



# What is the Matrix?: Jean Baudrillard and Simulation in the Wachowski Brothers' Matrix Series

*B Conrad Williams*

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The symbiosis between Baudrillardian simulation and the Wachowski brothers' Matrix franchise appears not only logical but irrefutable. Yet Baudrillard, strangely, is “unimpressed” with The Matrix, stating in the New York Times (2002) that “the film’s ‘borrowings’ from his work ‘stemmed mostly from misunderstandings’ and that no movie could do justice to the themes of his work”. What is the Matrix? explains why Baudrillard is mistaken. Baudrillard fails to recognise the Matrix series as a legitimate representation of simulation. Nevertheless, Baudrillard’s position is untenable as his assessment of the films reflects only a rudimentary and populist reading of cybernetic technologies in general and the Matrix in particular. Rather, the Matrix franchise is a far more paradoxical representation of virtual reality and the material world than Baudrillard allows. What is the Matrix? analyses the blurred boundaries of the Matrix and, considering the concepts of history, memory and subjective experience, shows how the Matrix series actually supports Baudrillard’s (1994:19) claim an extant reality is beyond comprehension. What is the Matrix? also considers the quest by the narrative’s protagonist to overcome the disruptive effects of the Matrix; his search for a coherent self-identity based on the apparently stable meaning system of the material world. The Matrix series not only substantiates Baudrillard’s notion of simulation, it also reveals links between Baudrillardian simulation, Lacanian models of subjectivity, and classic theories of the abject and the monstrous. Despite Baudrillard’s denial, the Matrix series provides a conveniently cohesive body of texts through which to examine some of the key tenets of postmodern theory and Jean Baudrillard’s own argument that the postmodern condition is one of simulation.

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