes so far as to argue that “style merged perfectly with content” in the original film (*‘The Matrix’*). As the films were perceived to move further away from this integrated ideal, the reviews grew more critical, drawing attention to the fragmentary nature of the sequels. Edelstein highlights this divide when he compares the purpose of the action sequences in *The Matrix* and *Reloaded*. He writes that each action sequence in *The Matrix* furthered the narrative; “each fight developed his [Neo’s] sense of who he was and what, within the Matrix, he was capable of doing” (*‘Neo Con’*). In contrast, Edelstein describes the action sequences in *Reloaded* as “laid on promiscuously and illogically” in a manner that he clearly finds disruptive (*‘Neo Con’*). The retrospective upgrading of *The Matrix* by some reviewers who were initially negative about the film might also be understood as a preference for ‘balanced’ or ‘integrated’ films. Such films would combine narrative and spectacle successfully, as some considered *The Matrix* to have done.

Conclusion

The reviewers of the *Matrix* trilogy approach the films in different ways. On one hand, there is a trend in the reviews that highlights the heterogeneity and eclecticism of the texts. Some reviewers focused on the attempted blend of disparate elements, such as the intertextual references, action sequences and special effects. These elements can be understood as cinematic ‘attractions’. Other reviewers were preoccupied with the emphasis on action sequences, especially in *Reloaded* and *Revolutions*. By contrast, some critics thought that *The Matrix* at least was able to combine narrative and spectacle in an effective manner. The second and third types of response can be situated in terms of debates around the role of spectacle in contemporary cinema. More broadly, we can see that the critical reception of the feature film trilogy is, in itself, heterogeneous. This is not entirely surprising because Staiger argues that the overall context surrounding a reception event is multifaceted. Because no two spectators are the same, Staiger argues that the types of readings produced are by necessity “contradictory and heterogeneous” (*Perverse* 162). Consequently, in her opinion a unified reading is impossible.

Or is it? The reviews, and the various tendencies within them, seem to have something in common: they are all implicitly concerned with the issue of textual *unity*. That is, they seem to read the films in terms of how they combine elements in a strong synthesis, and lament points at which this synthesis is flawed or absent. How, then, can we interpret this tendency? It is at this point that I want to turn to David Bordwell’s work on the classical nature of contemporary Hollywood cinema in his book *The Way Hollywood Tells It*. He argues that contemporary

films, including blockbusters, are still “a version of classical filmmaking” (180). Bordwell contends that action movies, however simple, “are outfitted with all the standard equipment of [classical cinema:] goals, conflicts, foreshadowing, restricted omniscience, motifs, rising action, and closure” (105). This is because, while the favoured technical devices Hollywood employs have changed, they are merely “a selection and elaboration of options already on the classical filmmaking menu” (180). Like Geoff King, Bordwell claims that both narrative and spectacle are necessarily interwoven. “Every action scene, however ‘spectacular’, is a narrative event,” he writes, echoing Edelstein’s review of *The Matrix* (104). The more excessively spectacular sequences of the *Matrix* franchise still operate within the classical framework (105). As far as Bordwell’s analysis is concerned, much of the spectacle of the films still works in direct relation to the narrative, often acting in support of the narrative drive of the trilogy. The only aspect of the franchise that Bordwell picks up on as being particularly unusual is the degree to which the Wachowskis spread elements of the story across multiple media. Despite the apparently excessive nature of this technique, Bordwell writes that the franchise is merely engaged in “elaborating classical premises” (60). This has the effect of making the film “more classical [...] than it needs to be” (61).

It is worth considering briefly what Bordwell (and others) mean by ‘classical’ narrative cinema. In *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, the authors propose that Hollywood films have similar properties to those of classical art. These elements include “notions of decorum, proportion, [and] formal harmony”, among others (3-4). These elements combine to form a coherent film. Bordwell *et al* apply the term ‘unity’ to several aspects of a film’s construction, linking it to

causal narratives (18), compositional coherence (71), and the film's ideology (81). Even the most radical or non-classical aspects of a film are considered to be subordinate to a larger classical structure (71). The transmedia storytelling of the franchise mentioned above might seem 'excessive', but for Bordwell this complexity can be seen as merely supporting the causal narrative of the trilogy. Thus, in terms of the *Matrix* trilogy, the techniques employed by the Wachowski siblings might differ considerably from those used in the studio period, but according to Bordwell's criteria the result remains unified.

The Matrix, of course, chronicles the attempts of Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) to find Neo, and Neo's process of acceptance and growth as 'the One'. The reviewers draw attention to this story arc, and the emphasis the film places on Neo as "the Messiah figure" whose arrival has been prophesied (Pierce, '*The Matrix*'). In analysing the critical reception of the films, we might be reminded of Morpheus, who like these reviewers searches for a singular entity. However, this preoccupation with textual unity is not merely limited to the immediate critical reception. It also finds its way into another arena: the extended academic response to the franchise.

CHAPTER TWO

“My Own Personal Jesus Christ”

The purpose of this chapter is to identify common features within the academic readings of the *Matrix* trilogy, and to explore the implications of these trends. This chapter will focus on those readings that approach the trilogy from a Christian, Gnostic or Buddhist perspective. I will argue that academic commentators often employ an allegorical approach in order to articulate the central concerns of the trilogy. Accordingly, I will draw to some extent on the work of Mike Milford, who writes on the evangelical Christian interpretations of the *Matrix* trilogy. In particular, I will apply his formulations of ‘postmodern’ and ‘secondary’ allegory to the religious readings. This chapter will examine a group of twenty religious interpretations of the feature films, mostly published in print anthologies and journals. This will require some reconsideration of Staiger’s framework. Specifically, I will expand her definition of the ‘traces’ used for the purposes of a historical reception study.

Academic Reception

The release of the *Matrix* trilogy, as discussed in the previous chapter, was met with a large response by film reviewers. These parts of the franchise also drew a large amount of academic attention by philosophers, religious scholars and scientists. In contrast to the critical reception of the trilogy, which was published within weeks of the films it evaluated, the academic response was produced over a much longer period of time. Articles that analysed and interpreted the feature films

were published in journals and full books on philosophy, film criticism, and religion. As mentioned in the introduction to this project, for example, Joshua Clover undertook a Marxist analysis of *The Matrix*. Jean Baudrillard also famously considered *The Matrix* to have misunderstood some of the theories he proposed in *Simulacra and Simulation*. His critique of the film was in turn debated by other commentators. Their responses were later analysed by Constable in *Adapting Philosophy*. The franchise also spawned a number of anthologies that grouped together articles approaching the franchise from different perspectives. Irwin's two anthologies, *The Matrix and Philosophy* and *More Matrix and Philosophy*, included articles based on the works of several philosophers, such as Plato, Descartes and Putnam, but also some religious interpretations. The same types of reading formed the majority of the work in Yeffeth's *Taking the Red Pill*, as well as several other anthologies. Yeffeth's collection also featured several articles that discussed the accuracy of the science presented in *The Matrix*. In many of these anthologies, the articles are grouped roughly together by content or conceptual approach. *Philosophers Explore The Matrix*, for example, begins with several articles that consider the nature of reality, rather than interspersing them throughout the book. The essays collected in *The Gospel Reloaded* all focus on particular aspects of religious interpretation, and omit scientific critiques. Most of the analyses of the feature films fall into the three categories referred to above. Each of these categories tends to share particular features regarding the types of analysis it attempts to perform.

Generally speaking, the scientific and philosophical readings of the *Matrix* franchise serve a different purpose to the religious interpretations. The majority of

scientific analyses of the films are dedicated to determining how accurately the films represent scientific concepts. Kevin Warwick, for example, writes on the plausibility of a functioning Matrix in ‘*The Matrix – Our Future?*’ A similar form of evaluation can be seen in the philosophical readings. Chalmers’ article ‘*The Matrix as Metaphysics*’, for example, draws on Descartes’ ‘evil demon’ theory and the ‘brain in a vat’ hypothesis proposed by Putnam.¹¹ However, the focus of the article is not to interpret *The Matrix* from this perspective. Chalmers instead uses the film as an example to further explicate his chosen philosophical concepts. In contrast to this, the articles with religious perspectives consistently take the interpretation of the franchise texts as their main goal. Their focus appears to be on identifying an underlying pattern within the narrative of the franchise that could enhance a reader’s understanding of the text. This approach is missing from many of the philosophical articles, with the exception of much of the work on Baudrillard. These articles tend to highlight the explicit role that Baudrillard’s work had within *The Matrix*, and comments on the way in which the film either faithfully represents or fundamentally misunderstands the philosopher’s concepts. A reading of the Baudrillardian arguments will not be undertaken in this chapter, however, for the reasons discussed in the introduction to this thesis.

In the interests of discussing interpretations of the *Matrix* trilogy, rather than evaluations, this chapter will focus on the religious readings of the films. As previously mentioned, several religious perspectives were employed in the reading of the trilogy. Christianity, Gnosticism, and Buddhism provided strong foundations for interpreting the films, and other readings were conducted that drew on Taoism, Hinduism, and Zoroastrianism. However, only the first three

¹¹ Chalmers 132-76; Descartes 295-307; Putnam 313-32.

approaches mentioned above could be considered to have been employed often enough to provide an adequate set of traces for a reception study. It is true that the Buddhist interpretations occasionally include Hindu or Taoist concepts, although these are usually discussed under the Buddhist term. This can be traced to the shared heritage of these religions and the emphasis they place on such topics as ethics and cyclical time. However, the Buddhist interpretations make these references to Hinduism and Taoism in a superficial manner.

At this point, it is useful to note that the religious reception of *The Matrix* has already been discussed to some degree. This is in the work of Mike Milford, who wrote on the evangelical Christian response to the film, and whose concepts will be employed later in this chapter. This chapter's mode of analysis differs from Milford's in two ways. Milford's analysis does examine some of the academic material discussed below, but his focus is particularly on what he calls "the evangelical Christian audience's response" (23). In order to do this, he also draws conclusions through readings of non-academic material, such as sermons and informal essays published on the Internet. In contrast to this, the sample discussed in this chapter is limited to published academic articles. The second difference between Milford's approach and the one employed in this chapter is that, because he draws centrally on informal sources, there are several Christian interpretations that will be discussed here that are absent in Milford's work.

Staiger

The reviews discussed in the previous chapter represented the immediate impressions that the trilogy had on a group of spectators (albeit a group of

spectators well-versed in discussing the medium). In the case of these academic articles, however, the published literature represents a more detailed engagement with the text over a longer period of time. The majority of the work discussed in this chapter was released between 1999 and 2005, but some published articles appeared up to a decade after the release of *The Matrix*. This indicates a need to revisit Staiger's understanding of the reception event and its traces in order to employ a historical reception approach in an appropriate way.

Can an array of chapters and articles published over several years constitute a body of work on a single topic? It is true that Staiger's studies of traces are often limited to a short period of time that represents a recent response to a textual object. However, if we examine what Staiger uses as a trace closely, it may go some way to arguing the validity of traces from an extended period of time. In the cases where this type of analysis is applied to a specific single event, as in the discussion of the reception of *The Silence of the Lambs*, the traces are from a period of sustained public debate of about three months. In other analyses, this range is expanded considerably. In some cases, Staiger's analyses on a particular topic focus on more than one event, as in her discussion of sexual politics in cinema in the early 1960s.¹² Her focus in this instance is on the portrayal of minority groups in cinema, particularly among the LGBT community. Considering the extensive process of "finding others like oneself" (*Perverse* 125), Staiger looks at a number of films and cultural products in the wider context of 1960s society. As a result, the large number of traces she collects for this study extends from 1959 to 1963. Staiger finds commonalities between them quite readily even though they do not function as traces of a single viewing under

¹² Staiger, 'Finding Community in the Early 1960s', in *Perverse Spectators*, 125-60.

identical conditions. Instead, they function as traces for the same kind of event – an attempt to interpret and analyse the same textual object. I have also expanded the category of traces in this chapter to include academic articles. The determination with which the respective authors adhere to their religious approaches is arguably ‘personal’ in nature.

Characterisation of Reception

Christian Interpretations

Several of the religious interpretations of the *Matrix* franchise consider the films as an allegorical version figures and events in the New Testament.¹³ These readings tend to treat aspects of the *Matrix* trilogy, such as characters, settings and events, as signs that require interpretation. Eight of these Christian interpretations will be analysed in this section. While all of the readings employ the New Testament to some degree, two of them conduct extended interpretations. One is Seay and Garrett’s *The Gospel Reloaded: Exploring Spirituality and Faith in the Matrix*, which conducts its reading in a series of essays. The other is ‘Finding God in *The Matrix*’, an article by Paul Fontana, which explores the religious symbolism of the protagonists of *The Matrix*. The breadth of their exploration and analysis partly explains the degree to which this section will cite their work. Many of these commentators begin their interpretations by drawing parallels between Neo (Keanu Reeves) and Jesus. The acts Neo performs in *The Matrix* are often described as miracles in the Christian readings. Seay and Garrett, for example, identify the crucial sign in these figures’ respective narratives as “the last great miracle [...] resurrection. Both die, remain dead for a period of time, and return to

¹³ This tendency is also significant in non-academic sources, such as many of those discussed by Milford in ‘Neo-Christ’.

life to continue their ministries” (60). This particular narrative event is highlighted by most of the Christian interpretations (even those that describe this type of interpretation as a precursor to offering an alternative). Many of these interpretations describe the ‘resurrection’ of Neo at the end of *The Matrix* as the final miracle the character performs. McGinn sees Neo’s return to life at the end of the film as “a clear reference to the Resurrection” (63). Both Bassham (113) and Fontana (164) describe how Neo ascends into the sky at the end of the film after he is resurrected, in a manner similar to Christ’s ascent into heaven. Schuhardt describes Neo’s resurrection as taking place “in the Hollywood equivalent of three days, which is about three seconds” (11). In doing so, Schuhardt collapses a seeming contradiction between the two events.

Like Christ, Neo’s resurrection comes after a ‘ministry’, as the final miracle after a series of smaller miracles, which are performed to convince those around him that he is somehow divine. These commentators write on a series of other actions that Neo takes, casting this concept in parallel to the miracles of Christ. What is interesting in these interpretations, however, is the simplicity these parallels are presented with. It appears that these commentators find the connections between Neo and Christ so salient that they (and by extension their readers) do not have to provide an exhaustive account of minor parallels. According to these writers, Neo’s ministry begins with the miracle of “dodging bullets on the rooftop”, which Seay and Garrett suggest is not enough to convince Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss) of Neo’s divine status (60). Some commentators consider the rescuing of Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) from his interrogation room in *The Matrix* as a parallel of the raising of Lazarus. According to both Paul

Fontana (163) and Seay and Garrett (60), Neo's line "Get up, Morpheus!" is intended to remind the viewer of Jesus' command "Lazarus, come out!" Elsewhere, Neo's revival of Trinity at the end of *Reloaded* draws attention as a potential retelling of this same story (Isaacs and Trost 67). What is notable about this particular interpretation is that it is the only instance in which a 'miracle' is suggested to have taken place after Neo's 'resurrection' in *The Matrix*. However, Isaacs and Trost suggest that this is before the true physical death of Neo in *Revolutions*. In other words, they shift the conclusion of Christ's narrative to map it onto the entire film trilogy, rather than just the first film. Although these writers differ on the precise Biblical narratives being re-enacted by Neo at given points in the trilogy, they all identify the raising of Lazarus as a miracle that is present within the narrative of the film. This overall pattern of miracles clearly places the interpretative framework of these articles. The first film, many of these articles propose, is a retelling of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Christ, and these two narratives are usually temporally matched. As we shall see, this is not the case for other principal characters of the films.

In order to fully flesh out this Christian allegory, the commentators also point to the roles the other characters play in the life of Neo and, by extension, the life of Christ. There are some connections that are drawn repeatedly in the allegories of various theorists. In *The Matrix*, the rebellion against the machines is betrayed by Cypher (Joe Pantoliano), who hands over Morpheus in exchange for a blissful life in the Matrix. Paul Fontana sees a direct connection here between Cypher and Judas Iscariot, who betrays Christ in a similar fashion. Beyond the bare facts of the betrayal, Fontana points out that both "Cypher and Judas are paid

for their actions” and that in neither case does the betrayer believe that they are in the presence of one who is truly the Messiah (170). Schuhardt also notes the latter point, stating that Cypher’s betrayal (of both Neo and the cause) is due to “Cypher’s doubts about Morpheus’s certainty” (9). Beyond this, Schuhardt draws a parallel between the contexts of the betrayals. In both cases, the betrayer “shares a cup” with the betrayed (9). Judas does so with Jesus at the Last Supper, and Cypher and Neo share a mug of Dozer’s moonshine in *The Matrix* while Cypher bemoans the whole rebellion. Seay and Garrett also read Cypher’s betrayal as analogous to Judas’, but they cast Cypher in another role as well: that of Lucifer (131). Lucifer has betrayed mankind since the beginning of time, they point out, and likewise, Cypher’s betrayal has started before the narrative of the film. In the first scene, Cypher has deliberately led the Agents to Trinity’s location (133). Gregory Bassham extends the connection between Cypher and Lucifer by pointing out the similarities in sound between the names of the two characters (113).

Although Fontana sees a “clear match” between Cypher and Judas, the interpretations of the other characters are a little less explicit (169). As well as the brief parallels between Morpheus and Lazarus mentioned earlier, Fishburne’s character is shown to wear “a number of allegorical hats” (Fontana 167). The writers connect Morpheus to both John the Baptist and God the Father within the first film. John the Baptist is responsible for the baptism of Christ, as Morpheus is (in a sense) for Neo (Seay and Garrett 83, Bassham 112). Seay and Garrett consider Neo’s baptism is synonymous with his emergence into the real world. After Neo is submerged in the water at the base of the ‘pod’ in which he has been imprisoned, Morpheus “pulls him up from the abyss to safety with his disciples”

(83). In a further parallel, Morpheus and John have prophesied the arrival of the Messiah figure long before his actual arrival (Schuhardt 8, Seay and Garrett 83, McGinn 63, Fontana 167-8). McGinn explicitly refers to Morpheus' expectation of Neo as "awaiting the Second Coming" (63). "As Morpheus tells it," Schuhardt writes, "The One has been prophesied, like Jesus of Nazareth, from time immemorial" (8). As described earlier, after Morpheus enacts the role of prophet and baptiser, these interpretations suggest that he enacts the role of Lazarus. The Lazarus narrative intrudes briefly into the Baptist narrative. Witherington, on the other hand, places Morpheus in the role of God the Father, teacher and begetter of Christ the Son (170). Witherington draws this parallel by referring to Tank's farewell to Morpheus in *The Matrix*: "You were more than just a leader to us, you were a father" (170). Seay and Garrett make the same reading of Morpheus from the same line of dialogue, suggesting that the viewer is "invited to identify him [Morpheus] with God" (82).

In a similar manner to the multiple readings of Morpheus, the academic literature has a number of possible interpretations for the character of Trinity. She is a character that many Christian spectators "found spiritual significance in" (Milford 24). Part of the reason for multiple interpretations, it seems, can be traced to a complication in the allocation of signs: Neo, Morpheus and Cypher are able to be allegorised as individual figures (even if they may take on more than one role in this parable). Trinity's name, however, seems to mark her out as representative of a concept rather than a discrete figure: in this case, the biblical 'trinity', or the tripartite concept of God as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. As a character, Trinity is part of a 'trinity' (with Morpheus and Neo). However, her name also

seems to indicate that she is 'the trinity' in its entirety. As such, the interpretations of Schuhardt, McGinn, and Seay and Garrett all place Trinity in the role of God in some manner, but also specifically avoid determining the precise religious entity that Trinity represents. Schuhardt states that Trinity is "an obvious allusion to the biblical concept of a triune God" (6), but this interpretation is later reduced to "the Holy Spirit" (11). McGinn describes her part as simply "closest to playing the God role", and cites her resurrection of Neo in *The Matrix* (63). Seay and Garrett combine the two, stating that Trinity is "God herself" and yet functions as "the Christian Holy Spirit" (102-3). Only Isaacs and Trost specifically define Trinity's role as "a feminized Holy Spirit" (66). In one way, this disagreement is hardly surprising: the tripartite concept of God has yet to be fully resolved in theological studies. However, the allegorical reading is muddled here: Trinity is the Holy Spirit, Trinity is God, she is both, and she is neither. Paul Fontana, responding to the complicated nature of constructing this part of the allegory, describes the process as "vexing" (168), stating that "one really can't argue that Trinity exhibits characteristics displayed by Christ, God and the Holy Ghost", and that even when limiting the reading to the Holy Ghost, "this connection is tenuous at best" (168).

Leaving the pitfalls of this interpretation aside, Schuhardt (11) and Di Filippo (79) consider the romance plot between Neo and Trinity to be similar to Christ and Mary Magdalene. This is closer to the narrative allegory displayed when discussing the other characters. Trinity's actions intersect with Neo's in a readily interpretable way: Trinity is "Neo's carnal worshipper" (Di Filippo 79), and is present during Neo's 'crucifixion' and rebirth. Fontana, while acknowledging these intersections between Trinity and Mary Magdalene, calls this

relationship “problematic” as well, as there is no textual certainty as to the identity of the Mary that is present at the crucifixion (168). At worst, Fontana seems to be arguing, this interpretation conflates more than one figure into the role of Trinity – a confusion that Fontana tries to avoid in the rest of his allegorical reading. While he acknowledges that Morpheus represents a number of figures from the New Testament, he sees these parallels as being complete, in a similar way to the parallel between Cypher and Judas. However, this sense of completion is not present in the reading of Trinity. Fontana is thus unable to draw a parallel, considering Trinity’s character to be “a mixed bag of subtle Biblical references” (169).

Fontana’s reading is particularly notable because he extends his construction of Christian allegory much further than the other writers do. For instance, he reads the rest of the crew of the *Nebuchadnezzar* as “approximately [fitting] into the role of the disciples” (171). He highlights similarities between the two groups, such as the inclusion within both of a pair of brothers, which “does not seem coincidental” (171). As well as this, Fontana attempts to interpret Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving) and his cronies, first as Satan. This level of interpretation, however, does not function with the same level of exactness that Fontana would perhaps like. He acknowledges, for example, that the crew of the *Nebuchadnezzar* contains fewer than twelve people, so he “cannot take this analogy [to the disciples] too far” (171). He also admits that the agents “are not really the enemy in *The Matrix* in the same way that Satan is the enemy of God” (173). That is, the two figures fulfil a slightly different role in their respective narratives. It is at this point that Fontana decides to resist the “allegorical urge”, and instead offers the

agents up as “generally representing agents of evil” (173). Despite his seeming wariness of overextending his reading of *The Matrix*, however, it is this “allegorical urge” that Fontana refers to that is of paramount importance.

One notable drawback to this particular approach is the role that violence plays within *The Matrix*. Specifically, the images of Neo and Trinity firing endless rounds of ammunition into the lobby of a government building seem at odds with the portrayal of Christ as a peaceful figure. Fontana admits that this sequence is “more violent” than the actions of Christ at any point in the Biblical narratives (163). Seay and Garrett write that “the use of violence to solve problems raises new problems for interpretation” (108). Both authors draw attention to the story of Christ evicting the money lenders from the Temple, in an attempt to equate Neo’s actions with a religious equivalent. Seay and Garrett also propose that Jesus “seems to have leaned toward action” rather than peaceful means in order to achieve ends (113). In doing so, they draw closer connections between the two figures and override a seeming dissonance between the two. As we shall see, this becomes more difficult to accomplish when the trilogy is read from other religious perspectives.

Gnostic Interpretations

There are several commentaries on the trilogy that employ a Gnostic perspective. This section will draw on six of these interpretations, particularly the two articles contributed to anthologies by Rachel Wagner and Frances Flannery-Dailey. The narratives of Gnosticism, while well-documented, are perhaps not as

well-known to many spectators. In order to facilitate the discussion, then, I will employ several of these interpretations to outline some features of Gnostic thought. According to Wagner and Flannery-Dailey, the myth of Gnosticism starts with the existence of a divine unknowable god, who rules over a realm called the *pleorema*, which is described by these authors as “akin to heaven” (‘Wake Up!’ 263). The *pleorema* is populated by other, lesser, divine beings, who are paired in a way that allows them to create divine offspring. One of these ‘aeons’ (lesser divine beings), Sophia, decides to use her power to create an offspring without the assistance of her mandated consort. The resulting imperfect demiurge is cast away from the *pleorema*, and “mistakenly believes himself to be the only god” (263). In an inspired burst, the demiurge originates the world and the human race to populate it, as well as a group of entities called archons to police the humans. Wagner and Flannery-Dailey state that Gnostics associate this demiurge (often known as Yaldabaoth) with the Creator God of the Old Testament, who brings the material realm into existence. The divine angels who accompany the Christian God are paralleled in Gnosticism by the concept of archons (263-4). Yaldabaoth breathes his spirit into man to animate him, but accidentally passes on the divine spark he received from Sophia to the human race, imbuing mankind with a divine spirit. As a result, mankind is “a divine spirit (good) trapped in a material body (bad) and a material realm (bad)” (264). Because of their material nature, humans “are exiled from the *pleorema*” (264). In order to ascend to the higher plane of existence, we must be made aware of our divine nature and the nature of the universe that surrounds us. The imparting of this knowledge (or gnosis) is facilitated by enlightened figures that are referred to as ‘redeemers’.

The commentators engaged in Gnostic interpretations argue that there are Gnostic redeemer figures in the feature films. Wagner and Flannery-Dailey state that the ‘Gnostic Redeemer’ is “a guide [...] who willingly enters the limiting material world of illusion in order to share liberating knowledge” (‘Wake Up!’ 259). They contend that Neo “functions as a classic Gnostic Redeemer figure” (‘Stopping Bullets’ 99). Many of the other Gnostic analyses also link this role to Neo. Gabriel McKee writes that Neo’s messianic traits emphasise “the salvific power” of *gnosis* (36). On the other hand, Brottman proposes that Morpheus represents this figure early on in *The Matrix*, explaining to Neo that he has come to this point because he knows something that he cannot explain (100). From the specific description that Wagner and Flannery-Dailey give of the redeemer figure’s traits, they also seem to apply this character archetype to the rebels in general. They often display “apparent superpowers” when fighting in the Matrix that might lead them to be considered as redeemers (McKee, 36).

The Gnostic concept of *gnosis* is presented within these discussions of the films as the central requirement of transcendence. *The Matrix* is focused around a narrative of revelation, as Neo learns “that reality is not what it seems” (McKee 37). As a result the “Gnostic ‘conceptual breakthrough’, from illusion to understanding, is central to the whole structure of the film” (Di Filippo 80). David Brottman claims that Morpheus provides *gnosis* in two ways. Beyond merely explaining what the Matrix is, Morpheus also “guides Neo out of the cubicle labyrinth of the corporation, the global body of materialism” (100). Where other commentators suggest that Neo receives *gnosis* during his first meeting with Morpheus, Brottman emphasises that receiving *gnosis* is a process of awakening

and rejuvenating, rather than merely learning (101). In doing so, he refers to several “Gnostic trope[s] for the awakening of the spiritual man”, such as the reanimated corpse, the cleansed or immersed body, and the neonate (101). It should be noted that these images in the film occur after Neo’s release from the Matrix, not before. In fact, because of Neo’s reluctance to believe in his divine power and the nature of reality, Brottman suggests that his “actualization” does not occur until much later (101-2). *Gnosis* is only fully realised when it is accepted as fact. When he meets Morpheus for the first time, Neo’s knowledge cannot be explicitly expressed. It is not a cognitive matter, or an understanding, but rather what Wagner and Flannery-Dailey describe as “an experiential and intuitive perception” (‘Wake Up!’ 264).

The Gnostic interpretations draw on the actual narrative of the trilogy to a much smaller extent than the Christian readings. Beyond the explication of certain concepts such as *gnosis* and the redeemer, Gnostic interpretations of the trilogy also attribute significance to the very roots of the franchise. Thus, the Gnostic allegories construct a narrative that is similar to the underlying concept of the entire franchise. In order to do this, they draw connections between Yaldabaoth’s realm and the Matrix. Several critics see particular parallels between the Gnostic demiurge and the Architect (Helmut Bakaitis), first met in *The Matrix Reloaded*. We learn through his conversation with Neo that the Architect was responsible for the creation of the Matrix. However, as a result of flaws in the first Matrix, two things occurred: a small group of humans was released into the real world, and the anomalous ‘One’ appeared. Wagner and Flannery-Dailey write that the “Architect apparently has created an illusory material realm” (‘Stopping Bullets’ 100). This

material realm corresponds directly to the creation of the world in Gnostic myth, down to the flaws in its creation. Faller draws the connection between these two narrative events even more strongly: “the devil-figure created the world as a means of enslaving humanity, and that kind of cosmology *would explain the Architect perfectly*” (27, emphasis added). Having secured this connection, these analyses then attempt to read other associated signs as allegorical. The Archons, for instance, “find their counterpart in the Matrix’s Agent Smith” (McKee 36). This connection is also found by Wagner and Flannery-Dailey, although in their arguments the parallel is extended to the Agents in general (‘Stopping Bullets’ 100; ‘Wake Up!’ 264-5). Brottman contends that the Archons were “agents of control and oppression”, whose “main task was to ensure that human beings remained stupefied and oblivious” (96). In his interpretation, it is the “humanoid minions”, constantly monitoring humanity and fostering its lack of awareness, that “function as analogues of the Archons” (99).

Wagner and Flannery-Dailey also expand their analysis by attempting to identify the franchise’s equivalent of the character of Sophia. In one reading, taking the Architect as the demiurge, they associate the role of Sophia with the actions of the humans before the advent of the Matrix. “Like Sophia, we conceived an offspring out of our own pride” and this offspring (the “birth of A.I.”, as Morpheus puts it) became the demiurge, its creations imprisoning humanity (‘Wake Up!’ 264). These authors have also constructed a secondary analysis, however, casting Agent Smith as the demiurge. This is based on the ways in which Smith can be viewed as a malformed creator who literally seeks to recreate the Matrix in his own image. In this interpretation, then, Sophia is the Oracle (Gloria

Foster), who says to Smith in *The Matrix Revolutions*, “You are a bastard”. For Wagner and Flannery-Dailey, this line directly “recall[s] the bastard offspring of Sophia”, a suggestion that is cemented by Smith’s reply, “You should know, mom” (‘Stopping Bullets’ 100).

Buddhist Interpretations

There have also been several Buddhist interpretations of the *Matrix* trilogy. As noted previously, the Buddhist interpretations often refer to other Eastern religions, such as Hinduism and Taoism. This section will explore only those readings that are explicitly referred to as Buddhist, but readers should be aware that many of these readings could be employed to make arguments from other Eastern religious perspectives. Some of the six Buddhist interpretations here are drawn from familiar sources, such as Flannery-Dailey and Wagner, whose articles on Gnosticism also conduct competing readings from a Buddhist perspective. Seay and Garrett also make an appearance here, devoting a chapter of *Gospel Reloaded* to Buddhist and other Eastern interpretations. Like the Gnostic readings summarised earlier, the Buddhist readings are interesting because they seem to employ allegory in more than one way. As well as constructing allegories based on the characters of the films, these interpretations also focus on the story of the franchise. They draw parallels between the world the franchise takes place in, and a Buddhist understanding of the nature of reality.

The Buddhist interpretations of the *Matrix* franchise often focus on the process of enlightenment and the exploration of the nature of reality. As with the Gnostic interpretations, some background information will be supplied for the

benefit of the reader. Writing in ‘Buddhism, Mythology and *The Matrix*’, James L. Ford lays out what he sees as the crucial elements of the Buddhist worldview. In particular, he describes the concept of *samsara*: the cycle of life. Within *samsara* “a world comes into being, evolves, devolves, and is finally destroyed” (127). Within each of these periods of the cycle, living beings also pass through a myriad of forms in the process commonly known as reincarnation. The ultimate goal in Buddhism is to escape from *samsara* and rise above the continuous cycles of existence and the suffering that is innate to them. Before the enlightenment of the Buddha, it was believed that this escape (or *moksha*) could be attained through the renouncing of possessions and the “denial of [...] the material self” (128). Siddhartha Buddha, struggling to choose between asceticism and hedonism, took a third option. He resolved to achieve *moksha* through meditation and the power of the mind alone. At the threshold of enlightenment, he was met by Mara, the demon that oversees *samsara*. The Buddha prevailed over Mara’s trickery and became enlightened to the true nature of reality. The teachings of Buddhism are founded on the teachings of the enlightened Buddha.

Ford goes on to describe these Buddhist teachings, paying particular attention to the ‘Four Noble Truths’. These four Truths underpin the experience of reality, as well as the escape from it. The First Noble Truth is “The truth of suffering” (129). Ford acknowledges that ‘suffering’ is quite a brutal term to use, as the word implies something quite distinct from what this Truth intends. “The idea here,” he writes, “is that there is a universal feeling of dissatisfaction that characterizes all of human experience” (129). The Second Noble Truth describes how this dissatisfaction arises from our experience of *samsara*. Because *samsara*

is an illusory world “constructed from the sensory projections formulated by our own desires”, we are unable to perceive the world as it actually is (Wagner and Flannery-Dailey, ‘Wake Up!’ 272). According to Ford, among the things we desire is permanence, and this desire blinds us to the changing and cyclical nature of existence (130). As a result, we are fundamentally incorrect in our perception of reality, and experience dissatisfaction as a result. Fortunately, there is a way out of this cycle of dissatisfaction, and this is explained in the Third Noble Truth. This Truth avers the existence of Nirvana, a way of understanding reality in a different and more accurate manner. Nirvana does not imply a physical transference into another realm, as is suggested in descriptions of ascendance in Christian and Gnostic narratives, but rather a mental cessation. It is only upon death that the enlightened Buddhist experiences “a complete escape from rebirth” in the cycles of existence (Ford 132). In order to achieve this Nirvana, the Fourth Noble Truth describes the training that one must undergo, referred to as the ‘eightfold path’. This includes a proper understanding of the nature of *samsara*, the development of a morality that minimises the harm one does to other sentient beings, and the transformation of one’s consciousness (which Ford describes as “a mental discipline”) (133).

Ford concludes his exploration of the relevant Buddhist terms by introducing two other concepts: the bodhisattva, and the idea of consciousness. Both of these stem from a Buddhist movement called Mahayana Buddhism. For Mahayana Buddhists, the ultimate goal is not to attain Nirvana alone, but to assist in the enlightenment of all beings. “Thus, a bodhisattva intentionally [turns their back on Nirvana] and comes back to the world of *samsara* in order to alleviate

suffering and help lead others to the same path” (Ford 134). As for consciousness, Ford writes that in Mahayana Buddhism, what is emphasised most in the imperative to perform certain actions is the “conscious *intention*” behind the act (134, emphasis Ford’s). Conscious intention and morality are symbiotic: awareness of the intent of one’s actions enhances the individual’s ability to perform such actions, and vice versa.

These Buddhist concepts described above are central to the Buddhist interpretative literature as a whole. Every reading from a Buddhist perspective draws on at least one of these core ideas. As well as this, a number of these interpretations focus on similarities between the progress of Neo and certain aspects of the Buddhist tradition. In these commentaries, Neo is often cast at first in the role of Buddhist acolyte. Seay and Garrett write that “Neo’s entire experience is a quest for [...] enlightenment” (40). When he achieves this goal at the end of *The Matrix*, he sees “the world as it is” (40). Neo is transformed in this process from a man who seeks knowledge and understanding to one who is enlightened. In this manner, the various training programs he goes through are similar to meditations, each providing greater awareness of the extent of the deceit being presented to him. However, in a fashion that tends to be typical in religious interpretations, a character may perform more than one role. Neo is also perceived by some of these critics to be the Buddha himself. In *The Matrix*, Neo’s arrival is predicted by the Oracle, and he is considered “one who has the ability to manipulate the Matrix” (‘Wake Up!’ 277). Ford focuses on Neo’s ‘Nirvana’ at the end of the first film, and his ability to manipulate the bullets fired at him by the Agents. He writes that in the Mahayana tradition, as one gets closer to attaining

Buddhahood, “one procures powers to manipulate the perceived ‘objective’ world” (139). As Neo is the only ‘good’ character to attain these powers, he is analogous to a Buddha.

In Buddhist tradition, the Buddha’s road to enlightenment was met with opposition by Mara, who attempted to distract the Buddha “through temptation, fear, and doubt” (Ford 128). Similarly, Neo is confronted over the course of the film by those that oversee the Matrix. His temptation may come at the hands of Mouse (Matt Doran), who creates the training program featuring the alluring ‘woman in red’. However, Neo also makes references to parts of the Matrix that he used to enjoy visiting. His visit to the Oracle initially convinces him that he is not ‘the One’, and the overwhelming force of the Agents increases this certainty. In the end, however, both figures prevail over their doubts and oppressors – and, notably, both figures do so by halting a projectile. Neo plucks from the air one of the bullets the Agents fire at him, and when Mara hurled a flaming discus at the Buddha to halt his meditation, the Buddha transformed it into a clump of flowers (Seay and Garrett 40). Despite the descriptions of Neo’s enlightenment, which would cast him as the Buddha, he and the other characters released from the Matrix are also occasionally read as bodhisattva figures. Rather than embracing Nirvana, the crew of the *Nebuchadnezzar* regularly return to the Matrix to assist others along the path to enlightenment (‘Stopping Bullets’ 101). There is, however, a potential conflict here between the interpretations. Seay and Garrett perform quite a literal reading of the final moments of *The Matrix*, suggesting that Neo has achieved Nirvana. If a strict allegory is intended here, however, he would be unable to return as a bodhisattva. This dissonance in the character is minimised,

however, by the ways in which he is read: Neo replicates enough of the traits of the Buddha to be read in this manner, but also can fulfil another role as well.

These commentators draw parallels between the franchise texts and their Buddhist equivalents regarding aspects of story as well as character. They regard the concept of the Matrix as similar to the illusory world of *samsara* and *maya*. For example, Wagner and Flannery-Dailey make this connection quite closely when they describe the “complex interconnected sensory illusions that lock human beings into a repeating cycle” (‘Stopping Bullets’ 101). They immediately follow this by describing the Matrix as a program that is “dependent upon interlocking neural perceptions” (101). Elsewhere, these same authors point out that the “viability of the Matrix’s illusion depends upon the belief by those enmeshed in it that the Matrix itself is reality” (‘Wake Up!’ 273). Ford contends that in both worldviews, “the fundamental problem is ignorance of the true nature of reality” (137). Brannigan argues that, despite the vast nature of the deception, this ‘illusory’ world is not an absence of existence. “The concrete world does exist, but our views and perception of this reality do not match the reality itself” (103). Paul di Filippo notes the consistent presence of ‘dream’ metaphors in *The Matrix*. He writes that “this suspicion of the validity of creation” and the inability to distinguish between dreams and reality are central to Buddhist thought (80-1). In both the Matrix and the Buddhist idea of ‘reality’, the basic idea is largely the same. There is a single concrete reality, full of individuals believing that they inhabit another.

This dissonance between the real world and the illusory realm bears a resemblance to some of the details of the First Noble Truth. This can be demonstrated in the conversation between Neo and Morpheus upon their first meeting. Here, the discontentment that is the result of existing in *samsara* is “much like the feeling of discontent Neo feels, the ‘splinter in his mind’ telling him of the wrongness of the universe” (Ford 129). There also seems to be an avenue of escape from the illusory world of the Matrix; a virtual Nirvana. Brannigan reminds the reader of the Third Noble Truth: that it is possible to escape from both the Matrix and *samsara*. The cause of suffering is our mentality and desires, and “the source of redemption comes from within us as well. It is precisely this Third Truth that Morpheus suggests” (108).

These commentators also tend to note a potential limitation of the Buddhist interpretations of the trilogy. Violence plays a significant role within the franchise, and this presence does not appear to sit well with a reading from a perspective noted for its non-violence. In a manner similar to the Christian interpretations discussed earlier, McGrath describes this violent tendency as acceptable under “a process of mythmaking” (165). Buddhist iconography and violent imagery must occur together, he suggests, because to remove one would be to privilege the other (165). The violence represented in the films can hardly be unintentional, as would be permissible under Mahayana Buddhism. Instead, Wagner and Flannery-Dailey note, the films appear to suggest “that violence is necessary for reaching higher states of reality” (‘Stopping Bullets’ 105). Mahayana Buddhism, as mentioned earlier, is devoted to the benefit of all souls, but in *The Matrix* killing agents “results in the deaths of real people in the ‘real world’” (105). It seems that one of

the core tenets of Buddhism is being overtly violated by the films. Wagner and Flannery-Dailey attempt to reconcile this contradiction, but are ultimately unable to do so ('Wake Up!' 282).

Analysis of Reception

Having outlined the academic reception of the trilogy of feature films, I will now examine the trends within it and explore their implications. In particular, I will now examine the issues of morality and knowledge that are central to the arguments in these traces. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, one of the trends that can be identified within the set of religious interpretations is that they often construct allegorical readings of events and characters within the films. For the reader's benefit, some explanation of the allegorical form is provided here. M. H. Abrams argues that an allegory is a narrative "in which the agents and actions, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived [...] to communicate a second, correlated order of signification" (5). Certain objects and events within the text are interrelated in a way that makes coherent sense, but also hearken back to another meaning, which is coherent in the same way. In traditional allegory, this secondary meaning is closely aligned with what the creator of the text intends the audience to understand (Milford 20). We can understand Abrams' "agents and actions" as being individual and discrete entities of meaning. Many of the interpretations discussed below, for example, will consider particular characters and concepts in the *Matrix* trilogy as representative of religious counterparts. This process involves clearly delineating particular 'meanings' within these figures, and creating parallels between them.

For Walter Benjamin, the search for an unyielding ‘truth’ or ‘essence’ to any of these objects or events was doomed to failure. The existence of one of these signs, or ‘monads’, was subject to a different type of time than the other elements of narrative.¹⁴ These two kinds of time are characterised as ‘messianic time’ or ‘now-time’ (for the monad) and ‘historical time’ (for everything else). Benjamin’s concept of historical time refers to the standard procession of time, marked by calendars and clocks and made up of identical, indistinguishable units. In contrast to the continuous flow of historical time, Benjamin defines messianic time as time that is experienced as immediate and intense (*Illuminations* 262-3). The messianic event has the power “to arrest the flow of time” for an observer by making them aware of a greater and more incisive significance to a particular moment (Ferris 134). Although nothing changes in a concrete sense, the observer’s understanding is fundamentally deepened. This process crystallises a multifaceted event, and turns it into an object with an essence. Whenever one perceives or approaches a historical event in order to ascertain its truth, “he encounters it as a monad” (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 263). The event has had its nuance stripped away and can only be perceived as an object with a single and finite meaning. To Benjamin, this “messianic cessation of happening” is something to be avoided, but in some sense it makes the discrete object within an allegory more finite (263). The presence of a monad does not necessarily imply an allegory, however, merely a readable object. In order to appropriately uncover an allegory within a text, the reader needs to ascertain the degree to which an agent in one text is representative of an agent in another. The more crystallised and finite the agent is, the more conclusively one can argue that an allegory is being presented.

¹⁴ Benjamin’s use of the monad is drawn from the work of Leibniz. Leibniz defines the monad as a complete concept “without parts”, which is augmented by other monads to create objects with nuanced meanings (*Monadology* §1).

Because the essence of the monad has been crystallized by messianic time, we always approach it as an object, and perceive it in varying ways. As such, the monad always represents something else: it is a symbol. Symbols are usually constructed “by exploiting widely shared associations between an object or event or action and a particular concept” (Abrams 320). The agents and events in an allegory are associated by a reader with other pieces of knowledge, often those pieces of information that are shared by a culture or society. The common knowledge implied by the symbol attempts to bridge the particular (the monad being read) and the universal (the experience that the symbol is designed to remind us of). For Benjamin, however, this attempt is ultimately unsuccessful: the symbol “can never *actually* embody the union of universal and particular, but only *represents* this unity for the imagination” (Wolin 67). Instead of being a failure, though, Richard Wolin reads this as a symptom for Benjamin that the allegory is utopian in nature – the symbol is still alive; it becomes something that could potentially be unified in the future (67). The symbol cannot unite itself, and must be completed by the allegorist. Simply saying that a symbol trades on “widely shared associations” is not enough to ascertain that it will be interpreted in the same way by all those who perceive it (as will be seen later in this chapter). After all, Wolin writes, the meaning of an allegory cannot be considered to be self-evident because the reader is removed from the essence of the symbol, and thus “*all* meaning has ceased to be self evident” (67). The symbol “is now quite incapable of emanating any significance or meaning of its own”, Benjamin writes; “such significance as it has, it acquires from the allegorist” (*The Origin* 130).

This relationship between symbol and allegory has been explored further. For Paul de Man, like Benjamin, the symbol attempts to unite the object and the totality of experience that the object ‘represents’. Allegory, on the other hand, keeps the object and subject separate: “The meaning constituted by the allegorical sign can [...] consist only in the *repetition* [...] of a previous sign with which it can never coincide” (de Man 207). As allegory refers back to a previous meaning of a sign, it in fact only refers back to a previous iteration of that particular monad – a process that potentially continues indefinitely in both directions. As a result, allegory is centrally linked to the issue of temporality. On one level, a traditional allegory is constructed out of a series of signs, linked together in a fixed order in time, that are associated with a similar or identical series of signs in another time. Because of its extended nature, allegory was seen to be a weak substitute for symbolism, offering “only the long-winded elaboration and excessive ornamentation of strained, commonplace associations” (Gilloch 81). At the same time, this extension that is central to the allegory enables the meaning to grow more expansive and potent. We can see what Ernst Bloch refers to in his writing on allegory: while the symbol strives for totality, the allegory is less grounded and “is free to go through a large repertoire of temporal appearances to find analogical pictures” (Seyhan 68). To summarise, traditional allegory can be considered to be a series of signs that are linked temporally. These refer the allegorist to another particular series of signs. The referents chosen by the allegorist can result in different interpretations between readers, as the function of allegory is, to some degree, arbitrary and dependent on repetition.

The three schools of religious interpretation discussed above all propose several binary oppositions within the *Matrix* trilogy. The first of these is between good and evil. This dichotomy is clearly apparent in the Christian interpretations, which hold that the Christian narrative shares a similar conception of good and evil to that featured in *The Matrix*. The primary focus of the narrative for these authors is the battle for supremacy between good and evil. Accordingly, these authors find parallels between Christ and Neo on the one hand, and the machine antagonists and Satan on the other. Neo, like Christ, is considered in these readings to be an ineffable force of good, and the Agents, like Satan, are considered to do only evil. What is perhaps notable about the treatment of this dichotomy in the Christian interpretations is that it is largely constructed without reference to the overall concept of ‘the Matrix’. That is, the central conflict in this film is not between Neo and the Matrix, but between Neo and Agent Smith. As mentioned earlier, the Agents are figures that it is difficult to properly find an analogue for. Fontana is forced to conclude that the Agents generally represent “agents of evil” rather than “specific Biblical characters” (173). These readings often leave the role of Satan ‘uncast’, refusing to draw a parallel between the ultimate evil and any one character in the films. In instances where Satan is part of a Christian allegory, this role always falls to Cypher, as in the articles by Seay and Garrett (133) and Bassham (113). It is significant that in the Christian narrative, Satan’s direct antagonist is not Jesus, but rather God. Indeed, just as Satan is absent from these allegories, so too is God. This absence is explicitly commented on by Richard R. Jones, when he writes that all “serious religious discussion[s] of the film” inevitably return to the missing figure (49). However, the Christian allegories that are constructed are focused on the battle between good and evil that occurs not

between God and Satan, but between Jesus and his earthly oppressors. The ‘resurrection’ that Neo undergoes is the most important facet of this, as resurrection is the point in the Christian narrative where Jesus overcomes “‘the enemy with His own death’” (LaVelle, quoted in Milford 24).

These interpretations go to some lengths to secure a strict distinction between good and evil. This involves reducing potential ethical complexities in the characters to black-and-white moral codes. For example, several of the interpretations seem to suggest that Cypher’s morality might be unclear. Schuhardt and Fontana both connect Cypher to Judas by forming an allegory around Judas’ betrayal of Christ. Their readings of the films state that Cypher makes a deliberate decision to betray Morpheus, because “he’s not certain he’s fighting on the right side” (Schuhardt 9). Fontana also draws this parallel. Cypher “never believes for a moment that the person he is betraying has any ontological, eschatological, or soteriological significance” (170). The fact that this is presented as Cypher’s choice undercuts any suggestion that Cypher’s morality is fixed. However, because Cypher is also linked in some places to Satan, his potentially unclear values are reduced to a generic malevolence. This helps these writers to maintain a strong binary opposition.

The Gnostic and Buddhist interpretations place less emphasis on direct correlations between specific *Matrix* characters and figures in their religious mythology. Instead, their emphasis is on the binary structure of the diegesis of the *Matrix* franchise. For example, the Gnostic commentators propose a contrast between the enlightened Redeemer figure on one hand and the malevolent

demiurge and his Archons on the other. They map this onto the opposition between the rebel fighters in the Matrix and the Agents and machines that they struggle against. Interestingly, the Gnostic critics are so focused on this moral confrontation that they treat the humans plugged into the Matrix as merely a conceptual starting point. For this allegory to be functional, it requires Neo to begin the film in a state of subjugation, such as the Matrix. However, his role in the allegory is decentralised. In these readings he only functions as a generic ‘Gnostic Redeemer’ whose “apparent superpowers” within the “false reality” are particularly strong (McKee 36). The parts of the Gnostic interpretations that attempt to parallel the events of the film lack specificity, because they can only draw connections between the characters of the films and *types* of Gnostic figures. The Gnostic readings are more precise when they read the construction of the Matrix as a retelling of the Gnostic creation myth, as in the articles by Wagner and Flannery-Dailey. In these instances, the Gnostic narrative retold through *The Matrix* reaches an end before the film actually starts. The creation myth of Gnosticism concludes with humanity in the bondage of a false reality, and these readings can find parallels in the figures that oversee this illusory realm with greater ease than they can in the protagonists of the trilogy. This may explain why the central characters of the film aside from Neo do not warrant inclusion in the Gnostic interpretations – they are outside the scope of the story of good and evil that is being told.

In the case of Buddhist interpretations, the writers develop an opposition between those who are either enlightened or who seek enlightenment, and those that actively fight against this path. This is played out in terms of the contrast

between Neo and the crew of the *Nebuchadnezzar* on the one hand, and those who are tied too much to the material pleasures of *samsara* and the demonic entities that oversee it on the other. This is similar to the Gnostic interpretations, as the central opposition is between forces rather than individuals. In the Buddhist readings, the side of ‘good’ is represented by Neo and the majority of the *Nebuchadnezzar*’s crew, who are often correlated with bodhisattvas. Their opponents are the Agents, who rule over the material realm, and the AI, which Ford associates with the demon Mara (140). In many ways, this is quite similar to the type of narrative posed by the Gnostic interpretations. However, Cypher’s betrayal also fits into this Buddhist scheme: he is so concerned with “wealth, ease, and sensual pleasures” that he is willing to turn over his comrades (Goonan 104). This interpretative framework allows for the inclusion of a separate Buddhist concept into the greater theoretical structure. This concept is used to illuminate several narrative events that can then be placed into the dichotomy of good and evil. For Wagner and Flannery-Dailey, the pleasures of *samsara* explain the failings of several characters. They not only prove irresistible for Cypher, but function as a deadly distraction for Mouse (‘Wake Up!’ 274-5). In this type of reading, Neo often plays a more central role, because he can be read as a Buddha as well as a *bodhisattva*, which gives his character more specificity within the narrative.

This opposition between good and evil, in all three schools of interpretation, can only be overcome by Neo and the other rebels through the acquisition of a particular type of knowledge. Over the course of several expository scenes in *The Matrix*, Morpheus explains to Neo that he has been

“living in a dream world”, the illusory realm of the Matrix. Each interpretative approach draws on this central ‘truth’, and applies it to their own particular type of revelatory knowledge. This knowledge takes its form most explicitly in the idea of *gnosis* in the Gnostic interpretations. According to Wagner and Flannery-Dailey, “Neo is ‘saved’ through *gnosis*” (‘Wake Up!’ 269). His revelation, and embodiment of the Redeemer figure, is what allows him “to break the rules of the material world” (269). This can be seen in the final scenes of *The Matrix*, where his knowledge of the nature of the illusory world enables him to temporarily defeat Agent Smith. The last scene of the film features Neo speaking to an unknown figure on a payphone, and stating that he will show humanity “what you don’t want them to see”. The implication is that he is speaking directly to the malevolent forces behind the Matrix.

This Gnostic allegory remains tenable even when the limitations of this approach are acknowledged. For example, Donna Bowman’s ‘The Gnostic Illusion’ suggests that *Reloaded* and *Revolutions* demonstrate the limits of the Gnostic interpretations of *The Matrix*. For Bowman, the *gnosis* that frees Neo and the others from the Matrix does not liberate them from reliance on machines. The central montage of *Reloaded* features a huge rave party among the inhabitants of Zion, following a rousing speech by Morpheus about the city’s strength. Bowman acknowledges that this scene is intended to be a celebration of the freedom of Zion, but even here, “Zion’s enslavement is evident” (§15). The released humans believe in their independence, having escaped the shared dream-state of the Matrix, but they remain largely unaware of the machines which Zion depends on for their water and air. “They have escaped one illusion of independence,”

Bowman writes, “only to fall into another” (§15). While Bowman’s interpretation of the sequels takes issue with the applicability of a Gnostic approach across the entire franchise, her article still avers that “a Gnostic interpretation of *The Matrix* illuminates that film’s presentation of enlightenment and salvation” (‘Abstract’).

The importance of revelation is also proposed by the Buddhist model of interpretation. In these readings, it is Neo’s development of a “Buddha-like awareness” that sets him apart from the other bodhisattva rebels (‘Wake Up!’ 279). However, it is only through Morpheus’ transmission of the revelatory knowledge that Neo is able to take this particular path. Learning about the nature of reality equips Neo to retaliate against the overlords of this illusory world. In this process Neo first has to display his intention to follow the Buddhist path and then undergo a process of meditation. Ford identifies parallels of these two aspects of the path in *The Matrix*. For him, Neo’s consumption of the red pill is “a kind of ritualistic expression” of his intention, and his martial arts training is seen by Ford as “a techno-cyber version of meditation” (138). In other words, the accrual of knowledge is a necessary but not sufficient condition to becoming a Buddha figure. Morpheus makes this explicit in *The Matrix*: “There’s a difference,” he says, “between knowing the path and walking the path”. The crucial knowledge of the nature of reality permits the crew of the *Nebuchadnezzar* to become bodhisattvas. However, it is only when this knowledge is embodied, as Neo does through his rigorous training and self-belief, that one is able to ascend to the role of the Buddha.

The Christian interpretations treat the acquisition of knowledge differently because the grand deception at play within the Matrix is outside the scope of the allegory they attempt to construct. As Bassham suggests, the fundamental illusion of the material world is a presentation of the “human predicament” that is “more consistent with Eastern mysticism or Gnosticism than it is with Christianity” (114). The idea of an illusory material world is “generally rejected as inconsistent with the existence of an all-powerful and truthful God” (115). In Christian interpretations, the ‘truth’ that Neo must come to terms with is less about the nature of reality than it is about the nature of Neo himself. In order to fight the Machines, Neo has to truly inhabit his role as Christ. Seay and Garrett describe the moments in which Neo progresses towards this acceptance as ‘leaps of faith’. The first occurs when Neo believes in his ability to save Morpheus and Trinity during the helicopter sequence (68-9). The second leap is “Neo’s assumption of his name” (69). Here, Neo expresses certainty that he is who he believes himself to be. By casting off his given name, Thomas, Neo disavows the role of ‘doubting Thomas’ and is able to fully realise his potential as ‘the One’.

The significance of Neo’s epiphany in Christian interpretations and the importance of revelation and acceptance in Gnostic and Buddhist criticism can be linked. In both types of reading, the *Matrix* trilogy contains a truth which can be discovered via a ‘master’ reading of the text. This type of reading is necessarily reductive. This next section of the chapter will analyse these readings through Mike Milford’s discussion of allegorical approaches. Milford’s work on allegory specifically focuses on the Christian interpretations of *The Matrix*, which he argues are representative of ‘secondary allegory’. This requires some explanation.

Milford begins by defining ‘traditional’ and ‘postmodern’ allegory. In traditional allegory, an informed reader can interpret the text through a particular framework, constructing a coherent reading “other than the literal one” (20). The resulting reading is intended by the creator of a text, who uses the structure of allegory to guide the process of interpretation. This is the same type of allegory as is theorised by the writers cited earlier. In contrast, postmodern allegory provides “a variety of symbols and images” which allow the reader to construct any number of allegorical readings “free of ideological constraint” (Milford 21). Postmodern allegory finds a “diversity of structure and derived meanings”, whereas traditional allegory attempts to validate a “singular ideological message” by attempting to connect two signs (21). Where traditional allegory relies “on structural similarity to reduce the distance between the surface text and the ideological pretext”, postmodern allegory provides a number of directions that a reader can expand upon (21). Milford argues that the *Matrix* trilogy is an example of postmodern allegory rather than traditional allegory because of the number of signs within the films that can convey multiple meanings. Milford deals briefly with other religious approaches, arguing that the commentators who approach the films from alternative religious positions are involved in the construction of a type of religious pluralism. In doing so, they rely on the “generalizability” of Neo as an all-purpose Redeemer figure, and acknowledge the prospect of multiple readings (25). For example, he draws attention to the diversity of allegorical readings that have been conducted on the franchise, mentioning the Gnostic readings of Wagner and Flannery-Dailey and the Buddhist reading of Banks (25). The fundamental feature of postmodern allegory, however, is the fostering of multiple coherent

allegories, and the way in which this multiplicity disavows the prospect of a single fixed meaning (21).

Despite the postmodern nature of the *Matrix* trilogy, Milford notes that the Christian interpretations employ a form of traditional allegory. He asserts that this kind of approach is symptomatic of ‘secondary allegory’. He defines secondary allegorisation as “rhetoric that retells the allegory while inserting a clear pretext” (23). Milford claims that the effect of secondary allegory is to transform the postmodern text into a traditional one with a singular ideological meaning. This tool is “necessary to eliminate ambiguity” in a postmodern text (23). Any discrepancies in the films that would suggest an alternative reading, Milford states, “are rationalized as the greater message of God overrides any dissonance” (25). He suggests that without the Biblical pretext, audiences “would see the postmodern nature of the film” (25). Milford’s examples of secondary allegory are mostly taken from Christian interpretations of the *Matrix* franchise. Many of his sources are sermons and informal essays published online, although he also refers frequently to Seay and Garrett. Milford writes that the majority of Christian readings “imposed Biblical iconography on the polysemic imagery of the films” (24). As a result of this, the central narrative of the trilogy operates as the ‘intended meaning’ of the films, and all evidence to the contrary is minimised in importance. In particular, these evangelical Christian readings focus on Neo’s progress, highlighting the prophesised arrival of ‘the saviour’, the performance of ‘miracles’ within the text, and the Resurrection sequence discussed earlier in this chapter (24). For Milford, the perceived similarity between the paths of Neo and

Christ is the central piece of evidence to enable this type of evangelical reading (25).

However, Milford's characterisation of the Gnostic and Buddhist readings neglects the fact that these interpretations privilege a particular interpretative framework, and also disavow the multiplicity of meanings potentially available. In some cases, the polysemic nature of the franchise is referred to, only to be summarily dismissed. For example, Fontana's Christian reading also refers to the potential for Gnostic and Buddhist interpretations, as well as metaphysics, "Pythagorean numerology, Neoplatonism, and, no doubt, countless of other ideological viewpoints" (180). He only does this, however, after highlighting the ways in which the film "resounds" with Christian themes (160). Wagner and Flannery-Dailey's Gnostic readings of the films acknowledge the influence of Christianity, but argue that these "Christian elements [...] make the most sense when viewed through the lens of Gnostic Christianity" ('Wake Up!' 262). In other words, these elements are argued to conform to a particular pretext. In this section of their article, Gnosticism absorbs some of the trilogy's Christian signs, and diminishes others. In the same article, these commentators pay attention to Buddhist concepts, which are said to "appear in close proximity with the equally strong Christian imagery" (271-2). However, Wagner and Flannery-Dailey only give one example of this juxtaposition. In a scene early in *The Matrix*, the minor character Choi refers to Neo as "my own personal Jesus Christ". "Almost immediately after," Wagner and Flannery-Dailey suggest, "this appellation is given a distinctly Buddhist twist" (272). Choi says, "This never happened. You don't exist". In this example, the seemingly explicit Christian imagery is reduced

to a supporting role, its relevance apparently hijacked by the construction of a coherent Buddhist reading.¹⁵ Ford's Buddhist interpretation also argues that the films are particularly illuminated by a Buddhist reading (136-7). In order to do this, Ford's interpretation needs to downplay the potential for an alternative reading to 'explain' the films as well as Buddhism does. He discredits the possibility of a Christian reading (and, it seems, a Gnostic reading too) by pointing to the fact that "God is nowhere present in the story" (136). A coherent Christian reading, it seems, would need to explain this absence, but also account for the allusions to karma and reincarnation present within the film (137). This privileging of particular interpretations creates a type of pretextual lens that invalidates other readings, even as the writer seemingly seeks to acknowledge their possibility. Rather than amalgamate, these interpretations separate. They highlight the ease with which one could construct multiple readings, but instead focus on a particular interpretations that enables the author to 'fit' the films to his or her chosen framework.¹⁶

The religious interpretations of the trilogy also have a tendency to simultaneously affirm and deny the accuracy of their allegorical approaches. This again points to the problem with ambiguity that Milford argues is common in secondary allegory. As noted above, these interpretations tend to suggest the

¹⁵ Although Wagner and Flannery-Dailey write of the potential for both Gnostic and Buddhist readings, their interpretations do not consider the films as postmodern allegory. Rather, each allegory is conducted separately, as any attempt to connect the readings "falls apart" ('Stopping Bullets' 98). The acknowledgment of another potential reading renders both the Gnostic and Buddhist allegories incoherent.

¹⁶ This tendency to 'fit' the films to singular readings can also be seen in the interpretations of some of the names found within the franchise. Several Christian readings, for example, interpret the name of Apoc (Julian Arahanga) as an abbreviation of 'apocalypse' – but never 'apocrypha', which might suggest a Gnostic reading. See Seay and Garrett 41; Faller 26; Yeffeth 245.

possibility of alternative readings, but then immediately foreclose on this potential. However, this opposition can be found more explicitly in some of the interpretations. For example, Issacs and Trost explain that “Neo is Christlike, but he is not Christ: he is not an avatar” (69, emphasis in original). This interpretation denies the allegorical parallels that Isaacs and Trost (among others) identify. Neo is not an avatar because, these commentators argue, he is not “descended (or arisen) into a simulated and fallen world to save humanity from its own sins” (69). Immediately after this, however, this reading quotes the *Animatrix* short film *The Second Renaissance Part I*, which says that man “‘became the architect of his own demise’” by making machines in his own image (69). The elements of sin and the fallen world are clearly present in this reading, but these commentators elect to distance themselves from making this particular claim. For Seay and Garrett, it is abundantly clear that “the Wachowski brothers mean for us to connect Neo with Jesus Christ” (58). Just a page later, however, they disavow this: “The Wachowskis do not want us to believe that Neo is Jesus – clearly he isn’t – but rather, they want us to take away some spiritual lessons by thinking of him in a Jesus-style role” (59). The multiple parallels that Christian commentators draw between the characters of Biblical narratives and those of the trilogy (which I discussed earlier in this chapter) can also be understood as affirmation and denial.

Schuhardt’s Christian reading of *The Matrix* tempers a large-scale retelling of the film’s allegory with a paragraph about how “*The Matrix* is not simply a Christian allegory” (8). Instead, “it is a complex parable that pulls strongly from Judaism and other traditions” (8). These ‘other traditions’ appear to include Buddhism and other religions, but Schuhardt does not specifically explain how the

film does this (9). The only particular Judaic reference in this interpretation is to the concentration camps of the Second World War (8). These conceptual asides appear to entertain the idea of the text's polysemic nature, but ultimately the specificity of the Christian reading is used to persuasive effect.

This simultaneous affirmation and denial can be found elsewhere.

Brottman's Gnostic reading conducts an extensive interpretation of *The Matrix*, and refers to quite obscure and profound Gnostic tropes in the process. However, Brottman briefly mentions the "melange of intertextual references" found in the film, including the work of William Gibson and Baudrillard (107). This reading subordinates these intertextual meanings to a larger point about "Gnostic syncretism" (107). For Wagner and Flannery-Dailey, "[t]he Matrix itself is a cogent articulation of the classic Gnostic world view" ('Wake Up!', 265). At times, however, "this basic Gnostic rejection of materiality as reality sometimes seems to falter" (268). Elsewhere, Brannigan, having described the ways in which the franchise exemplifies elements of Buddhist mythology, states that "*The Matrix* is not strictly a Buddhist film, nor was it intended to be" (110). The religious interpretations of the films seem to be hesitant of enforcing their chosen reading in its entirety – either they briefly express uncertainty about the tenability of the reading, or they briefly entertain alternative interpretations.

The Structuring Absence

Interestingly, there is a religious interpretation that is largely absent from the academic literature. Although many of the interpretations discussed above label themselves as 'Judeo-Christian', there is nothing specifically Judaic about

them. As mentioned above, Schuhardt's lone Judaic example is historical, rather than forming part of a religious narrative. In fact, the Judaic narratives found within a Biblical framework are absent from the interpretations discussed in this chapter. Considering the frequency with which the religious interpretations focus on the founding myths of Buddhism, Gnosticism and Christianity, this absence is surprising. I would argue that this is an example of what Staiger refers to as a 'structuring absence'. Staiger writes that the final step of a historical reception analysis is to make clear "what the readings did not consider" and to analyse these traits (*Perverse* 163). These structuring absences are important because, as Thomas O. Beebee writes, they represent "what a text can not say but says in spite of itself" (quoted in Staiger, *Perverse* 65). These alternative methods of reading the text can illuminate some of the central principles of the methods that *were* taken.

Although one of the central narrative components of the *Matrix* trilogy is the release of human beings from slavery, the figure of Moses makes no significant appearance in the academic literature. None of the academic articles discussed within this chapter make reference to any figure in the films as representative of this religious figure. This absence is surprising in several respects, not least of all because there are several figures within *The Matrix* that could be considered to have some parallels to Moses. What is particularly telling about the absence of Moses, however, is that Moses is also a messianic figure who leads the children of Israel towards the promised land of Zion. As a conceptual place, Zion is also central to the *Matrix* trilogy as the rebels' own version of the 'promised land', the last human city. As well as this, Moses also functions as a

provider of revelatory knowledge in the book of Exodus. He descends from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments, providing evidence of the existence of God to the doubtful Israelites. Moses' knowledge of the divine is in stark contrast to the Egyptians and Israelites, who are either ignorant of or no longer believe in anything beyond the material world. The absence of Moses, a figure who shares many of the traits that are found elsewhere in the religious interpretations, is surprising. However, Moses is more than just a messianic figure. He also institutes the concept of monotheism. The first commandment he provides is "Thou shalt have no other God before me." This is the central tenet of monotheism, and it is, above all else, the most illuminating part of this structuring absence. The focus on knowledge and redemption in the Christian, Gnostic and Buddhist interpretations can be considered as a movement away from ambiguity. In doing so, they attempt to cement their chosen religious narrative as the most appropriate lens with which to view the text. This tendency towards secondary allegory is also predicated on the denial of other possible meanings. The exclusion of a Judaic narrative from the large number of competing interpretations might be crucial in order to ensure that the remaining readings are coherent.

The religious readings discussed in this chapter rely on a particular hermeneutic framework in order to disavow competing readings. To argue, as these readings do, that Neo represents Jesus, or a Gnostic redeemer, or a bodhisattva, it is necessary to foreclose on other potential interpretative approaches. These readings cannot acknowledge the validity of these other approaches, but this process also involves discarding the religious narrative that represents the monotheistic structure most clearly. Having read the significant

trends within this set of religious discourses, it is worth returning to the immediate critical reception discussed in chapter one. It is time to draw some conclusions about these two receptions.

CONCLUSION

“Everything that has a Beginning has an End”

This project has analysed the reception of the *Matrix* trilogy, both by film critics and by academic commentators who adopted a religious perspective in their interpretations. This conclusion will reiterate the main results of these analyses before attempting to synthesise them around the themes of unity or oneness. It is my contention that this trend parallels Morpheus’ perspective in *The Matrix*, and points to the repetitive qualities of the reception, particularly in the academic commentary. I will argue that a different approach is possible that also has affinities with the franchise. Specifically, this position is closely aligned with that of Neo.

The first chapter of this thesis constructed a set of traces out of a number of published reviews of the three feature films in the *Matrix* trilogy. It employed Janet Staiger’s methodological framework of historical reception studies. Staiger’s approach involves analysing film reviews as ‘traces’ of particular audience members’ engagements with texts. She interprets these responses by utilising relevant theoretical discourses. Her readings of reviews and other published materials sometimes draw attention to ‘structuring absences’ – tacit or unspoken aspects of traces which can be an important factor in completing an interpretation of a particular reception event. Because of the extended timeframe of the *Matrix* trilogy’s release, it was necessary to expand Staiger’s framework somewhat.

The reviews of the *Matrix* trilogy indicated that, generally speaking, the reviewers reacted most favourably to the initial film, but they felt that the sequels were less accomplished, especially *Revolutions*. What was particularly notable, however, was that the critics tended to split the filmic elements of the trilogy into two categories. It seemed that the films' 'spectacular' visual elements competed with the narrative for the attention of the audience. I argued that this reception could be understood in two ways by using research in Film Studies on the relationship between narrative and spectacle. In the first approach, the visual effects and intertextual references could be situated with the discourse of the 'cinema of attractions', as articulated by Tom Gunning and others. I proposed that the perceived decline in quality over the trilogy could be linked to an absence of novelty. Because these visual elements were no longer surprising, they became merely superfluous to the overall trajectory of the films.

A second approach suggested that this reception of the trilogy could be positioned in terms of the continuing debate over the relationship between narrative and spectacle in contemporary cinema. For some reviewers, the emphasis on action sequences (whether martial arts or CGI) in *Reloaded* and *Revolutions* detracted from their narratives and created an imbalance. This kind of response arguably confirms the hypotheses of Scott Bukatman and others who contend that spectacle plays an increasingly important role in contemporary Hollywood cinema. However, as I noted, writers such as David Bordwell and Geoff King claim that narrative and spectacle actually work together in genres such as the action film. This concords with the responses of some reviewers, who felt that *The Matrix* in particular contained a balance between these two things. In my view, the debates

around narrative, spectacle and attractions imply that the reception is concerned in various ways with the notion of the unity of the classical text. Indeed, one could argue that the classical text is a structuring absence in the film reviewers' reception of the trilogy.

The second chapter applied Staiger's approach to the extended academic response to the films. This required further expansion of Staiger's framework, both in the use of academic articles as traces and the further expansion of the filmic event to include a period of prolonged study. This chapter focused in particular on the interpretations of the films from Christian, Gnostic and Buddhist perspectives. My analysis found that all three approaches tended to read the films in an allegorical manner. Mike Milford's work on the Christian reception of *The Matrix* suggests that the trilogy is an example of 'postmodern' allegory, but the writers whose work he analysed viewed the films in slightly different terms. He argues that evangelical Christian readings tended to construct traditional allegories from the postmodern franchise. They do this through the use of 'secondary allegory', which inserts a pretext into the interpretation process, thus minimising any contradictions within the text.

My reception study indicated that the Gnostic and Buddhist interpretations employed secondary allegory as well as the Christian interpretations. All three religious approaches highlighted a moral binary in the text between good and evil, and paid close attention to the transformative power of knowledge in the narrative. Both of these constructs, however, were influenced heavily by the particular religious perspective that was being employed. I argued that the lack of any

particularly Judaic readings could be understood as a structuring absence. In particular, Moses' function as a messianic figure and the founder of monotheism reinforces the notion that the religious interpretations of the trilogy were predicated on proving the existence of a 'master' reading that reduced the ambiguity of the films.

At the beginning of this project, the process of interpreting the *Matrix* franchise was likened to the process of decoding the Matrix itself. I suggested that Cypher's ability to look through the massive amount of code to see "blonde, brunette, [and] redhead" rather than incomprehensible code could be compared to the interpreter's process of finding specific meanings within the texts. It is not just that Cypher sees the women passing through the Matrix. Rather, he sees *only* the women because that is all he aims to see. This may explain why Slavoj Žižek referred to the films disparagingly as a kind of cinematic inkblot test (240-1). The *Matrix* is a mirror, reflecting the intent of its reader. It also resembles an echo chamber because it amplifies particular readings.

The shared focus of the two receptions of the *Matrix* trilogy on the issues of unity or oneness also resembles one of the franchise's key tropes: the figure of 'the One'. In *Reloaded*, Neo encounters the Architect, the character who is responsible for the construction of the Matrix. The Architect informs Neo that the Matrix has been 'reloaded' a number of times. Each version or cycle of the Matrix has a Messiah, the One, who emerges from a mass reincarnation event. Neo is actually the sixth in a series of messianic figures. In the context of the trilogy, this raises some interesting questions about the nature of free will. For example, if Neo

is the One, and the same as his predecessors, then presumably he must perform the same role as them. It is significant that Neo is the only character to receive this knowledge about the structure of the Matrix. For others, such as Morpheus, the search for the One is conducted without any awareness of the continuous and incomplete nature of the process. For Morpheus, there is, and only ever has been, a single messianic figure or One.

Those that await the arrival of the messianic figure in *The Matrix* do so because of their faith that there has only been one Matrix. This faith is based on the evidence of their experience, which is somewhat ironic given the existence of the Matrix itself. However, basing their actions on this assumption results in unavoidable repetition. The disciples such as Morpheus who hope for Neo's arrival are involved in the precise same process of searching as their predecessors in earlier versions of the Matrix. Beyond the limits of the text, this same approach can be found in the academic reception discussed in the second chapter. The academic commentators analyse the franchise as though there is demonstrably a single meaning contained within it. They draw their evidence for their interpretations from the trilogy, but the majority of it derives from *The Matrix* – a film that does not refer to the possibility of other iterations of the Matrix. Their single-mindedness suggests that they occupy the position of Morpheus (or even the disciples in each version of the Matrix) rather than Neo. They continue to read the films in the same way, despite the support for more than one interpretative perspective.

It is true that the film review reception is more heterogeneous than the religious reception. The film critics discussed in the first chapter comment on a range of issues in relation to the trilogy and do not always try to reconcile them. However, it is worth observing that they display an interest in the figure of Neo. Some writers expressed dissatisfaction with *Reloaded* and *Revolutions* because these films included new characters such as Mifune and Kid, who was introduced in *The Animatrix*, as Jenkins notes (*Convergence* 102-3). These sequels spent a disproportionate amount of time focused on these characters, which in turn distracted the viewer. Kennedy, for example, complains that these “underwritten new characters” mean that “Neo’s struggle with superpowers cannot possibly resonate as deeply” as in the first film (*Reloaded*).¹⁷ The *Empire* critic laments that Neo is largely absent from the Sentinel attack on Zion, the “sustained set piece” of the final film (*Revolutions*). Andrew O’Hehir also notes that “Neo is mostly out of the picture while Zion is fighting its apocalyptic battle”. Instead, as the battle rages with humanity’s future on the line, “Neo wanders through his cartoony 2001-goes-to-Mordor search for the Big Answers” (*Revolutions*). What these comments suggest is the desire of critics for the films to be other than they actually are: as the main protagonist, Neo should be at the centre of the narrative structure in these films if they are to be more successful (that is, more classical).

In some sense, then, the writers discussed in this thesis are analogous to those that seek the arrival of the One in the *Matrix* franchise. They are involved, perhaps unwittingly, in a cycle of repetition that seems impossible to break, at least from their perspective. The ability to break this cycle is not their choice to make,

¹⁷ Curiously, while *Empire*’s review of *Revolutions* refers to these characters as being fully fleshed-out in the “derided computer game *Enter the Matrix*”, the same magazine awarded this video game a higher score than the film (Richards, *Enter*).

but rather the result of decisions offered to the One. In *Reloaded* the Architect offers Neo the choice of two doors. Behind one is the option to reload the Matrix, allowing the cycle to begin anew. Behind the other is the option to save Trinity from certain death. The second option, however, comes at the cost of the Matrix, which will crash and kill everyone attached to it. Neo effectively takes a third option, rescuing Trinity and later brokering a peace with the machine antagonists. However, the choice as presented only offers the option of a continuing cycle, or an option of total collapse. In order to step outside the process of repetition, it may be fruitful to change the way in which one engages with the text. As Neo grows in awareness, he develops powers that enable him to shape both the Matrix and the world outside it. Because he is presented with the choice to be an active agent in the shaping of the Matrix, however limited that choice may be, and because by the end of his narrative he is given a complete understanding of the structure of the world he is responsible for, he is able to take it apart and see it in its entirety. Such an approach to the *Matrix* franchise is vital. Otherwise, we merely repeat the path of searching for the One, which only provides limited results.

If adopting Neo's perspective is necessary in order to broaden the response to the trilogy, then it is worth considering what this approach might entail. Neo's awareness of the previous cycles of the Matrix, and also the 'glitches' present within it, could be considered to be representative of the franchise as a whole.¹⁸ Those that have written on the *Matrix* universe so far have largely constructed their own version of it that enables them to reduce the cinematic world down to a manageable degree that involves overlooking or even eliminating inconsistencies.

¹⁸ In *The Matrix*, characters' experiences of déjà vu are explained as glitches in the Matrix's programming.

By contrast, a ‘Neo-centric’ approach would acknowledge and draw on features from the entirety of the franchise rather than just the trilogy.¹⁹ By drawing attention to the ambiguities and complexity of the texts, this approach would also allow the construction of interpretations that could encompass multiple meanings. Significantly, it would no longer be necessary to dismiss counter-examples within the franchise, as the religious interpretations do. It would also be possible to embrace the heterogeneity of responses, such as those found in the reception of the film reviews. Instead, any ‘glitches’ in interpretation could be accepted as signposts towards potential alternative readings. The existence of these alternatives does not necessarily devalue the process of interpretation, just as the existence of a previous Matrix does not reduce the import of Neo’s actions. Neo’s perspective includes the fact that he is part of a larger story, rather than the sole figure within it.

It might be argued that there is a third discourse of reception that bears some similarity to this approach. As a reading structure, fandom is centred around the fostering of multiple perspectives and interpretations, as well as avidly consuming all the textual components of a franchise. In *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins writes that fandom “involves a particular mode of reception”, in which the consumption of the text is the beginning of a larger engagement with it, rather than the totality of the engagement (277-8). Fandom also “involves a particular set of critical and interpretive practices” (278). This category emphasises the active nature of the fans, who “work to resolve gaps, to explore excess details and undeveloped potentials” (278). What these factors stress is the ability of fandom to foster new and unexpected lines of development. This is done through the creation

¹⁹ For an exploration of the franchise in its entirety, the reader is invited to refer to the appendices.

of competing interpretations and new fan-created material, such as fanfiction, which serves to fill part of the franchise's narrative space. Matt Hills uses the term 'hyperdiegesis' to describe this type of textual world – "a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen" (137). Jenkins' discussion of the transmedia *Matrix* franchise directly connects it with the concept of the hyperdiegesis (*Convergence*, 102-3). The *Matrix* franchise is considered not to be a passive text, there for the purpose of interpretation, but rather an immersive environment "with which consumers and spectators can engage as many times in as many ways as possible" (Jess-Cooke, 85). This multiplicity is directly opposed to the ways in which the academic literature engages with the text. While the academic literature is involved in a Morpheus-like search for a single meaning, the fan reader is able to operate like Neo, remaking the universe of the franchise as they see fit.

An analysis of the fandom reception of the *Matrix* franchise would certainly be interesting, as the method of engagement present within it is so clearly different from the other approaches that have been taken. However, the breadth of such an analysis is so immense that it would inevitably become a larger and more complicated project than can be undertaken here. This project would also entail a return to the *Matrix* franchise, and significant immersion in the texts that comprise it. This is not without difficulties. Since the trilogy of feature films was described in reviews as "bloated", the franchise as a whole might be considered akin to an immense and roaring freight train. Of course, assuming Neo's position in relation to knowledge of the entire franchise brings the risk of interpretation, but it is impossible "not to read a film" despite the pleadings of David Bordwell (*Making*

249-50). As Agent Smith states in *The Matrix*, when his fight with Neo takes them both into the path of a subway train, “That is the sound of inevitability.”

APPENDIX A: Franchises and Narratives

The purpose of this appendix is to detail the components of the *Matrix* franchise, and to map the ways in which their narratives are woven together into a kind of ‘master’ narrative. The primary reason for including this information is to provide a point of context for the rest of this project. The majority of traces discussed in the thesis demonstrate a tendency towards reducing the franchise to a manageable size. This often consists of a focus on the three feature films, with the occasional inclusion of one or two other texts. Because of this trend, the entirety of the franchise has not been mapped out in the academic or critical literature. This approach is also absent from discussions of the *Matrix* franchise as an example of ‘transmedia’ storytelling, as in the work of Jenkins mentioned in the introduction to this project. This information is presented here in a textual format, but it is also displayed in a graphic format in Appendix B to demonstrate the complexity of this construction.

The *Matrix* franchise, counting only those objects sanctioned by the Wachowski siblings, consists of forty-five texts. The most analysed of these are the feature films: *The Matrix* (1999), *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), and *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003).

The Animatrix consists of nine short films in varying art styles, influenced by Japanese anime cinema: *Final Flight of the Osiris*, *The Second Renaissance Part I*, *The Second Renaissance Part II*, *Kid’s Story*, *Program*, *World Record*, *Beyond*, *Matriculated*, and *A Detective Story* (all 2003). All nine films were

released on DVD in 2003. *Final Flight* was shown in cinemas as a trailer for the Lawrence Kasdan film *Dreamcatcher* (2003). *Renaissance I*, *Renaissance II*, *Program* and *Detective* were released on the *Animatrix* official website in 2003.

Three interactive games were also released as part of the franchise: *Enter the Matrix* (2003), *The Matrix: Path of Neo* (2005), and *The Matrix Online* (2005-2009). Both *Enter* and *Path* were video games, released for the standard consoles of the time. *Online* was a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) that ran continuously for approximately four years.

A number of comics stories were released on the franchise's official website between 1999 and 2004. Specific dates of publication are difficult to determine, but the majority of the comics were grouped together in a pair of trade paperbacks. *The Matrix Comics Volume I* (2003) featured twelve comics stories: 'Goliath', 'Sweating the Small Stuff', 'There Are No Flowers in the Real World', 'Bits and Pieces of Information', 'A Life Less Empty', 'Butterfly', 'Burning Hope', 'Get It?', 'The Miller's Tale', 'A Sword of a Different Colour', 'Hunters and Collectors', and 'Artistic Freedom'.

The Matrix Comics Volume II (2004) featured a further twelve: 'Farewell Performance', 'Deja Vu', 'System Freeze', 'The King of Never Return', 'An Asset to the System', 'A Path Among Stones', 'Run, Saga, Run', 'Wrong Number', 'Broadcast Depth', 'Saviours', 'Who Says You Can't Get Good Help These Days?', and 'I Kant'.

Six *Matrix Comics* were available on the franchise's official website, but not published in print anthologies: 'The Man Who Knew Too Much', 'Morning Sickness', 'Day In... Day Out', 'An Easy One', 'Let It All Fall Down', and 'Return of the Prodigal Son'.

The majority of the articles and reviews discussed in this project dismiss most of these component texts as irrelevant or of secondary importance. However, this limits the ability to apprehend the complete narrative of the franchise. Of the forty-five texts listed above, twenty of them are interwoven into a narrative that extends across the franchise. The basic structure of this narrative is laid out in the chart at the end of this appendix. That structure will be expanded upon here for further clarity.

For the purposes of clarity, I will attempt to outline the overarching narrative in chronological order. The first event is found in 'Bits and Pieces' (*Comics I*). The story revolves around the trial of a robotic servant, the first machine to be convicted of murder. Parts of this story are re-enacted and expanded upon in *Renaissance I*, which details the machines' rise to self-sufficiency and their rejection by mankind. *Renaissance II* continues this series of events by depicting the U.N.-sponsored attack on the machine city 'Zero One', the machines' retaliatory attack, and their victory over and subjugation of the human race. Morpheus alludes briefly to these events in *The Matrix*, during his 'desert of the real' monologue, but this speech obfuscates much of the information that can be gleaned from *Renaissance II*. Under the machines' rule, the human race is collectively plugged into the virtual reality known as the Matrix. A small number

of people have been freed from the Matrix before, however. One of these is Morpheus, seen as a young child in ‘The Miller’s Tale’ (*Comics I*). This narrative sets the scene for the release of Neo in *The Matrix*. Neo is freed, taught of his potential power, and comes to accept his role as ‘the One’ by the end of the film. Several of the scenes from the film can be played as levels in the video game *Path*. As well as this, *Path* details Neo’s efforts to release other people from the Matrix. The events of *Kid’s Story* occupy this approximate point in the narrative, too: Kid is contacted by Neo and manages to release himself, to the surprise of Neo and Trinity.

The events of the feature film *Reloaded* are preceded by the final transmission of the Osiris. This event is one of the most frequently noted in discussions of the franchise’s transmedia qualities. In *Final Flight*, the Osiris’ crew learn that the machines are attempting to tunnel to the underground city of Zion, the refuge of the freed humans. They pass a message on warning others of the impending danger, but the ship is destroyed immediately afterward. This message is retrieved and delivered by the player of *Enter*, and it is referred to in the opening moments of *Reloaded*. Other scenes of *Reloaded* are interwoven with the levels of *Enter*, in which players take on the roles of Niobe and Ghost, two significant franchise characters. The events of *Reloaded* are immediately followed by those in *Revolutions*, which focus on the attack on Zion and Neo’s attempts to broker an accord with the machines. Neo’s success comes at the cost of both his life and Trinity’s, a fact that is referred to during Kid’s training in ‘I Kant’ (*Comics II*). This training, however, prepares Kid for a major role in *Online*, in which he leads a group of players in various missions. *Online*’s story begins with

the death of Morpheus, and diverges into numerous plots. The franchise's central narrative ended in 2009 at the conclusion of *Online*.

Some of the events and texts of the franchise cannot be pinpointed in this timeline, although they are clearly linked to it. Trinity appears in *Detective*, for instance, but this text does not provide enough information for it to be situated precisely. Likewise, the Buddhist boy who tells Neo "There is no spoon" in *The Matrix* appears in 'Artistic Freedom' (*Comics I*), and Link appears as the Nebuchadnezzar's 'operator' in *Reloaded* and *Revolutions*, but also in 'Wrong Number' (*Comics II*), where he is clearly employed on a different ship. These repetitions serve to enhance the impression that every one of the component texts of the franchise operates in the same self-contained universe.

With the use of multiple media, however, some aspects of this textual consistency begin to fray. In 'Goliath' (*Comics I*), for instance, the main character is released from the Matrix in the 1970s, rather than 1999. *Matriculated* features a group of rebels who live on the Earth's surface rather than underground. It also features a design for its machines that is significantly different from any other appearance in the franchise. A second character named Link, who bears some resemblance to the character from the feature films, appears in 'Burning Hope' (*Comics I*). However, textual clues exist to differentiate the two figures. In some respects, these franchise texts appear to mimic the processes of fandom. Fandom creation, as expressed in the conclusion, often focuses on the creation of new objects that operate within or explore new aspects of a textual world. The diversity of approaches suggests an attempt to generate a textual universe that is impossible

to apprehend. In some cases, this feature is part of the medium. The structure of video games enables players to repeat levels that have already been played. *Path* alters the central narrative by offering a different envisioning of Neo's final battle with Agent Smith in *Reloaded*. In *Path*'s version, Neo fights a regenerating Smith in a manner akin to traditional video game 'boss battles'. This breakdown of 'unity' is perhaps most notable in *Online*. While several reviewers lamented the centrality of characters such as Kid, Niobe and Ghost to the events of *Reloaded* and *Revolutions*, these characters were still directly linked to the overarching narrative. In contrast, *Online* allowed players to create their own characters. Moreover, because each player encountered a different set of missions, goals, and subplots, *Online* had two effects on the narrative that were unique within the franchise. Firstly, aside from key events such as the death of Morpheus, no two consumers were able to experience an identical narrative. Secondly, by virtue of this first effect, no consumer could experience *Online*'s narrative in its entirety. In effect, the *Matrix* franchise concluded by deliberately diffusing its central narrative.

APPENDIX B: Franchises and Timelines

As mentioned in the previous appendix, another way of considering the franchise is to map it in a graphic format. This has the benefits of showing instances in which one narrative event is covered by multiple franchise texts. However, this version also demonstrates clearly the degree to which the feature films serve only as a small part of the overall narrative. This chart has been divided into columns in order to show the function of various media in crafting the franchise at large. Spaces in the leftmost column indicate moments where no story event is explicitly shown, but an undetermined period of time is implied to have passed. Places where a story event is explicitly shown, or a character from one text is shown elsewhere, are marked with question marks. This is to indicate that these texts can be roughly placed in the overall narrative, but there is insufficient information to locate them precisely.

Event	Comics	Animatrix	Trilogy	Video Games
First instance of A.I. being tried for murder	'Bits and Pieces'			
Machine uprising		<i>Second Renaissance I</i>		
Human enslavement		<i>Second Renaissance II</i>		
Morpheus freed from Matrix as a child (?)	'The Miller's Tale'			
Trinity encounters detective named Ash (?)		<i>A Detective Story</i>		
Introduction of Neo				
Neo escapes office building				
Neo visits Oracle; introduction of 'Spoon Boy'	'Artistic Freedom' (?)			
Neo fights Agent Smith				
Neo revealed to be 'the One'			<i>The Matrix</i>	
Neo releases various 'redpills' from the Matrix				
Kid freed from the Matrix		<i>Kid's Story</i>		<i>Path of Neo</i>
'Redpills' freed, machines prepare their attack on the city of Zion	'Run, Saga, Run' (?)			
	'Wrong Number' (?)			
	'Burning Hope' (?)			
Osiris learns of attack		<i>Final Flight of the Osiris</i>		
Ghost and Niobe deliver message from Osiris to Neo				
Neo prepares to defend Zion				
Freeway chase sequence with Neo, Trinity, Niobe and Ghost				
Agent Smith appears in 'real world'				
Neo and Trinity travel to Machine City				
Trinity killed				
Neo defeats Smith				
Peace brokered			<i>Revolutions</i>	<i>Path of Neo</i>
Kid's training (?)	'I Kant'			
Release of 'redpills' (?)	'A Life Less Empty'			
Assassination of Morpheus				
Various <i>Online</i> missions				
Collapse of the Matrix				<i>Online</i>

WORKS CITED

- Abrams, M.H., and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 8th ed. Boston: Thomson, Wadsworth, 2005. Print.
- Bassham, Gregory. "The Religion of *The Matrix* and the Problems of Pluralism." Irwin (i) 111-25. Print.
- Baudrillard, Jean. "*The Matrix* Decoded: *Le Nouvel Observateur* Interview With Jean Baudrillard." Trans. Gary Genosko and Adam Bryx. *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 1.2 (Jul. 2004): n. pag. Web. 21 Jun. 2013.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1968. Print.
- . *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Trans. John Osborne. London: NLB, 1977. Print.
- Bordwell, David. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1989. Print.
- . *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and New York: University of California Press, 2006. Print.
- Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. London: Routledge, 1985. Print.
- Bowman, Donna. "The Gnostic Illusion: Problematic Realized Eschatology in *The Matrix Reloaded*." *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 4.2 (2003): n. pag. Web. 17 Jun. 2013.

- Brannigan, Michael. "There Is No Spoon: A Buddhist Mirror." Irwin (i) 101-10. Print.
- Brottman, David. "A Gnostic *Matrix* for the Masses: A Conspired Space of Metaphysical Totality." *Film and Philosophy* 7 (2003): 92-109. Print.
- Bukatman, Scott. "Zooming Out: The End of Offscreen Space." *The New American Cinema*. Ed. Jon Lewis. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998. 248-72. Print.
- Chalmers, David J. "*The Matrix* as Metaphysics." Grau 132-76. Print.
- Clover, Joshua. *The Matrix*. London: British Film Institute, 2004. Print.
- Constable, Catherine. *Adapting Philosophy: Jean Baudrillard and The Matrix Trilogy*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009. Print.
- Corbett, Kevin J. "Empty Seats: The Missing History of Movie-Watching". *Journal of Film and Video* 50.4 (Winter 1998-1999): 34-48. Print.
- De Man, Paul. *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983. Print.
- Di Filippo, Paul. "Building a Better Simulacrum: Literary Influences on *The Matrix*." Haber 74-96. Print.
- Dreyfus, Hubert L., and Stephen D. Dreyfus. "Existential Phenomenology and the Brave New World of *The Matrix*." Grau 71-97. Print.
- Driver, Julia. "Artificial Ethics." Grau 208-17. Print.
- Ebert, Roger. "*The Matrix*." *rogerebert.com*. Ebert Digital, 31 Mar. 1999. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.
- . "*The Matrix Reloaded*." *rogerebert.com*. Ebert Digital, 14 May 2003. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.

---. "The Matrix Revolutions." *rogerebert.com*. Ebert Digital, 5 Nov. 2003. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.

Edelstein, David. "Altman's Gold." *slate.com*. The Slate Group, 11 Apr. 1999. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.

---. "The Matrix: Regurgitated." *slate.com*. The Slate Group, 4 Nov. 2003. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.

---. "Neo Con." *slate.com*. The Slate Group, 14 May 2003. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.

Faller, Stephen. *Beyond the Matrix: Revolutions and Revelations*. Danvers, MA: Chalice Press, 2004. Print.

Ferris, David S., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Print.

Flannery-Dailey, Frances, and Rachel Wagner. "Stopping Bullets: Constructions of Bliss and Problems of Violence." Kapell and Doty. 97-114. Print.

Fontana, Paul. "Finding God in *The Matrix*." Yeffeth 159-84. Print.

Ford, James L. "Buddhism, Mythology, and *The Matrix*." Yeffeth 125-44. Print.

Gillis, Stacy. *The Matrix Trilogy: Cyberpunk Reloaded*. London: Wallflower, 2005. Print.

Gilloch, Graeme. *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations*. Malden, MA: Polity/Blackwell, 2001. Print.

Gleiberman, Owen. "The Matrix Reloaded Review." *ew.com*. Entertainment Weekly, 23 May 2003. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.

Goonan, Kathleen Ann. "More Than You'll Ever Know: Down the Rabbit Hole of *The Matrix*." Haber 98-111. Print.

Gordon, Devin. "The Matrix Makers." *The Daily Beast*. Newsweek/The Daily Beast, 29 Dec. 2002. Web. 21 Jun. 2013.

- Gordinier, Jeff. "1999: The Year That Changed Movies." *ew.com*. Entertainment Weekly, 26 Nov. 1999. Web. 21 Jun. 2013.
- Grau, Christopher, ed. *Philosophers Explore The Matrix*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. Print.
- Gunning, Tom. "'Now You See It, Now You Don't': The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions". *The Silent Cinema Reader*. Eds. Lee Grieveson and Peter Krämer. New York: Routledge, 2004. 41-50. Print.
- . "The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde." *Strauven* 381-8. Print.
- Haber, Karen, ed. *Exploring The Matrix: Visions of the Cyber Present*. New York: Byron Preiss, 2003. Print.
- Hall, Stuart. "Encoding/decoding." *Culture, Media, Language*. Eds. Stuart Hall et al. London: Hutchinson, 1980. 128-38. Print.
- Hanley, Richard. "Never the Twain Shall Meet: Reflections on the Very First *Matrix*." Grau 115-31. Print.
- Hellekson, Karen. "Fan Studies 101." *SFRA Review* 287 (2009): 5-7. Print.
- Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Hoberman, J. "Holy Trinity." *villagevoice.com*. Village Voice, 4 Nov. 2003. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.
- . "Use Your Illusions." *villagevoice.com*. Village Voice, 13 May 2003. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.
- Isaacs, Bruce, and Theodore Louis Trost. "Story, Product, Franchise: Images of Postmodern Cinema." Kapell and Doty 65-79. Print.
- Irwin, William, ed. *The Matrix and Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (i). Chicago: Open Court, 2002. Print.

- . *More Matrix and Philosophy: Revolutions and Reloaded Decoded* (ii). Peru, IL: Open Court, 2005. Print.
- Jenkins, Henry, III. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press, 2008. Print.
- . *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Print.
- Jess-Cooke, Carolyn. *Film Sequels: Theory and Practice from Hollywood to Bollywood*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009. Print.
- Jones, J.R. "The Matrix Revolutions." *chicagoreader.com*. Sun-Times Media, n.d. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.
- Jones, Richard R. "Religion, Community, and Revitalization: Why Cinematic Myth Resonates." Kapell and Doty 48-64. Print.
- Kapell, Matthew, and William G. Doty, eds. *Jacking Into the Matrix Franchise: Cultural Reception and Interpretation*. New York: Continuum, 2004. Print.
- Kennedy, Colin. "The Matrix Reloaded." *empireonline.com*. Bauer Consumer Media, n.d. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.
- King, Geoff. *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. Print.
- . *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster*. London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 2000. Print.
- King, Noel. "Hermeneutics, Reception Aesthetics, and Film Interpretation." *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*. Ed. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. 212-223. Print.

- Kirby-Diaz, Mary. "Buffy, Angel, and Virtual Communities." *Buffy and Angel Conquer the Internet: Essays on Online Fandom*. Ed. Mary Kirby-Diaz. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009. 11-41. Print.
- Lacasse, Germain. "The Lecturer and the Attraction." *Strauven* 181-92. Print.
- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. *The Monadology and Other Philosophical Writings*. Trans. Robert Latta. London: Oxford University Press, 1898. Print.
- Lim, Dennis. "Grand Allusions." *villagevoice.com*. Village Voice, 6 Apr. 1999. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.
- McCarthy, Todd. "The Matrix." *variety.com*. Variety Media, 28 Mar. 1999. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.
- . "The Matrix Reloaded." *variety.com*. Variety Media, 7 May 2003. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.
- . "The Matrix Revolutions." *variety.com*. Variety Media, 2 Nov 2003. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.
- McGinn, Colin. "The Matrix of Dreams." *Grau* 62-70. Print.
- McGrath, James F. "The Desert of the Real: Christianity, Buddhism and Baudrillard in *The Matrix* Films and Popular Culture." *Visions of the Human in Science Fiction and Cyberpunk*. Ed. Marcus Leaning and Birgit Pretzsch. Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2010. 161-72. Print.
- McKee, Gabriel. *The Gospel According to Science Fiction: From the Twilight Zone to the Final Frontier*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007. Print.
- "The Matrix (1999)." *Box Office Mojo*. IMDB, 27 Aug 2013. Web. 27 Aug 2013.
- "The Matrix Revolutions." *empireonline.com*. No author cited. Bauer Consumer Media, n.d. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.

- Mawson, Tim. "Morpheus and Berkeley on Reality." Grau 24-39. Print.
- Mayne, Judith. "Paradoxes of Spectatorship." *The Film Cultures Reader*. Ed. Graeme Turner. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. 28-45. Print.
- Milford, Mike. "Neo-Christ: Jesus, *The Matrix*, and Secondary Allegory as a Rhetorical Form." *Southern Communication Journal* 75.1 (2010): 17-34. Print.
- Nathan, Ian. "*The Matrix*." *empireonline.com*. Bauer Consumer Media, n.d. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.
- O'Hehir, Andrew. "A Future Worth Fighting For." *salon.com*. Salon Media Group, 16 May 2003. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.
- . "*The Matrix Revolutions*." *salon.com*. Salon Media Group, 6 Nov. 2003. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.
- Partridge, John. "Plato's Cave and *The Matrix*." Grau 239-57. Print.
- Phipps, Keith. "*The Matrix*." *avclub.com*. Onion, 11 Jun. 1999. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.
- . "*The Matrix Revolutions*." *avclub.com*. Onion, 10 Nov. 2003. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.
- Pierce, Nev. "*The Matrix*." *bbc.co.uk*. BBC, 26 Feb. 2003. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.
- . "*The Matrix Reloaded*." *bbc.co.uk*. BBC, 22 May 2003. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.
- . "*The Matrix Revolutions*." *bbc.co.uk*. BBC, 6 Nov. 2003. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.
- Pierson, Michele. *Special Effects: Still In Search of Wonder*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. Print.
- Rabin, Nathan. "*The Matrix Reloaded*." *avclub.com*. Onion, 13 May 2003. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.
- Richard, Olly. "*Enter the Matrix*." *empireonline.com*. Bauer Consumer Media, n.d. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.

- Rosenbaum, Jonathan. "*The Matrix*." *chicagoreader.com*. Sun-Times Media, n.d. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.
- . "*The Matrix Reloaded*." *chicagoreader.com*. Sun-Times Media, n.d. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.
- Røssaak, Eivind. "Figures of Sensation: Between Still and Moving Images." *Strauven* 321-36. Print.
- Schuhardt, Read Mercer. "What Is *The Matrix*?" *Yeffeth* 5-21. Print.
- Schwarzbaum, Lisa. "*The Matrix* Review." *ew.com*. Entertainment Weekly, 9 Apr. 1999. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.
- . "*The Matrix Revolutions* Review." *ew.com*. Entertainment Weekly, 3 Nov. 2003. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.
- Seay, Chris, and Greg Garrett. *The Gospel Reloaded: Exploring Spirituality and Faith in The Matrix*. Colorado Springs: Piñon Press, 2003. Print.
- Seyhan, Azade. *Representation and Its Discontents: The Critical Legacy of German Romanticism*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1992. Print.
- Smith, Murray. "Theses on the Philosophy of Hollywood History." *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*. Ed. Steve Neale and Murray Smith. New York: Routledge, 1998. 3-20. Print.
- Staiger, Janet. *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992. Print.
- . *Media Reception Studies*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2005. Print.
- . *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2000. Print.

- Strauven, Wanda, ed. *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006. Print.
- . "Introduction to an Attractive Concept." Strauven 11-27. Print.
- . "From 'Primitive Cinema' to 'Marvelous'." Strauven 105-20. Print.
- Travers, Peter. "The Matrix." *rollingstone.com*. Rolling Stone, 31 Mar. 1999. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.
- . "The Matrix Reloaded." *rollingstone.com*. Rolling Stone, 16 May 2003. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.
- . "The Matrix Revolutions." *rollingstone.com*. Rolling Stone, 3 Nov. 2003. Web. 16 Jun. 2013.
- Wagner, Rachel, and Frances Flannery-Dailey. "Wake Up! Worlds of Illusion in Gnosticism, Buddhism, and *The Matrix* Project." Grau 258-88. Print.
- Warwick, Kevin. "The Matrix – Our Future?" Grau 198-207. Print.
- Witherington, Ben, III. "Neo-Orthodoxy: Tales of the Reluctant Messiah, Or, 'Your Own Personal Jesus'." Irwin (ii) 165-74. Print.
- Wolin, Richard. *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982. Print.
- Wood, Aylish. "The Collapse of Reality and Illusion in *The Matrix*." *Action and Adventure Cinema*. Ed. Yvonne Tasker. London: Routledge, 2004. 119-29. Print.
- Yeffeth, Glenn, ed. *Taking the Red Pill: Science, Philosophy and Religion in The Matrix*. Dallas, TX: BenBalla Books, 2003. Print.
- Žižek, Slavoj. "The Matrix: Or, Two Sides of Perversion." Irwin (i). 240-66. Print.

MEDIA TEXTS CITED

FRANCHISE

Andrews, Kaare, and Ron Turner. "I Kant." Wachowski (ii) 141-55. Print.

Bagge, Peter. "Get It?" Wachowski (i) 94-8. Print.

---. "Who Says You Can't Get Good Help These Days?" Wachowski (ii) 126-30. Print.

Beyond. Dir. Kôji Morimoto. Warner Bros., 2003. DVD.

Brite, Poppy Z., and Dave Dorman. "System Freeze." Wachowski (ii) 30-6. Print.

Chadwick, Paul. "Déjà Vu." Wachowski (ii) 17-29. Print.

---. "Let It All Fall Down." *What is the Matrix*. Warner Bros., 13 Jan. 2010. Web. 26 Aug. 2013. *Accessed via Internet Archive*.

---. "The Miller's Tale." Wachowski (i) 117-28. Print.

A Detective Story. Dir. Shinichirô Watanabe. Warner Bros, 2003. DVD.

Edwards, Tommy Lee. "An Easy One." *What is the Matrix*. Warner Bros., 28 Sep. 2009. Web. 26 Aug. 2013. *Accessed via Internet Archive*.

Enter The Matrix. Atari, Inc. 2003. Video game.

Evans, Vince, and Jason Keith. "Wrong Number." Wachowski (ii) 99-106. Print.

Final Flight of the Osiris. Dir. Andrew R. Jones. Warner Bros., 2003. DVD.

Gaeta, John, et al. "Morning Sickness." *What is the Matrix*. Warner Bros., 5 Sep. 2009. Web. 26 Aug. 2013. *Accessed via Internet Archive*.

Gaiman, Neil, Bill Sienkiewicz and Gregory Ruth. "Goliath." Wachowski (i) 41-8. Print.

Gibbons, Dave. "Butterfly." Wachowski (i) 64-77. Print.

Grant, Keron. "Run, Saga, Run." Wachowski (ii) 79-98. Print.

- Kid's Story*. Dir. Shinichirô Watanabe. Warner Bros, 2003. DVD.
- Krueger, Jim, and Tim Sale. "Farewell Performance." Wachowski (ii) 5-16. Print.
- Lamm, Spencer, and Michael Oeming. "Saviours." Wachowski (ii) 131-40. Print.
- Lapham, David. "There Are No Flowers in the Real World." Wachowski (i) 99-116. Print.
- McKeever, Ted. "A Life Less Empty." Wachowski (i) 27-40. Print.
- McKeever, Ted, and Chris Chuckry. "The King of Never Return." Wachowski (ii) 37-54. Print.
- McKeever, Ted, and Keron Grant. "Day In... Day Out." *What is the Matrix*. Warner Bros., 11 Jan. 2010. Web. 26 Aug. 2013. *Accessed via Internet Archive*.
- Matriculated*. Dir. Peter Chung. Warner Bros., 2003. DVD.
- The Matrix*. Dir. Andy Wachowski and Lana Wachowski. Warner Bros., 1999. DVD.
- The Matrix Online*. Sega/WB Games. 2005. Video game.
- The Matrix: Path of Neo*. Atari, Inc. 2005. Video game.
- The Matrix Reloaded*. Dir. Andy Wachowski and Lana Wachowski. Warner Bros., 2003. DVD.
- The Matrix Revolutions*. Dir. Andy Wachowski and Lana Wachowski. Warner Bros., 2003. DVD.
- Nixey, Troy. "An Asset to the System." Wachowski (ii) 55-66. Print.
- Nixey, Troy, and Dave McCaig. "A Sword of a Different Colour." Wachowski (i) 78-93. Print.
- Program*. Dir. Yoshiaki Kawajiri. Warner Bros., 2003. DVD.
- Ruth, Gregory. "Hunters and Collectors." Wachowski (i) 143-57. Print.

- . "A Path Among Stones." Wachowski (ii) 67-78. Print.
- . "Return of the Prodigal Son Part I." *Accessed via deviantart.com*. 9 Feb. 2012.
Web. 26 Aug. 2013.
- . "Return of the Prodigal Son Part II." *Accessed via deviantart.com*. 9 Feb. 2012.
Web. 26 Aug. 2013.
- The Second Renaissance Part I*. Dir. Mahiro Maeda. Warner Bros., 2003. DVD.
- The Second Renaissance Part II*. Dir. Mahiro Maeda. Warner Bros., 2003. DVD.
- Sienkiewicz, Bill. "Broadcast Depth." Wachowski (ii) 107-25. Print.
- . "Sweating the Small Stuff." Wachowski (i) 17-26. Print.
- Van Fleet, John. "Burning Hope." Wachowski (i) 49-63. Print.
- W, W Wilbur. "The Man Who Knew Too Much." *Accessed via scribd.com*. n.d.
Web. 26 Aug. 2013.
- Wachowski, Andy, and Lana Wachowski, ed. *The Matrix Comics* (i). New York: Burlyman Entertainment, 2003. Print.
- . *The Matrix Comics Volume 2* (ii). New York: Burlyman Entertainment, 2004.
Print.
- Wachowski, Andy, Lana Wachowski and Geof Darrow. "Bits and Pieces of Information." Wachowski (i) 5-16. Print.
- Windham, Ryder, and Kilian Plunkett. "Artistic Freedom." Wachowski (i) 129-42.
Print.
- World Record*. Dir. Takeshi Koike. Warner Bros., 2003. DVD.

OTHER MEDIA TEXTS

- 2001: A Space Odyssey*. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1968.
DVD.

Alien. Dir. Ridley Scott. Twentieth Century Fox, 1979. DVD.

Aliens. Dir. James Cameron. Twentieth Century Fox, 1986. DVD.

The Birth of a Nation. Dir. D.W. Griffith. Epoch, 1915. DVD.

Blade Runner. Dir. Ridley Scott. Warner Bros., 1982. DVD.

Dark City. Dir. Alex Proyas. New Line Cinema, 1998. DVD.

Dreamcatcher. Dir. Lawrence Kasdan. Warner Bros., 2003. DVD.

Gone with the Wind. Dir. Victor Fleming. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939. DVD.

Independence Day. Dir. Roland Emmerich. Twentieth Century Fox, 1996. DVD.

Jurassic Park. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Universal Pictures, 1993. DVD.

Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior. Dir. George Miller. Kennedy Miller, 1981. DVD.

Metropolis. Dir. Fritz Lang. Universum, 1927. DVD.

The Silence of the Lambs. Dir. Jonathan Demme. A Strong Heart/Demme, 1991. DVD.

The Sixth Sense. Dir. M. Night Shyamalan. Spyglass Entertainment, 1999. DVD.

Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace. Dir. George Lucas. Lucasfilm, 1999. DVD.

Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope. Dir. George Lucas. Lucasfilm, 1977. DVD.

The Terminator. Dir. James Cameron. Hemdale Film, 1984. DVD.

Terminator 2: Judgment Day. Dir. James Cameron. Carolco Pictures, 1991. DVD.

Titanic. Dir. James Cameron. Twentieth Century Fox, 1997. DVD.

Toy Story 2. Dir. Ash Brannon, John Lasseter, and Lee Unkrich. Walt Disney, 1999. DVD.