HYPERREALITY UNVEILED IN 2020: *MATRIX* AND THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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ABSTRACT

We live in a postmodern world, characterised by scepticism and suspicion of reason, which has the legacy of great theorists and writers. Looking at the contemporary world with a banal view is easy, but equally monotonous. The year 2020 will be one of the most debated years in coming times, and a plethora of literature is already being produced for posterity. The year is going to be preserved into history, and it is critical to preserve every detail. Using the concept of hyperreality to crack open this mysterious year would help understand it from a different angle. In addition, the film Matrix is helpful in comprehending a new domain. Matrix depicts a dystopian world in which humans are trapped inside a simulated reality created by intelligent machines. Human bodies are used as a source of energy for the survival of machines. When computer programmer Thomas Anderson, also known as Neo, finds the truth, he with others who have been freed from the Matrix are drawn into a rebellion against the machines. The paper uses this movie to understand the chaos in our contemporary world, with special reference to COVID-19. It will also try to unravel the truth that usually remains hidden from the human eye.

KEY WORDS: *Hyperreality, real, simulation, matrix, Disneyland*

The year 2020 was a collapsing hyperreality which seemed so unreal, just like a plot of a horror movie or a bad dream. This year, plagued by a virus, forcibly engaged an individual to feel the presence of the strange parallel world. The orange 'apocalyptic' sky witnessed in Los Angeles in 2020 in the middle of a pandemic is just the tip of the iceberg of calamity, as there is more that needs to be heeded. Before discussing the *Matrix* and the contemporary world, it is pertinent to understand the concept of hyperreality. The concept was given by Jean Baudrillard, which was later elaborated and expanded by some of the famous theorists like Albert Borgmann, Daniel J. Boorstin, Neil Postman, and also Umberto Eco. The concept, in terms of postmodernism and semiotics, is defined as an individual's incapability of consciousness to differentiate between reality and a simulation of reality. It is seen as a phenomenon in which reality and fiction are fused and yoked together, so that there is no way to distinguish between the two. It co-mingles the human brain with artificial intelligence and material or physical reality with virtual reality. It states that individuals may find it difficult to cope with the new reality, but in time, they adapt or get more involved in hyper-reality than in the real world. In other words, hyperreality is the inability to distinguish between what is real and what is a simulation. A hyperreality has been called 'more real than real' because human consciousness has accepted the hyperreality as being real rather than any kind of actual reality.

Hyperreality has had a strong influence on films such as *Transformers*, *Matrix*, *Ironman*, etc. The *Matrix* is an American action film based on science fiction written by Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski, two trans-women who are called the Wachowskis. They also directed the movie, starring Keanu Reeves, Luarence Fishburne, Hugo Weaving, and Joe Pantoliano. The movie is futuristic, depicting a dystopian world in which humanity is trapped in the frame of simulated reality. The *Matrix* is created by super-intelligent machines to befuddle individuals while sucking energy to reinforce their structure. In the movie, people are hooked up to machines and enter into a simulated existence. Neo, the main character, has been perplexed by repeated online encounters with the phrase "the Matrix," and he discovers that a man named Morpheus may help him. One day he encounters Morpheus who advises Neo to escape this vicious existence created by machines. Neo chooses to surrender rather than risk a dangerous escape. After this encounter, the Agents of the *Matrix* try to persuade Neo to help them find Morpheus,

whom they accuse of being a terrorist. Neo refuses to give them any information and is assaulted and implanted by a chip on his body. Neo is eventually taken to meet Morpheus by Trinity, an anti-Matrix activist group. They remove the implanted chip and Morpheus offers Neo the two pills: red, which will reveal the truth about the *Matrix*, or blue, which will allow him to forget everything and return to his previous life. Neo chooses red pill and discovers the truth and the simulation he has been living in. When Neo uncovers the truth, he rebels against the system governed by machines and frees himself, along with his other accomplices.

For the people in simulation, the *Matrix* is 'more real than real' because their consciousness has accepted it and validated it with time, repeating the course again and again. Hyperreality is not only limited to the computer world but can be found everywhere. For example, certain religions that have lost touch with reality could be considered hyperrealist. Disneyland is a more familiar example, which both Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco used to explain hyperreality. Eco theorises that the settings in Disneyland, where streets and big houses have been simulated and created to project absolute reality, forces visitors' consciousness to a "fantastic past." This simulated situation creates an illusion, making it easier for people to believe in this 'reality.' The idea behind this example is that nothing in this world is real and concrete. In his magnum opus work, *Simulacra and Simulation,* Baudrillard argues that:

> The Disneyland imaginary is neither true nor false: it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real. Whence the debility, the infantile degeneration of the imaginary. It is meant to be an infantile world, in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the "real" world, and to conceal the fact that real childishness is everywhere, particularly among those adults who go there to act the child in order to foster illusion of their real childishness. (28)

This implies that visiting the obviously imaginary streets and fabricated world of Disneyland has the effect of causing one to believe that the rest of the world is real. Stepping into an obviously fabricated world like Disneyland reinforces the belief that the world outside of Disneyland is real. But in the year 2020, Disneyland was closed and a question arises: why did this year seem so surreal? The answer could be that the institutions propping up hyperreality have begun to collapse. 2020 is not strange, but the world as a whole has always been strange, and people have only recently begun to notice. For example, in the movie *Matrix*, Neo is unplugged from the simulation and gazes upon the real world for the first time and realises that he has been living a lie his entire life.

2020 is strange, not because it is strange in itself, but because people are finally beginning to see that what they have been told is not real at all. When people protest and fight for their rights on a mass scale, it is a sign that they have realised that freedom and equality do not exist. People have been told since their birth that the country they live in is the greatest country in the world. They believe it even though it is not true. It becomes more real than real. But in the year 2020, people were no longer distracted by any theme parks, bars, night clubs, or movie theatres because they were closed, and people were forced to stay in reality and discover a world of brutality and hatred. They started realising that the world is nothing like the way they imagined or idealised it should be. Many people are still attempting to preserve their hyperreality in order to keep each other in simulation. For example, Donald Trump's adviser Kimberly Guilfoyle said in a famous speech, "The best is yet to come," which is a hyperreal narrative that implies 'things are great' despite the chaotic and enigmatic reality. The year 2020 served as a wake-up call. The people were forced to experience and confront reality because everything around them was turned off and there were fewer distractions. Brutality and injustice remained unnoticed in the past, because people were more interested in things like the latest Hollywood or Bollywood movie releases, or other less important and trivial things.

The year 2020, because of Corona virus, witnessed the closing of all such mediums and the new realisation came forth that all the institutions people once believed were phony. In short, the year 2020 stripped away the surface reality and revealed the ugly, radical, catastrophic cracks in our system that have always been there since the ages. The simulation in this year crumbled, and this is not a negative thing; it gives an individual an opportunity to create a new world. But the problem is that some people are less interested in a new world; they want to go back to where they were before; they want to be plugged back into the simulation just like some people in the *Matrix*. People in the movie chooses to stay away from reality. They prefer Disneyland over real world.

There's nothing wrong with fantastic worlds like theme parks or Disneyland, but they become dangerous when they exist within a lethal system designed to enslave, brainwash the populace, and obscure the cracks of reality. Those who desperately want to return to sleep and live in a fantasy in order to be plugged back into their hyperreality are unconcerned about the system's failures that have been revealed as a result of the pandemic. The year was a wakeup call for those who truly want to stay connected to reality and unplug from hyperreality. The year allowed a person to build a new world. Just like Disneyland that exists, in order to make one

believe that the rest of the world is real, prisons also exist to hide the fact that one is already in prison. Baudrillard says, "Prisons are there to conceal the fact that they are social in their entirety." In its banal omnipresence, which is carceral" (22). This means that just as visiting Disneyland makes the rest of the world more real, so does the existence of prison, causing one to think that one is free outside. One of the greatest illusions ever nailed to the human psyche is the concept of freedom. One is told that one lives in the land of the free, that one exists at the pinnacle of freedom, while one is forced to work for hours to feed the greed of the global elites. Just like the humans in the *Matrix* who are not people for the system but "battery," a unit of energy that helps the system get richer and stronger.

The pandemic had changed many courses in the system, including work, the economy, and life in general. In India, where the pandemic turned things upside down, liquor shops were thrown open to catalyse the country's economy. The government cared about the economy, not the women who have already suffered domestic violence and were vulnerable to patriarchal oppression. Dr. Ranjana Kumari, a social activist says:

> According to the government's own National Family Health survey data, there is a direct link between alcohol use and violence by men. So certainly it will escalate. Already there are two times more cases of domestic violence reported the NCW. People are already facing financial difficulty and this will add fuel to the fire. They will vent it out on women and kids. (Pune Mirror)

The government's obfuscated guidelines hides a terrible fact which supplements the hyperreal world. People are led to believe that everything a system does is for their own good, which is reinforced by discourses and news outlets. People are surrounded by simulated experiences, and the presence of hyperreality is sometimes not felt by an individual. People are designed to accept "readymade" realities, meaningless bans on the internet (as observed in Jammu and Kashmir), acts of terrorism and collapsing cultural and traditional values. This is what Jean Baudrillard called "the hyperreal," which is wholly in simulation and invincible to break. The reality is reproduced, which is so real that it can even be replaced by it. This is what Baudrillard called "Simulacra" in his work, *Simulacra and Simulation*, which he defines as "a copy of a copy, so far removed from its original, that it can stand on its own and even replace the original." It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal . . . substituting the signs of the real for the real" (41). The virtual reality that individual is hooked up into not only limits one's access to material reality, but

his/her own consciousness is so cleverly trapped that the brain itself simulates a world that is so perfect and complete that it includes models of consciousness itself.

Understanding the world today using Baudillard's concept may not help one to find the way out, but nevertheless provides a description of contemporary trends and strategies to adopt this new realization. The world doesn't have to be this way. One has the power to make it more real according to his or her own will, and the natural order could be restored. The elites, or the machines in the *Matrix*, shouldn't be allowed to continue to hoard the wealth of the world and manufacture a false reality. It is one's choice to be just a "battery", a power source for machines, or like Neo, who exposes the system and ceases to be commanded and ruled.

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