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In the Mirror of the Matrix: The Labyrinth of Anomie and Simulation in the Digital Age

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Abstract

The Matrix trilogy emerges as a philosophical work questioning the complex structure of modern society and the individual's place within it. This article examines *the Matrix* films in light of Émile Durkheim's concept of anomie and Jean Baudrillard's simulation theory, attempting to understand the intricate structure of today's digital society. Anomie, a condition resulting from the weakening or collapse of social norms, perfectly reflects the situation of humans in *the Matrix* universe. Simulation theory, defining a world of signs and symbols that replace reality, demonstrates that the Matrix itself is a perfect example of simulation. The article relates themes such as alienation, loss of meaning, and questioning of reality perception experienced by the characters in the films to the problems of today's digital age. New social dynamics created by technologies such as social media, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence are reinterpreted in light of Durkheim and Baudrillard's theories. In conclusion, this examination through *the Matrix* trilogy provides a powerful tool not only for understanding the films but also for analysing the complex structure of the digital age we live in and making predictions about the future. While this analysis helps understand how the perception of reality is shaped and how social norms evolve, it allows to rethink the position of the individual in the digital age.

Keywords: The Matrix Trilogy, Anomie, Baudrillard, Durkheim, Simulation Theory.

Matrix'in Aynasında: Dijital Çağın Anomi ve Simülasyon Labirenti

Öz

Matrix üçlemesi, modern toplumun karmaşık yapısını ve bireyin bu yapı içindeki yerini sorgulayan felsefi bir eser olarak karşımıza çıkar. Bu makale, Émile Durkheim'in anomi kavramı ve Jean Baudrillard'ın simülasyon teorisi ışığında *Matrix* filmlerini inceleyerek, günümüz dijital toplumunun karmaşık yapısını anlamaya çalışmaktadır. Anomi, toplumsal normların zayıflaması veya çökmesi sonucu ortaya çıkan bir durum olarak, Matrix evrenindeki insanların içinde bulunduğu durumu mükemmel bir şekilde yansıtır. Simülasyon teorisi ise, gerçekliğin yerini alan işaretler ve semboller dünyasını tanımlayarak, Matrix'in kendisinin mükemmel bir simülasyon örneği olduğunu gösterir. Makale, filmlerdeki karakterlerin yaşadığı yabancılaşma, anlam kaybı ve gerçeklik algısının sorgulanması gibi temaları, günümüz dijital çağının problemleriyle ilişkilendirir. Sosyal medya, sanal gerçeklik ve yapay zekâ gibi teknolojilerin yarattığı yeni toplumsal dinamikler, Durkheim ve Baudrillard'ın teorileri ışığında yeniden yorumlanır. Sonuç olarak, *Matrix* üçlemesi üzerinden yapılan bu inceleme, sadece filmleri anlamak için değil, aynı zamanda içinde yaşadığımız dijital çağın karmaşık yapısını çözümlenmek ve geleceğe dair öngörülerde bulunmak için de güçlü bir araç sunmaktadır. Bu analiz, gerçeklik algımızın nasıl şekillendiğini ve toplumsal normların nasıl evrildiğini anlamamıza yardımcı olurken, dijital çağda bireyin konumunu yeniden düşünmemizi sağlar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Matrix Üçlemesi, Anomi, Baudrillard, Durkheim, Simülasyon Teorisi.

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Introduction

Philosophical discourse has extensively centred around the sense of alienation and the absence of significance that individuals undergo through the indeterminate framework of contemporary society. These talks indeed follow many trajectories and endure changes as technology and societies mutually influence one another. Émile Durkheim's theory of anomie and Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation will be the main filters to evaluate *the Matrix* trilogy, which is considered a very influential and representative piece of popular culture from the late 20th century. In that respect, this article seeks to evaluate *the Matrix* trilogy within the framework of cultures experiencing a feeling of dislocation and challenging the concept of reality.

The Wachowski sisters directed *the Matrix* trilogy (*The Matrix*, 1999; *The Matrix Reloaded*, 2003; *the Matrix Revolutions*, 2003), with its philosophical depth and the theme of technological dystopia, which occupies an important place in the history of modern cinema. The films depict a future in which humanity lives in a simulation controlled by machines. In this scenario, it leads to deep thoughts about how the perception of reality can be manipulated and how the concept of "truth" itself can be questioned. The concept of reality and its true understanding could be considered the epitome of human achievement, as it continues to be a subject of inquiry among numerous scientists. Agent Smith's words while he is interrogating Morpheus are noteworthy: "[h]ave you ever stood and stared at it, marvelled at its beauty, its genius? Billions of people just living out their lives, oblivious" (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999). Through the lens of irony and complexity, one might arrive at a profound conclusion. Smith is praising the Matrix as a stunning and brilliant creation, referring to it as a virtual reality. This emphasises the indistinct boundary between actuality and imitation within the film's realm. Conversely, the term 'oblivious' indicates that individuals inside the Matrix are ignorant of their actual circumstances. This pertains to the film's examination of the contrast between ignorance and unsettling truth. Therefore, the very existence of a potential simulation would fundamentally alter all our current knowledge. In his 1977 speech in Metz, Philip K. Dick posited the notion that perhaps none of us truly has an existence.² The concept constitutes the fundamental principle of the Matrix triangle and embodies the existential dilemma faced by contemporary individuals. In the movie *The Matrix*, this concept is represented by Morpheus's well-known inquiry to Neo: "What is real? How do you define real? If you're talking about what you can feel, what you can smell, what you can taste and see, then real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain."³ Similar to the question Morpheus poses, some profound philosophical inquiries concerning the essence of reality, and the reliability of our perceptions are also relevant. As Dick foresaw, the individuals within the Matrix universe are indeed components of a computer-generated simulation, which serves as a testament to the precarious nature of our notion of actuality. Furthermore, this paper also intends to contribute to the ongoing debate on the intervention of digital culture, popular media and sociological theory. Through relating Durkheim's concept of anomie and Baudrillard's simulation theory to *The Matrix* trilogy it is aimed to illuminate the complex dynamics of contemporary digital society. Finally, this article builds upon preceding work in this area, such as Merrin's (2003) exploration of Baudrillard's influence on *The Matrix* and extends it to consider more recent technological developments and their societal implications.⁴

1. Anomie: The Anatomy of Social Disintegration

Émile Durkheim first coined the term 'anomie' in his 1897 work *Suicide*. According to him, anomie arises with the decadence and weakening of societies. In this case the individuals lose their societal connections and experience a feeling of absence. Durkheim states that this condition is seen in the process of fast pacing changes of societies.

² YouTube, "Philip K Dick Speech (Interpreter Edited out) in Metz, France, 1977," *YouTube* 17 May 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQbYiXyRZjM&t=285s>

³ Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski, dirs., *The Matrix* (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1999).

⁴ William Merrin, "Did You Ever Eat Tasty Wheat?: Baudrillard and The Matrix," *Scope: An Online Journal of Film and Television Studies* (2003). <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/scope/documents/2003/may-2003/merrin.pdf>

According to Durkheim anomie is a state where norms (expectations on behaviours) are confused, unclear or not present.⁵ This definition quintessentially reflects the situation of the people in the Matrix universe. Humanity under the control of the machines exactly resides in this anomie. People living in a simulated reality, disconnected from the real world, try to exist in an environment where social norms and values lose their meaning. Such a way of life has lost its purpose and path and has now created a semi-zombie bot⁶-like people who live aimlessly only with the instinct to survive at a subconscious level. This is also emphasized by the words of the Morpheus in the film: “What is the Matrix? Control. The Matrix is a computer-generated dream world built to keep us under control to change a human being into this.” [Morpheus holds up a battery]⁷ This quotation emphasizes that individuals are unaware of their current circumstances, and they have already assumed the role of a control mechanism. This condition presents a precise parallelism with Durkheim’s anomie concept. People have lost the meaning of the social structure they live in, leading to a feeling of purposelessness. At this point, it would be appropriate to focus on some key scenes in the films in order to examine the reflections of the concept of anomie in *The Matrix* trilogy in more detail.

1.1. Anomic Shock and the order of Society

The shock that Neo experiences after being removed from the Matrix system is a perfect example of an anomic state. Having spent his entire life in a simulation that he had thought was real, Neo encounters a profound sense of alienation and meaninglessness when he confronts to the real world. Morpheus’s words to him summarise this situation intensely:

“Welcome to the real world, Neo.”⁸ This scene displays analogies with Durkheim’s observations of the effects of anomie on the individual. Durkheim puts forward the idea that “[w]hen society is disturbed by some painful crisis or by beneficent but abrupt transitions, it is momentarily incapable of exercising this influence.”⁹ The crisis and reality shock Neo experiences when he is disengaged from the Matrix system brings him to the brink of death and paralysed with experiencing mental breakdown.

The underground city of Zion, where people who have fled the Matrix are trying to overcome anomie, can be seen as an example of an effort to overcome anomie. The inhabitants of Zion try to establish a new social order, away from the control of the machines. However, this new order also contains contradictions and difficulties. The ideological conflict between Commander Lock and Morpheus shows the difficulty of how to determine norms and values in a newly established society. Moreover, the reality of Zion is also questionable. Although Neo has powers in the real Matrix universe, the fact that he can stop sentinels in the real world raises the suspicion that Zion may be a layer within the simulation:

The idea of a separate observer and observed universe doesn’t exist in quantum physics. Not only does quantum physics disrupt the whole idea of subject-object separation, but it opens a door that many physicists are uncomfortable with: we may not be living in an “objective” reality after all! In fact, our consciousness is so interconnected with reality that we may be living in a set of interconnected subjective realities.¹⁰

Similarly, according to Durkheim, if the reorganization necessary wherever social instability take place is not produced at once, the state of anomie endures.¹¹ These words present the situation whereby the shift from the simulated realm to the so-called ‘actual’ realm in the Matrix gives rise to a condition of deep-seated societal turmoil

⁵ Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson. (New York: Free Press, 1997).

⁶ Traditionally speaking bots are computer-controlled characters in games bereft of autonomy

⁷ Wachowski and Wachowski, *The Matrix*.

⁸ Wachowski and Wachowski, *The Matrix*.

⁹ Durkheim, *Suicide*, 12.

¹⁰ Rizwan Virk, *The Simulation Hypothesis: An MIT Computer Scientist Shows Why AI, Quantum Physics and Eastern Mystics Agree We Are in a Video Game* (Mountain View, California: Bayview Books, 2019), intro. 11.

¹¹ Durkheim, *Suicide*, 12.

identical to the one elucidated by Durkheim. Upon liberating themselves from the Matrix, individuals undergo a profound disintegration of their perceived societal norms and structures, resulting in a state of abnormality or anomaly. The resolution of this distortion cannot be achieved promptly as liberated humans must adjust to a wholly novel reality, emphasising the caution that the anomie will persist unless Durkheim's reconstruction is promptly executed. In addition, within the simulated realm of the Matrix, when the characters start to doubt the authenticity of their existence, there is a possibility for abnormality to arise. This abnormality leads to disruptions in social order that jeopardise the overall stability of the simulation. This analogy emphasises the significant metaphorical role that the concept of simulation plays in *the Matrix*, enabling the exploration of sociological concepts like as the abnormality and fragility of social order.

This fragility of society also causes rapid ruptures and subsequent collapses within the norms - no matter how carefully or strongly the system has been constructed. Cypher's desire to return to the Matrix represents the desperation and search for meaning experienced by an individual in an anomic society. Cypher cannot stand the hardships of the real world and prefers to return to the simulated reality. His words summarize this situation strikingly: "Why, oh why, didn't I take the blue pill?"¹² This scene puts the emphasis on an important part in Durkheim's theory: the weakening of social ties makes individuals more vulnerable and disoriented.

2. Simulation Theory and Hyperreality

It may be that the concept of living in a simulation is nearly as old as mankind itself, despite the fact that the prospect of living in a simulation may appear to be one of the most fascinating possibilities of the present day. It is impossible to advance this discussion beyond the current level of speculation or likelihood without understanding previous civilisations and the written works passed down from the past. One could argue that all debates about the origin of the universe and the existence of man are part of a simulation that has been going on since the beginning of time. In other words, all the theories about the universe's formation, from Anaximander to Plato, and from Ovid to the Big Bang theorists, may have advanced similarly. However, before we have completely solved the riddle of the cosmos, none of them will be able to empirically offer us an equation that is appropriate for either inductive or deductive from a cosmogonic or theogonic point of view. Even though the scenario may look different from current faiths, references to a simulated universe are possible. At first inspection, this idea is not completely insane.¹³

The theory of simulation, set forth in Jean Baudrillard's work *Simulacra and Simulation*, describes a world of signs and symbols that replace reality. According to Baudrillard, in modern society the boundary between reality and its representation has become blurred, even absent. This situation is called "hyperreality" - a reality that appears more real than the real, but is essentially artificial. Baudrillard says that "[t]he simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true."¹⁴ That is to say, it is a condition in which reality and simulation become so intertwined that it becomes impossible to distinguish between them. In hyperreality, simulations can feel more real than the reality they're meant to represent. This definition fits into the idea of the Matrix since the Matrix is a perfect Simulacrum example that hides the lack of reality. *The Matrix* movies are almost the cinematic manifestations of Baudrillard's theory. People are encapsulated in a world created by machines though they think they live in a real world. Neo's discovery of the "real world" and his understanding of the artificial nature of the Matrix coincides with the idea of "the destruction of reality" in Baudrillard's theory. Although Baudrillard is somewhat critical when he states that "*The Matrix* is surely the kind of film about the matrix

¹² Wachowski and Wachowski, *The Matrix*.

¹³ YouTube, "Is the Universe a Mathematical Simulation?," YouTube 23 October 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ZQv1wWnOm0&t=17s>

¹⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 166.

that the matrix would have been able to produce”¹⁵ his words are still a part of his meta narrative aspect of the film, and thus, Baudrillard’s ideas of simulation. When Morpheus tells Neo that the life he has lived so far isn’t real and he cannot see what he perceives as real, the situation fits perfectly well into Baudrillard’s theory. That is to say, the structure of the Matrix is a perfect example of Baudrillard’s simulation theory. Individuals inhabit a realm that they perceive as genuine; however, they are in fact ensnared within a fabricated virtual environment designed by artificial intelligence. The following words used by Morpheus to explain the Matrix to Neo summarize this situation strikingly: “The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us. Even now, in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work... when you go to church... when you pay your taxes.”¹⁶ In this context, being completely covered with a fabricated universe shows that this invented universe replaces the reality, and the simulation replaces the perception of reality. According to Baudrillard, simulation is the derivation of reality, devoid of an origin or reality, through models.¹⁷ Therefore, it is never known what reality is, or since reality does not have substance, it is also unknowable what is real and what is not. On the other hand, the experiences simulated in the Matrix reflects Baudrillard’s hyperreality notion in a very smooth way. For example, Cypher’s words while eating a slice of steak catches the very nature of hyperreality: “I know this steak doesn’t exist. I know that when I put it in my mouth, the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious.”¹⁸ Therefore, it can be argued that the real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced: that is, the hyperreal.¹⁹ The famous quote from Cypher regarding “the Matrix steak” is an outstanding instance of how Baudrillard’s idea of hyperreality is portrayed in the film. Cypher exemplifies the blurring of boundaries between simulation and reality that is fundamental to Baudrillard’s ideas by accepting the non-existence of the steak while yet enjoying its simulated flavour. Knowing full well that the experience he is having is simulated, his eagerness to welcome it underscores Baudrillard’s claim that in hyperreality, the reproduction becomes more real than the original. The Matrix-generated steak is a prime example of Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra, which is a copy without an original. It is a computer fabrication without a physical counterpart. The difference between real and fake becomes irrelevant in both Baudrillard’s hyperreality and Cypher’s Matrix experience, since perception changes reality. This analogy emphasises how *The Matrix* functions as a potent investigation of intricate philosophical ideas concerning simulation, reality, and the nature of experience in a world growing more and more digital.

Throughout *The Matrix* trilogy, it is apparent that the border between the simulation and reality becomes blurred. As previously mentioned, Neo begins to use his power both inside and outside (where he stopped the Sentinels), demonstrating the permeable nature of the border between simulation and reality. The architect’s words provide powerful parameters that bolster this claim:

Your life is the sum of a remainder of an unbalanced equation inherent to the programming of the Matrix. You are the eventuality of an anomaly, which despite my sincerest efforts, I have been unable to eliminate from what is otherwise a harmony of mathematical precision. While it remains a burden assiduously avoided, it is not unexpected, and thus not beyond a measure of control, which has led you, inexorably, here.²⁰

This situation shares a strong affinity with Baudrillard’s ideas, which suggests that there is no distinction between reality and its conception. These remarks imply that Neo’s existence as the “One” is a deliberately created abnormality, which questions the concept of free will and genuine reality. Within this framework, *The Matrix* transforms into an impeccable simulacrum, a replica devoid of an authentic source, causing the differentiation between reality and simulation to become completely meaningless, as Baudrillard theorised in his philosophical writings.

¹⁵ Kelly Reid, “The Matrix Decoded: Le Nouvel Observateur Interview with Jean Baudrillard,” *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies*, n.d. <https://baudrillardstudies.ubishops.ca/the-matrix-decoded-le-nouvel-observateur-interview-with-jean-baudrillard/>

¹⁶ Wachowski and Wachowski, *The Matrix*.

¹⁷ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.

¹⁸ Wachowski and Wachowski, *The Matrix*.

¹⁹ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 73.

²⁰ Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski, dirs., *The Matrix Reloaded* (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2003).

The trilogy functions as a cinematic examination of Baudrillard's concepts, depicting a universe in which reality and simulation have merged to the point of becoming indiscernible. This prompts both the protagonists and the audience to contemplate the essence of their own existence and perceptions.

2.1 Recent Scholarship on *The Matrix* and Social Theory

The Matrix has been the focus of thorough scholarly examination since its inception. Gunkel (2008)²¹ analyses the film's exploration of the boundary between reality and virtuality and contends that it disrupts conventional philosophical quandaries. In his study, Kilbourn (2010)²² examines how memory and identity are portrayed within the framework of digital culture. Valdez (2017)²³ conducted a study on the correlation between the Matrix and current discussions on post-real politics and false news.

Within the realm of sociological theory, numerous scholars have utilised Durkheim's notion of anomie to analyse the impact of the digital age. Aiken (2016)²⁴ contends that social media and its persistent connectivity give rise to a novel digital aberration, marked by the erosion of conventional social norms and the establishment of new, frequently precarious online standards. Curran and Hesmondhalgh (2019)²⁵ examine the impact of digital platforms on social interactions and power dynamics, drawing comparisons to Durkheim's observations of social transformation during the industrialisation period.

The simulation hypothesis proposed by Baudrillard has once again attracted attention due to current advancements in technology. Nechvatal (2021)²⁶ explores the extent to which virtual and augmented reality technologies align with Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality. Lovink (2019)²⁷ utilises simulation theory to analyse the occurrence of 'deep fraud' and its potential ramifications on public discourse and the sense of reality.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative content analysis methodology that utilises critical theory and cultural studies approaches. Through a meticulous examination of *The Matrix* trilogy, some pivotal sequences and exchanges that exemplify the notions of anomaly and simulation will be scrutinised. The findings of this textual analysis will be subsequently integrated into more comprehensive sociological and philosophical frameworks, including the theories proposed by Durkheim and Baudrillard. Some references to the most recent scholarly works on digital culture, with a specific emphasis on research that applies traditional sociological ideas to current technological phenomena, reinforce the validity of this theory. Through the synthesis of these diverse sources, the objective is to offer a complete analysis of how *The Matrix* trilogy mirrors and anticipates the fundamental challenges of progressively digitised society.

4. The Intersection of Anomie and Simulation in *the Matrix* Trilogy

"We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning"²⁸

²¹ David J. Gunkel, "The Real Problem: Avatars, Metaphysics and Online Social Interaction," *New Media & Society* 12, no. 1 (2010): 127-141.

²² Russell J. A. Kilbourn, *Cinema, Memory, Modernity: The Representation of Memory from the Art Film to Transnational Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

²³ Inés Valdez, "It Could Be Otherwise: Contingency and Necessity in Digital Culture," *Theory, Culture & Society* 34, no. 7-8 (2017): 39-59.

²⁴ Mary Aiken, *The Cyber Effect: A Pioneering Cyberpsychologist Explains How Human Behavior Changes Online* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2016).

²⁵ James Curran and David Hesmondhalgh, eds., *Media and Society* 6th ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

²⁶ Joseph Nechvatal, *Immersion Into Noise* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2021).

²⁷ Geert Lovink, *Sad by Design: On Platform Nihilism* (London: Pluto Press, 2019).

²⁸ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 79.

The Matrix trilogy presents a strong societal criticism on the intersection of anomie and simulation. The characters in the movies, like individuals in modern societies, struggle against the ambiguity of reality and the weaknesses of societal connections. Agent Smith's words to Neo strikingly summarize the anomic state of modern society: "Human beings are a disease, a cancer of this planet. You're a plague and we are the cure."²⁹ This phrase not only represents the machines' perspective on humans but also symbolises the sense of isolation and detachment felt in our progressively digitalised society. The trilogy focuses on the examination of how technology and simulated realities might cause a deterioration of societal standards and authentic human relationships, reflecting the idea of anomie in contemporary sociology. While these words mirror the feeling of uncertainty and alienation of society, this incident also overlaps with Durkheim's concept of anomie. Humans are seen as elements that destroy the system rather than a part of it. In fact, this is indeed the case. Since mankind became a part of this nature, it has wiped out most life forms from the face of the earth. Scientists generally agree that human activities have significantly accelerated the rate of species extinction, particularly in recent centuries. This phenomenon is often referred to as the "Anthropocene extinction" or the "sixth mass extinction." A widely known study on this topic estimates that the current extinction rate is about 100 to 1,000 times higher than the natural background rate.³⁰ The cause of this extinction is not being addressed; yet it is indisputable that the existential crisis is paradoxically formed. To put it simply, if there were no actual entities, the issue of how humans might eradicate non-existent species in this simulated state would also arise. Thus, on the other hand, it is inevitable that an existential crisis will emerge.

Although *The Matrix* was shot in 1998, the Wachowskis' predictions about the future are not entirely wrong. Especially when one considers the last decade, the advances in VR and Augmented Reality (AR) are at a level that could show that a simulated universe is possible. The scene in *The Matrix* where Neo says, "[t]here is no spoon,"³¹ shows how our perception of reality can change. In parallel with this, as Baudrillard states, "[o]ur society is characterized by a cancerous growth of vision, measuring everything by its ability to show or be shown."³² This is happening in a similar way in today's digital world. Augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) technologies are increasingly blurring the line between physical and digital reality. In the realm of quantum physics, the concept of a distinct observer and observed universe is non-existent. Quantum physics challenges not only the concept of separating subjects from objects, but also it introduces the unsettling possibility that our world may not be truly 'objective.' Our awareness is deeply intertwined with reality to the extent that we might actually exist within a network of interconnected subjective realities.³³ In that respect, the film's exploration of the nature of reality and consciousness aligns intriguingly with some interpretations of quantum mechanics. The idea that observation plays a role in shaping reality, and that there might not be a clear distinction between observer and observed, echoes the film's themes of reality being more malleable and subjective than it is typically assumed. In fact, this type of digitalized identity confusion is already happening.

Given the proliferation of digital technology and the growing prevalence of virtual reality encounters, Baudrillard's theory of simulation and Durkheim's notion of anomie are gaining significance in contemporary society. Although social networking platforms, online games, and virtual reality applications separate users from the physical world, they also establish a novel form of social connection and set of social norms. While social media platforms provide individuals with the ability to construct their own 'simulated' worlds, they can also exacerbate the sense of normlessness described by Durkheim. With the rise of online communities, people are finding it more difficult to distinguish between what is genuine and what is fake. As Baudrillard states, "[t]he virtual world is subject to the

²⁹ Wachowski and Wachowski, *The Matrix*.

³⁰ Gerardo Ceballos et al., "Accelerated Modern Human--Induced Species Losses: Entering the Sixth Mass Extinction," *Science Advances* 1, no. 5 (2015): e1400253. <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.1400253>

³¹ Wachowski and Wachowski, *The Matrix*.

³² Jean Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images* (Sydney: Power Institute of Fine Arts, University of Sydney, 1987), 13.

³³ Virk, *The Simulation Hypothesis*, intro. 11.

same laws that characterize the real world it supposedly transcends.”³⁴

In the digital age, traditional social norms are being replaced by new, online norms. This introduces a new dimension to Durkheim’s concept of anomie. For example, the number of “likes” and “followers” on social media are becoming new measures of individuals’ social status and Durkheim’s words can be a very robust perspective for this behaviour of such societies: “Society is not a mere sum of individuals. Rather, the system formed by their association represents a specific reality which has its own characteristics.”³⁵ In the episode of the Black Mirror series called *Nosedive*³⁶, the point that social media has reached and can go is perfectly touched upon. Indeed, today, social media has become a medium that can not only shape lives but also end them and inevitably cause great psychological destruction, and has gotten out of control, causing people to create their own worlds and reach a point of no return. In fact, what actually happens is not much different from this. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter engage algorithms to curate content, which may end up with the creation of isolated information bubbles. These bubbles are essentially simulated environments where individuals selectively curate their own version of reality.³⁷ Furthermore, virtual influencers, such as Lil Miquela, are some computer-generated personas with a large following on Instagram. They exemplify Baudrillard’s notion of hyper-reality by obscuring the differentiation between authentic and synthetic personas. The simulation world is not limited to this. The world has been very seriously interested in cryptocurrencies for a long time and investments exceeding trillions of dollars are being made worldwide.³⁸ Cryptocurrencies and NFTs are digital assets that represent a sort of simulated value. They challenge traditional concepts of value and ownership, reflecting the artificial constructions portrayed in *The Matrix*.³⁹

The Matrix trilogy has been reinterpreted in light of technological developments and social changes since its inception. While some of the technological developments predicted by the films have come true, the changes in the social structure also parallel the themes of the films. *The Matrix* world continues to grow with *Resurrections*, the 4th film in the series, released in 2021, and many people still think that *The Matrix*, the first film in the series, is both the most striking and relevant to the present day. One way or another, the film’s echoes continue, and its future seems to be indisputably consistent with the Wachowskis’ predictions.

The 1999 film’s true strength lies in its near-perfect balance. As much as it is a landmark action movie, *The Matrix* also incorporates cerebral science fiction and can either be enjoyed as a mindless fists-and-firefight flick or endlessly analyzed and dissected as a dystopian think-piece. Such balance is lost in the sequels, with *The Matrix Reloaded* falling too far into action territory, *Revolutions* losing itself in an attempt to be intelligent, and *Resurrections* caught between meta-reality and the simulated fictional battle. The Matrix manages to tread the fine line between intriguing audiences and frustrating them with ambiguity.⁴⁰

The emergence of artificial intelligence technology today has added a new dimension to the war between humans and machines depicted in *The Matrix*. The prospect of artificial intelligence surpassing human intelligence evokes thoughts of the nightmarish scenario portrayed in *The Matrix*. Considering the leap forward that artificial intelligence has experienced today and what it can do, it would be appropriate to evaluate it as a multi-layered simulation within a simulation that can be possible when fully combined with VR or AR technologies, as mentioned earlier in the article before. Just as today’s web browsers monitor our every move, back up our actions, and

³⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, trans. Chris Turner. (London: Verso, 1996), 38.

³⁵ Émile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, trans. W. D. Halls. (New York: Free Press, 1982), 129.

³⁶ “*Nosedive*” is the first episode of the third season of the British science fiction television series *Black Mirror*.

³⁷ Alice E. Marwick, “The Algorithmic Celebrity: The Future of Internet Fame and Microcelebrity Studies” in *A Companion to Celebrity*, ed. P. David Marshall and Sean Redmond (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 345-364.

³⁸ Forbes Advisor, “Cryptocurrency Statistics 2024,” *Forbes* accessed 4 August 2024. <https://www.forbes.com/advisor/au/investing/cryptocurrency/cryptocurrency-statistics/>.

³⁹ Usman W. Chohan, “Non-Fungible Tokens: Blockchains, Scarcity, and Value,” Critical Blockchain Research Initiative (CBRI) Working Papers, 2021. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3822743>

⁴⁰ Craig Elvy, “The Matrix Movies, Ranked Worst to Best,” *ScreenRant* 1 April 2024. <https://screenrant.com/matrix-movies-ranked-best-worst/>

phones, computer motherboards, and all electronic devices are designed to automatically initiate audio and video recording, the control system in the Matrix parallels today's big data and surveillance technologies. The collection and processing of personal data creates a structure similar to the control mechanism of the Matrix. As a result, with the development of virtual reality and augmented reality technologies, the concept of simulated reality envisioned by *The Matrix* is becoming increasingly realistic. The Architect's words may resonate this truth when he talks to Neo: "Your life is the sum of a remainder of an unbalanced equation inherent to the programming of the Matrix"⁴¹ On the other hand, though Durkheim's concept of anomie and Baudrillard's simulation theory offer valuable foundations for comprehending *The Matrix* and modern digital culture, it is crucial to recognise their limitations. Durkheim's theory of anomie has been criticised by scholars like Lockwood (1992)⁴² for its tendency to oversimplify intricate social events and its potential failure to adequately consider individual agency. Similarly, researchers such as Norris (1992)⁴³ have criticised Baudrillard's work for its apparent inclination towards technical determinism and occasional absence of empirical evidence.

Therefore, when analysing *The Matrix* and modern digital society through these theories, it is important to exercise caution and avoid exaggerating their ability to provide comprehensive explanations. In the current digital era, it may be necessary to develop more sophisticated theoretical frameworks that consider the intricate structure of online interactions and the various ways in which individuals engage with digital environments. To ensure the longevity and ongoing revitalisation of theories, it would be highly advantageous to re-analyse them using advancing technology and go beyond the boundaries of current modern technology. It should also be kept in mind that, according to Neumann, online radicalisation is the process by which individuals adopt extremist ideologies as a result of their interactions on the internet. This process might be viewed as a digital anomaly, as it entails deviating from conventional social norms and embracing more radical concepts.⁴⁴

Conclusion

The Matrix trilogy has successfully introduced debates of profundity in the realms of philosophy and sociology to a broad audience by incorporating theories of anomie and simulation into popular culture. The films effectively tackle a significant existential dilemma encountered by contemporary individuals: the sensation of 'residing in a place without identity' and the notion that 'nothing possesses genuine existence.' By analysing Durkheim's notion of anomie and Baudrillard's theory of simulation within the context of *The Matrix* trilogy, a robust framework that facilitates comprehension of the intricate structure of contemporary society emerges. The films prompt us to scrutinise the manner in which our understanding of reality is influenced, the process by which societal conventions are established, and the position of the individual within these frameworks.

In the era of digitalisation, the notions of anomie and simulation acquire fresh significance and intensely impact the social framework. The rapid advancement of technologies such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and augmented reality has brought us closer to a world that eerily resembles the simulated reality of *The Matrix*. In the film, Morpheus eloquently raises the question "[w]hat is real? How do you define 'real'? If you're talking about what you can feel, what you can smell, what you can taste and see, then 'real' is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain."⁴⁵ This phrase succinctly captures the escalating challenge of differentiating between the authentic and the virtual in our progressively digitised society. The proliferation of social media, online communities, and digital identities has created a new layer of hyperreality, where the boundaries between the physical and virtual

⁴¹ Wachowski and Wachowski, *The Matrix Reloaded*.

⁴² David Lockwood, *Solidarity and Schism: 'The Problem of Disorder' in Durkheimian and Marxist Sociology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

⁴³ Christopher Norris, *Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals, and the Gulf War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992).

⁴⁴ Peter R. Neumann, "Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization in the United States," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 6 (2013): 431-459.

⁴⁵ Wachowski and Wachowski, *The Matrix*.

worlds are increasingly blurred. This digital anomie, characterized by the erosion of traditional social norms and the emergence of new, often unstable online norms, presents both challenges and opportunities for social cohesion and individual identity formation.

As we navigate this complex landscape of reality and simulation, the words of Neo at the end of the trilogy resonate with particular force: “I don’t know the future. I didn’t come here to tell you how this is going to end. I came here to tell you how it’s going to begin.”⁴⁶ This sentiment suggests that while we may not have all the answers, we have the power to shape our future interactions with technology and society. The real ‘salvation,’ as Neo implies, may lie in our collective effort to maintain our humanity and agency in the face of increasing digitalization and simulation. It calls for a critical engagement with our digital environments, a re-evaluation of our social norms, and a conscious effort to create meaningful connections that transcend the boundaries of the real and the virtual. In doing so, we may be able to forge a new type of existence that acknowledges the realities of our digital age while preserving the essence of human experience and social cohesion. Examining *The Matrix* trilogy from the perspectives of Durkheim’s anomie and Baudrillard’s simulation theory uncovers the movie’s insightful examination of topics that have gained significance in our modern digital era. The films’ major themes of social disintegration, loss of meaning, and the merging of reality and simulation have notable similarities to modern phenomena like social media echo chambers, virtual influencers, and online radicalisation.

In the final analysis, it would be appropriate to say the following for the result. This study adds to the current corpus of literature by showcasing the ongoing significance of classical sociological theories in comprehending contemporary digital culture. By employing these theories to analyse both *The Matrix* and modern-day instances, the study underscores the significance of popular culture as a powerful tool for scrutinising intricate societal matters. Nevertheless, this approach also highlights the necessity for more sophisticated theoretical frameworks that can adequately explain the intricacies of digital society. Further investigation could examine the potential synergies or conflicts between contemporary sociological theories, such as network theory or affect theory, and the perspectives offered by Durkheim and Baudrillard when analysing digital phenomena. Furthermore, with the ongoing progress of technology, namely in fields such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality, the concepts examined in *The Matrix* may have even greater significance. Subsequent research could investigate the extent to which these technological advancements may increasingly blur the line between physical reality and virtual experiences, and the potential consequences of this blurring for societal cohesion and individual identity formation. Ultimately, analysing *The Matrix* through the lens of traditional sociological theories and contemporary digital phenomena yields valuable insights into the nature of our increasingly digitized society. This analysis not only enhances our understanding of a seminal cultural text but also provides a framework for critically engaging with the digital realities that are reshaping human existence. By examining the parallels between the film’s themes and current technological trends, we can better anticipate and address the sociological challenges posed by the ongoing digital revolution, including issues of social fragmentation, the malleability of perceived reality, and the evolving concept of self in virtual spaces.

⁴⁶ Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski, dirs., *The Matrix Revolutions* (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2003).

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