

**The Rhetoric of the Science Fiction Film in Utopian and Dystopian
“Worlds in Collision”¹: *The Matrix* Tetralogy (1999, 2003, 2021) and
Transcendence (2014)**

Ileana JITARU
Ovidius University of Constanta

Abstract: *The present paper investigates figural techniques and features of the sci-fi genre in The Matrix Tetralogy (The Matrix / The Matrix Reloaded / The Matrix Revolutions / The Matrix Resurrections) – directors Andy Wachowski and Lana Wachowski (1999, 2003, 2003, 2021) – and Transcendence (director Wally Pfister, 2014), in which the film medium becomes an intermediation of dystopian / utopian worlds. The focus will lie on film techniques (mise en scene, cinematography, editing, sound) as poetics of the science fiction film able to intermediate a hyperreality.*

Keywords: *dystopian / utopian films, science-fiction, hyperreality, the Matrix*

The Sci-Fi: history, style, criticism

Although some theorists entrapped by the science-fiction muse try to give a definition to this genre, the attempt is difficult to pursue if we take into account the hybrid / morphing nature of this genre, which intersects the fantasy, the horror, and the action adventure films, but guided by a series of advancements of technology and science that impact the individuals or society as a whole, usually in a fantastic, imaginary, futuristic manner involving alien beings, robotics, and parallel times. As a popular fictional genre engaging with (and visualizing) prophetic warnings, utopian goals, dystopic scenarios for imaginary worlds, apocalyptic natural disasters, strange voyages, the science fiction as a literary or filmic genre recirculates: the future, artificial creation, technological invention, extra-terrestrial contact, physical or mental mutations, futuristic techs, experimentation. Science fiction films incorporate tropes like space travel and time travel, utopias and dystopias, encounters with alien beings, interstellar travel, extra-terrestrial lifeforms, cyborgs, and relies upon theatrical mise-en-scene, editing and special effects to create a credible version of new possible worlds. Simultaneously, in order to increase its marketability and to attach a more humane touch to this tech genre, authors interpolate romantic or even thrilling elements that belong to romance or thrillers as

¹ “Worlds in collision” is a phrase coined by Russian astronomy researcher Immanuel Velikovsky in his book *Worlds in Collision*, published in 1950. The phrase is used to argue that the order in our planetary system is disturbed, and that cataclysms occur from the collision of stellar bodies in the universe.

adjacent lit-film genres, thus engaging the audience in a different response: “Science fiction films are traditionally dramas about these topics, usually with thrilling and romantic elements and often reliant upon state-of-the-art special effects techniques to create a new, or expanded, worldview” (Johnston 1).

One of the acknowledged precursors of the science-fiction literary genre, Cyrano de Bergerac, imagined a voyage to the Moon that finds a utopian society of men free from war, disease, and hunger (*États et Empires de la Lune / Comical History of the History of the States and Empires of the Moon*, 1657). It was Bergerac who inspired Jonathan Swift in writing his social satire *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) and Voltaire in criticising his contemporary society in *Micromégas* (1752). A century later, Mary Shelley reinvented the stylistics of this genre in *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). Later, in the 19th century, Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Invisible Man* (1897), and *The War of the Worlds* (1898) meant new itineraries in the sci-fi realm, with their avantgarde imaginings of all the themes and topics that were to be recirculated and enriched from that moment by several of their followers in this type of writing. In the 20th century, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949) represent landmarks in the subgenre of dystopian novels – a pillar to the science fiction episteme.

In the cinema, sci-fi themes, settings or narrative strategies gained visibility in Hollywood productions as early as the Silver Screen Age: Fritz Lang’s silent film *Metropolis* (1927) interpolates the inventor C.A. Rotwang, played by Rudolf Klein-Rogge, and his robotic invention (Brigitte Helm), and this production promised early in the history of the sci-fi cinematics the intermediality of science in a media form.

Scholars of the genre broadly polarised the iconography of science fiction into ‘soft’ sci-fi features, dealing with the “social aspects of the near future and inner spaces” (Sobchack 24), technophilia, utopic spaces, technologically advanced beings. These may become the embodiment of the Saviour or Messiah, which is the case of Steven Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977): “Technology has redeemed them from original sin, made them godlike, sent them to us with the best of intentions” (Ruppersberg 35). At the other end of the scale lies ‘hard’ sci-fi exploring “technology-for-technology’s-sake” (Sobchack 25), technophobia, apocalyptic disasters, cyborgs, interstellar travel, dark cities of a remote future or interplanetary invasions that operate in dystopic spaces.

If we were to identify the textual elements of the sci-fi film, “innovative stylistic or narrative elements includes sci-fi still frames” (Irwin 12), we feel bound to mention “the art deco-influenced robot body in *Metropolis* (1927); the resplendent jump cut from flying bone to floating space station in *2001: A*

Space Odyssey (1968)” (Grant xix); the iconic Dinosaurs in Steven Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park* (1993), the kinetic space battles of *Star Wars* (1977); the humans vs. machines clash in *Terminator 1* and *Terminator 2* (James Cameron, 1984 and 1991) and, the robots in the noir SF in *Blade Runner* (1982); or the ‘bullet time’² ballet sequences of *The Matrix* (1999).

In 2008, an article published in the *Guardian* questioned the future of the science-fiction genre, claiming that it “splintered into a series of subgenres (such as biopunk, space opera, clockpunk, time travel, military sci-fi and steampunk)”, and notes that elements of the science-fiction genre “had grown outside itself and invaded the Hollywood mainstream” (Irvine n.p).

In a reputed essay entitled “Genre Films and the Status Quo”, Judith Hess Wright³ performs a critical investigation into various genres and deconstructs the stiff, immutable features of each film genre, which, in her opinion, prevent a genre from mutations and progress. As to the science fiction, “according to these films, there is only one possible response. We must use every scientific means at our disposal to destroy the invader” (65).

Theorising the science-fiction genre

In typical science-fiction films, the ‘worlds’ of the setting should be understood literally as *planets*, or two different ‘colliding’ worlds that characters vacillate between by means of interplanetary travel. Central to this is the topos of “another world’s intrusion into this one” (McHale 59) in the interplanetary context, and it takes the form of invasion from outer space – whether malign, or benign. The complementary *topos*, that of the earthling’s visit to an alien planet, occurs in a number of variants:

- a) the simple travel to a single other world or ‘planet-hopping’ from world to world;
- b) travel across a planet on which distinct life-forms, races, civilizations are juxtaposed, creating a pluri-world continuum;
- c) another variant, which Brian McHale calls “zero degree” of the interplanetary motif (Brian McHale 60), involves projecting a different planet without any provision for intrusion in either direction, by its inhabitants into our world or by earthlings into their world. The confrontation between the projected world and our empirical world is

² The ‘bullet time’ technique involves the use of still photography. Several stills are taken in a complex sequence, digitized and then further manipulated to enable the filmmakers to produce moving images in which time is expanded or compressed within the spatial dimensions defined by the original sequence of still images. In this filmic work, cameras descend and move round a slow-motion action sequence.

³ Judith Hess Wright blames the science fiction films that comply too soon with the status quo, arguing that they are actually incapable of advancing a truly viable solution to the problems they discuss in the filmic narrative.

implicit, experienced by no representative character but *reconstructed* by the reader.

Science fiction films are space-travel and time-travel narratives, since they are projected into the future, where technological advancement allows the transfer from the ‘here’ and the ‘now’. Whether simultaneous or not, both types of supplanting movements, spatial and temporal, effect the same ‘cognitive alienation’ to the two confronting worlds.

Concerning the settings, the goal of science-fiction narratives is to polarise around the utopian worlds, in a concern to create a peaceful, equal, safe, free, independently thinking environment, and to annihilate dystopian worlds marked by a controlling oppressive government or propaganda that bars free thinking. The mode of displacement from present to future falls into one or another of several categories:

- a) ‘future history’, which narrates more or less continuously the unfolding of things that are to happen with or without time travel (the 13-film *Star Trek* series (1979-2016); *Twelve Monkeys* – dir. Terry Gilliam, 1995)
- b) ‘sleeper wakes’ motif, “in which an inhabitant of our time hibernates through the intervening centuries and awakens in the world of the future” (Johnston 11) (or the past), as it occurs in *Groundhog Day* (dir. Harold Ramis, 1993). There are also many films in the SF genre which feature a figure from the past who awakens into the present or the opposite. Modern tales of this type hardly focus on the awakened sleeper, but rather on the impact (inappropriate or alien) the intruder may have on the collided world.
- c) the ‘time machine’ motif inaugurated by H. G. Wells’s 1895 novel *The Time Machine*, which was adapted into a 2002 film by the same title (dir. Simon Wells) and advanced by *The Terminator* (dir. James Cameron, 1984), or by *Back to the Future* (dir. Robert Zemeckis, 1985), where a young man is accidentally sent 30 years into the past in a time-traveling machine invented by his friend.

Science-fictionalisation of the real / hyper-real / un-real; simulation / simulacra; utopian / dystopian

The dialogue engaged in reading films involves the development of a new model for interrelating philosophical and filmic texts. *The Matrix Tetralogy*, canonical 20th/21st century science-fiction films, has generated a body of literature explaining its philosophical stances, evoking traditional theme debates like reality vs illusion and free will vs determinism. This critical literature centres on a philosophical approach to the film grounded in Plato, Descartes, Karl Marx, Hillary Putnam and Robert Nozick, and it is these responses that have turned *The Matrix* into a new breed of “*intellectual action*

movie” (Wachowski, qtd. in Gordon 103). The 1999 film overly uses textual allusions, most famously of which is the presentation of Baudrillard’s book *Simulacra and Simulation* as a hiding place for Neo’s computer discs, and one of the foci of this paper is to place the film under the lenses of its main source, Baudrillard’s first essay “The Precession of Simulacra”. Actually, Baudrillard’s book appears on screen and Morpheus quotes from this first essay: “Welcome to *the desert of the real*”. Following the intertextual link we reach the Source, one of the key notions in the narrative, and Neo’s professed goal in the film: “Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. (...) It is the real (...) whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. *The desert of the real itself*” (Baudrillard 1).

Baudrillard argues that the “current postmodern condition is the result of a crisis in the relation between reality and the image” (11). The traditional mimetic relation between the two, in which the image was judged to be a more or less accurate copy of reality, becomes dissipated. Instead, reality can be now perceived as a copy of the image: “this inversion of the mimetic relation results in the precession of simulacra – the image and the model – and the loss of the real. Utterly permeated by the image, reality has become the *hyperreal*” (Baudrillard 12). Baudrillard states that the domain of the hyperreal has been expanded by the current science fiction, in that it mediates the loss of the opposition between reality and fiction. The lack of differentiation between reality and fiction that science fiction helps to bring about also affects the genre itself. Baudrillard argues that it is “no longer possible for current science fiction to explore a range of parallel, double or possible universes because such distinctions are eliminated within the single, all-encompassing ‘universe of simulation’ that constitutes the hyperreal” (Baudrillard 12).

Less obvious than in *The Matrix* Tetralogy, the second film under consideration, *Transcendence*, could be also interrogated from the tenets of another article in the same volume, “Simulacra and Science Fiction”. Here the French philosopher introduces three orders of simulacra:

1. “simulacra that are *natural*, naturalist, founded on the image, on imitation and counterfeit, that are harmonious, optimistic” (Baudrillard 81), which includes the imaginary of the Utopia;
2. “simulacra that are *productive* (...) founded on energy, force, its materialization by the machine and in the whole system of production (...) expansion, an indefinite liberation of energy” (Baudrillard 82), which includes science fiction;
3. “simulacra founded on *information*, the model, the cybernetic game – total operationality, hyperreality, aim of total control” (Baudrillard 82).

Although Baudrillard no longer ascribes a type of imaginary, we could dare include the dystopian in this third order, owing to its anarchic, repressive manifestation: “Between the operative (the theatrical status of theatrical and fantastical machinery)”, which corresponds to the first order, “the operative (the industrial) that corresponds to the second order” and “the operational (the cybernetic, aleatory, uncertain status of ‘metatechnique’)”, which belongs to the third order, “all interference can still be produced today at the level of science fiction” (Baudrillard 84).

This philosophical tripartite trope lies at the core of Wally Pfister’s film *Transcendence*, in which a transcendent sphere, “a radically different universe takes form even in unconscious structures” (Baudrillard 81). But the dissociation from the “real world is maximized and the island of Utopia stands opposed to the continent of the real” (81).

In an unacknowledged reformulation of Baudrillard, Will Caster’s statement triggers the conflict in the film and foretells that a world that was meant Utopian will soon prove not only impossible to reach but will rather turn Dystopian under Caster’s universal conscience guide:

For 130,000 years, our capacity to reason has remained unchanged. The combined intellect of the neuroscientists, mathematicians and... hackers... in this auditorium pales in comparison to the most basic A.I. Once online, a sentient machine will quickly overcome the limits of biology. And in a short time, its analytic power will become greater than the collective intelligence of every person born in the history of the world. So imagine such an entity with a full range of human emotion. Even self-awareness. Some scientists refer to this as ‘the Singularity’. I call it ‘Transcendence’. (*Transcendence* 00:09:14-00:10:21)

A natural extrapolation of the concept of utopia, dystopia is the other double of utopia, the former playing on everything that the latter is not. The popularity of dystopias in literature and film, especially in science-fiction films, springs from their relying on conflict to ensure the basic driving force of the narrative and the core material of any captivating story: “Science fiction has always played on the double ... either artificial or imaginary, whereas here the double has disappeared, there is no longer a double (...) simulation is insuperable, unsurpassable (...) we will no longer even pass through to ‘the other side of the mirror’, that was still the golden age of transcendence” (Baudrillard 83).

A central difficulty of utopian fiction is the lack of dramatic conflict; a state of perfection is inherently uneventful. Utopias commonly featured “moderns” undergoing a conversion experience to the utopian mind-set – after

which, all action stopped. In dystopias, a character representing moderns is excitingly chased down, persecuted, degraded, and commonly killed.

The Matrix Tetralogy: time bulleting from space to space

The Matrix films play a game with both its characters and its audience, a game in which reality and illusion are equally addressed. One of the central structuring devices of *The Matrix* is an exploration of the relationship between humans and technologies, a concern common to many science fiction films, the opposition between alienating technology and the liberating struggle of the human beings. “The utopian promise of the science fiction film – the superiority of the human – may be battered and beleaguered, but it is still there, fighting for validation” (Bukatman 17).

In a book on the science-fiction genre, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*, Scott Bukatman quotes science fiction writer and critic Samuel R. Delaney who coined the blend word ‘paraspaces’ to safeguard the idea of juxtaposed alternative worlds. “As two worlds (or more) become aligned with each other, the events occurring in one world produce a commentary on events in the other(s). Delaney suggests that a number of science fiction writers ‘posit a normal world – a recognizable future – and then an alternate space, sometimes largely mental, but always materially manifested, that sits behind the real world, and in which language is raised to an extraordinarily lyric level’ (Wood 126).

In *The Matrix* (1999), IT programmer Thomas Anderson (Keanu Reeves) leads a secret hacker life under the pseudonym Neo and tries to find the answer to the question “What is the Matrix?”. The world Neo has lived in since he was born is the Matrix, an illusory simulated reality, built on the world model and dominated by machines to keep the human population under control. Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) and his proponents are a group of free men, who try to disconnect from the Matrix, and recruit Neo (Keanu Reeves) and Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss) to help them in the war against the Sentinels. Within the Matrix they are able to break the laws of physics with superhuman powers. Neo is trained to become a group fighter and he is believed to be the ‘Chosen One’, a man who was predicted to end the war with his unlimited power over the Matrix. With each fight, Neo becomes more and more confident in his ability to manipulate the Matrix and realizes that he is indeed the Chosen One. After destroying Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving), Neo returns to the real world just in time for the ship’s electromagnetic pulse to destroy the Sentinels who had already managed to enter the crew room. Later, Neo enters the Matrix again and, through a phone call, promises the people enslaved in the system that he will render them free into the real world, where anything is possible. The film’s closure ends in Neo’s predicting manifesto: “I am going to show you a world without rules and controls, without borders and

boundaries. A world where anything is possible. Where we go from now is a choice I leave to you” (*TM* 2:03:20). The film opens with a corollary, suggesting that the Matrix and the Real World are distinct: “Whilst the two paraspaces are presented as distinct, one actual and the other virtual, one apparently real the other apparently an illusion, such a distinction itself turns out to be something of an illusion” (Wood 127). Cinematography supports this claim: in the Matrix tetralogy it relies on dark desaturated colors for the real world, placed in opposition with the world of Matrix, dominated inside by hues of green.

The Matrix Reloaded (2003) recirculates the three characters, Neo (Keanu Reeves), Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss) and Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) and takes their adventure one level deeper, where Neo meets the Architect (Helmut Bakaitis), a computer program and the mind master that created the Matrix and reveals to Neo that he is The One enabled with the ability to save the Matrix. Zion is besieged by the Army of Machinery. Just hours before the destruction of the last human enclave on Earth, Neo and Trinity choose to return to the Matrix with Morpheus, unleashing their arsenal of extraordinary abilities and weapons on the forces of repression and exploitation. Now at the confluence of love and truth, destiny and wisdom, purpose and logic, Neo must follow the path he has chosen if he is to save the world from the dark fate that haunts his dreams.

The Matrix Revolutions (2003) resumes the war between machines and the human race with Neo (Keanu Reeves), Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) and Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss), who have to engage in war to defend Zion, the last real-world city, from the machines that have enslaved the human race. As Neo learns more about his heroic powers, including his ability to see the codes of things and people, and he is the one who will end the war and bring the long-awaited peace to humanity, a resolution that had not been foreseen by the very Oracle, who had announced Neo’s extraordinary powers. As a confirmation of the Oracle, the film ends with the main hero embodying the religious symbol of the Saviour. The film also incorporates other mythological figures, among whom Deus Ex Machina is the commander of the machines, who intimates the film’s happy ending. In the final scene, in a meeting between the Oracle (Mary Alice) and the Architect (Helmut Bakaitis), the latter promises that peace will last as long as possible and that he will allow all people to leave the underworld Matrix for the real world. The film ends in a totally different cinematography, a sunrise and a new colourful view of the Matrix, devoid of the green-hued desaturated colorizations that had dominated the cinematography of the entire tetralogy. Hence, in a level of higher spirituality and religious inferences, the final scene in the film concludes in the same prophetic words uttered by the Oracle: “Did you always know?”, she is asked. “Oh, no. No. But I believed. I believed” (*TMR* 1:54:55).

The Matrix Resurrections (2021) reunites Neo and Trinity, rebooted by the machines, and brought back in a renewed version of the Matrix. The two protagonists become involved in the same vacillating movement between the everyday life of Zion and the dark world of the Matrix. In the same shift between two possible hyper-worlds, Neo's mission is "to show us what is real" (*TMR* 00:16:34). Director Lana Wachowski has wrapped this sequel in a more contemporary musical score, with sound dynamics of the 21st century, that marks the 20-year span between the 2021 film and its 1999 predecessor. Also, the 2021 script offers a critique on the new media that fools the 21st-century users: the grand narratives of traditional videogames and films have been replaced by the shallow social media: "Face reality, people. Movies are dead. Games are dead. Narrative? Dead. Media is nothing but neuro-trigger response and viral conditioning" (*TMR* 1:36:56).

This fourth film confirms the corollary of *The Matrix* Trilogy: Neo is re-established as the mythical figure of Saviour or Messiah, with his self-sacrifice that is meant to free the humankind from the machine-dominated world.

***Transcendence* – dystopian into utopian or the other way round?**

The reliance of the science-fiction film *topoi* on invasions from outer space, visits to other planets, utopian or dystopian futures/worlds, time-travel, parallel or lost worlds has developed under the guidance of the ontological poetics of the literary science-fiction. Although the sci-fi media in the literature and film genres have followed distinct paths, these separate but parallel lines have produced motifs and *topoi* which are often identical.

Wally Pfister draws on variations of familiar science-fiction elements and uses a number of strategies recuperated from the repertoire of popular fiction to organize the plot in his film: the death-world derives from the postmodernist preoccupation with death as the ultimate ontological boundary, which may be traced through the many postmodernist variants (revisionist, parodic) on the venerable topos of the 'world to come'. Will Caster's controversial experiments made him famous, on the one hand but, but on the other, also the target of an anti-technology extremist group (Revolutionary Independence From Technology – R.I.F.T.), who regards the computer-controlled world of Caster and his *Transcendence* project as a dystopian world that has to be annihilated. By way of consequence, the extremists shoot him with a bullet of radioactive material that will kill him soon, and so, Will is supposed to be prevented from establishing a world where computers can transcend the abilities of the human brain.

Grounded in a cinema that preferred to adapt science fiction's motifs of temporal displacement and spatial displacements alike, Pfister's film is a hybrid, focusing on a parallel world, the e-world of the internet that threatens

to take control of the earthly one. In constructing the present technological other world, the director of *Transcendence* tends to focus on social and institutional repercussions of these innovations rather than on the strictly technological innovations themselves. The film opens with its resolution: following a post-IT revolution that led to the dissolution of the world wide web, what was meant as a utopian world turns into an anarchic dystopia which is kept under control by the military and the paramilitary. This introductory sequence is filmed in desaturated colours and features several close ups of objects that describe the ‘new order’: a derelict computer keyboard thrown away in the grass or placed in the doorway to keep the door wide open is a visual and indexical sign iterated a couple of times to signal the end of the internet and the end of technology. After this apocalyptic sequence, the film’s main diegesis begins retrospectively (filmed in warm saturated colours) and narrates the sequence of events that led to this apocalyptic denouement. A team of experts led by Dr. Will Caster (Johnny Depp), wife Evelyn Caster (Rebecca Hall) and best friend Max (Paul Bettany) inaugurated a project, ‘Evolve the Future’, that postulates:

“A new type of thinking is essential if mankind were to survive and to go higher levels of evolution”. Albert Einstein said that more than 50 years ago and it couldn’t be more relevant than it is today. Intelligent machines will allow to conquer the most intractable of challenges, not only to cure disease but to eradicate hunger and poverty, to heal the planet and build a better future for all of us. (*Transcendence* 07:52–08:34)

Father of this project is Will Caster, whose mission lies in creating a machine able to experience human emotions in what is called a state of ‘transcendence’, and ultimately artificial intelligence. With this purpose in mind, Caster designs PINN, an independent neuronal network able to develop itself. After his physical death, Will’s conscience is uploaded into PINN but once up there, he soon manifests a desire to have more power (the pun is obviously non-fallacious) in order to have access to the financial markets, universities, the government. In an unstoppable drive to control the world and be with Evelyn, Caster replicates himself in the people around Evelyn and turns everybody in the town into invincible machined-human hybrids.

In a similar way with other SF texts, *Transcendence* projects the state of the future in a ‘what if?’ mode and postulates the competition among various life-forms: the inhabitants of Brightwood, quasi-robots controlled by Dr. Caster, engage in open conflict against the anti-technology group, including Will’s former colleagues, who have realised the danger of Will extremist actions.

In a chapter of *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987/2004) dedicated to the topoi of science fiction, Brian McHale recycles the concept of *novum* (a character who did not exist in the empirical world or an event that did not really occur) introduced by Robert Scholes in *Structural Fabulation: An Essay on Fiction of the Future* (1975) and states that: “What distinguishes science fiction is the occurrence of this *novum* not (or not only) at the level of story and actors but in the structure of the represented world itself”. McHale further clarifies sci-fi tropes as “not the occurrence of a single *novum*, but the projection of a network of innovations, with their implications and consequences; in other words, the projection of a world different from our own” (59-60).

The movie *Transcendence* exploits the possibilities provided by SF genre and its *novum* on more than one level. On the one hand, it explores the network as we know it from our immediate experience – the internet – a world wide web that is able to connect users globally. On the other hand the dichotomy civilisation vs. nature becomes surfaced and portrayed in such a way that the viewer has the opportunity to state his position depending on his subjective perception. Nature is also a network, but a natural utopian one, which is not always controlled by humans. The second, even more abstract, network is the neurological one (or consciousness) which can be loaded in a computer and connected to the internet. The film is innovative in its bringing these networks together and combining them in order to reach an alleged utopian world. But the fear of the new, of the unknown proves to be more powerful, and what is meant to be a utopia after the demise of the internet and the IT technology gradually becomes a dystopian society (the opening and ending sequence), where order is inaugurated by the army.

In keeping with the conventions of the sci-fi, director Wally Pfister loads most of the 21st-century denominators of the genre into his film: the nano-bots (nano-technology); the cyberspace; the conflict between man and machine-robot; the transcendence from a physical body to a digital conscience; transportation from the real world to the cyberspace; the human/earth regeneration; mega-computers. He portrays a world in the future, in which the advanced innovative technologies show the potential of the human race, the dichotomy utopia vs. dystopia, nature vs. technology, better intelligent beings created by humans being capable of threatening humankind and reducing it to mere slaves; human beings who lose their individuality and respond to a higher consciousness, the super-human who is endowed with superpower and immunity.

From Matrix to Transcendence: spaces of intermediality

In an intermedial game of blurring boundaries, which is so specific to science fiction, the reality of the dystopian in the ‘real world’ in all five films must be secured by ensuring the illusory status of *The Matrix* and of *Transcendence*. In

order to describe these films as mere stories in which humans transcend the alienating power of technology, it is necessary to believe in the characters' belief in the reality of the Real World. There are several ways of blurring the distinction between the Real World and the Matrix or Transcendence. On an overt level within *The Matrix*, the competition between the machines and the resistance is played out through the fight and chase sequences between Morpheus, Trinity and Neo, and the representatives of the machines: the Agents, the sentinels (in *The Matrix* films) or through the fight between the anti-tech R.I.F.T group, the FBI and researcher Max on the one hand, and on the other, Will, Evelyn and their empowered replicas (in *Transcendence*). The two types of paraspaces that are generated in this conflict are manifested at the level of the action of the characters but also at the level of the machinic rhythms of the narrative, constantly in tension with each other. Take for example Agent Smith's slow-paced speech pattern, which establishes one model of progression that seems discontinued from the more natural faster-going speech patterns of the human characters. And similar is the speech of Dr. Caster once he becomes a cyber-scientist responsible for, and in charge with, a global conscience.

The intertwining movement between space-time phases is most apparent in the slowing, stretching and twisting of space-time ratio in both *The Matrix* and *Transcendence*. Take the opening sequence of *The Matrix*: while Trinity is being chased, “some of the possibilities of this spatio-temporal shift are demonstrated with a figure who can hang in the air, leap across impossibly wide spaces and vanish into thin cable via the electronic signal of a phone line” (Gordon 116). Or, in *Transcendence*, consider the scene when a deadly wounded Martin (the chief constructor) regenerates his wounds instantly or when plants grow n^{th} times faster than their natural rhythm under the power of the machines created by the almighty e-conscience of Dr. Caster in the Data Center. All these feats are created through the use of digitizing CGI effects, wire-work stunts and bullet-time editing effects: “This latter technique captures most fully the disruption of time and space, enabling the filmmakers to slow or speed the sequence of shots, tempering some while accelerating through others” (Johnston 180).

A consistent trope of the science-fiction genre, ‘paraspace’ was introduced by Samuel Delany, who defined the term as a “space existing parallel to normal or ordinary space” (5). According to Delany, the para-space is an alternate space that “exists parallel to the normal space of the diegesis – a rhetorically heightened other realm” (Delany 6), while Scott Bukatman redefines the paraspace as a “cyberspace”.

In the narratives of both *The Matrix* and *Transcendence*, the paraspaces and cyberspaces function in opposition: the Real World as opposed to the Matrix, the real world as opposed to Transcendence, “reality as opposed to

illusion, freedom as opposed to enslavement” (Wood 123), dystopias opposed to utopias. “However, in each case, the significance of each term in these oppositions lies in its difference from its other” (Wood 123). Turning to Neo in the *Matrix*, or Max in *Transcendence*, these two protagonists “must exploit technology in order to battle with the machines and their emissaries, the Agents” (Wood 125) and thus save humanity from under the power of cybernetics and robotics.

Another visual intermediation between the two films lies in the form of the Resistance as a source of conflict or as a motivation for the protagonists to repair the ravaged worlds. The spectators are guided gradually in order to ensure that they understand the difference between the opposing spaces the films’ diegeses dwell in. While the Real World is dark, cold, dingy, it lies in opposition to the Matrix, where humans are reduced to batteries that enable machines to function. In *Transcendence*, the ‘real world’, that of the questionable technology, is increasingly governed by the anti-tech group supported by people in the government and the former fellow researchers of Dr. Caster. All these form the Resistance in *Transcendence*, in an intention to make humans want to release themselves from the tyranny of over-empowered technology embodied by the Dr. Caster’s e-version: “The Real World as a paraspace to the Matrix establishes the latter as a place of enslavement and exploitation; so is the real world of Brightwood town which opposes the technological ascendancy of Dr. Caster” (Bukatman 57).

The plot of both films, *The Matrix* and *Transcendence*, is circular “as Neo ends up in Room 303, exactly where the whole game began with the police chasing Trinity” (Neale 179). Similarly, Wally Pfister’s film ends with Max in the very same garden (that once belonged to the Casters) which opened the film, in the utopian world of sunflowers growing free in their natural environment. “But the game does not end with watching Neo, or Max and the other characters of the plot; it also invites the audience to discern between the reality or illusions” (Neale 179-180) of the film.

Both in *Transcendence* and in *The Matrix*, the extent of the illusion or the depth of the escape into the not-real is not the only thing in doubt; so too is the question of where their boundaries are. While such uncertainties that these films play upon in creating meaning lead to the exclusion of the possibility of a single cinematic world, they lead to a reconstitution of filmic identity, one that takes into account the paradigms offered by the alternative realities: “What is real? How do you define real? If you're talking about your senses, what you feel, taste, smell, or see, then all you're talking about are electrical signals interpreted by your brain” (*TM* 00:37:33).

The Matrix tetralogy offers a cohesive visual identity specific to the auteurs Wachowski brothers and equally to the science fiction film aesthetics: the ‘real’ world is actually hyperreality, ‘the Matrix’ is a cyber space. The same

special effects are recirculated: Trinity jumps between buildings; Neo's hand, arm, body are covered in black morphing fluid; Neo and Morpheus fly over the Zion cityscape. The films share the same generic cinematic iconography, grounded in action-based imagery, with camera work shifting between slow-motion and fast-motion filming, CGI morphing, 360-degree panning cameras and desaturated blue-green cool colorization, and frenetic montage sequences. The topos is a dystopian future landscape dominated by futuristic machinery. The special effects-based movement of Trinity floating up in the air and kicking an attacker (while the camera drifts around the action), and slow-motion fight scenes in a subway or image of Neo rejecting bullets in a 'bullet time' sequence that slows the motion down to show bullet trails flying past his twisting figure, and Morpheus' warning about the Matrix "you have to see it for yourself" (*The Matrix Revolutions* 1:55:38), appear to address the audience, who are thus invited into the space of the Matrix.

The science fiction genre, as mystified as it is with its reiterated established conundrums of mise en scene, cinematography, editing, offers "elements that are hypothesized as meaningful and able to trigger correlations" (Krutnik, Maltby 349) in the mind of the audience. The resulting hyperreal spaces built within the sci-fi narratives become part of an intermedial complex of cinematic challenges that the spectators are invited to decode.

Works Cited

- Baudrillard, Jean. "The Precession of Simulacra." *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1995. 1-30.
- Baudrillard, Jean. "Simulacra and Science Fiction." *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1995. 81-84.
- Bukatman, Scott. *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1993.
- Delany, Samuel R. "Some Real Mothers: An interview with Samuel R. Delany by Takayuki Tatsumi." *Science Fiction Eye* 1.3 (1988): 5-11.
- Gordon, Andrew. "The Matrix: Paradigm of Postmodernism or Intellectual Poseur, Part Two." *Taking the Red Pill: Science, Philosophy and Religion in The Matrix*. Ed. Glenn Yeffeth. Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2004. 102-123.
- Grant, Barry Keith. "Introduction." *Film Genre Reader IV*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012. xvii-xxii.

- Irvine, Lindsay. “Is there a Future for Science Fiction?” *The Guardian*, 22 March 2008.
<<https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2008/mar/22/5>>.
- Johnston, Keith M. *Science Fiction Film: A Critical Introduction*. London and New York: Berg Press, 2011.
- Irwin, William. “Computers, Caves, and Oracles: Neo and Socrates.” *The Matrix and Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. Ed. William Irwin. Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 2002. 5-15.
- Krutnik, Frank, Richard Maltby. “Narration, Point of View and Patterns in the Soundtrack of *Letter from an Unknown Woman*.” *Film, Cinema, Genre: The Steve Neale Reader*. Eds. Frank Krutnik and Richard Maltby. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2021. 337-352.
- The Matrix*. Dir. Larry Wachowski, Lana Wachowski, Andy Wachowski, Lilly Wachowski. Warner Bros., 1999. 131 min.
- The Matrix Reloaded*. Dir. Andy Wachowski, Lilly Wachowski, Larry Wachowski, Lana Wachowski, Warner Bros., 2003. 133 min.
- The Matrix Revolutions*. Dir. Andy Wachowski, Lana Wachowski, Larry Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski. Warner Bros. and Village Roadshow Pictures, 2003. 124 min.
- The Matrix Resurrections*. Dir. Lana Wachowski. Warner Bros. and Village Roadshow Pictures, 2021. 148 min.
- McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004 (1987).
- Neale, Steve. “Questions of Genre.” *Film Genre Reader IV*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012. 178-202.
- Ruppersberg, Hugh. “The Alien Messiah.” *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*. Ed. Annette Kuhn. London: Verso, 1991. 32-38.
- Sobchack, Vivian. “Images of Wonder: The Look of Science Fiction.” *The Science Fiction Film Reader*. Ed. Gregg Rickman. London and New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. 22-36.
- Transcendence*. Dir. Wally Pfister. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2014. 119 min.
- Wood, Aylish. “The Collapse of Reality and Illusion in *The Matrix*.” *Action and Adventure Cinema*. Ed. Yvonne Tasker. London and New York: Routledge, 2004. 119-129.