Exploring the Matrix: Versions of the Cyber Present

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Exploring the Matrix: Versions of the Cyber Present

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In keeping with our summer pledge to lighten up a bit, here we review a book that treats the extremely popular and influential film, “The Matrix” (2001) as a serious intellectual topic. The film has been followed by a sequel, “The Matrix Reloaded” (2003), now showing worldwide to a mixed audience reaction, and a third film is to be released in the December, 2003. Those who have not seen the film, or are unfamiliar with science fiction in its many forms (or outright contemptuous of it) may find this review a bit puzzling, even wonder why an Internet Studies Center should review such a book. We think, however, that popular culture and its icons are in important indicator of the impact of the Internet, and tend to treat them seriously here at the Berglund Center. Perhaps, in part, because our student editors give us little choice!

There are a number of reasons why those interested in the impact of the Internet should also follow popular culture. One is certainly that the feedback loop between computing and popular culture has been clear for several years now. The Matrix phenomenon has influenced how people speak, how they dress, and even brought ancient philosophical systems such as Gnosticism, hitherto fore restricted to a very small group (such as the fans of the very influential sci-fi writer Philip K. Dick) into common awareness. And post-modernists will also spot the influence of the French thinker Baudillard throughout the film. The film is a virtual dumping ground of homage, pop cultural references, and visual tropes on a bewildering variety of themes. If you don’t understand a number of commercials backed by green digital numbers in parallel columns currently running on television, or if you wonder why fashion seems to have suddenly gone to black form-fitting long garments, you probably need to rent the film.

Perhaps the central idea of the film, and one explored in great depth in Haber’s work, is the relationship between reality and between perceptions of reality. The protagonists are battling in a
Gnostic world—that is, one in which “reality” is what the participants perceive it to be (the workaday world of the early 21st century), rather than the underlying “true” reality, (a distant future in which computers grow humans in pods and harvest their biochemical energy while programming them to accept their cable-fed perceptions as “real”). Haber’s contributors discuss everything from the possibility of such a world (how much energy can be harvested from human beings as opposed to the amount of energy necessary to maintain the fictitious “reality”) to its desirability (if such a world were possible, wouldn’t it be preferable to this one, for many of the world’s population currently living in misery?).

For those of us interested in computing and the Internet, these topics are all familiar ones to us: what is the reality of the Internet? Do we spend too much time there, wherever “there” is? What is the impact of computers in our own lives? What should it be? Are we going down a dangerous path ending in a pod or its intellectual or moral equivalent?

In addition to the work reviewed here, there are a number of others that treat the film seriously. I am familiar with the series Popular Culture and Philosophy, and assume that William Irwin’s edited work in that series, The Matrix and Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real, is also well worth reading. But I have chosen to review Haber’s work because it treats the film not only as a cultural phenomenon, but several of the articles included in the book place it into the context of previous works which have dealt with computers and computing. In fact, one of the common topics treated in the book is the manner in which the film takes a rather familiar perspective in this context. Like many films and stories in science fiction or fantasy, it treats computers as the enemy (the Terminator series of films comes immediately to mind, but there are thousands of others) while simultaneously glorifying them. “The Matrix” is a splendid example in that while battling the evil machines and their programmatic constructs its heroic protagonists download the skills they need in their fight from their own computers.

A number of the articles in Haber have real fun with “The Matrix” and its presumed core audience of teen-age boys. The film seems to promise not only the end of the necessity to study (just download that knowledge!) but also a supply of beautiful girls who dress really well but don’t seem to expect anything from males. But there are also a number of articles that tie the film into previous utopian or dystopian views of computers and computing. It is clear that the film is truly an artifact of the Internet, and has not only been influenced by it, but in turn influences it.

If you wish to understand the impact of “The Matrix” and its current sequel (rent the first before seeing the second, if you have not already seen it), and the third, planned for release in December of 2003, then you would do well to read Exploring the Matrix.