Violence, Desire, and the Sacred

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Violence, Desire, and the Sacred

Volume 3

Edited by Scott Cowdell, Chris Fleming, and Joel Hodge

The Matrix E-Motion: Simulation, Mimesis, Hypermimesis

Nidesh Lawtoo

What is the best medium to invoke in order to reflect on the mimetic transformations that are currently generating phantoms in place of egos? Does the classical choice of the theater still capture the "shadow" of mimesis and the affective confusions that ensue, as Plato suggested at the origins of mimetic theory? Or does the modern choice of the novel now serve as the privileged medium to frame "mimetic desires" and the contagious rivalries that follow, as René Girard indicates at the other historical and theoretical end of the mimetic spectrum? In a recent book titled *The Phantom of the Ego*, I argued that looking back to both classical and modern media, such as the theater and the novel, can help us look ahead toward the mass-mediated phantoms that animate the modern and postmodern world.[1] Furthering this line of inquiry, I would like to capitalize on Girard's recent assertion that the novel no longer captures the "meaning of an era,"[2] in order to look for alternative media that can help us reload the old problematic of mimesis for our contemporary, digitized times.

Focusing on an artistic form that has its origins in modernity, but continues to inform postmodernity as well, namely film, this volume provides a timely direction of inquiry to further mimetic theory in the twenty-first century. As pioneering anthropological accounts in cinema studies have recognized, the seventh art functions as a privileged medium to dissect what Edgar Morin calls the "imitation-hypnotic" states that viewers experience in movie theaters.[3] And as media theorists have observed, cinema helps unmask new forms of virtual mimesis that can no longer be contained within realistic notions of "imitation," but generate what Jean Baudrillard calls "hyperreal simulations."[4] Rather than adjudicating between these competing perspectives, I would like to articulate the dynamic interplay between what might be described as the ancient logic of embodied imitation and the postmodern logic of virtual simulation in order to reflect on the real and hyperreal emotions that inform the contemporary imagination. If René Girard's account of the "contagious" nature of human emotions caused by the triangular structure of "mimetic desire" remains useful to frame all-too-human rivalries in the real world,[5] I argue that this approach needs to be supplemented in order to describe the spiral of mimetic impersonations that is currently connecting posthuman subjects to computerized alter egos in the virtual world.

Faced with choosing a case study, I turn to a much-discussed sci-fi blockbuster that reloads mimetic shadows as virtual simulations: Larry and Andy Wachowski's *The Matrix* (1999).[6] My wager is that this film complicates accounts that pit the classical logic of mimesis against the postmodern logic of simulation in order to open up an interface that, at different junctures, alternately connects and disconnects these antagonistic worlds. In particular, I suggest that in *The Matrix* mimesis can neither be considered simply in terms of realistic imitation (representation), nor can it be relegated to a hyperreal cyberspace without origins (simulation). Rather, it emerges from the interplay where real bodies and hyperreal phantoms face each other, without confusing one for the other (hypermimesis).[7]

Critics have noticed that the Platonic account of mimesis is electronically reloaded in *The Matrix* and informs the much-discussed distinction between the true world and the illusory world. Less discussed is that such a mimetic heritage triggers "ancient quarrels" (Plato's term) between artists and philosophers, generating "mimetic rivalries" (Girard's term) between popular filmmakers and pop philosophers as well. Confronting affective/conceptual rivalries at the level of the philosophical message, before considering the specificity of the cinematic/virtual medium, I suggest that what is at play in this philosophical blockbuster is a type of bio-electronic "extension of man" (McLuhan's term) that emerges from the interplay between real, mimetic emotions, and hyperreal, simulated motions. Out of this confrontation emerges what I call hypermimetic *e-motions*, in the double sense of embodied, neural-based emotions and electronic, digitally-based motions.[8] As we will see, *The Matrix* e-motion reveals a posthuman subject increasingly connected to virtual reality that emerges from the interface where real impersonations and hyperreal simulations meet, clash, and above all reflect (on) each other.

Mimetic simulations

The Matrix is programmed to trigger philosophical responses, and these responses have not failed to materialize since its release in 1999. Despite the film's futuristic representation of a posthuman world around 2199, dominated by machines, this philosophical blockbuster brings us back not only to a virtual representation of the world in 1999, but also to the origins of mimetic theory in classical antiquity. It is in fact a critical commonplace to identify the illusory world of *The Matrix* in terms of the ancient Platonic determination of *mimesis* understood as a false representation, or "phantom," of reality.[9] Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), the philosophical gadfly who sets out to liberate Neo's (Keanu Reeves) enslaved mind from an illusory world of virtual simulation articulates it in well-worn terms. Claiming that "the Matrix is everywhere," he defines this virtual reality in terms of its wide and indiscriminate visual reach ("you can see it out your window or on your television"), its metaphysical status in terms of illusion (a "world pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth"), and its physical effects in terms of mental bondage ("a prison for your mind"). If the metaphorical allusions to a virtual web characteristic of ramified digital media—from TV to the Net—are *future*-oriented, the Platonic conceptual echoes are *past*-oriented:

just as the chained subjects in the *Republic* watched "shadows cast from the fire on the wall of the cave,"[10] so human subjects in *The Matrix* are chained in vats that connect their brains to a dream world of virtual shadows.[11]

Looking through the mesmerizing "holy" trinity of Neo, Morpheus, and Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss), we see that mimesis functions as the conceptual protagonist of the *Matrix*, if only because this Janus-faced concept serves as the medium that both divides and connects the true world and the illusory world, structuring the ontological polarity at play in *The Matrix*. It is thus not surprising that the philosophical reception of the film has been determined by the Platonic ontology that programmed it in the first place. Thus, if a philosopher of Platonic orientation such as Alain Badiou prescribes *The Matrix* "as a preparation for Plato,"[12] an anti-Platonic theorist of Nietzschean inspiration such as Jean Baudrillard diagnoses it as a symptom of an "embarrassing ... Platonic treatment."[13] Be it with Plato or contra Plato, philosophers on both sides of the ontological fence tend to agree that the old Platonic account of mimesis understood as illusory representation continues to animate what is now called "The Matrix simulation."[14]

In a sense, then, *The Matrix* looks back to the ancient problematic of mimesis to foreground the postmodern concept of simulation, in a spirit of artistic and philosophical reconciliation.[15] That the medium (cinema) intends to mediate a philosophical message (the world is just a simulation) is clear. In the opening scene, we see a close-up of Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* serving as a cover for Neo's illegal software: an obvious indication that simulation will be central to the film.

The message emerging from this artistic homage to the father of simulation is clear and operates on different levels. First, this scene sets spectators on the path of a conceptual adventure that used to be confined to philosophy books, but can now be mediated by philosophical blockbusters. Second, it provides a clue to the *telos* of this philosophical investigation by establishing a link between computer programs and the postmodern conception of simulation. And third, it suggests that simulation has a double function insofar as it hides as much as it reveals: if the medium of the hollowed-out book within the diegesis covers the material software necessary to live out hollow dreams in the Matrix, the medium of cinema sets out to reveal the material reality behind the virtual illusion we see at play in *The Matrix*. And what we see is a dualistic world in which the reality of material exploitation of human bodies around 2199 is hidden behind the illusory surface of a virtual reproduction of the human world in 1999. Surface vs depth, illusion vs reality, mind vs body, original vs copy: despite its futuristic orientation, the mimetic ontology of this film is familiar. And the growing number of books on *The Matrix* and philosophy testify to the possibility of productively joining what once were two rivalous perspectives (philosophy and art) by reflecting on the very concept that caused the quarrel in the first place (mimesis).

Mimetic quarrels reloaded

And yet, ancient quarrels can easily be reloaded in the present, for even postmodern philosophers are programmed to notice the poisonous effects of artistic gifts. Baudrillard, in fact, (in)famously critiqued the Wachowski Brothers for their lack of comprehension of what simulation truly is. Yet his critique is less original than it appears to be, and is steeped in layers of Platonic irony that cut both ways: against the artists, for their lack of conceptual understanding of the postmodern logic of simulation, but also against the philosopher, for his reproduction of the mimetic ontology he wants to distance himself from. In order to move beyond true and false affective/conceptual polarities, we need to take a closer look at the two sides of this ancient quarrel reloaded.

On the conceptual side, the French philosopher reminds spectators of the original meaning of simulation in his written work in order to denounce the cinematic reproduction of his conceptual formulations as an illusory artistic manifestation. Baudrillard was in fact quick to recognize that *The Matrix*'s artistic take on simulation proved to be far removed from the conceptual reality—not in the Platonic sense that the mimetic medium represents a copy of a book three times removed from the French original but, rather, in the anti-Platonic sense that the mimetic message of *The Matrix* is far removed from the anti-mimetic origins of hyperreality.[16] For Baudrillard, in fact, the Wachowski Brothers framed the hyperreal logic of simulation within the Platonic ontology of imitation he so sharply opposes. As he puts it: "They took the hypothesis of the virtual for an irrefutable fact and transformed it into a visible phantasm. But it is precisely that we can no longer employ categories of the real in order to discuss the

characteristics of the virtual."[17] For Baudrillard, this is a serious transgression. As he had made clear at the opening of *Simulacra and Simulation*, "simulation" has nothing to do with the world of "imitation" and the dualistic "metaphysics" it entails: "No more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concepts," he says; rather, it is a question of "generating models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal."[18] No wonder that Baudrillard concludes his interview by trenchantly quipping: "The most embarrassing part of the film is that the new problem posed by simulation is confused with its classical, Platonic treatment."[19] And this ontological sin against postmodernism is itself aggravated by what he perceives as the film's "absence of a glimmer of irony."[20] The philosopher contra the artist, conceptual irony contra artistic seriousness: Baudrillard's critique is intelligible, subtle, persuasive.

And yet, as always with artistic reproductions, irony may generate destabilizing, mirroring effects that concepts cannot fully stabilize. In this case, in a reflective move reminiscent of a looking glass, it even generates an inversion of perspectives that unmasks, in a playful way, the mimetic logic the philosopher seriously denounces. It is, of course, ironic that the Platonic conception of mimesis that, to this day, informs philosophical discussions of *The Matrix*, has been inspired by a book whose clear goal was to transgress, not promote, a Platonic theory of imitation. It is also quite ironic that thanks to the mass-mediated success of *The Matrix* the version of simulation that impressed the popular imagination has nothing to do with the real, conceptual version, which is itself an ironic artistic confirmation of Baudrillard's theory that signs of the real have now replaced reality—including the very concept of hyperreality. But the most embarrassing part of this mirroring inversion is that the anti-Platonic philosopher feels compelled to articulate the true, original meaning of simulation, dismissing the cinematic representation as a false artistic copy, phantom, or simulacrum, thereby replicating the most classical take on mimesis—with the exclusory logic and ontological hierarchies it entails—that postmodernism is up against.

The philosopher contra the artist, the power of concept contra the power of the image, the logic of simulation contra the irony of imitation ... Echoing Neo, we could say: "Whoa. Déjà vu." This is, indeed, an ancient quarrel reloaded. And given that artists' massive power of impression (from the *Iliad* to *The Matrix*) always had an affective advantage over philosophers' conceptual investigations (from Plato to Baudrillard), it is no wonder that a pop philosopher with a literary disposition feels compelled to counter the smashing power of affective mimesis by engaging in a "mimetic rivalry" that is at least double—in the Girardian sense of an imitation of a "model" that generates rivalrous emotions (from jealousy to *ressentiment*)[21] which, in turn, reproduce the most classical Platonic stance on the epistemic value of artistic mimesis based on aristocratic emotions (from pride to contempt).[22] In short, under the new banner of simulation we find a contemporary reenactment of what Plato called an "ancient quarrel"[23] between philosophy and mimetic art. As Morpheus equitably puts it: "There are some things in this world ... that will never change."

But then, he adds: "Some things do change."

Now, if looking back to the past allows us to see that change is not on the side of the mimetic message (mimesis as the source of emotional rivalries), it is perhaps on

the side of the mimetic medium (mimesis as a source of artistic spectacles) that we need to turn to if we want to look ahead to what does change. As modernist quarrels have taught us, it is in fact possible to go "beyond the rivalry principle"[24] in order to articulate more playful, re-productive, and affirmative investigations that keep up with the old phantom of imitation as it crosses over into new digital mediations. If Girard does not himself address the mimetic effects of digital mediation, he nevertheless offers us a methodological principle to look ahead to the future of mimetic theory. Privileging the practice of hermeneutics over the abstractions of theory, he usefully reminds us that "one cannot map out the way mimesis works with writers in general." And he adds: "Each one demands an entirely different demonstration."[25] As we turn to see, this lesson is especially timely when the texts under scrutiny open up future-oriented lines of investigation that turn egos into digital phantoms.

Digital phantoms

In order to go beyond past-oriented quarrels and move toward the future that *The Matrix* invites us to consider, we should remember that from the very beginning of mimetic theory mimesis has resisted all attempts at unitary conceptual definition that would freeze it into some univocal idea.[26] Mimesis is indeed a dramatic, protean concept whose identity is not one, in the sense that it is at least double, if not multiple. It is thus as stabilizing as it is destabilizing, generative of conceptual disjunctions as much as of affective conjunctions. As that Janus-faced artist-philosopher par excellence, Friedrich Nietzsche, was quick to notice, already in Plato's *Republic* mimesis concerns not only the making of shady representations that Socrates calls "phantoms" of reality, and the ontological disjunctions between the true and the false world such phantoms entail, but it also concerns emotional impersonations that generate what Nietzsche calls a "phantom of the ego," and the psychic conjunctions between self and others this phantom generates.[27] This is why Socrates inaugurates the discussion of mimesis via the medium of the theater, and the actor's psychosomatic transformations, rather than via the medium of painting, and the painter's visual reproductions. As Socrates puts it in Book 3 of the *Republic*, the actor (*mimos*) speaking in direct speech (mimetic *lexis*) "assimilates" a fictional character by "likening oneself to another in speech or bodily bearing," thereby "deliver[ing] a speech as if he were someone else" (mimetic impersonation).[28] And this bodily motion, in turn, generates emotions such as "anger" or "pity" that spread contagiously across the body politic. From the origins of mimetic theory, then, we witness the postulation of a contagion of emotions and a multiplying series of bodily replications—a process that moves actors from within and that spectators see, initially at least, from without.[29]

Now, reloading *The Matrix* from the angle of bodily impersonation reveals the digital reality that informs virtual simulations in the Matrix. Take the Agents, for instance: computer-sentient programs designed to protect the Matrix from hackers such as Morpheus. Despite their virtual reality being disconnected from any bodily referent, Agents are the clearest manifestation of this virtually embodied mimesis.

They are, in fact, mimetic not simply in the sense that they are copies of each other (that can be digitally reproduced *ad infinitum* (reproduction); nor solely in the sense that they are virtual figures without a real referent (simulation); nor only in the sense that they generate violent "battles to the end" that turn difference into sameness (mimetic escalation)[30]—though mimesis operates on all these levels. What is new in *The Matrix* is that Agents are mimetic in the most disturbing sense that they can infiltrate, virus-like, other virtual bodies, assimilating themselves to others in such a fundamental way that the other does not simply act as if s/he were an Agent, but *becomes* one. In this digital impersonation, then, the other is dispossessed of an identity that, in any case, has never been a real one—but only a virtual one.

To be sure, this form of virtual impersonation is not a simple reproduction of theatrical mimesis. It is not a question of speaking in the name of the other via assimilation of mimetic *lexis*, but of digitally *becoming* the other via a reconfiguration of pixels. Yet, this virtual transformation reframes a mimetic principle that was once bodily at play on theater stages via a new, digital medium. And what this mimetic principle shows us is a total bodily assimilation, itself mediated via a screen-like framing surface of a helicopter window that self-reflectively recalls a TV screen. If we reflect on this doubly-framed screen, then, we see that when it comes to virtual reality and the emotions it

generates, the boundaries dividing self and other(s), what is me and what is not me, are not as stable and self-enclosed as they appear to be, but instead turn out to be unstable and fluid, allowing for an endless regress of digital impersonations that inform the phantasmal world of simulation. In *The Matrix Reloaded*, Agent Smith puts it with characteristic succinctness: "The best thing about being me … there's so many of me."

In a sense, then, a digitized impersonation functions as a virus that infects the medium of virtual reality, a mimetic virus the protagonists of *The Matrix* set out to exterminate.

And yet, what was true of philosophical therapies in the present, insofar as in the Matrix not only the distinction between self and others, but also that between the poison and the cure is far from stable. Just as Plato, with the support of the Oracle, reconfigured a real character named Socrates to combat, via mimetic dialogues, mimetic poets and rid the world of artistic phantoms, so in *The Matrix* Morpheus, with the support of the Oracle, discovers a hyperreal character named Neo, whom he trains in virtual impersonations to combat the mimetic Agents and rid the world of virtual phantoms. The medium has changed, but the paradoxical message has not. In fact, within *The Matrix*, digital mimesis emerges as a double-faced concept that functions as much as a poison as a cure—or, as Plato used to call it, a *pharmakon*.[31]

This pharmaceutical side of mimesis is fully at play in the interface that connects and disconnects the real world and its virtual copy, and vice versa. Take Neo's initial liberation from the Matrix: in a mirroring inversion of Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*, Neo transitions from the dream world of the Matrix to what Morpheus (echoing Baudrillard) calls the "desert of the real" world, as he realizes that the bodily referent reflected in a mirror is, in reality, nothing but a pack of digits! Having swallowed the red pill, Neo is shown in front of a cracked looking glass that does not represent a unitary image but, rather, a multiplicity of fragmented reflections—an indication that, despite his nickname, Neo has an identity that is far from being one, for he is virtually no one: "virtually" both in the sense that he approaches non-being and in the sense that he is a being whose horizon of existence is itself virtual. And as the red pill begins to have its effect, the reflective deformations increase, the mirror loses its representative function and becomes a plastic, malleable, and transparent fluid that threatens to dissolve his virtual *imago*.

The shift between two models of mimesis could not be more striking: we move from a distanced, stabilizing refraction in a mirror that generates low degrees of emotional participation to a fully immersed, fluid, digitized body overtaken by powerful emotions; from the Matrix's dualist ontology to its power of digital disfiguration.[32]

Clearly, in this state of digital transformation, dualistic distinctions between copy and original, self and other, inside and outside, surface and depth no longer hold, generating a digital continuity in place of ontological discontinuities.[33] And it is once the boundaries of Neo's digital body are about to dissolve that the camera plunges—via a close-up shot—down that rabbit hole of his open mouth and we find ourselves on the other side of the looking glass virtually impersonating—via an I-camera shot—a naked, embryonic human body immersed in amniotic fluid in a vat. Thus, Neo is finally unplugged from the world of virtual phantoms without substance that held his mind prisoner of an ego that was not one, let alone The One, but the product of serial 101 digits. Dissolution of a hot digital representation, rebirth via a cool bodily impersonation: this is, in a nutshell, the initial pharmacological effect of the red pill.

Now, if mimesis uploads the human mind in digital images without substance whose virtual existence poisons the real body; it also has the power to download a digital mind in a bodily referent for the therapy to start. Mimesis is thus not only part of the pathological message of *The Matrix*; it is also the very medium that enables such therapeutic transformations to take place. And yet, the distinction between the poison of virtual representations and the therapy of bodily impersonations is, once again, far from being clear cut. In fact, Neo's return to a bodily impersonation in the real world is only the necessary condition to be uploaded in the Matrix simulation. And here is where the medium of neural and digital motions, which are both embodied and electronic and are, thus, strictly speaking, not emotions but e-motions, come into play.

Hypermimetic e-motions

The problematic of mimesis in *The Matrix* is more slippery than it appears to be and cuts different ways: if the mimetic representations in the Matrix set up an ontological

distinction between two worlds that fascinates idealist philosophers of Cartesian derivation, the one of digital impersonation articulates the interplay between the virtual and real world that interests materialist philosophers of Nietzschean inspiration. Baudrillard, for one, is true to the stabilizing, idealist side of mimesis at the level of the ideological message, as he identifies the duality it generates as follows: "The actors," he says, "are in the matrix, that is, in the digitized system of things; or, they are radically outside it, such as in Zion, the city of resistors."[34] Yet, he misses the material fluidity of the virtual medium as he says that "what would be interesting is to show what happens when these two worlds collide."[35] This collision is, in a sense, precisely what animates *The Matrix*. The entire movie is based on the plugging and unplugging of human bodies in and out of computers, thereby generating emotional continuities (confidence, hope, and love, being the primary ones) between two clashing yet nonetheless linked worlds: one related to human (neural) impersonations, the other to CG (computer-generated or virtual) simulation. Indeed, the definition of the Matrix as a "neural interactive simulation" articulates the interplay between reality and hyperreality along lines that are based on neither a realistic notion of imitation (or mimesis), nor on a real account of appropriation (mimetic desire), nor on a purely virtual notion of simulation (or hyperreality), but, rather, on the connection between "hyperreal" simulation and "neural" mimesis (or hypermimesis). Every gamer is already familiar with a virtual-bodily reality generated by new computerized media. The film's massive success arguably stems from spectators' emotional familiarity with videogames (the medium), rather than with classical conceptual speculations on metaphysics (the message).[36] And yet, this does not mean that the hypermimetic medium that in-*forms* (gives form to) the message of this film has been fully analyzed. In order to do so we need not let go of both the affective and conceptual dynamic informing neural-electronic simulations whereby the subject is uploaded and downloaded in and out of the Matrix. Since this neural simulation generates virtual motions mediated by the "interaction" of "neural" and virtual "simulations," I call this interaction between two opposed yet connected worlds "e-motions"—in the double sense of human, embodied emotions, and e-lectronic, digital motions.

The diagnostic of the hypermimetic e-motions that animate *The Matrix* cuts both ways. On the one hand, the virtual world is what the human rebels on Zion oppose since it is part of the technological poison responsible for "the desert of the real." On the other hand, it is only by "jacking" into the Matrix and playing out virtual simulations that a virtual fight against this growing desert can start. Despite the technological changes, the structure of mimesis never changes: it is the locus of both poisonous exploitation and therapeutic revolutions; a source of both material dispossessions that generate virtual motions and virtual (dis)possessions that generate neural interactive e-motions. In order to complete our diagnostic operation it is thus necessary to abandon stabilizing metaphysical solutions and trace the destabilizing physical and virtual movements generated by the "bioelectricity" that mediates between these connected worlds.

The Matrix e-motion generates a spiraling, hypermimetic paradox that can be summarized as follows: the same electricity that generates unconscious phantoms

without substance that poison human bodies also provides the energy to upload digital phantoms as a virtual cure. This dynamic is perhaps nowhere more visible than in the plugs at the base of the human heads, symptomatic of a posthuman, e-motional subject. Used to connect and disconnect brains to and from machines, this disjunctive conjunction is also responsible for what McLuhan prophetically called an "extension" of "our senses and our nerves."[37]

The *Matrix*'s diagnostic of this e-motional extension of man is double-faced: if machines originally use these plugs to drain human bodies of their "bioenergy" in the real world, this energy can also be recycled by humans to upload a "digital projection of the mental self" in the virtual world. The e-motions that animate virtual phantoms are thus not simply the product of the "bioenergy" generated by human bodies qua batteries, nor solely the effect of "interactive simulation" qua Matrix, but rather they are generated by the interplay between the CG electronic simulation and the human neural energy qua e-motion. We reach here the paradoxical movement of hypermimesis that sets *The Matrix* simulation in motion, generating e-motions that are as neural as they are virtual, as poisonous as they are therapeutic. In this e-motional interplay, the distinction between the human mind and the virtual image, neurobiology and digitization, bodily emotions and electronic motions no longer holds. In fact, the virtual e-motion that allows humans to hack into the Matrix can be activated

only once computer simulation programs have been downloaded in the human mind (or, better: brain), generating a spiraling loop whereby neural impersonations and digital simulations, bodily emotions and electronic motions are not only one, but virtually generate The One.

The conception of the posthuman brain that underscores the Matrix e-motion is clear. Just as software needs hardware for computer programs to work, so a digital alter ego needs a human brain as its material support for e-motions to be activated. Hence, in order to be reloaded in the Matrix, Neo is subjected to a "loading program" training that downloads virtual combat programs directly into his brain, formatting his neural motions, which, thus reformatted, can trigger e-motions necessary to impersonate his virtual alter ego in the Matrix.
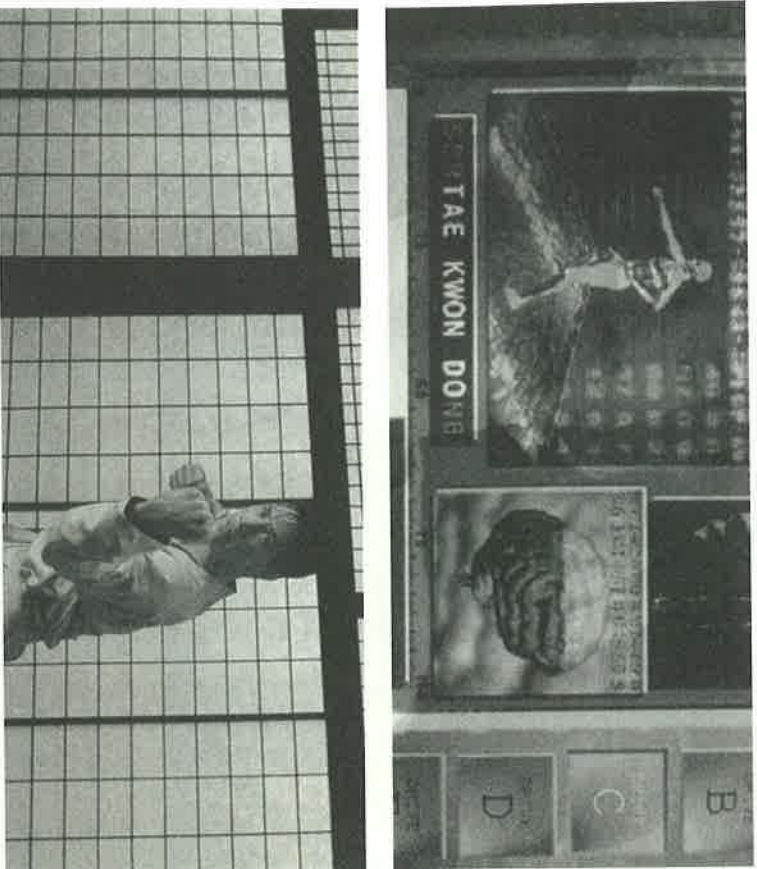
Here we see how hopelessly outmoded both the realistic notion of mimesis and the hyperreal notion of simulation are to capture the logic of e-motions. Clearly, the computer screen does not simply reflect Neo's movements in the virtual training program at one additional remove from biological reality, as the logic of representation suggests. Nor does Neo's virtual alter ego operate without a material, biological referent, as the logic of hyperreality suggests. And if it is true that the virtual violence at play in the Matrix is based on "mimetic rivalries" that generate apocalyptic "battles to the end,"38 it is equally true that the logic of "mimetic desire" that structures Girard's

analytic does not capture the specific *relation* between the human brain and the virtual alter ego, which gives form to *The Matrix*. Let us thus not let go of our specific "demonstration" (Girard's term) so as to derive the theory from the text itself. In fact, if we focus *simultaneously* on the medium of the computer screen on the left and its CG referent on the right—both mediated by a cinematic screen—a new mimetic lesson emerges: namely that the interplay between neural interactions in the human brain and digital representation on the virtual screen provide a neuro-digital key that opens the door for e-motions to operate, as the logic of hypermimesis suggests. It is in fact because computer programs have been directly downloaded in the human brain, rewiring its neural connections, that this brain can, in turn, generate an extension of humanity necessary to activate the Matrix e-motion. Conversely, it is only because of the existence of fully embodied, human emotions—and Trinity's love is the key emotion—on the side of reality that Neo is resuscitated on the side of virtuality: his e-motions are powerfully reloaded, turning a figure who was virtually no one, into The One. Perhaps, then, the final battle, which puts an end to the battle, is as cinematic as it is theoretical and reveals that a shift in power relations has taken place; just as Agent Smith's virtual motions are absorbed by Neo's e-motions, the logic of hyperreality is absorbed by the logic of hypermimesis. Welcome to the desert of hypermimesis!

Above all, as a welcome to this growing desert, *The Matrix* is a reminder that even in a world of simulation, embodied emotions are the rock on which virtual e-motions rest. Take away the human—all too human—emotions that generate powerful e-motions, and the virtual simulation is unplugged. No matter how hyperreal cyberspace is, the neural and digital side of hypermimetic e-motions cannot easily be disconnected. This is true for the virtual simulations within the Matrix, but it may also be true of the virtual media—from TV to portable phones, the Internet to iPhones—that the Matrix mirrors. That is, when it comes to the e-motions that the new digitized media massively generate, it is not simply a question of the body being connected to the mind, or of the real ego to the digital alter ego. Rather, it is a question of electronic CG stimuli having real, all too real, effects on human bodies, which, in turn have set a virtual alter ego in motions, generating hypermimetic e-motions that transgress the boundaries between the real and the hyperreal, neural impersonations and digital simulations. Hence the pull to follow up our neural extensions via the hypermimetic medium of e-motional simulations. Hence the urgency for future theorists of mimesis to diagnose the emotional effects of new mimetic media on our neural system.

To conclude this mirroring operation, *The Matrix* makes us wonder: is the reliance on a computerized model of the human brain still in line with our increasingly digitized times? Or is it rather the digital world that turns to the human brain as a model to reflect on the increasing ramification of virtual lives? While *The Matrix* suggests that the former option is the correct one, its diagnostic is symptomatic of a film that, while looking ahead to the 2190s, still remains very much the product of the 1990s: a period under the spell of an emerging computer-based reality (or virtual reality) that serves as the very model (or matrix) for digitally reproducing a computerized version of the human self (or brain). And yet, if we look at more recent futuristic representations that *The Matrix* helps to bring into play, the second option seems the more plausible one.

In a mirroring counter-movement, contemporary sci-fi films—from James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) to Guillermo del Toro's *Pacific Rim* (2013)—are, in fact, turning to the neural connections in the human brain (brain as network) as a model to frame hyper-mimetic e-motions generated by new virtual media (network as brain).

Given that empirical discoveries in the neurosciences are currently confirming the mimetic foundations of human emotions—from mirror neurons to neuroplasticity—it is perhaps not unlikely that the brain will be the medium that will serve as a model for reflecting e-motional messages yet to come. Whether new futuristic sci-fi films will also continue to generate mirroring reflections that look back to where we came from in order to look ahead to where we are going remains to be seen.

Notes

1   Nidesh Lawtoo, *The Phantom of the Ego: Modernism and the Mimetic Unconscious* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013).

2   René Girard, "The Future of the Novel," *Contagion* 19 (2012): 1–8, at 1.

3   Morin considers that spectators in the darkness of the movie theater enter a light, hypnotic trance that generates a form of psychic mimesis or imaginary "identification" with the figures on the screen. Edgar Morin, *The Cinema, or the Imaginary Man*, trans. Lorraine Mortimer (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 96.

4   Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981). For a pioneering account of the "technological simulation of consciousness" and the "extension of man" new media generate, see Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (New York: Signet Books, 1964), 19.

5   Girard's theory of "mimetic desire" has its origins in writers whose "novelistic genius" deconstructs the romantic *mensonge* of originality; see *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), 38. Still, as Girard's career-long meditation on the real effects of mimesis (and the violent rivalries it generates) makes clear, he never loses sight of the referential dimension of fictional texts. His emphasis on the "contagious" dimension of desire and violence in particular has contributed to the emerging dialogue between mimesis and the empirical sciences. See *Mimesis and Science: Empirical Research on Imitation and the Mimetic Theory of Culture and Religion*, ed. Scott R. Garrels (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011).

6   For reasons of space, I concentrate primarily on the first, and for my purpose, most relevant, film of the *Matrix* trilogy.

7   On hypermimesis, see Nidesh Lawtoo, "The Avatar Simulation in 3 Ts: Techne, Trance, Transformation," *Science Fiction Studies* (forthcoming). Both that article and the present chapter contribute to extending mimetic theory to sci-fi studies.

8   The "affective turn" tends to consider emotions in opposition to affects. Influenced by Gilles Deleuze, Brian Massumi, one of the foremost advocates of affect theory, defines emotions as subjective, ideological, and social, and affects as pre-subjective, pre-ideological, and unconscious, and characterized by bodily speed and intensity; Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham:

Duke University Press, 2002). Influenced by Nietzsche, I think of emotions along unconscious, bodily, and intersubjective lines that most theorists now tend to group under the new rubric of "affect" but that, on closer scrutiny, resonate with the ancient notion of "pathos." See Lawtoo, *The Phantom of the Ego*, 3–19. I retain the concept of emotion not only for its playful rhetorical potential to be reloaded as virtual emotion, but also because internal to this notion (emotion, from Latin *emovere*, move out, remove, agitate) is already an embodied, troubling dynamic that moves the subject in and out of emotional lines I will discuss below.

9   See John Partridge, "Plato's Cave and *The Matrix*," in *Philosophers Explore The Matrix*, ed. Christopher Grau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 239–57; Matt Lawrence, *Like a Splinter in Your Mind: The Philosophy Behind The Matrix Trilogy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 4–6; Catherine Constable, *Adapting Philosophy: Jean Baudrillard and The Matrix Trilogy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 42–5; William Irwin, "Computer, Caves, and Oracles: Neo and Socrates," in *The Matrix and Philosophy*, ed. William Irwin (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), 5–15; Slavoj Žižek, "The Matrix: Or the Two Sides of Perversion," in *The Matrix and Philosophy*, 240–66, at 241.

10 Plato, *The Republic*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963), 575–844, at 747.

11 This rationalist skepticism reappears in the modern period in Descartes' radical doubt and finds a more recent analytical manifestation in the "brain in a vat" thought-experiment; see Gerald J. Erion and Barry Smith, "Skepticism, Morality, and *The Matrix*," in Irwin, ed., *The Matrix and Philosophy*, 16–27; Carolyn Korsmeyer, "Seeing, Believing, Touching, Truth," in *The Matrix and Philosophy*, 41–52.

12 Alain Badiou, "Dialectiques de la fable," in *Matrix: Machine philosophique*, eds Elie During et al. (Paris: Ellipses, 2003), 120–9, at 129. Unless specified otherwise, translations from French are mine.

13 Jean Baudrillard and Aude Lancelin, "The Matrix Decoded: *Le Nouvel Observateur* Interview with Jean Baudrillard," http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jean-baudrillard/articles/the-matrix-decoded-interview/ (accessed March 15, 2014).

14 See Constable, *Adapting Philosophy*, Ch. 3; David Weberman, "The Matrix Simulation and the Postmodern Age," in *The Matrix and Philosophy*, ed. Irwin, 225–39; Elie During, "Trois figures de la simulation," in *Matrix: Machine philosophique*, 130–46; Seyda Öztürk, "Simulation Reloaded," http://cinetext.philo.at/magazine/ozturk/simulation_reloaded.html (accessed March 10, 2014).

15 Philosophy and art were opposed in the classical period, but furthering a modernist tendency I have traced elsewhere (*The Phantom of the Ego*, 8–12), the artists here quote the philosopher in a *spirit of reconciliation*.

16 On Baudrillard's complaint on the "the film's role as an unfaithful adaptation of his ideas," see also Constable, *Adapting Philosophy*, 22–8, at 26.

17 Baudrillard and Lancelin, "The Matrix Decoded."

18 Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation*, 10.

19 Baudrillard and Lancelin, "The Matrix Decoded."

20 Ibid.

21 See Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 14. From a Girardian perspective, Baudrillard's violent rejection of the artists is symptomatic of a prior identification with the artists as "models," which, in turn, leads to a "mimetic desire" of their mass-mediated success and the "rivalry" that ensues.

22 As Chris Fleming has usefully pointed out, this classical stance might itself be inflected by Baudrillard's reluctance to have his name linked to one of the most popular manifestations of the postmodern medium he so carefully studies from a distance. Additional twists could be given to this ironic spiral.

23 Plato, *The Republic*, 832.

24 Lawtoo, *The Phantom of the Ego*, 45–52.

25 René Girard, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture* (with Pierpaolo Antonello and João Cezar de Castro Rocha) (London: Continuum, 2007), 174.

26 I have discussed this elsewhere (*The Phantom of the Ego*, 8–12), but the claim is far from original. Jacques Derrida reminds us that "one cannot avoid missing mimesis as soon as one identifies it and wants to decide on its truth value." "Introduction: Desistance," in *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. Christopher Fynsk (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 1–42, at 25. The origins of the "constitutive undecidability of mimesis" are not postmodern but can be traced back to Plato's thought; see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Typography," in *Typography*, 43–138, at 97. See also Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), 23–7.

27 Lawtoo, *The Phantom of the Ego*, 52–68.

28 Plato, *The Republic*, 638. For an important discussion of theatrical mimesis in Plato and its relation to Girard's mimetic theory, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Typography," in *Typography*, 43–138, esp. 96–117.

29 For an account that roots simulation in *The Matrix* back in the "concrete *dispositifs*" informing the "interactive" and "psycho-technical" dimension of "virtual reality" as an "interface" between man and machine, see also During, "Trois figures de la simulation," 134–7.

30 There is a sense in which Mr Smith and Mr Anderson, like many antagonistic sci-fi figures, are "mimetic doubles" in Girard's sense of twin rivals. See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), Ch. 7. In particular, the final fight between Neo and Agent Smith in *Matrix Revolutions* dramatizes Girard's account of mimetic "escalation" typical of a "battle to the end"—though the trilogy provides an end to the battle. See René Girard, *Battling to the End* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011).

31 See Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 61–171.

32 This shift from mimetic representation to mimetic digitization parallels McLuhan's account of "hot" and "cool" media and the shift in emotional participation it entails: the former he defines in terms of "exclusion" and "low participation," the latter in terms of "inclusion" and high "empathy or participation"; see *Understanding Media*, 36–43.

33 If this mimetic continuity distantly recalls a "mimetic crisis" in Girard's sense, the anthropology that underscores it is distinctly posthuman. See Lawtoo, "The Avatar Simulation in 3 Ts."

34 Baudrillard and Lancelin, "The Matrix Decoded."

35 Ibid.

36 On *The Matrix* as a "response to the challenge of videogaming," see Joshua Clover, *The Matrix* (London: BFI, 2004), 24–8, 48–51.

37 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 19.

38 Girard, *Battling to the End*, Ch. 1.

8

Apocalypse of the Therapeutic: *The Cabin in the Woods* and the Death of Mimetic Desire

Peter Y. Paik[1]

Readers of René Girard are familiar with his thesis that the primary source of confli[ct] in the modern, secular world is rivalry, which is no longer constrained by the sacre[d] hierarchies and sacrificial practices that defined the archaic community. For Girard, the danger posed by the escalation of rivalry and competition in modernity is the necessary and unavoidable consequence of the demystification of sacrificial violence. Although the Bible has succeeded in dispelling the essential illusion on which the efficacy of sacrifice depends, this epistemological and anthropological breakthrough has at the same time deprived human beings of the beliefs and mechanisms tha[t] enabled them to control violence in times of crisis. The Judeo-Christian revelation ha[s] had the effect of leaving the world more at the mercy of rivalry and antagonism than eve[r] before. Whereas the hierarchy of class and networks of interlocking duties formerl[y] restrained and moderated competition, whether by curtailing the material aspira[-] tions of the common people or by channeling ambition into otherworldly directions in modern society, by removing these social barriers, exacerbates feelings of envy and resentment, as equality becomes the defining value.[2] Modernity, in drowning the ambitions of the nobility and the devotions of the religious in the icy water of equality and egotism, brings people to face the real conditions of their life and relations with each other, which for Girard means the worsening of antagonism as rivalry becomes experienced as an increasingly compulsory aspect of social life.

The disappearance of sacrifice leaves only "mimetic rivalry" which is prone to "escalate to extremes."[3] For Girard, the breakdown of the sacrificial illusion leaves modern societies hovering on the brink of apocalyptic calamity, in which the outbreak of mimetic conflict can easily escalate into the effort to annihilate entire peoples. Human beings are thus left with a stark dilemma, in which they must choose between becoming "reconciled without the aid of sacrificial intermediaries" and resigning "themselves to the imminent extinction of humanity."[4] Although he framed this either/or during the penultimate decade of the Cold War, when the threat of nuclear annihilation hung over the globe, Girard has continued to insist on the relevance of this formula for the crises of the present—the war on terror, ecological destruction, and economic meltdown—on the basis that they remain subject to the possibility of