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## ““Hey! What Did You Do to the World?": Conceptualizing the Real with Baudrillard and Žižek”

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As it is well known today, one of Žižek's more important contributions to contemporary psychoanalytic media and cultural studies remains his focus on the Lacanian Real. As he puts it in one of his first articles written in English, while discussing the use of Lacanian psychoanalysis in 1970s 'Screen Studies', "[t]he Lacan who served as a point of reference for these theories [...] was the Lacan before the break" (Žižek 1989: 7). This break, of course, corresponds to Lacan's attention to the Real as that which lies beyond representation and symbolisation during the last decade of his teaching. Over the decades, and through an ongoing opus, Žižek has put forth a theoretical edifice that focuses on this "late turn in Lacanian teaching; a turn that could be summarized concisely by the

formula: ‘form the signifier to the object’” (7). While 1970s film studies focused on the “boundary separating the Imaginary from the Symbolic”, and thus paid little attention to the object but instead gave much room to the ideological foundations of the signifier, Žižek allowed the emergence of a Lacanian approach to film, media and culture grounded in an emphasis on “the barrier separating the Real from symbolically structured reality”; he provided the framework allowing Lacan’s thought to be applied to “those leftovers or remnants of the Real that escape symbolic ‘mediation’” (Žižek 1989: 11). The most notable aspect of this contemporary Lacanian theoretical framework remains its focus on the incompleteness of signification and, of course, the radical and traumatic manifestations related to this incompleteness. Žižek’s use of psychoanalysis for the analysis of cultural and media artefacts lies in this simple yet important account of the actual potential of Lacanian theory: “For Lacan, psychoanalysis at its most fundamental is not a theory and technique of treating psychic disturbances, but a theory and practice that confronts individuals with the most radical dimension of human existence” (Žižek 2007: 3). This radical dimension, precisely, is the emergence of the Real within our symbolically mediated reality. Žižek brings to our attention the fact that what we call ‘reality’ is in fact an illusory realm founded on the intangible act of signification.

On the other hand, and given his interest in what he also calls the Real, the quasi-absence of Jean Baudrillard’s theoretical contribution to media studies from Žižek’s opus is somewhat surprising. Indeed, both thinkers have provided media studies and cultural studies with a theoretical model allowing the understanding of our everyday reality as a virtual fiction based on the act of signification, but have done so in a mutually uninfluenced way – while Baudrillard makes little reference to Lacan or to psychoanalysis, Žižek makes very little reference to Baudrillard. And while Baudrillard’s emphasis is mostly maintained on the media and their role with regards to our perception of the world surrounding us, rather than on everyday signification and its relation to subjectivity, it is most interesting to note that his work is punctuated with nomenclatures that are familiar to Lacanian- and Žižekian-inclined media and

cultural theorists: indeed, he defines — albeit in a somewhat different way — such terms as the symbolic order, the Imaginary, and the Real, all of which are key concepts for the psychoanalytically inclined theorist. Of course, what Lacan (and Žižek) refer to as the symbolic order somewhat differs from Baudrillard's conception of it; however, both are grounded in the prevalence of the act of signification in the determination of the human experience of reality. In this respect, Baudrillard's thought is not as estranged from Lacanian psychoanalysis as one might initially believe. Lacan and Žižek consider our symbolically-mediated existence as incomplete and struck with the fundamental lack that accompanies any act of signification; it is this lack that produces a potential radicality one can encounter as a traumatic Real that lies beyond signification. In a somewhat similar way, Baudrillard also conceptualizes the Real as a realm with which the subject cannot interact, as it is rendered inaccessible by the constant mediascapes that rely both on signification and on perpetual simulation. In both cases, the Real exists — or rather ex-sists<sup>1</sup> — as “the impossible-real nucleus resisting symbolization” (Žižek 1989: 25) or, in Baudrillard's conception, as the inaccessible desert that lies beyond our hyperreal mediascape. Most importantly, in both cases the Real is thought of as that which eludes us through its resistance to symbolic reproduction; for both thinkers the real is inaccessible, albeit for different reasons.

In light of these common grounds between two theoretical frameworks that are seldom thought of as compatible, this paper aims to provide an understanding of the Real as it is perceived both by Baudrillard and Žižek — and, of course, Lacan. However, it is of crucial importance to note that the aim is in no way to endeavour upon a reading where Baudrillard's Real would be presented as equivalent to Lacan/Žižek's Real. Attempting to do so would require the perversion of Lacan's reliance on structuralism and Baudrillard's position as a postmodernist — a position he never acknowledged, but that is rightfully attributed to him all the same. Through the analysis of film discourses that deal specifically with the virtual and its necessary veiling of the Real, this paper will attempt to consolidate Baudrillard's notion of the Real with that put forward by

Lacan/Žižek; using these analyses, the Real will be discussed with regards to its opposition with a symbolic frame of signification and/or an imaginary frame of representation. I will first discuss *The Matrix* (Wachowski and Wachowski 1999), a most obvious film with regards to a (tentative) rendering of the Baudrillardian Real. Using the numerous and various discussions that followed the Wachowski brothers' direct reference to Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* in the film, I will attempt to build on the ensuing debates in order to ascertain the similarities both thinkers share in their conception of the Real through the analysis of *The Thirteenth Floor* (Rusnak 1999). As it will be shown, the implications and the importance of Baudrillard's theoretical framework with regards to media and cultural studies go way beyond the insert of a book within a film; his understanding of the Real can indeed supplement a purely psychoanalytic, Lacanian/Žižekian approach to the symbolic virtuality that surrounds us.

### ***“Welcome to the Real World”: Ontology and The Matrix***

In a critical article published in the wake of *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski and Wachowski 2003), Adam Gopnik ponders the outstanding obsession and cult following generated by the first film. After mentioning Žižek's *Matrix*-influenced *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*<sup>2</sup> as well as the growing number of college epistemology courses that supposedly used *The Matrix* as an object of study, he states that “[i]f the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard [...] has not yet embraced the film it may be because he is thinking of suing for a screen credit” (Gopnik 2003: unpaginated). Coincidentally, in a well-known interview published exactly one month later in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Baudrillard notoriously refuted the Wachowski brothers' use of his concepts of simulation and simulacrum as the underpinning of the ontological situation depicted in *The Matrix*. Stating that “there have been misinterpretations”, Baudrillard speculates on how the screenwriters/directors “took the hypothesis of the virtual for an irrefutable fact and transformed it into a visible phantasm” (quoted in Lancelin 2004: unpaginated). *The Matrix* does indeed pose certain theoretical problems with regards to its use of Baudrillard's opposition between a virtual hyperreality

maintained by continuous simulation and a Real that has become an inaccessible desert; at first hand, the film seems to confuse, as Baudrillard suggests, “the new problem posed by simulation” and its “classical, Platonic treatment” (quoted in Lancelin 2004: unpaginated). He goes on to note how “[t]he radical illusion of the world is a problem faced by all great cultures, which they have solved through art and symbolization,” eventually accusing the Wachowskis’ film of being highly reactionary, stating that “*The Matrix* is surely the kind of film about the matrix that the matrix would have been able to produce” (quoted in Lancelin 2004: unpaginated).

Indeed, one of the core theoretical and philosophical premises of the film is its Platonic tension between reality and representation, whereas Baudrillard’s ideas — at least those discussed in *Simulacra and Simulation*, a book that is directly referred to at the beginning of the film — concern the contemporary deadlock where there is no longer a foundation of truth behind the act of simulation. The Platonic tension between reality and its representation therefore implodes in Baudrillard’s examination of postmodern media; as he puts it, “[t]he impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real is of the same order as the impossibility of staging illusion. Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible” (Baudrillard 1994: 19). It is through such declarations that one can note the passage from the “modern”, situationist Baudrillard of *The Consumer Society* and *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, to the postmodern Baudrillard of *Simulacra and Simulation*. This transition is apparent in the opening lines of *Simulacra and Simulation*, where Baudrillard turns away from the dualistic relation between the real and its representation, stating that “[i]f we once were able to view the Borges fable in which the cartographers of the Empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up covering the territory exactly [...] as the most beautiful allegory of simulation, this fable has now come full circle for us, and possesses nothing but the discreet charm of second-order simulacra” (Baudrillard 1994: 1).<sup>3</sup> The direction his thought takes on in the 1980s influenced such postmodern theorists as Youssef Ishaghpour (1986), who interestingly claims that “an image no longer suffices as proof of reality; it needs other images

to reinforce itself: while reality has disappeared, images proclaim it exists because they themselves reproduce reproductions” (31, my translation). Obviously, the postmodern Baudrillard who brought complex reflections on simulation and the inaccessibility of the Real cannot be reduced to a Platonic tension between reality and illusion.

However, Baudrillard’s rebuttal should in no way bar the road to a Baudrillardian reading of *The Matrix*, nor should it deter us from attempting to consolidate Baudrillard’s ontology with Lacan’s, as both can indeed be analysed in the film. In this sense, the task of reconciling Baudrillard with *The Matrix* has been very accurately carried out by Randy Laist (2011), who sees the Wachowskis’ film as “one of the most interesting conversations to open up between philosophy and popular culture in recent decades.” The foundational posture from which Laist can attempt the consolidation of the Wachowskis’ film with its quoted source of influence relies on a question of analytical perspective. Indeed, as he notes, the film (obviously) invites us to identify with Neo (Keanu Reeves) and with the inhabitants of the Matrix; doing so brings us to “encounter a dualistic, Platonic division between reality and illusion” (Laist 2011: unpaginated). However, approaching the film through its reception, and hence from the perspective of the inhabitants of the “real 1999” rather than the film’s inhabitants of the “simulated 1999”, can provide a much more radical analysis — one where a Baudrillardian reading can function and be put into relation with a Lacanian/Žižekian reading.<sup>4</sup> In this regard, “[b]y performing a reading of *The Matrix* that emphasises its roundabout reference to its own contemporary historical moment, we can identify a sense in which the film authentically captures a Baudrillardian variety of space-time” (Laist 2011: unpaginated). And while Laist does indeed provide a most pertinent reading of the film through a Baudrillardian lense, situating the film within the “increasing cultural inquiry into the phenomenological issues associated with a new kind of mediated reality” (Laist 2011: unpaginated), it appears possible to add to this reconciliation of the film with Baudrillard by supplementing it with an inquiry into the question of a Real that lies beyond the incessant simulations of the hyperreal.

One of the most notable aspects of the film's depiction of a tension between Real and Symbolic, or between Real and hyperreal, is the idea — conveyed to Neo by Morpheus (Lawrence Fishburn) — that “no one can be told what the matrix is. You have to see it for yourself” (Wachowski and Wachowski 1999). Much in the same way as Lacan's notion of a Symbolic order that structures our everyday reality, the film insinuates its virtual reality as a system upon which occupants are defined according to their roles within it. As Morpheus puts it, “The Matrix is a system”, and within that system are “businessmen, teachers, lawyers, carpenters” (Wachowski and Wachowski 1999). In the same perspective, Žižek notes that the matrix is “[s]imply the Lacanian ‘big Other,’ the virtual symbolic order, the network that structures reality for us.” Just as the “subject doesn't speak, he ‘is spoken’ by the symbolic structure” (Žižek 1999: unpaginated), *The Matrix* provides an exemplary metaphor of a symbolic network (here the use of data networking makes the idea of a network doubly important) that provides the impalpable coordinates of subjective existence.

In this sense, one of the most interesting scenes within the film remains that of Neo's “birth” — his awakening within the “real” world veiled by the matrix. Upon sitting up in his pod, Neo has a view of that which could not be explained: he can see — as does the spectator through the camera's movements — the towers of pods containing every individual inhabiting the matrix. He sees the ‘Real matrix’ behind the matrix; rather than perceiving the inhabitants within their symbolic roles, he sees them *beyond* those roles and, most importantly, *beyond* their symbolically-mediated existence. Hence, there is a tension in this scene between the “coded” symbolic reality of the matrix and the matrix in its Real, physical form; this tension seems to resolve the impossible task that would be that of physically revealing the symbolic order. While a subject is in the matrix, its structure as well as its “Real” ontology remain beyond perception, much in the same way as the building blocks of any symbolic order — language, signifiers, the big Other, the objet a, etc. — are impossible to perceive. In other words, within the Wachowskis' film, if you can see the matrix, you are not *in* the matrix: beyond the birth scene where Neo can see the physical, Real matrix, the film

also provides scenes where the Nebuchadnezzar's crew can see the matrix as code that scrolls down computer screens. These filmic depictions of a tension between being *in* a symbolic realm and being *outside* it are perhaps one of the most radical moments of the film, as they confront the viewer with the ontological impossibility of seeing beyond his symbolic universe. Just as Lacan's conception of the Real represents that which cannot be spoken or represented, since it falls within the various blind spots of signification, you can't "be told what the matrix is." Not only does this relate to Lacan's notion of the impossibility of meta-language since there is no absolute point from which one could signify "outside of the enunciated content" (Flisfeder 2012: 46)<sup>5</sup>; it also suggests to the viewer of the film — those that Laist describes as inhabitants of the "real 1999" — that there is an imperceptible ontological level *beyond* signification. As Žižek reminds us, "the Real [...] escapes inscription (the Real of the sexual relation, for example); but at the same time, the Real is the writing itself as opposed to the signifier" (Žižek 2008: 193). It is for these reasons that one "can't be told what the matrix is": the matrix *is* the coded writing behind the symbolic universe depicted in the movie; the coding is real insofar as it escapes signification. As such, the film's "Real" ontology is the lieu of instinct and trauma.

It is interesting to note how *The Matrix* appears to mimic three separate ontological levels that can be related to Lacan's three registers of human existence. Of course, the actual matrix is an instance of the Lacanian symbolic, while the film's "desert of the real" represents that which lies beyond signification.<sup>6</sup> But the film also seems to rely on an intermediate level that can be seen to mimic the Lacanian Imaginary. This is most obvious when Morpheus explains the matrix to Neo while they are jacked into a virtual reality program referred to as "the construct." When Neo shows disbelief at the idea that they are inside a computer program, Morpheus answers "Is it really so hard to believe? Your clothes are different, the plugs in your arms and head are gone, your hair has changed. Your appearance now is what we call 'residual self-image'. It is the mental projection of your digital self" (Wachowski and Wachowski, 1999). Of course, this description perfectly echoes the psychoanalytical notion of the ideal



ego as the imaginary instance of fantasmatic projection where the subject falls for the lure encapsulated within representation. While “jacked into” the various training programs and — eventually — into the matrix itself, subjects are virtualized and, as such, lose touch with their Real selves. Life in the matrix is therefore deployed along the lines of a Borromean ontology: the inhabitants of the matrix exist symbolically through the code the matrix provides their existence with; they exist on the imaginary level through their appearance that covers what cannot be seen (the symbolic structure) and what cannot be signified (their Real predicament as slaves attached to a pod); and they exist in a physical, instinctual *Real-ity* they know nothing of, and that lies beyond any possible symbolization or representation beyond the matrix.

With this in mind, it is most interesting to note the organic quality that the directors chose to provide the film’s *Real-ity* as it is opposed to the symbolic universe of the matrix. Upon waking up, Neo quickly finds himself face to face with a giant arachnid-shaped machine that seems to be there to dispose of him. Once the machine has freed him from his spinal and cervical attachments to the matrix, Neo’s pod is literally “flushed” as he is “swallowed” by the throat-like tube that leads him to be evacuated, only to be saved by the umbilical-like claw of the Nebuchadnezzar. The world he “wakes up” in is decidedly opposed to the structured reality that was his in the matrix. It is in this sense that the Wachowskis’ rendition of Baudrillard’s “desert of the real” can be tied to a Lacanian version of this *Real-ity-as-desert*. For instance, all the machines within the film’s *Real-ity* are reminiscent of unpleasant insect-like life forms that seem to confer a certain abject quality to this ontological level of existence.<sup>7</sup> This detail is most important, since it conveys a sense of organicity to the machine-lead *Real-ity*, and accentuates the tension between the matrix-as-symbolic and the Real-as-beyond. Furthermore, it is possible to tie this Lacanian reading of the matrix and its beyond to a Baudrillardian conception of the film since “what Baudrillard defines as ‘reality’ or as code is equivalent with the Lacanian symbolic; for both thinkers this reality is mediated and to a large extent alienated by language and cultural norms” (Papadopoulos 2012: unpaginated). In this sense, it seems

important to redeem the idea of the “desert of the real” as it is depicted within *The Matrix*.

As is well known, *The Matrix* was immediately considered as a Baudrillardian-influenced film for two main reasons: a hollowed-out copy of Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* appears early on in the film, and Morpheus directly quotes the last sentence of one of the opening paragraphs of the book, when he welcomes Neo “to the desert of the real.” However, as Laist interestingly notes, “[t]he film does not show us the familiar, iconic edition of *Simulacra and Simulation*, [...] but a strange mock-up: a blue hardcover with embossed lettering that looks about ten times as thick as the actual book.” Noting how the film’s — and hence the matrix’s — version of the book even goes so far as placing the beginning of the chapter on nihilism on the wrong side, Laist suggests that “[t]he writers seem to be fairly direct in admitting that the Baudrillard to which their film alludes is a distorted, eviscerated simulacrum of the ‘real’ Baudrillard.” And because Neo’s copy of *Simulacra and Simulation* is necessarily one generated by the matrix, Laist concludes with the suggestion that “[t]he Wachowski brothers seem to be admitting their intention to stage a deceptive effigy of Baudrillardian concepts, requiring a thoughtful viewer to ask how *The Matrix* uses Baudrillardian ideas, rather than judging the film by whether or not it faithfully parrots them” (Laist 2011: unpaginated).<sup>8</sup> This provides legitimacy to the proposed reading of *The Matrix*, and also warrants an investigation into the meaning of the film’s depiction of a “desert of the Real.” Just as the film depicts a tension between the matrix-as-symbolic and the real-as-Real, the “real 1999” also has a relation to an inaccessible Real: here lies the true radicality of the film, one that is often unseen due to the film’s otherwise reactionary qualities.

As Žižek remarked in an article that preceded the 2003 release of both sequels to *The Matrix*, “in the sequel [...] we shall probably learn that the very ‘desert of the real’ is generated by (another) matrix” (Žižek 1999: unpaginated) – a decidedly Baudrillardian prediction that relies on the idea of infinite, perpetuating simulations of the real. While this did not turn out to be entirely true,

Žižek's prevision was correct in the sense that the film's *Real-ity* is in fact part of the equation. As we eventually find out, the machines discovered that despite their attempts to "balance the equation", an anomaly persisted, hence the existence of "the One". Neo is actually the sixth "One;" instead of playing a truly subversive and revolutionary role, his rebellion is merely part of the system: he is there to pick the individuals who are to rebuild Zion after its destruction by the machines. In this sense, the matrix trilogy is somewhat reactionary: its portrayal of rebellion is one of a rebellion that is necessary to the system and thus completes it, allowing it to perpetuate. As Laist points out, *The Matrix* is distinct from its sequels insofar as its sequels belong to a separate, post-9/11 epoch. "When we consider the first *Matrix* film in isolation, however, the delineation between reality and hyperreality is much more ambiguous than it becomes in its post-9/11 installments" (Laist 2011: unpaginated).<sup>9</sup> It is from this perspective that Laist proposes *The Matrix* as a film that "clearly holds a privileged place in the canon of 1990s hyperreality cinema" (2011: unpaginated). And while it is true that the first film is far less reactionary than its sequels when we consider it from the perspective of the "real 1999", it is also true that its astounding commercial success left certain other films from the same "hyperreal" cinematic trend in the dark. Indeed, other films from the same period, that explore similar ontological tensions, provide a much more drastic reflection on the various ontologies of human existence as they can be apprehended through both a Žižekian and Baudrillardian approach.

**"Show Me What Is Real": The Thirteenth Floor and the limits of ontology**

One such film, that very accurately explores the problematic limits between ontological levels of simulated (hyper)reality, is Josef Rusnak's *The Thirteenth Floor*, adapted from Daniel Galouye's *Simulacron 3*, and in which computer scientist Hannon Fuller (Armin Mueller-Stahl), who has created a fully functioning simulated world, eventually discovers that he himself inhabits a simulated universe. After having left a letter detailing this discovery for his colleague Douglas Hall (Craig Bierko) within the simulated world they created, a 1930s-era

Los Angeles, he is murdered, leaving Hall as the prime suspect. When Hall “jacks into” the system in order to understand what his mentor was attempting to tell him, he is faced with the traumatic discovery, and brings the viewer to several most interesting moments where ontological levels are left highly problematized. Indeed, while *The Matrix* provides viewers from the “real 1999” with an interesting perspective on the simulated aspect of their relation to a *Real-ity* beyond the confines of mediation, its representation of a “desert of the Real” avoids the ultimate traumatic dimension that marks Lacan’s Real — as well as its rearticulation by Žižek. *The Thirteenth Floor*, however, provides a much more radical reflection on the problematic relation our epoch maintains with a Real beyond signification — a reflection that calls for an analytical reading based on the Baudrillardian/Žižekian/Lacanian paradigm I have proposed so far.

Our ontological reality, as well as our subjective existence as viewers, is problematized as early on as the opening quote of the film. Indeed, Rusnak most interestingly chose to precede the film’s opening titles with the Cartesian *cogito* (“I think, therefore I am”), only to follow with Fuller’s voice-over reading of the letter he wrote to Hall which reads: “[t]hey say ignorance is bliss. For the first time in my life, I agree. I wish I had never uncovered the awful truth” (Rusnak 1999). These two items — the Cartesian *cogito* and the well-known proverb that originates from Thomas Gray’s *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*<sup>10</sup> — are of course diametrically opposed: while Descartes believed subjectivity to be at the center of cognitive processes, “ignorance is bliss” focuses on the idea that an ultimate pleasure lies *beyond* cognition. This is highly noteworthy from a Lacanian/Žižekian point of view, since Lacan’s conception of subjectivity has little to do with — and is notoriously in opposition to — Descartes’ *cogito*. Descartes believed the Ego to be defined by an individual’s capacity for thought; for Lacan, as is well known, subjectivity is based on an individual’s position within a given symbolic order, and therefore relies on the *subjection* to an Other and to desire. Furthermore, contra Descartes, Lacan’s conception of the Ego is grounded in the fundamental lure that is our existence on the Imaginary level. Hence, Descartes’ “I think” is in fact separated from his “I am” by the ontological barriers between

Symbolic, Imaginary and Real. By placing the Cartesian *cogito* against the idea according to which pleasure lies within the absence of knowledge, Rusnak is in fact setting the tone for the ontological complexity that is at the heart of his film. Here, bliss results from the ignorance of what lies beyond the symbolic, but only at the condition of it being conceived in retrospect; without the knowledge of a given trauma, there would be no ignorance to wish for. In *The Thirteenth Floor*, the characters' discovering the limits of a hyperreal symbolic order necessarily hints at the existence of a Real beyond signification, something that is regularly kept from being hinted at within mainstream cinema.

From a Baudrillardian perspective, on the other hand, one of the most notable elements of Rusnak's film remains the idea of a simulation within a simulation. While *The Matrix* can lend itself to a Baudrillardian analysis once we consider it from the perspective of its reception, *The Thirteenth Floor* also provides a Baudrillardian radicality from a diegetic perspective. By having the viewer identify with protagonists that turn out to be the inhabitants of a simulated world, the film provides the coordinates for a much more traumatic instance of a Real beyond simulation — one that allows for further exploration from a Baudrillardian-Žižekian perspective. Because the Real is lost behind the multitudinous simulations within the narrative, the film is in fact much closer to a truly Baudrillardian representation of the hyperreal. When Hall asks Jane (Gretchen Mol) how many simulated worlds there are similar to the one he exists in, she answers “thousands”, adding that “yours is the only one that ever created a simulation within the simulation” (Rusnak 1999). But the short glimpse we get of the reality behind the simulation(s) in *The Thirteenth Floor* reveals a reality that also appears highly simulacral, with its representation that relies on an extensive use of CGI and visual effects. In light of this, one can only wonder if it is not, rather, that the world Hall exists in is the only one *known* to have created a simulation within the simulation. Given the infinitesimal peek the viewer gets at the reality to which Hall's simulated world belongs to, the film seems designed for speculation on the part of the viewer. And in the final analysis, the very fact that a simulation can create a simulation gives Rusnak's film an extremely

Baudrillardian facet, as it investigates simulation and simulacra as complex acts of mediation that have no foothold in the Real. For Baudrillard, simulation is “a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say [...] an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes” (Baudrillard 1994: 2). Through its simulation within the simulation, *The Thirteenth Floor* evacuates the more traditional, Platonic approach to the criticism of a virtual realm ruled by ideology as it is depicted in *The Matrix*. It articulates this criticism through a postmodern stance by suggesting that the Real is not that which *can* be reproduced, but rather that which *is already* lost in a never-ending string of reproduction and simulation; it is so impossibly distanced from us that it becomes that which we no longer need to think or search for. In this perspective, Rusnak’s film provides a much more radical filmic experience once it attempts to reveal the limits of the ontological realms it depicts.

In a way, *The Thirteenth Floor* seems to provide its main character — and the viewer — with the emblematic “third pill” Žižek so interestingly requests in Sophie Fiennes’ *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*, in reference to the two pills Morpheus offers Neo in *The Matrix*. By gradually revealing how Douglas’ reality is just as simulated as the 1930s-era Los Angeles he created with Fuller, and by problematizing the basis of subjective existence within these simulacra, Rusnak indeed brings the viewer to “perceive not the reality behind the illusion, but reality in illusion itself” (Žižek, quoted in Fiennes 2006). In this way, *The Thirteenth Floor* goes beyond the ontological reflections proposed by *The Matrix*; while the latter does pose interesting questions on the viewer’s position within a symbolically-mediated hyperreality in which any relation to the Real is virtually impossible, it does not reveal the ontological barriers that separate these realms. As such, the former turns out to be a much more radical filmic experience with regards to our connection to these barriers separating the realms of human existence in a hyperreal symbolic order.

One of the crucial moments of this radical experience is, of course, Douglas' discovery of the limits to his own symbolic universe, and the events that lead to it. While attempting to recover the letter Fuller left for him in the simulation of 1930s Los Angeles, Hall ends up discovering that the barman Fuller left the letter to, Jerry Ashton (Vincent D'Onofrio), actually read the letter and applied its confession to his own reality.<sup>11</sup> This leads to an ontological confusion between the characters, a confusion that is necessarily conveyed to the first-time viewer: Ashton tells Hall how he followed the letter's instructions and drove "through the desert" to "the ends of the earth," and how the view that revealed itself to him "scared [him] to the depths of [his] miserable soul." It is of paramount importance that the flashback shot showing Ashton getting out of the car and viewing the "ends of the earth" is not followed by a reverse shot of what it is he is looking at: this maintains — at least for a while — an idea of something traumatic that lies beyond the known world, and most importantly beyond symbolization. But of course, the viewer knows, as does Hall, that the 1930s-era simulation of Los Angeles is "a sham," a computerized simulation. This leaves Hall wondering why Fuller would write to him "about the limitations of the system." It is only after encountering Fuller's daughter Jane in another identity — as Natasha Molinaro, a supermarket clerk — that he understands what it was that Fuller was trying to tell him. In the same manner as Ashton did in the 1930s simulation, Hall drives "through the desert" and makes it to the "end of the world," only this time the reverse shot is shown once he gets out of his car: we literally see Hall's physical reality "end" as the horizon expands through computerized wire-frames.<sup>12</sup> Hall understands at that moment the "truth" Fuller wanted to relay to him: his world is as simulated as the 1930s-era Los Angeles he created with his mentor. In a rare filmic instance, we are shown what lies beyond traditional computer-generated simulacra.

Through its depiction of a chain of simulations leading to a hyperreality with no possible action or contact in the Real, *The Thirteenth Floor* reveals a most interesting discourse both from a Baudrillardian and a Lacanian/Žižekian analytical point of view. By confronting the viewer with an instance of

Baudrillard's third order of simulacrum, the film makes no tangible distinction between various simulations: they are all perfectly-functioning machines that reproduce reality without any possibility for change. Through this filmic discourse on virtuality and our own relation to a Real beyond language and signification, Rusnak — as well as Galouye, the author of *Simulacron 3* — delivers a discourse on ideology that can be read through both the theoretical lenses of Baudrillard and Žižek (and Lacan before him). In attempting to consolidate Lacan and Baudrillard, Papadopoulos notes how “[b]oth thinkers see ideology as a structural form, rather than a misguided content,” adding that for both “[t]he ideological construction of reality becomes a function of the representational systems (predominantly language) that the subjects share and use in their effort to communicate and symbolize their environment.” But most importantly (at least in the perspective of this paper), “[b]oth thinkers seem to share a certain kind of attachment to a state of affairs before, or maybe beyond, language. The Real for the Lacanians, as well as Symbolic Exchange for Baudrillard, provide the possibility of a utopia that is necessary for ideology critique and more importantly is necessary as a point of rupture that can facilitate the possibility of radical liberation” (Papadopoulos 2012: unpaginated). Despite the fact that Papadopoulos mainly discusses the “modern” Baudrillard of *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, with little attention paid to the postmodern Baudrillard of *Simulacra and Simulation*, his attempt to consolidate both theoretical standpoints is operational insofar as it addresses the idea Baudrillard maintains of a Real beyond the simulacrum and the hyperreal. From this perspective, *The Thirteenth Floor* proves to be a radical film that challenges the viewer to rethink the intricacies of his own relation to simulation and the symbolic.

The critique of our postmodern ideological predicament — where subjectivity is founded on language, desire on the necessary lack signification implies, and where a Real state of existence is dissimulated under the constant simulation of never-ending mediascapes — is cleverly addressed in *The Thirteenth Floor*. Just as the film places the viewer in the midst of a complex relation to ontology, the various conversations that punctuate the unravelling of



the ontological plot twist generate a most interesting discourse on the shortcomings of representation and simulation. This is best evidenced in the scene where Hall's assistant Jason Whitney (Vincent D'Onofrio) jacks into the 1930s-era Los Angeles simulation in order to find out more, and gets killed, propelling his avatar Jerry Ashton's conscience into his 1999 body. When a security agent notices Whitney/Ashton acting strangely, he contacts Hall so that he can assess the situation. As Hall arrives, Whitney/Ashton is sitting in amazement in front of a wall of televised images. When Hall addresses him, his only answer is to reply, in a most striking reflection: "All these pictures, this is your world?" (Rusnak 1999). This reply is most important, as it hints at the film's complex discourse on simulation and its effects on the relation with *Real*-ity. Whitney/Ashton is drawn into the lure of Imaginary representation to such an extent that when Hall turns the televisions off, he very candidly asks "Hey! What did you do to the world?" (Rusnak 1999). And when Hall explains that there is another world "on top of" the one they are in, Whitney/Ashton insists, in a highly childlike manner, that he wants to see it. His fascination again acts on an Imaginary level: it veils the trauma of his highly contingent existence, that is immaterial and seems doomed to be trapped in various virtual spaces where the Real is never more than an evanescent concept.

***"Are we still in the game?"***

In the final analysis, the possibility of consolidating the Baudrillardian Real with its Lacanian/Žižekian counterpart hinges on its status as concept. Of course this is the ultimate deadlock we encounter when theorizing the Real: if the Real, in its Lacanian/Žižekian conception, is that which resists imaginary representation and lies beyond symbolic signification, how can we conceive it? The same can be asked of the Baudrillardian "desert" of the Real: if the Real is always-already reproduced and inaccessible from within the (hyper)realm of the simulacrum, how can it be theorized? As Papadopoulos (2012) notes when discussing the similarities between Baudrillard's and Lacan's Real: "[d]iscursive formations create a veil of meaning that is superimposed on the physical world and gives

rise to human interaction and social reality” (unpaginated), a wording that allows us to tackle the notion of the Real from a Lacanian/Žižekian *and* a Baudrillardian standpoint. Although the Real cannot be symbolized, represented or simulated, it is always-already present as a traumatic beyond, as a lack in the field of meaning. As Žižek notes, “nothing is lacking in the Real — that is, the lack is introduced only by the symbolization; it is a signifier which introduces a void, an absence in the Real” (Žižek 2008: 191). In this way, films that discuss our relation to virtual realms or ubiquitous mediascapes — such as those discussed here — hold the potential for radical filmic discourses: they can potentially generate a reception where the viewer is brought to problematize his own relation to the socio-symbolic realm he exists in and, most importantly, his relation to the Real this realm dissimulates.

While *The Matrix* and *The Thirteenth Floor* provide analytical paths allowing one to consolidate Baudrillard’s and Žižek’s (and Lacan’s) notion of the Real, I would like to close this reflection by pondering the complexity of this consolidation as it can appear through David Cronenberg’s *eXistenZ*, also — and highly coincidentally — released in 1999. While similar to Rusnak’s film insofar as it plunges its unknowing viewer into the midst of a simulation within a simulation, Cronenberg’s film is focused on the ubiquitousness of videogames and, as such, provides a distinct reflection on our relation to a virtual hyperreal. The film opens with most of the characters beginning a demo session for a new virtual-reality videogame titled *eXistenZ*; once in the game, the two main characters end up jacking into another virtual “game-within-the-game.” It is only at the end of the film that the viewer understands that the main ontological level narrativized in the film (where the characters play *eXistenZ*) is in fact also a simulation. In the “real” ontological and diegetic level of the film, the characters are actually playing the game *TransCendenZ*. As such, in a way similar to *The Thirteenth Floor*, *eXistenZ* provides a complex array of ontological levels that echoes Baudrillard’s third order of simulacrum. However, in Cronenberg’s film, the deceit appears more complex because of its filmic rendering; it implies that if *eXistenZ* is the game within the game, existence (or ex-sistence) is the Real

within the illusion. As such, much in the same way as Rusnak's film, *eXistenZ* seems to correspond to the idea of a "third pill" Žižek requests in *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*.

Furthermore, the film holds a particular kinship to Baudrillard's theoretical framework in light of its relation to iconoclasm. Throughout the film, diegetic discussions include references to the strong feeling of derealisation that accompanies existence within hypereal realms. For instance, when Allegra (Jennifer Jason Leigh) and Ted (Jude Law) pull into a rural gas station in order for Ted to be fitted with a bioport (the orifice that allows the highly organic umbilicus to link a human to the organ-like game-pod), they are greeted by a character (played by Willem Defoe) who simply goes by the name of Gas. Surprised by the fact that Gas can also (very illegally) fit people with bioports, Ted asks him what his life was like before he was taken into the world of videogames, to which he answers "I operated a gas station". When Ted responds by asking "you still operate a gas station, don't you?," Gas states that is so "only on the most pathetic level of reality," a most striking response from a Baudrillardian perspective on simulation and the individual's relation to reality. This is a first hint at a discourse on iconoclasm within the film, as Allegra and Ted turn out to be "realists" that set out against the creator of *TransCendenZ*, claiming — almost in a post-situationist stance — that his role as one of the world's leading game developers makes him an enemy of reality. In another scene imbued with a critical approach to simulation and hyperreality, Ted and Allegra pause their game of *eXistenZ* in order for him to regain contact with his "reality". He then states "I'm feeling a little disconnected from my real life. I'm kinda losing touch with the texture of it," adding how "I think there's an element of psychosis involved here." (Cronenberg 1999). Through remarks such as these, *eXistenZ* provides a very strong discourse on the inaccessibility of the Real via the presence of a discourse that echoes that of Baudrillard. Even at the end of the film, we are unsure where the string of simulations ends, as one of the players asks Allegra and Ted, who are on a killing spree motivated by their realist claims, if they "are [...] still in the game?" (Cronenberg 1999). As the end credits

roll immediately after this ontological question, the viewer can legitimately wonder if the ontological level presented is in fact the “real” one, given that what he believed to be the main ontological level just a few minutes before turned out to be a simulation. In this way, *eXistenZ* is similar to *The Thirteenth floor* insofar as — contra *The Matrix* — they both avoid the pitfalls of “showing” the Real: both films instil doubt in the viewer’s mind vis-à-vis the authenticity of the *Real*-ity they very briefly present.

The “realism” defended by the characters in *eXistenZ* can be tied to the Lacanian/Žižekian concept of the Real through the very brief Baudrillardian analysis I have proposed here. Indeed, the key idea is again that of a *beyond*: the “Real-ists” in the film claim there is a form of technological alienation from a “true” state of existence. As such, they conceive this Real as an ontological level the impossibility of which is echoed both in a Baudrillardian perspective and in a Lacanian/Žižekian perspective: the Real they strive to defend lies in ruins under the infinite replications of simulated hyperrealities; it is also conceived from the impossible perspective of the symbolic, and as such represents an impossible state that can only be conceived in retrospect. As Žižek proposes, “[t]he Real is [...] simultaneously both the hard, impenetrable kernel resisting symbolization *and* a pure chimerical entity which has in itself no ontological consistency” (Žižek 2008: 190). This conception of the Real is situated at the juncture of two thinkers that have more in common than what has been largely admitted so far; as such, it deserves an attention that reaches far beyond the scope of this paper. As we well know, Žižek has written and elaborated extensively on Lacan’s notion of the Real, allowing media and film scholars (among others) to address the radicality of today’s various mediascapes. And while the analyses proposed here have allowed a brief understanding of contemporary cultural preoccupations, perhaps the time has come for Žižekians to expand on the notion of the Real as that which lies beyond. In doing so, it would seem only pertinent to turn to Baudrillard for further theoretical and philosophical inquiries.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For more on Lacan's use of the term "ex-sistence" as "an existence that stands apart", see Fink (1995: 122).

<sup>2</sup> While the title of Žižek's book is obviously influenced by *The Matrix*, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* is in fact dedicated to questions that do not concern the Wachowskis' film, but rather those related to a post-9/11 epoch.

<sup>3</sup> Baudrillard's recourse to Borges' fable to illustrate the first orders of simulation seems to echo Debord's stance on the society of the spectacle. The reference is most obvious in thesis 31 of *The Society of the Spectacle*, where Debord claims that "[t]he spectacle is the map to this new world, a map which covers precisely its territory. The very powers which escaped us *show themselves* to us in all their force" (Debord 1970: 33, emphasis in text).

<sup>4</sup> The true potential of film and media studies lies precisely within an approach where the spectator is the center of interest. This is perhaps one of the fundamental differences between traditional film psychoanalysis such as 1970s *Screen Theory* and the contemporary film psychoanalysis advocated by Žižek as well as Joan Copjec and Todd McGowan, to name but a few. Early psychoanalytical film theory conceptualized film reception essentially through the specular identification narrative films usually encourage and, in doing so, neglected the more radical aspects of spectatorship that lie beyond the specular. The true radicality of film and media lies in the effects cultural discourses can have on viewers' subjectivity through the construction of desire, the problematization of cultural fantasies, and the relation to the gaze as objet a. Hence, any diegetic analysis should be supplemented by the question of reception. For more on these topics, see Žižek (1992), Copjec (1994), Cowie (1997) and McGowan (2007).

<sup>5</sup> In a detailed passage on metalanguage, Matthew Flisfeder goes on to explain "metalanguage is Real in the sense that 'it is impossible to *occupy* its position'" (Flisfeder 2012: 46). In light of this, we can better understand the idea that "no one can be told what the matrix is," since the person attempting to describe it would actually be trying to adopt the impossible position of metalanguage.

<sup>6</sup> While it occupies an ontological position similar to the Lacanian Real, and despite the impossibility of "speaking" it from within the matrix, the film's "Real"-ity does not quite correspond to the Lacanian Real insofar as language does exist in its realm. In the attempt to read *The Matrix* from the Baudrillardian/Žižekian perspective I am proposing, I will refer to this ontological level as the film's *Real-ity*.

<sup>7</sup> This aspect of the film is most interesting, as it depicts an opposition between an aseptic symbolic order and an abject and organic Real, much the same as the *Alien* franchise opposes the scientific, phallogocentric and structured world of the humans with the organic, unfathomable, feminine, and ultimately highly abject reality of the xenomorphs. In fact, the machine world's resemblance to the various spaces inhabited by the xenomorphs is most striking, ranging from its bleak and dark qualities to its arachnoid and reptilian resemblance. For more on the question of the feminine abject and the *Alien* franchise, see Creed (1993).

<sup>8</sup> While one could undoubtedly argue that Laist's interpretation is somewhat extrapolated, it is important to note that using a mock-up copy of *Simulacra and Simulation* in the film is logistically much more complex for the artistic direction than simply using a purchased copy of the book. This provides a discursive intention to the

choice of the prop used in the scene, and hence gives great credibility to Laist's reading of this detail.

<sup>9</sup> In his attempt to reconcile *The Matrix* with a Baudrillardian reading, Laist adequately remarks how "[i]t is significant that Baudrillard's response to *The Matrix* refers to both the original 1999 film and its 2003 sequel, *Matrix: Reloaded*." Noting how the first film represents the "crowning example of several interrelated trends in Hollywood movies of the 1990s," he insists on a distinction between it and its sequels on the basis that they in fact belong both to different eras and to different cinematic genres (Laist 2011: unpaginated).

<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that this particular proverb ("ignorance is bliss") also appears in *The Matrix*, when Cypher (Joe Pantoliano) discusses his reinsertion into the matrix with an agent. In both films, the presence of this proverb plays a crucial role: it emphasises the ideological role of any symbolic order in keeping the traumatic reality of a contingent existence at bay.

<sup>11</sup> When Hall asks Ashton what was in the letter, Ashton simply replies "everything!" This is most interesting from a Lacanian point of view: it is as if the letter, as well as the ultimate ontological truth it contains, represents an instance of an otherwise impossible metalanguage — a language that accomplishes the impossible task of *speaking the Real*.

<sup>12</sup> In a Baudrillardian perspective, it seems important to note how both characters must go through the desert to attain the limit of their ontological reality and to experience what can only be referenced as a "desert of the Real" — one that has far more in common with Baudrillard than that portrayed in *The Matrix*.

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## Abstract

This paper aims to propose a tentative consolidation of Baudrillard's notion of the Real as that which is inaccessible through its status as always-already reproduced, and Žižek's development of Lacan's notion of the Real as that which resists symbolic signification and imaginary representation. While both notions (as well as their authors) bear obvious variances, they also share similarities insofar as they designate an unapproachable *beyond* that can only be apprehended in retrospect. Through the analysis of *The Matrix* and its criticized ties to Baudrillard's ontological stance on simulacra and simulation, that I tie to a Žižekian ontology, I venture a Baudrillardian/Žižekian/Lacanian frame that is then used to discuss *The Thirteenth Floor*, a film that appears much more radical in its problematization of the Real. By proposing a parallel conception of the Real through Baudrillard and Žižek, the aim of this paper is first and foremost the opening of Žižekian media studies to Baudrillard's theoretical framework.