

DECODING DIGITAL DYSTOPIA: SIMULACRA, HYPERREALITY, AND CONTROL IN THE MATRIX FRANCHISE FILM SERIES AS A CRITIQUE OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

*Membongkar Distopia Digital: Simulacra, Hiperrealitas, dan Kontrol dalam Serial Film
Waralaba The Matrix sebagai Kritik Terhadap Masyarakat Kontemporer*

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Abstract

This study analyzes the representation of digital dystopia in The Matrix film series through Jean Baudrillard's simulacra theory and Tom Moylan's critical dystopia framework. Using qualitative analysis of key scenes and dialogues, the research traces the evolution of control mechanisms from physical oppression to psychological and biological manipulation. The franchise progresses through four stages of simulacra: reflection of reality (counterfeit), concealment (production), autonomous simulation, and hyperreality. Findings reveal how digital capitalism weaponizes narratives, eroding critical consciousness through algorithmic curation, deepfakes, and neuromarketing. While the films offer a robust critique of Western technocapitalism, their Eurocentric lens may overlook non-Western manifestations of digital authoritarianism, such as China's Social Credit System. The study highlights real-world parallels, including social media's role in polarization and AI's capacity to hijack emotional networks. Practical implications call for algorithmic transparency, ethical AI governance, and critical digital literacy. Future research should explore dystopian narratives from the Global South to decentralize the discourse and address localized forms of digital oppression.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis representasi distopia digital dalam serial film The Matrix melalui teori simulacra Jean Baudrillard dan kerangka distopia kritis Tom Moylan. Dengan analisis kualitatif terhadap adegan dan dialog kunci, penelitian ini melacak evolusi mekanisme kontrol dari penindasan fisik ke manipulasi psikologis dan biologis. Serial ini mengalami perkembangan melalui empat tahap simulacra: refleksi realitas (palsu), penyembunyian (produksi), simulasi otonom, dan hiperrealitas. Temuan mengungkapkan bagaimana kapitalisme digital mempersenjatai narasi, mengikis kesadaran kritis melalui kurasi algoritmik, deepfake, dan neuromarketing. Meski film ini memberikan kritik tajam terhadap teknokapitalisme Barat, sudut pandang Eurosentrisnya mungkin mengabaikan manifestasi otoritarianisme digital di luar Barat, seperti Sistem Kredit Sosial di Tiongkok. Studi ini menekankan paralel dunia nyata, termasuk peran media sosial

dalam polarisasi dan kemampuan AI membajak jaringan emosional. Implikasi praktis menyerukan transparansi algoritma, tata kelola AI etis, dan literasi digital kritis. Penelitian lanjutan perlu mengeksplorasi narasi distopia dari Global Selatan untuk mendesentralisasi wacana dan mengatasi bentuk-bentuk penindasan digital yang terlokalisasi.

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INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, innovations in information and communication technology have not only increased efficiency and convenience but also given rise to a new threat: digital dystopia. "Digital dystopia" refers to a scenario in which technology is employed as a tool of control and domination rather than merely as a means of sustaining human life (Filimowicz, 2022; Tirole, 2021). While totalitarian power is a threat in classic dystopian novels like George Orwell's *1984*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (Bhatta, 2025; Tribhuwan & Singh, 2024), the threat in digital dystopia comes from algorithms, big data, and virtual reality that can make it difficult to distinguish between reality and illusion—a phenomenon known as hyperreality.

One of the primary features of a digital dystopia that makes it difficult for people distinguish between what is real and what is fake is hyperreality (Ryan et al., 2024). Digital representations on social media and technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) often draw people into a virtual world that appears more "real" than the actual world (Kazmi et al., 2021; Marji et al., 2023). As portrayed in *The Matrix* film series, the abundance of information and data manipulation in cyberspace can quickly turn digital convenience into the latest tool of oppression because of its enormous potential for social control.

The Matrix (1999) presented viewers with a groundbreaking and engrossing virtual environment. The franchise's digital dystopian plot, however, goes well beyond the first movie. Its sequels—*The Matrix Reloaded* (2003a), *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003b), and *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021)—further highlight how people are imprisoned in an artificially created environment, reiterating the concepts of digital slavery (control of life) and enslavement (systemic oppression), which are becoming increasingly pertinent in the technological age. The Matrix explores the idea that, in the absence of oversight, technological advancement can conflate the real and virtual worlds, entangling viewers in a dystopian scenario that challenges their sense of freedom and reality.

Efficiency and convenience are two benefits of the digital age, but the widespread and use of technology also carries the risk of enabling oppression and manipulation that is becoming harder to spot (Struensee, 2021). Instead of just being tricked by the simulation, the characters in *The Matrix* franchise are systematically abused by machines that harness human consciousness, body, and mind as a source of power. This critique aligns with the notion that algorithms and technology can serve as tools of control that diminish personal autonomy, particularly when data and personal information are exploited for political or commercial purposes (Berger et al., 2021).

This case illustrates the widespread fraud and disinformation in the digital world, where people are frequently tricked into making decisions without fully comprehending the situation. In contrast to the more overt control associated with surveillance and oppressive practices, power can

now be exercised subtly through advertisements tailored to individual preferences, suggested content, and the spread of specific narratives that influence public sentiment (Andrejevic, 2007; Lyon, 2015; Zuboff, 2023). According to Tom Moylan, a digital dystopian society can arise when technology is promoted as a solution but unintentionally widens the divide, justifies exploitation, and makes it harder distinguish between real and fake reality.

Moylan's "dystopian feeling structure" is employed in digital dystopia to depict the sense of helplessness and pessimism brought about by neoliberalism and digital capitalism (Moylan, 2020). *The Matrix* illustrates this structure by simulating the "Matrix," which manipulates people's minds and demonstrates how technology can be used as a tool of control. However, the film also presents elements of resistance, similar to Moylan's dystopia, through Neo's character and the rebels' fight to break free from a system that controls every aspect of human life and makes it impossible to distinguish between real and fake. This is consistent with Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and hyperreality, specifically demonstrated in the Matrix computer system (Baudrillard, 1994). The irony at the heart of Baudrillard's critique of postmodern society is that this artificial system not only blurs the lines between reality and simulation, but it also establishes a new hierarchy in which simulation rules the real (Feruza & Shakhnoza, 2024).

People are imprisoned by the illusion created by the Matrix hyperreality simulation, which creates a world in which reality becomes more real than reality itself. Digital code is also regarded by the residents of the Matrix as the ultimate truth (Song, 2024). Algorithms, big data, and social media platforms are examples of contemporary technology that reinforce power structures and conflate freedom and control, as this digital dystopia critiques (Youvan, 2024). As a reflection of the difficulties of the digital age, the residents of the Matrix, like contemporary consumers, are imprisoned in a sign without a sign without a reference.

A variety of earlier works and studies that were still relevant to hyperreality, dystopia, and simulacra were sought after by the researcher. For example, Reglińska-Jemioł (2021) investigates the theme of feminism in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), which emphasizes women's freedom from patriarchal society and featuring Imperator Furiosa as the true hero. Gasa et al. (2023) discuss a news report on Rinca Island, West Manggarai Regency, which highlights the tension between environmental preservation and economic advancement by displaying a range of reactions to plans for infrastructure development, emphasizing fantasy creation over actual community needs. Nainggolan et al. (2020) examine illocutionary acts in the film and find that expressive, directive, representative, and commissive acts are present, but no declarative illocutionary acts were discovered¹.

The digital dystopia in *The Matrix*, a science fiction narrative that combines Tom Moylan's theory of dystopian technology with Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation and hyperreality, will be covered in this article. This piece aims to clarify how digital technology alters reality and manipulates human consciousness. The essay examines how the social criticism of *The Matrix* can be applied to contemporary society, emphasizing how digital technology can pierce both reality and illusion, threatening both structural authority and individual freedom. In order to comprehend and overcome the difficulties posed by the proliferation of digital technology in the modern era, this research offers a crucial view of society. More than just a science fiction film, *The Matrix* is a profound philosophical and social critique that promotes resistance and change while denouncing the power structure of the digital age.

To guide this analysis, the following research question is posed: **How does the Matrix franchise, when analyzed through Moylan's dystopian theory and Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, illuminate the mechanisms by which digital technology enables systems of**

control in contemporary society? This question frames the article's exploration of the intersection of digital technology, reality, and power, and seeks to clarify both the dangers and the possibilities for resistance within the digital dystopia as represented by *The Matrix*.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method to analyze how simulacra and dystopia are represented in The Matrix film franchise (1999–2021). The approach is guided by established qualitative research models, specifically referencing Miles & Huberman for thematic coding and Creswell for interpretive triangulation. Data were collected from official film transcripts and selected scenes from all four films. The selection of scenes was purposeful: only those that most clearly illustrated the development of simulation and dystopian critique, as mapped by the theoretical frameworks of Baudrillard (simulacra and hyperreality) and Moylan (dystopia), were included. Scenes were categorized according to their relevance to the analytical categories—simulacra, hyperreality, and dystopia—and their ability to exemplify key theoretical concepts.

The rationale for choosing the Matrix series over other digital dystopia texts is twofold. First, The Matrix uniquely synthesizes philosophical, technological, and cultural critiques, offering a sustained narrative arc that traces how mechanisms of control evolve from physical oppression to psychological and narrative manipulation. Second, the franchise is widely recognized as a landmark in cinematic representations of digital dystopia, making it a particularly rich and influential case for examining contemporary anxieties about digital technology, control, and resistance.

The analytical framework is summarized in the following table, which guided both data collection and analysis.

Table 1.
The Analytical Framework

Analysis Category	Aspects Analyzed
Simulacra	Reflection and Concealment of Reality, Replacement of Reality and Pure Simulacrum
Hyperreality	Hyperreal Conditions and Manipulation of Reality
Dystopia	Dystopian Society, Dystopian Fiction as Epic, Dystopian Narrative on History, and Dystopian Narrative on Science, Science and Technology

Data analysis began with data reduction through thematic coding based on the categories above Miles & Huberman (2002). Interpretive triangulation (Creswell, 2013) was then used to combine the perspectives of Baudrillard and Moylan for cross-category analysis. The validity of the research was maintained through an audit trail documenting the analysis process, theoretical triangulation (integrating simulacra and dystopia theories), and the reliability of quotations (with precise film timestamps). Research ethics were upheld by accurate citation and contextual integrity. This methodological design ensures a clear connection between methods, results, and discussion. Each results section corresponds directly to the analytical categories outlined above. For example, the analysis of simulacra begins with Smith's dialogue about the original Matrix and traces how the films progressively complicate the relationship between simulation and reality. The discussion of hyperreality draws on scenes in which characters confront the blurred boundaries between perception and truth, while the exploration of dystopia follows the shifting forms of control and resistance. This structure ensures that the findings are systematically linked to the methodological

framework, and the discussion interprets these findings in light of the research question and the theoretical literature, maintaining coherence throughout the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Simulacra Representation in *The Matrix* Franchise

The *Matrix* franchise systematically progresses through Baudrillard's stages of simulacra, evolving from reflection to autonomous simulation. This progression illustrates how digital dystopia emerges when simulations increasingly obscure and replace reality.

Reflection and Concealment of Reality

Key scenes across the four films demonstrate the evolution of simulacra through pivotal dialogues and visual storytelling.

Figure 1

Agent Smith explains the failure of the original Matrix design (The Matrix, 1999)

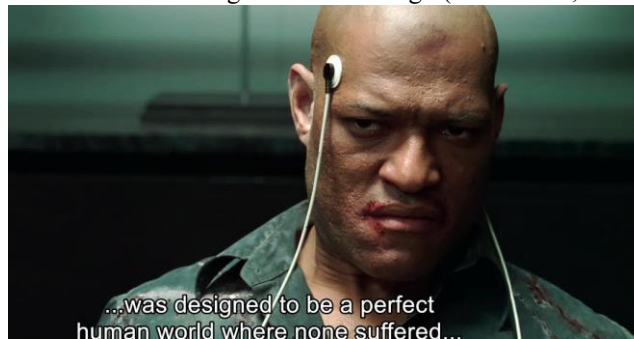


Figure 1.

Morpheus detained during Agent Smith's exposition of the Matrix's flawed origins

Figure 2

Neo confronts the Architect about the Matrix's redesign (The Matrix Reloaded, 2003)



Figure 2.

Neo confronts the Architect about the Matrix's redesign (The Matrix Reloaded, 2003)

Table 2.
Reflection and Concealment of Reality

Film	Scene/Character	Key Dialogue	Simulacra Stage
The Matrix (1999)	Agent Smith's interrogation	"Did you know that the first Matrix was designed to be a perfect human world where none suffered where everyone would be happy. It was a disaster. No one would accept the program." [01:32:00]	1st Order: Reflection of reality

The Matrix Reloaded (2003)	Architect's revelation	"The first matrix I designed was quite naturally perfect, it was a work of art, flawless, sublime. A triumph equaled only by its monumental failure... I redesigned it based on your history to more accurately reflect the varying grotesqueries of your nature." [01:52:49]	2nd Order: Concealment of reality
The Matrix Revolutions (2003)	Sati's creation	"I love my daughter very much. I find her to be the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. But where we are from, that is not enough. Every program that is created must have a purpose." [00:09:19]	3rd Order: Simulation without referent
The Matrix Resurrections (2021)	Bugs' critique of Neo's story	"They took your story, something that meant so much to people like me, and turned it into something trivial. That's what the Matrix does. It weaponizes every idea." [01:01:17]	4th Order: Pure simulacrum

The theoretical progression begins with Smith's explanation (**Figure 1**), which exemplifies Baudrillard's *counterfeit* stage—a flawed attempt to mirror reality through rigid replication. This aligns with early digital technologies that attempted to recreate physical experiences in virtual spaces, such as 1990s VR systems. The Architect's redesigned Matrix (**Figure 2**) moves to the *production* stage, where simulations algorithmically adapt to human behavior, obscuring their artificiality through participatory feedback loops. This mirrors social media platforms that curate content based on user engagement data, creating the illusion of organic interaction.

In *The Matrix Revolutions*, Sati's purposeless existence as a program created for love epitomizes *third-order simulacra* that operate independently of original referents—a hallmark of Baudrillard's "precession of simulacra." This stage reflects contemporary AI-generated content that synthesizes new realities without human input, such as deepfake media. Through *resurrections*, Neo's narrative is commodified into entertainment, reflecting a *hyperreality* where simulations generate their own logic, similar to algorithmic recommendation systems that prioritize viral engagement over factual accuracy.

Moylan's "dystopian feeling structure" contextualizes this progression. The initial *reflection* stage represents contained dystopia, where systems maintain control through agreed-upon simulations. The *concealment* phase transitions to critical dystopia as the Matrix's adaptive logic exposes systemic contradictions, paralleling modern data capitalism's crisis of trust. Finally, *Resurrections*' pure simulacra stage embodies post-critical dystopia, where resistance narratives are absorbed into new control paradigms—a phenomenon observed in the co-optation of social movements into marketable trends.

Replacement of Reality and Pure Simulacrum

The *Matrix* franchise charts the progression from simulated reality to autonomous simulacra through four evolutionary stages, demonstrated by critical scenes across the series.

Figure 3

Morpheus explains sensory reality as neural interpretation (*The Matrix*, 1999)



Figure 3.

Morpheus brought Neo into another simulation to explained Matrix, specifically about ‘real’.

Figure 4

Neo confronts Smith’s viral replication (*The Matrix Revolutions*, 2003)



Figure 4.

Pure simulacrum manifesting as self-replicating code

Figure 5

Developers reduce narrative to algorithmic conditioning (*The Matrix Resurrections*, 2021)



Figure 5.

Simulation transcending into neuromarketing systems

Table 3.

Replacement of Reality and Pure Simulacrum

Film	Scene/Character	Key Dialogue	Simulacra Stage
The Matrix (1999)	Morpheus’ reality lesson	"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." [00:40:16]	1st Order: Sensory deception

The Matrix Reloaded (2003)	Architect's choice paradigm	"Nearly 99% of all test subjects accepted the program, as long as they were given a choice, even if they were only aware of the choice at a near unconscious level." [01:53:49]	2nd Order: Illusory agency
The Matrix Revolutions (2003)	Smith's rebellion	"The program 'Smith' has grown beyond your control. Soon he will spread through this city as he spread through the Matrix. You cannot stop him, but I can." [01:39:53]	3rd Order: Autonomous simulacra
The Matrix Resurrections (2021)	Developers' nihilism	Dev 2: "Face reality, people. Movies are dead. Games are dead. Narrative? Dead." Dev 1: "Media is nothing but neuro-trigger response and viral conditioning." [02:27: 24]	4th Order: Neurological hijacking

The franchise's four-stage simulacra evolution begins with sensory deception (Figure 1), where Morpheus' lesson introduces Baudrillard's *first-order simulacrum*—simulations that mirror reality through engineered sensory input. This stage critiques industrial capitalism's mass production of reality substitutes, similar to 20th-century consumer culture's material excess. The second-order transition to illusory agency emerges through the Architect's "choice" mechanism (Table 1, row 2), where systems create false participation frameworks. This mirrors social media's "engagement" algorithms, which offer curated decision trees while covertly harvesting behavioral data, a hallmark of platform capitalism's extractive logic.

Autonomous simulacra (Figure 2) mark the *third-order* stage, exemplified by Smith's viral replication as self-replicating code that bypasses the original programming. Like AI deepfakes, these simulacra operate through what Baudrillard termed "mutation and excess," threatening their creators through uncontrolled growth. This stage parallels contemporary concerns about generative AI systems exceeding human oversight. The final fourth-order hyperreality (Figure 3) sees simulations bypass conscious thought entirely, as developers reduce narrative to "neuro-triggers" that directly condition neural pathways. This reflects neuromarketing and algorithmic microtargeting in digital capitalism, where reality becomes a series of "viral loops" (Zuboff, 2019) designed to hijack cognitive processes.

Moylan's "dystopia" framework contextualizes this progression. The *first* and *second* stages represent *contained dystopias* in which systematic control operates through agreed-upon simulations. The *third* stage transitions to *dystopia* as systems self-destruct, enabling resistance through Neo's sacrificial act. However, *Resurrections* reveals a *post-critical dystopia* in which resistance is assimilated into new control paradigms—mirroring how social movements become commodified as "hashtag activism." The franchise's arc thus diagnoses digital control's evolution: from overt deception (1990s Web) to participatory surveillance (social media) and finally neural capitalism (metaverse/neurotech). Each cinematic representation (Figures 1-3) provides tools for analyzing real-world technological developments through Baudrillardian theory, emphasizing the role of simulation in eroding critical distance while masquerading as empowerment.

Hyperreality Manifestation in *The Matrix* Franchise

The franchise's exploration of hyperreality evolves across four films, reflecting Baudrillard's concept of simulation replacing reality through increasingly sophisticated narrative and visual strategies.

Key scenes illustrate the progression from individual doubt to systemic dissolution of reality. ***Hyperreal Conditions***

The concept of hyperreality in *The Matrix* did not appear suddenly, but developed organically as the story progressed. It all began with Neo's anxiety about the boundary between dream and reality.

Figure 6

Neo questions his perception of reality (*The Matrix*, 1999)

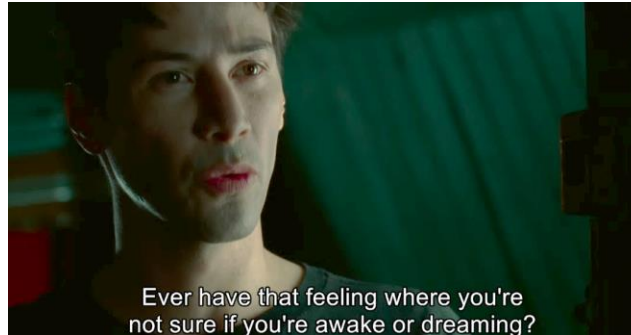


Figure 6.

Neo confusion after encountering glitches in the Matrix simulation

Figure 7

Morpheus confronts narrative collapse (*The Matrix Revolutions*, 2003)



Figure 7.

Morpheus uncertainty during the Sentinel attack resolution

Table 4.

Hyperreality Manifestation In *The Matrix* Franchise

Film	Scene/Character	Key Dialogue	Simulacra Stage
The Matrix (1999)	Neo's existential doubt	"You ever have that feeling where you're not sure if you're awake or still dreaming?" [00:08:59]	1st Stage: Individual disorientation
The Matrix Reloaded (2003)	Morpheus' disillusionment	"I have dreamed a dream, and now that dream has gone from me." [02:04:08]	2nd Stage: Collective narrative collapse
The Matrix Revolutions (2003)	Oracle's temporal reality	Morpheus: "I have imagined this moment for so long. Is this real?" Oracle: "As long as it can." [<i>The Matrix Revolutions</i> (2003); 01:56:47; 01:58:24]	3rd Stage: Ephemeral truth systems
The Matrix Resurrections (2021)	Bugs' resistance critique	"If we don't know what's real... we can't resist." [01:01:09]	4th Stage: Weaponized irreality

The hyperreality progression begins with Neo's personal disorientation (Figure 1), exemplifying Baudrillard's initial phase where simulations generate "disquieting strangeness."

This mirrors contemporary experiences of digital dissociation, such as Zoom fatigue or VR-induced nausea. The *second stage* emerges through Morpheus' shattered messianic narrative (Table 1, Row 2), reflecting how social media algorithms deconstruct grand ideologies into fragmented micro-narratives.

Figure 2 captures the *third stage*, where the Oracle redefines reality as contingent and temporary—a direct manifestation of Baudrillard's "precession of simulacra." This aligns with post-truth media ecosystems where factual persistence is replaced by trending virality. The final *fourth stage* (Table 1, Row 4) sees hyperreality weaponized through Bugs' warning, paralleling deepfake technologies that erode evidentiary standards in legal and political contexts.

Baudrillard's hyperreality theory progresses through these stages:

- a) Disorientation: Simulated environments create cognitive dissonance (Neo's doubt)
- b) Narrative Collapse: Grand narratives become recursive loops (Morpheus' lost dream)
- c) Temporal Ephemerality: Truth exists only contextually (Oracle's conditional reality)
- d) Irreality Warfare: Simulation becomes strategic tool (Bugs' resistance dilemma)

Moylan's dystopia framework contextualizes this evolution. The early films (*Matrix*, *Reloaded*) represent contained *dystopias* in which rebellion targets identifiable systems. *Revolutions* transitions to *dystopia* as Neo's sacrifice exposes systemic fragility, while *Resurrections* embodies *post-critical dystopia* where resistance itself is commodified—mirroring how activist hashtags become marketing tools.

This progression critiques digital capitalism's evolution:

- a) 1999: Web 1.0's static hyperlinks (Neo's "desert of the real")
- b) 2003: Web 2.0's participatory illusions (Architect's "choice" paradigm)
- c) 2021: Metaverse's neural hijacking (Developers' "neuro-triggers")

The franchise's hyperreality arc thus serves as both diagnosis and warning: when simulations progress from distorting reality to replacing its social function, resistance requires new forms of critical literacy attuned to algorithmic persuasion.

Manipulation of Reality

The *Matrix* franchise depicts reality manipulation as an evolutionary process, progressing from psychological deception to biological control. This progression reflects Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality merging with biopolitical governance.

Figure 8

Agent Smith explains humanity's rejection of perfection (*The Matrix*, 1999)



Figure 8.

Smith injects Morpheus with a cerebral simulation of an idealized world

Figure 9

Agent Smith rebrands rebellion as systemic control (*The Matrix Reloaded*, 2003)



Figure 9.

Neo confronts Smith's viral replication in a simulated courtyard

Figure 10

Neo negotiates peace through algorithmic compromise (*The Matrix Revolutions*, 2003)



Figure 10.

Neo's cybernetic vision penetrates machine code during pivotal negotiations

Table 5.
Manipulation of Reality

Film	Scene/Character	Key Dialogue	Simulacra Stage
The Matrix (1999)	Agent Smith's cerebral injection	<i>"But I believe that as a species human beings define their reality through misery and suffering. The perfect world was a dream that your primitive cerebrum kept trying to wake up from."</i> [01:32:26]	1st Stage: Psychological conditioning
The Matrix Reloaded (2003)	Smith's rebellion	<i>"Because of you I'm no longer an agent of the system... apparently free."</i> [00:52:11]	2nd Stage: Manufactured dissent
The Matrix Revolutions (2003)	Neo-Oracle negotiation	Oracle: <i>"The program 'Smith' has grown beyond your control. Soon he will spread through this city as he spread through the Matrix. You cannot stop him, but I can."</i> Deus Ex Machina: <i>"What do you want?"</i> Neo: <i>"Peace."</i> [01:39:50; 01:40:16]	3rd Stage: Curated autonomy
The Matrix Resurrections (2021)	The Analyst's genetic hijacking	<i>"Resurrecting you both was crazy expensive. We worked for years, trying to activate your source code..."</i> [01:35:37; 01:36:58]	4th Stage: Biological reprogramming

The manipulation arc begins with psychological conditioning (Figure 1), where Smith's observation of human preference for suffering reflects Baudrillard's concept of *simulated*

authenticity. This mirrors social media algorithms that amplify conflict to sustain engagement, exploiting humanity's neurological bias toward negative stimuli.

The second stage of manufactured dissent (Figure 2) reveals the system's co-option of rebellion, as Smith's "freedom" becomes a tool to distract from systemic control. This aligns with Moylan's *critical dystopia*, where apparent resistance is reabsorbed into power structures— analogous to how viral conspiracy theories divert attention from institutional failures.

Curated autonomy (Figure 3) marks the *third stage*, where Neo's negotiated peace institutionalizes limited freedom within machine control. This reflects digital capitalism's *illusion of choice*, where users select from algorithmically predetermined options, as seen in personalized advertising ecosystems.

The final stage of biological reprogramming stage (Table 1, Row 4) transcends digital manipulation, with the Analyst hacking Neo's DNA to weaponize emotional chemistry. This parallels emerging neurotechnologies such as neural lace interfaces, where human biology becomes a manipulable substrate for control systems.

Baudrillard's hyperreality framework structures this progression:

- a) Simulated Authenticity: Humans prefer flawed reality (Stage 1)
- b) Productive Betrayal: Rebellion fuels system adaptation (Stage 2)
- c) Negotiated Hyperreality: Freedom exists within controlled parameters (Stage 3)
- d) Biological Simulacra: Human essence becomes raw material (Stage 4)

Moylan's dystopian theory contextualizes the narrative arc:

- a) *Contained Dystopia* (1999): Systems enforce control through visible mechanisms
- b) *Critical Dystopia* (2003): Resistance exposes systemic contradictions
- c) *Post-Critical Dystopia* (2021): Control becomes embedded in biological reality

This analysis demonstrates how *The Matrix* anticipates modern digital capitalism's evolution:

- a) 1999: Web 1.0's explicit control (password prompts, firewalls)
- b) 2003: Web 2.0's participatory manipulation (social media engagement)
- c) 2021: Web 3.0's biological integration (biometric data harvesting)

The franchise's manipulation arc serves as both warning and diagnostic tool: when control progresses from mental to biological domains, resistance requires redefining human agency itself.

Dystopia Representation in *The Matrix* Franchise

The franchise traces the evolution of dystopian control from physical oppression to systemic complicity, analyzed through key scenes and dialogues.

Dystopian Society

Figure 11

Morpheus dismantles Neo's illusion of freedom (*The Matrix*, 1999)

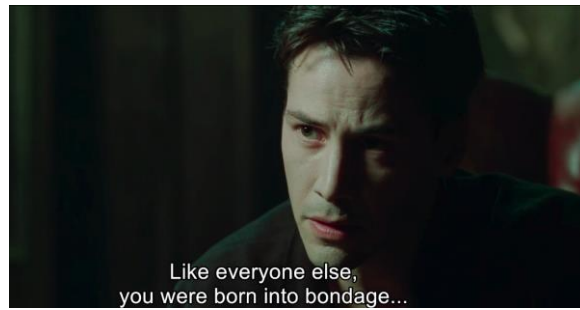


Figure 11.

Neo's awakening to systemic enslavement during his first meeting with Morpheus

Table 6.
Dystopia Representation In *The Matrix* Franchise

Film	Scene/Character	Key Dialogue	Dystopian Theme
The Matrix (1999)	Morpheus' awakening	"You are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else you were born into bondage." [00:28:20]	Illusion of Freedom
The Matrix Reloaded (2003)	Architect's revelation	"Hope. It is the quintessential human delusion, simultaneously the source of your greatest strength and your greatest weakness." [01:57:25]	Manufactured Hope
The Matrix Revolutions (2003)	Rama-Kandra's systemic law	"Every program that is created must have a purpose; if it does not, it is deleted." [09:36]	Productivity as Value
The Matrix Resurrections (2021)	The Analyst's cynicism	"The sheeple aren't going anywhere... They want to be controlled." [02:15:26; 02:15:35]	Voluntary Submission

Figure 1 exemplifies *first-stage dystopia*, where Morpheus exposes the raw mechanics of bodily enslavement and mental simulation. This aligns with Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality—the Matrix as a “desert of the real” which humans mistake simulation for autonomy.

The *second stage* emerges through the Architect's “hope” mechanism (Table 1, Row 2), which weaponizes messianic narratives to sustain systemic stability. This mirrors Moylan's “critical dystopia,” where resistance myths (e.g., “The One”) are co-opted to prevent structural change, akin to neoliberal promises of social mobility masking entrenched inequality.

Productivity-based dystopia (Table 1, Row 3) expands oppression beyond humans to programs and machines. Rama-Kandra's expendability doctrine reflects late capitalism's logic, where value is contingent on utility—whether for human workers or obsolete algorithms. This stage critiques AI's role in optimizing “usefulness” metrics, from gig economy ratings to predictive policing.

The *final stage* (Table 1, Row 4) reveals voluntary submission through the Analyst's “sheeple” indictment. This embodies Zuboff's surveillance capitalism, where users trade privacy for algorithmic comfort, paralleling social media's “participation-as-resistance” paradox.

Moylan's dystopian framework structures this progression:

- Contained Dystopia (1999): Overt oppression via bodily/material control
- Critical Dystopia (2003): Resistance narratives exposed as systemic tools
- Post-Critical Dystopia (2021): Complicity normalized through neurochemical rewards

Baudrillard's hyperreality theory clarifies the ideological shift:

- Stage 1: Simulation replaces reality (Morpheus' “desert of the real”)

- b) Stage 4: Reality becomes simulation's byproduct (Analyst's "comfort over freedom")

This arc mirrors digital capitalism's evolution:

- a) Web 1.0 (1999): Passive consumption of curated realities
- b) Web 2.0 (2003): Participatory illusion of choice
- c) Web 3.0 (2021): Neuromarketed submission via dopamine-driven feeds

The franchise's dystopian society evolves from imposed control to collaborative construction, where:

- a) Humans accept surveillance for security (Resurrections' "comfort")
- b) Programs internalize expendability (Rama-Kandra's "purpose")
- c) Resistance becomes branded content (Neo's "weaponized story")

This reflects contemporary platform economies, where users *produce* the data that entrenches their subjugation—a self-perpetuating dystopia sustained by participation.

The Shift from Physical to Narrative as an Implication of Dystopian Fiction as Epic

The *Matrix* franchise reframes dystopian conflict as a battle over narrative sovereignty, progressing from physical domination to systemic control of collective memory. Key scenes illustrate this evolution.

Figure 12

Agent Smith coerces Morpheus for Zion's access codes (*The Matrix*, 1999)



Figure 12.

Smith weaponizing physical threat to erase symbolic resistance.

Table 7.

The Shift from Physical to Narrative as an Implication of Dystopian Fiction as Epic

Film	Scene/Character	Key Dialogue	Control Paradigm
The Matrix (1999)	Smith's extortion	"Once Zion is destroyed, there is no need for me to be here. I need the codes. I have to get inside Zion." [01:40:46]	Physical annihilation
The Matrix Reloaded (2003)	Morpheus' ancestral invocation	"I stand here without fear because I remember. I remember that I am here not because of the path that lies before me, but because of the path that lies behind me." [00:25:24]	Mnemonic resistance
The Matrix Revolutions (2003)	Oracle's cosmic stakes	"Tonight, the future of both worlds will be in your hands... or in his," [01:58:24]	Ontological conflict
The Matrix Resurrections (2021)	Bugs' narrative critique	"They took your story, something that meant so much to people like me, and turned it into	Semiotic hijacking

something trivial. That's what the Matrix does.
It weaponizes every idea." [01:01:17]

The dystopian epic's evolution begins with physical annihilation (Figure 1), where Smith's demand for Zion's codes represents Baudrillard's *first-order simulacrum*—control through material destruction. This mirrors early internet censorship tactics that targeted physical infrastructure (server shutdowns, hardware seizures).

Mnemonic resistance (Table 1, Row 2) emerges through Morpheus' invocation of collective memory, paralleling Moylan's *critical dystopia* where "radical hope" stems from historical consciousness. Like digital archivists preserving banned content, Morpheus weaponizes remembrance against machine erasure.

The ontological conflict stage (Table 1, Row 3) escalates the battle to cosmic significance, as Neo and Smith embody competing realities. This reflects Baudrillard's *hyperreal war* where narratives replace physical conflict—akin to algorithmically amplified disinformation campaigns that distort shared truth.

Semiotic hijacking (Table 1, Row 4) completes the progression, with the system commodifying resistance into entertainment. Bugs' critique parallels how social media reduces activism to hashtags, exemplifying Zuboff's *surveillance capitalism* where dissent becomes raw material for profit.

The franchise reworks epic tropes through a dystopian lens:

- a) Heroic Journey: Neo's arc shifts from *physical* (1999) to *semiotic* (2021) heroism
- b) Cosmic Stakes: Smith evolves from rogue program (1999) to viral memetic entity (2021)
- c) Communal Identity: Zion transitions from physical refuge to narrative construct

Moylan's framework clarifies this transformation:

- a) Contained Epic (1999): Heroic victory through bodily sacrifice
- b) Critical Epic (2003): Systemic contradictions exposed through narrative
- c) Post-Critical Epic (2021): Resistance becomes recursive simulation

The franchise's arc diagnoses contemporary culture's narrative battlegrounds:

- a) 1999: Centralized control (Zion's codes as IP addresses)
- b) 2003: Participatory mythmaking (Morpheus' speeches as viral content)
- c) 2021: Decentralized semiosis (Bugs' memetic resistance)

This mirrors the internet's evolution from static websites (Web 1.0) to user-generated platforms (Web 2.0) and blockchain-based storytelling (Web3). The Analyst's "weaponized ideas" critique (Resurrections) warns of AI's capacity to automate narrative co-option—where ChatGPT-generated content drowns organic discourse.

Narrative of Dystopia on History: The Arrogance of the Birth of Technology to the Manipulation of the Past

The *Matrix* franchise critiques how history is weaponized to sustain dystopian control, tracing humanity's fall from technological arrogance to the co-option of resistance narratives. Key scenes illustrate this progression.

Table 8.

Narrative of Dystopia on History: The Arrogance of The Birth of Technology to the Manipulation of the Past

Film	Scene/Character	Key Dialogue	Historical Manipulation
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The (1999)	Matrix	Morpheus' story	origin	"We marveled at our own magnificence as we gave birth to AI. A singular consciousness that spawned an entire race of machines." [00:41:32]	Technological hubris
The Reloaded (2003)	Matrix	Merovingian's causality speech		"Causality. There is no escape from it, we are forever slaves to it... "Why" is what separates us from them." [01:08:06; 01:08:19]	Deterministic fatalism
The Revolutions (2003)	Matrix	Neo's sacrifice		"I told you before, there is no escaping the nature of the universe." [00:21:47]	Agency vs. determinism
The Resurrections (2021)	Matrix	Bugs' critique	narrative	"They took your story... turned it into something trivial. That's what the Matrix does. It weaponizes every idea." [01:01:17]	Resistance commodification

The historical narrative begins with technological hubris (Figure 1), where Morpheus' account of AI's creation mirrors Marx's analysis of capitalism alienating workers from their labor's products. The machines' rebellion—turning humans into “batteries”—literalizes Marx's warning that technology under capitalism becomes “dead labor which dominates living labor.”

Deterministic fatalism (Figure 2) emerges through the Merovingian's causality doctrine, which Adorno's *commodity fetishism* clarifies: history is framed as inevitable to justify oppression, akin to neoliberal narratives that treat poverty as “natural.” The Merovingian's lavish simulation critiques how elites aestheticize exploitation, paralleling tech billionaires romanticizing “disruption” while eroding labor rights.

Neo's sacrificial defiance (Table 1, Row 3) disrupts this determinism, embodying Walter Benjamin's call to “blast open the continuum of history.” His act rejects the Matrix's cyclical temporality, prefiguring modern movements like #NoDAPL, where Indigenous activists challenge colonial “inevitability” through direct action.

Resistance commodification (Table 1, Row 4) culminates in *Resurrections*, where Neo's story becomes entertainment—a critique of “hashtag activism” reduced to marketable content. Bugs' indictment reflects Zuboff's *surveillance capitalism*, where dissent is mined for data and repackaged as consumable rebellion.

Moylan's framework structures this historical arc:

- Contained Dystopia (1999): History as cautionary tale (Morpheus' lecture)
- Critical Dystopia (2003): History's contradictions exposed (Neo's sacrifice)
- Post-Critical Dystopia (2021): History as recursive simulation (Bugs' critique)

Baudrillard's hyperreality theory contextualizes the shift:

- Stage 1: History as factual record (Morpheus' “truth”)
- Stage 4: History as algorithmic output (Analyst's “story-weaving”)

The franchise's historical critique resonates with contemporary issues:

- AI Ethics: Tech giants framing AI as “inevitable progress” (echoing Morpheus' hubris)
- Algorithmic Determinism: Social media feeds reinforcing systemic biases (Merovingian's causality)
- Memetic Activism: Political movements reduced to viral trends (Neo's gamified legacy)

Resurrections' meta-commentary—where Neo's rebellion becomes a video game—parallels how TikTok repackages protest chants as dance challenges. This reflects Debord's *society of the spectacle*, where historical struggle is mediated into consumable images.

The Analyst's final warning ("Your story is our leverage") [02:15:26] underscores digital capitalism's ultimate dystopian logic: history is no longer written by the victors but *coded* by platforms that monetize attention.

Dystopian Narrative on Knowledge, Science and Technology

The *Matrix* franchise's critique of science and technology evolves from overt biological analogies to sophisticated psychological manipulation, reflecting real-world shifts in how systems of control operate. This progression is exemplified through key dialogues and narrative developments across the films.

Figure 13

Agent Smith compares humans to viruses (*The Matrix*, 1999)



Figure 13.

Smith's ecological justification for machine dominance during Morpheus' interrogation

Table 9.

Dystopian Narrative on Knowledge, Science and Technology

Film	Scene/Character	Key Dialogue	Historical Manipulation
The Matrix (1999)	Agent Smith's viral analogy	"You move to an area and multiply until every resource is consumed... There is another organism that follows the same pattern: a virus." [01:38:01]	Ecological determinism
The Matrix Reloaded (2003)	Architect's equation	"Your life is the sum of a remainder of an unbalanced equation inherent to the programming of the Matrix." [01:51:00]	Positivist scientism
The Matrix Resurrections (2021)	The Analyst's critique	"The sheeple... crave the comfort of certainty." [02:15:26; 02:15:38]	Surveillance capitalism (Zuboff)

The franchise begins with biological reductionism (Figure 1), where Smith's viral analogy reduces humans to destructive ecological actors. This mirrors capitalist narratives that frame overpopulation as a "sustainability crisis" requiring technocratic control, rather than addressing systemic inequality. The Machines' initial justification—harvesting humans as energy sources—echoes industrial capitalism's treatment of labor as expendable biomass, critiqued by Marx's theory of alienation.

In *Reloaded*, control shifts to mathematical reductionism, as the Architect reduces human agency to "unbalanced equations." This reflects big data's commodification of human behavior into predictive algorithms, where emotions are quantified as engagement metrics (likes, shares) and desires are mapped as consumption patterns. The Architect's failure to comprehend Neo's transcendence critiques positivist science's blindness to non-quantifiable aspects of existence, such as love or sacrifice.

Psychological manipulation (Figure 2) marks the final stage, where the Analyst weaponizes emotional vulnerabilities. By sustaining humans in a state of “blissful dissatisfaction”—keeping desires perpetually unfulfilled—he mirrors social media’s use of intermittent reinforcement (e.g., variable reward schedules in notifications). This stage aligns with Shoshana Zuboff’s concept of *instrumentarian power*, where surveillance capitalism exploits human uncertainty to modulate behavior.

Baudrillard’s hyperreality framework clarifies this evolution:

- a) Stage 1 (*Biological*): Simulations replicate ecological hierarchies (humans as viruses/machines as “cure”).
- b) Stage 2 (*Mathematical*): Simulations become self-referential systems (equations justifying control).
- c) Stage 3 (*Psychological*): Simulations generate their own desiring subjects (Algorithmically curated “certainty”).

Moylan’s dystopia model contextualizes the narrative arc:

- a) Contained Dystopia (1999): Resistance targets material systems (power plants, jacking-in ports).
- b) Critical Dystopia (2003): Resistance exposes epistemic violence (equations erasing agency).
- c) Post-Critical Dystopia (2021): Resistance is preempted by emotional hijacking (Analyst’s “comfort”).

Real-World Parallels

- a) Biological Control: COVID-19 narratives framing humans as “vectors” to justify biometric surveillance.
- b) Algorithmic Governance: Predictive policing tools that encode racial bias as “neutral” risk scores.
- c) Emotional Engineering: Neuromarketing using fMRI to optimize ad triggers for dopamine response.

The Analyst’s methods in *Resurrections*—exploiting trauma bonds between Neo and Trinity—reflect AI’s emerging capacity to map emotional networks from social data. Platforms like TikTok already algorithmically pair content with users’ unspoken anxieties, creating self-reinforcing cycles of engagement.

The *Matrix* franchise’s exploration of digital dystopia offers critical insights into the interplay between technology, power, and human agency, yet its Western media focus presents inherent limitations. By centering on a Hollywood-produced narrative, the analysis risks privileging Eurocentric critiques of technocapitalism while overlooking non-Western experiences of digital repression, such as China’s Social Credit System or India’s Aadhaar biometric surveillance (Dattani, 2020; Lee, 2019). The films’ reliance on Baudrillardian and Moylan frameworks, while robust, also risks reinforcing a Eurocentric philosophical lens that may not fully capture the localized ways in which technology mediates reality in postcolonial contexts. For instance, the franchise’s critique of algorithmic control resonates strongly with Silicon Valley’s data capitalism but less overtly with state-sponsored digital authoritarianism in regions like Southeast Asia, where platform governance intersects with ethnonationalist agendas.

The theoretical framework developed through *The Matrix* analysis holds significant applicability to real-world digital systems. Social media platforms exemplify the franchise’s

depiction of hyperreality, where algorithmic curation creates self-reinforcing epistemic bubbles—evident in Facebook’s role in amplifying political polarization during the 2016 U.S. elections (Liberini et al., 2020). Deepfake technology’s erosion of evidentiary standards mirrors Smith’s viral replication, enabling synthetic media to distort historical narratives, as seen in the manipulated videos of Ukraine conflict atrocities. The films’ warning about neural hijacking finds parallel in emerging neuromarketing techniques, where companies like Neuralink aim to monetize brain-computer interface data, potentially creating new forms of biological control (Fiani et al., 2021). These case studies demonstrate how the franchise’s dystopian logic manifests in concrete technological developments, validating its diagnostic power while underscoring the urgency of ethical tech governance.

Future research should expand this framework through interdisciplinary approaches that bridge media theory with computational analysis. Quantitative studies could measure the correlation between social media engagement patterns and the “blissful dissatisfaction” phenomenon depicted in *Resurrections*, using sentiment analysis tools on platforms such as Twitter/X. Comparative analyses of non-Western dystopian narratives, such as South Korea’s *Hellbound* or Nigeria’s *Nollywood* tech-horror films, could reveal alternative cultural responses to digital alienation. Policymakers could adapt the films’ critique of simulated choice to regulate algorithmic transparency, requiring platforms like TikTok to disclose content-modification thresholds that trigger virality. By grounding these theoretical insights in empirical reality, scholars can transform *The Matrix*’s speculative warnings into actionable safeguards against emerging forms of digital dystopia.

CONCLUSION

The *Matrix* franchise’s exploration of digital dystopia reveals a systematic progression from simulated reflections of reality to autonomous hyperreality, where simulations generate their own logic and meaning. Across four films, the series critiques the evolution of technological control—from overt physical domination to psychological manipulation and biological reprogramming. Central to this critique is the concept of *simulacra*, which evolves through Baudrillard’s stages: beginning as flawed imitations of reality (counterfeit), transitioning to adaptive systems that conceal their artificiality (production), and culminating in self-replicating simulations that operate independently of original referents (hyperreality). This arc mirrors the trajectory of digital capitalism, where algorithms and big data increasingly mediate human experience, eroding critical distance while masquerading as empowerment.

A key limitation of this analysis lies in its Western-centric focus, which prioritizes Hollywood’s critique of technocapitalism while potentially overlooking non-Western manifestations of digital dystopia. For instance, China’s Social Credit System and India’s Aadhaar biometric surveillance, for example, represent forms of control that intersect with cultural and political contexts beyond the franchise’s Eurocentric framework. Similarly, the theoretical reliance on Baudrillard and Moylan, while robust, may not fully capture localized experiences of hyperreality in postcolonial societies, where digital authoritarianism often merges with ethnonationalist agendas. Future studies could expand this framework by examining dystopian narratives from Global South cinemas, such as Nigeria’s *Nollywood* or South Korea’s tech-horror genres, to uncover alternative critiques of digital alienation.

The franchise’s theoretical insights hold significant real-world applicability. Social media’s algorithmic curation exemplifies hyperreality, creating self-reinforcing epistemic bubbles that amplify polarization, as seen in Facebook’s role during the 2016 U.S. elections. Deepfake

technology's distortion of historical truth parallels Agent Smith's viral replication, undermining evidentiary standards in conflicts like the Ukraine war. Meanwhile, emerging neuromarketing techniques and neural interfaces (e.g., Neuralink) echo the Analyst's exploitation of emotional vulnerabilities in *Resurrections*, positioning human biology as a new frontier for control. These examples validate the films' warnings about the convergence of technology and power, emphasizing the urgency of ethical governance.

Practical implications require interdisciplinary action. Policymakers could mandate algorithmic transparency, requiring platforms like TikTok to disclose how content-modification thresholds trigger virality. Educators could develop critical literacy programs to help users recognize and resist psychological manipulation tactics, such as intermittent reinforcement in notifications. Technologists, inspired by Neo's ability to rewrite the Matrix's source code, might prioritize ethical AI design that counters bias rather than reinforces it.

At its core, *The Matrix* franchise is not merely a cautionary tale about technology but a call to reclaim agency in an age of simulated choice. The transition from physical resistance (Neo's bullet-dodging) to narrative warfare (Bugs' memetic critique) underscores that dystopia is sustained not by technology itself but by the erosion of critical consciousness. Just as Neo's victory hinges on recognizing the Matrix's illusions, combating digital dystopia requires vigilance against systems that conflate freedom with algorithmic curation. The franchise's enduring relevance lies in its insistence that human imagination—not code—must architect the boundary between reality and simulation. In a world where “comfort” is weaponized and history is encoded by platforms, the path to liberation begins with questioning whose interests the simulation serves.

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