

BUILDING A BETTER SIMULACRUM:
LITERARY INFLUENCES ON *THE MATRIX*

by
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Very few science fiction movies of the post-*Star Wars* era owe a greater debt to printed SF--or have repaid that debt so spectacularly and intelligently--as *The Matrix* (1999). The co-creators of the film, Larry and Andy Wachowski--who, jointly, both scripted and directed it--appear to have drawn with wide-ranging familiarity on a vast range of modern science fiction, from the works of Philip K. Dick to the mythology of the DC Comics universe.

But their creative mining of printed SF transcends mere borrowing. The unique and startlingly novel synthesis which *The Matrix* offers is--in the best tradition of SF--a quantum leap upward from the ground state of its ancestors. Standing on the shoulders of giants, the Wachowskis obtain a fresh view of new horizons which they share with us.

It would be illuminating--yet falls outside the scope of this essay--to compare at length the accomplishments of *The Matrix* with those of the original *Star Wars* from 1977 (now retitled *Episode IV: A New Hope*), the only other film (or series of films, actually) of this period faithfully to adapt so many of the tropes of printed science fiction. *Star Wars* and its sequels indeed elicited the reaction from knowledgeable viewers of seeing for the first time on screen many of the quintessentially steplike images, characters and action previously only generated on mental movie screens. But the overall effect was one of confirmation of the canonical--and, at that, the pulpish canon. Additional sophistication and extension of the borrowed material was almost nil. George Lucas was satisfied with bringing to life the blended, older dreams of Isaac Asimov and Frank Herbert, among others, without truly expanding or rethinking them.

The Matrix, on the other hand, does not simply replicate familiar joys in another medium. Despite its many Philickian moments, the film is not essentially a Philip K. Dick movie. What the Wachowskis absorbed, they also metamorphosed, even if only by increasing the amplitude of the writer's original vision. The salient difference between *Star Wars* and *The Matrix* is that while the former was instantly duplicable (witness *Battlestar Galactica*), the latter, in its originality, has thus far frustrated imitators.

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Any critic, when trying to track down allusions and derive sources for homages, must play a guessing game. What did the creators know, and when did they know it? My citations of various works which I believe the Wachowskis must have known could be undone in a moment by a simple statement from the brothers that they never encountered Book X or Story Y prior to filming their masterpiece. Indeed, they might already be on record as saying such; I have not tried to research exhaustively all their interviews. Yet science fiction is such a gloriously incestuous medium, one in which ideas float freely from story to story in a kind of generous conversation, that I feel confident in holding forth my selections as valid influences. Even if not encountered in the primary sources, the ideas in these various texts have percolated throughout the field, so that any reader worth his salt has internalized the conceptions, even if divorced from the original creators.

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Two schemes for cataloging the literary seeds sown throughout *The Matrix* appear valid. One might step chronologically through the movie, labeling instances of literary allusions whenever found; or one might work chronologically through the history of SF, citing relevant works in order of publication, and pointing to their outcroppings in the film. The latter approach appeals more to me, as someone whose background is primarily in the written word, and also seems better suited to indicate how extensive in time the Wachowskis' borrowings are.

But before examining the "hardcore" modern SF which served as inspiration for *The Matrix*, we must journey much farther back into literary or quasi-literary history to appreciate certain layers of meaning and allusion in the film.

Our first hint of Biblical references exists in the name of the vessel piloted by Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), the *Nebuchadnezzar*. However, the significance of this naming seems almost gratuitous, or offkey. The Babylonian king, while a forceful conqueror, is not generally taken as a symbol of enlightenment or visionary longings in line with the aspirations of the rebels. In fact, "Babylon" is traditionally used as shorthand for captivity, and might better represent the AI masters, were they within the realm of human signification. But perhaps the Wachowskis meant to invoke the king's legendary incident of grass-eating madness, as a symbol of the psychic dangers that the rebels against the Matrix must face. Perhaps the name was simply chosen as euphoniously mythical. Either way, a more apt borrowing occurs when the last human redoubt is revealed to be dubbed Zion, the Biblical term for a part of Jerusalem which came to symbolize paradise or the promised land.

In any case, these two Biblical literalisms are swamped by the less explicit but undeniably powerful Christ symbolism swathing Neo (Keanu Reeves). Deemed "the One" by Morpheus, Neo undergoes death and resurrection to redeem all mankind. The single communal meal taken aboard the *Nebuchadnezzar* even partakes of a Last Supper ambiance. And of course, Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss), as Neo's carnal worshipper, stands in for Mary Magdalene--despite some confusing aspects to her own name, traditionally assigned to the tripartite Godhead, not to a mere mortal. And ultimately Neo's soaring ascent into the heavens at the film's end further solidifies the parallel with Christ's life. In this sense, the Bible is the oldest text which the film draws on.

(It might be remarked that the path of Neo's quest--from ignorance through initiation and trial to mortal challenge--also follows the famous generalized scheme devised by Joseph Campbell in his study *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* [1949], a scheme known as the "Monomyth." Thus a hundred different ancient legends flow into Neo's creation, not just the Judeo-Christian tradition.)

But below the Judeo-Christian stream runs a dark river that serves as the antithesis to the aboveground teachings. This secret underground philosophy is known as Gnosticism, and in *The Matrix* the Gnostic interpretation adds a new valence to the Messiah imagery. (Interested readers should seek out the work of scholar Elaine Pagels for complete information on the Gnostics.) Briefly rendered, the historically widespread heresy known as Gnosticism maintains that the material Creation is a literal hell, brought into being by a flawed, malign demiurge. Mankind is mired in the terrestrial mud in physical bodies that are mockeries of our true forms, with the mass of mankind ignorant of their predicament. Only derangement of the senses can free the mind from the snares of our common clay.

Curiously enough, Satan is the hero of the Gnostic worldview, as the lone rebel against the mad God's tyranny. And Morpheus is tinged with Satanic colorations. His generally black attire--identical with Trinity's and, eventually, Neo's--seems to imply an infernal origin. And his offering of the red pill of knowledge to Neo runs parallel to the serpent's temptation of Adam and Eve with a red apple.

The mapping of this Gnostic worldview--further explored below--onto the film is undeniable. The Gnostic "conceptual breakthrough" from illusion to understanding is central to the whole structure of the film. Only through Neo's senses-shattering initiation with the red pill, during which his physical form is warped by contact with the reflective fluid that flows off the pliable mirror, is Neo awakened to the true state of existence.

Of course, this suspicion of the validity of creation is found in other religions, notably in the Hindu and Buddhist concept of *maya* and *samsara*, the veils that conceal the true nature of reality from us. Notable also is the emphasis in the film placed on dream states, and the inability to distinguish between them and ostensibly conscious moments. Of course, the viewer is bound to recall one of the most famous parables involving dreams of all literature, the dream preserved in Taoist texts of the philosopher Chuang Tzu, who could not determine whether he was a butterfly dreaming he was a man, or a man dreaming he was a butterfly.

All these ancient ontological conundrums find masterful embodiment under the shaping hands of the Wachowskis. That the arid material of a million "Introduction to Philosophy" courses can be received eagerly through the medium of a "simple" action film is a remarkable achievement.

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Leaving the classical world behind, we make a brief stop in the timeless realm of European fairytales. For one thread running through *The Matrix* is the tale of Sleeping Beauty. Just as the kingdom and castle of Sleeping Beauty have been put into stasis, so has the human world of the twenty-first century been forced into hibernation, starting when the AIs took over. We are told by Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving) that when the Matrix was first conceived, it was engineered by the AIs to be a Utopia. But mankind was not content in this virtual paradise, and so the late twentieth century milieu was recreated. But this begs the question of how time flows within the Matrix. Apparently, the Matrix has been in place for decades, and yet human "history" seems not to have advanced beyond 1999. Is the same year replayed over and over, after an annual mass mindwipe of virtual memories? Neo appears to sense something like this during his first reinsertion into the Matrix, when he questions all his Matrix past as unreal in a different way than simply "actual versus factitious."

Not only is the Matrix stalled in time, but so is the blasted exterior world, which resembles the thorny thickets and wild forests that grow to surround Sleeping Beauty's home. Although we are not privy to the inner or social or political lives of the AIs (seemingly a single intelligence distributed across many vessels), they seem to have stopped developing once the system of human batteries was established. Earth's history has effectively halted.

Significant as this time-disjunction and stasis are, the real clincher between fairytale and movie is of course the climactic speech and kiss which Trinity bestows on the dead Neo, awakening him to his transcension. This reversal of gender roles is typical

of how the Wachowskis are not content with simply duplicating received templates but creatively revising them.

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The visionary poet William Blake (1757-1827) must take centerstage for a short turn now. A famous aphorism from his *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-3) strikes me a seminal to the film. "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite." What more compact statement of the movie's theme could there be? I believe that visual homage is paid to Blake in a curious scene. Neo is undergoing a dressing-down from his boss at Metacortex for being late. Outside the office, workers on scaffolding wash the skyscraper's windows with loud squeegeeing noises. The undue attention the camera pays to this seemingly gratuitous bit of spear-carrier business is puzzling, until one takes the Blake quote into account. True, doors are not windows, but they will stand in well enough as a symbol of the awakening Neo is about to undergo--especially since Neo does, moments after this scene, employ a window as a door, under instructions from Morpheus.

And of course, Blake's phrasing was later borrowed by Aldous Huxley for his 1954 examination of drug-induced states of consciousness, *The Doors of Perception*. The Sixties' notion of enlightenment through a pill--LSD, peyote or other drug--is yet another numinous trope informing *The Matrix*.

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Two Victorian fantasies indisputably play their part in the feel and plot of the film. The works in question are none other than Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871). These are the texts referenced most explicitly in the film, through several bits of dialogue from Morpheus and others, and it would be heavyhanded on the part of this critic to belabor the parallels, from the moment Neo is told to "Follow the white rabbit" to the "Drink me" moment when Morpheus offers the red pill. Carroll's surreal universe is so well known that even the most naive viewer will have no trouble catching these references. (And the adoption of Carroll and his hookah-smoking caterpillar by the hippie movement ties in with the drug theme alluded to above.)

But it should be remarked how extensively both "rabbit hole" and "mirror" imagery occur in the film. The opening shot down the white light of a policeman's flashlight is the initial rabbit hole, followed by such other instances as the descent down Neo's throat, to the entry by the invulnerable Neo into the very body of Agent Smith. Mirror imagery is even more widespread: reflective sunglasses; a spoon; Morpheus's pill case; the literal melting mirror which creeps up Neo's body; the mirrored skyscraper into which Trinity crashes the helicopter; a car mirror; a computer monitor--all these and others reflective liminal surfaces serve as signposts along the road of identity and as tokens of worlds separated by the thinnest of interfaces. Finally, it is certainly not coincidental that Zen texts refer to meditation and subsequent enlightenment as "polishing the mirror of the mind."

Finally, the Wachowskis once again play with gender reversal, as Neo assumes the role of the girl-child Alice.

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Our last brief pause before leaping fully into an examination of the "hardcore" genre materials that were integrated into *The Matrix* concerns a touchstone of twentieth-century fantasy: L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900). When Cypher informs Neo, "Buckle your seat belt, Dorothy, 'cuz Kansas is going bye-bye," we are forced to lay this famous template over the movie. On the whole, though, the parallels between Baum's Oz saga and the film are less impressive than the Carrollian ones, and seem to derive mainly from the cinematic version of the novel. None of Baum's many eccentric prose creations are referenced. (Although perhaps the conquering AIs are Tik Tok the mechanical man writ large!) True, Neo could be seen as a deracinated Dorothy (another bit of sexual confusion), having picked up various companions embodying various virtues during his almost-involuntary quest. But there is no Emerald City as goal, and the prospect of returning home is nil.

The famous cinematic transition from black-and-white Kansas to Technicolor Oz is actually present in the newer film, but in reverse. Life in the Matrix is brightly lit, exhibiting a full range of colors. But the higher ontological reality (the devastated Earth) is monotone, all blacks, grays, duns, and the occasional flash of red. Again, an intriguing twist against viewer expectations.

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In the following sections, as I examine different themes and tropes from *The Matrix* and their genre sources, I will of necessity have to jump back and forth through the history of SF, abandoning a simple one-way trip through the literature.

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The prospect of mankind being conquered, dominated and superseded by their own children, intelligent machines, is as old as genre SF. The threat was given new potency over the past few decades, as realworld advances in cybernetics, artificial intelligence and emergent phenomena such as a-life seemed to inch us closer to the time when we would have to face our artificial peers and reach some agreement on the sharing of the world. Ultimately the cyberpunks brought new sophistication and polish to such ubiquitous tropes.

It would be impossible to list every work from the SF canon that focused on such issues and possibly fed into the Wachowski Brothers' conception of a world ceded to machines. As part of the free-floating SF consensus future, the notion of a globe consumed by runaway mechanisms is one of the more potent timelines intuited by even those without a vast experience of the literature. But it is possible to cite a few works which seem to lend their flavor to *The Matrix*.

Two of John W. Campbell's early stories seem to me to capture the tone of *The Matrix*, if not the same exact outlines of its future history. In "Twilight" (1934), a time-traveler finds our Solar System millions of years from now populated by a declining, decadent humanity served by hordes of infallible, tireless machines. Mankind has long ago exterminated every other organic lifeform, echoing the human-triggered "scorching of the sky" in *The Matrix* and the apparent lack of animal life on that barren globe. By the story's end, a last desperate quest is underway to create "a machine which would have what man had lost. A curious machine." Instead of war between organic and inorganic, it's the passing of a torch. Campbell's "Night" (1935), a quasi-sequel, journeys even further into futurity, detailing the plight of the intelligent machines against the heat-death

of the universe. This elegaic tone of this Darwinian transition seems a perfect fit for the film.

Jack Williamson's *The Humanoids* (1949) tells of robots who, given their programming to protect and serve mankind, interpret their directive in an unsettling manner, forbidding mankind to undertake any task or indulgence they deem "dangerous." Mankind ends up *de facto* prisoners of their servants. In a less sinister yet similar fashion, the robots in Clifford Simak's *City* (1952) shield their owners rather too strenuously from unpleasantness, and end up inheriting the Earth after humanity departs. Although outright hostility and warfare on the scale depicted in *The Matrix* is not a feature of these books, there is an angle to the film that evokes them. Namely, why does the Matrix exist at all?

If the AIs require humans simply for their bio-electric potential--as living batteries and furnaces--certainly it would be easier to lobotomize every person and keep them as mindless cattle without risk of rebellion. Why go to all the trouble of maintaining and policing a virtual reality for them? It is almost as if the machines cannot overcome a certain inbuilt caretaker tendency--as in Brian Aldiss's "But Who Can Replace a Man?" (1958), where boastful robots turn submissive at the first sight of a human. This unexplained paradox speaks of more complex motives on the part of the machines than simple unreasoning hatred or desire for genocidal destruction.

In the 1950s, no more clairvoyant exponent of war between man and machine existed than Philip K. Dick. His stories and novels are strewn with automatons of varying degrees of threat and intelligence. When attempting to identify Dickian influences on *The Matrix* one is faced with a plethora of citations, and only a few representative examples can be fitted into this discussion.

Let the short story "Second Variety" (1952) stand as the quintessential instance of such a war. On an Earth reduced to "endless ash and slag, ruins of buildings...eternal clouds of rolling gray...", conflict between the Russians and "UN forces" are carried out via armed robot intermediaries, fabricated by underground automated factories. When the killer robots begin to modify their own evolution, mankind is swiftly doomed.

Throughout the 1960s, the *Berserker* stories of Fred Saberhagen and the *Bolo* stories of Keith Laumer continued to examine the way in which artificially intelligent war machines might interact with and against mankind. The hypothesis that computers of sufficient complexity could bootstrap themselves into intelligence began to percolate, in such novels as D. F. Jones's *Colossus* (1966). But more sophisticated examinations of the treachery of artificial intelligences had to wait until the cyberpunk era. William Gibson's "loas" from the trilogy that commenced with *Neuromancer* (1984)--AIs born in the net and deriving their name and appearances from voodoo deities--stand as the archetypical contemporary embodiment of this conception. (Although not explicitly a follower of voodoo, the Oracle (Denni Gordon) whom Neo consults, as an African-American seeress, radiates a kind of Haitian sacredness, as if the Matrix could indeed be accessed via pagan religious rituals.) And Rudy Rucker's rogue robots known as "boppers," found in the series that opened with *Software* (1982), are the comic side of this threat.

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Prior to their filmmaking career, the Wachowskis scripted several tales for Marvel Comics. Their familiarity with this medium so closely allied to prose SF shows up heavily in *The Matrix*.

The opening scene of policemen closing in on Trinity in a nighted urban landscape resembles something out of the darker moments of Batman's mythos, with perhaps the deadly Joker substituted for the good-girl Trinity. But the heavier influence on their urban landscape surely is traceable to the work of Will Eisner, in his tales of the Spirit. Famous for his nearly tactile depiction of running water, Eisner is visually quoted in such scenes as Trinity's rooftop chase and Neo's car ride through rainy streets.

The phone motif--exits and entrances from and into the Matrix are achieved via phone lines--evokes two of DC Comics's characters. Who else but Superman has ever relied so heavily on phone booths as a venue for changing identities? Trinity's escape through an old-fashioned full-sized phone booth (an unlikely archaic survival in 1999) mirrors the way Superman would enter such a booth, change, and vanish at super-speed. And of course Ray Palmer, the Silver Age Atom, was fond of shrinking to quantum size and traveling down phone lines. Multiple shots of dangling receivers post-departure could have been panels swiped direct from Atom's adventures.

Finally, consider the "comic book physics" literalized on the screen. Long before the achievements of Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* (2002), the Wachowskis succeeded in porting over from comics in eye-popping fashion the extravagant physical feats of generations of superheroes. The wall-walking and tumbling; Trinity's corkscrew flight off a rooftop and into a window; Neo's climactic subway battle and his triumphant final leap into the virtual heavens of the Matrix--all these mythic moments so easy for artists to capture on paper finally found cinematic actualization.

Finally, "bullet time," the time-distorting special effect utilized when, for instance, Neo dodges shots from an Agent during the rescue of Morpheus, is nothing less than the stop-motion perceptions of such super-fast characters as Quicksilver, the Flash or Wonder Woman (who was, admittedly, fonder of bouncing bullets off her bracelets than simply ducking them).

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SF has a long record of examining various epistemological and ontological questions, framing them in disturbing narratives. The core conceit of *The Matrix*--that simulation and reality can be indistinguishable, and that hidden masters rule our lives--has always been alluring to SF writers.

Certainly the most vivid early usage of this theme occurs in Robert Heinlein's "They" (1941), in which the fears of a paranoid mental patient are dismissed by his doctor, who, in private, then orders the remaking of the stageset that is reality, so as to further ensnare the man. In 1950, the less well-known novella by Fritz Leiber, "You're All Alone," took this conceit even further, positing that our world was one populated by automatons with only a few truly awakened souls. (Leiber's protagonist was initiated into this worldview by a female character, just as Trinity inducted Neo.)

With the arrival on the 1950s genre scene of Philip K. Dick, this theme met its acknowledged master. No one could trump Dick when it came to framing questions of identity and perception and the nature of reality (or multiple realities) in gripping narratives, and the Wachowskis are indubitably his self-appointed heirs. Practically every major work by Dick revolved around the same core issues which inform *The Matrix*. Again, it would be prohibitive to catalogue all such instances in Dick's oeuvre. From the sequential dream worlds in *Eye in the Sky* (1957) through the onion-like layers of deceit and confusion in *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1966) to the after-death dreams

of *Ubik* (1969), Dick specialized in questioning and destroying common assumptions about the nature of life and the cosmos. One early story, "Adjustment Team" (1954), in which even a man's dog is part of the reality-remodeling containment scheme against him, can stand for the earliest instances.

But it is the late-period novel *Valis* (1981) which of course resonates most strongly with *The Matrix*. Here, the protagonist Horselover Fat (a PKD doppelganger) receives illumination via a pink beam of light (Neo's red pill), later confirmed by a young woman, and learns that our modern era is an illusion superimposed over the real chronological period, which is an age of Roman Imperialism and servitude known as the "Black Iron Prison." Through Dick, Gnosticism becomes part of the common SF parlance. Once again, the globe is held in secret stasis. Compare this motif to Morpheus's speech to Neo: "[You are] born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. A prison for your mind."

A final citation from the 1950s must be granted to Frederik Pohl's "The Tunnel Under the World" (1954), in which a small town full of unwitting humans (save for two rogue males), which relives the same day over and over as a test-market for advertisers, is proven to be a tabletop diorama.

Until the 1960s and the advent of full-blown computing technology, all such counterfeit worlds had been conceived of as physical venues or ill-defined dream states. But the arrival of machines which seemed to hold forth the potential of duplicating the exterior world in solid-state form opened the door for what we nowadays refer to commonly as "virtual reality." The literal hardware and software was in place for SF writers to utilize. Starting in 1962, when computer scientists Ole-Johan Dahl and Kristen Nygaard began to formulate the language known as SIMULA for the express purpose of "conceptualizing complex real world systems" *in silico*, SF began to turn its attention to such "cyberspaces."

Perhaps no work offers in short form a more disturbing vision of mankind abandoning its physical birthright for virtual comfort than Keith Laumer's "Cocoon" from 1962. With astonishing foresight and understanding of the embryonic challenge offered by the new technology, Laumer depicts a world where vast tank farms hold the majority of citizens. Swaddled in responsive sheets, wired up to dozens of contacts, eyes blinkered with screens that display numerous channels of entertainment, sucking down "Vege-pap" to subsist, Laumer's protagonist is shaken from his false utopia only by a physical breakdown in the system. After 200 years in the tank, glaciers have intruded on the farm. Laumer's portrayal of the struggle to escape from the nutrient bath mirrors Neo's awakening in his own tank to a remarkable degree.

Another pivotal and remarkably prescient work of this period is *Simulacron-3* (1964) by Daniel Galouye. Scientists working on the eponymous machine (as in Pohl's story, for purposes of test-marketing products) are unaware that their own world is itself nothing but a simulation in a larger machine (a layering of ontological falsity which *The Matrix* seems disinclined to pursue, although sequels may prove otherwise). Again, a female initiate plays a part in shattering the complacency of the male protagonist. This novel was filmed as *The Thirteenth Floor* and, curiously enough, released in the same year as *The Matrix*.

Without a doubt, *The Matrix* belongs to that great late-twentieth-century category of conspiracy fiction, narratives which assert that invisible metaschemes govern our daily lives. No writer was more influential in establishing this subgenre than Thomas Pynchon,

and his 1966 classic *The Crying of Lot 49*, with its emphasis on Information Theory, offers this incredibly relevant passage: "For it was now like walking among the matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above, hanging like balanced mobiles right and left, ahead, thick, maybe endless. Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth." The precision with which this fits Neo's ultimate epiphanical vision of the Matrix is uncanny.

Certainly one of the most startling and easy-to-spot visual "swipes" from the printed page in *The Matrix* occurs during Neo's interrogation by Agent Smith, after Neo's capture at his workplace. Manipulating the very stuff of the Matrix, the Agent cause Neo's mouth to disappear, replaced by a smooth facade of skin. Any viewer who knows Harlan Ellison's "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" (1967), which recounts the Dantesque trials of humans trapped in the bowels of a sentient computer named AM, will appreciate this reference.

Perhaps no SF novel of the past four decades has been as seminal to a certain cadre of writers as Samuel Delany's *Nova* (1968). An ultra-literate, allegorical space opera, it paved the way not only for the cyberpunk movement but for the newest style of Hard SF being written by such authors as Paul McAuley and Alastair Reynolds. By the second paragraph of Delany's masterpiece, we are introduced to the concept of "spinal sockets," a method of cyborgization whereby humans may jack into and operate machinery and sensors. Neo and the other rebels, of course, rely on just such devices for entering the Matrix. But whereas these dataports into the body are generally innocuous and unobtrusive in *Nova*, in the film they are lumpy and painful-looking, and the components that mate with them seem physically longer than the human body can contain. This ramping up of the intrusive nature of such devices is another instance of the Wachowskis creative revisionism.

Jumping ahead to 1971, we find a curious resonance in Philip Jose Farmer's *To Your Scattered Bodies Go*. Farmer's book, the first in a long series, concerns an artificial physical venue that is as duplicitous as any virtual reality: Riverworld, which plays host to reincarnations of every human who has ever lived, resurrected by godlike secret masters. When the protagonist first wakes--ahead of schedule--he finds himself floating in a limitless space, one naked, bald body in latticework of billions. The resemblance to Neo's vision of the endless ranks of pods around his own is unmistakable.

After all this groundwork, by the time of William Gibson's catalytic *Neuromancer* (1984) the audience was primed to accept and understand a vivid, tangible "cyberspace" that was a "consensual hallucination." Reality, as Morpheus explains to Neo, was nothing more than the interpretation of chemicals and electrical currents in the brain, and could be made to vanish or be replaced at whim.

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As a final aside, we might consider the literary derivations of three of the characters in *The Matrix*.

Neo, as a hacker, owes a lot to Case in *Neuromancer*, a fringe figure living off his wits in the information economy. And Trinity shares a lineage with Molly, the slim and dangerous mirrorshaded assassin from that book. But Neo also hails from a long line of anti-authoritarian rebels. SF has long postulated dystopias which can be toppled--however magically--by just the right person in just the right place at just the right time, and Neo fits squarely into that mold. It is no coincidence that his apartment is Room 101,

the brainwashing HQ in George Orwell's *1984* (1948). With Neo as Winston Smith and Trinity as his lover Julia, the risk of betrayal--under compulsion from the Agents of the Matrix--is symbolized by the insertion of the "navel bug" into a captive Neo. The Wachowskis, however, opt for a positive outcome rather than Orwell's pessimistic downer. This startling motif also calls up echoes of Philip K. Dick's "Imposter" (1953), in which the protagonist, all unwittingly, proves to be a robot bearing a bomb inside himself.

Morpheus in his more obsessive, Captain Ahab moments, resembles the nova-fixated Captain Lorq Von Ray in Delany's *Nova*. And of course the name of one of Morpheus's crew ("Mouse") can be nothing other than a tribute to the identically named protagonist of Delany's novel. But Morpheus, in accordance with his mythological name, resembles also the hero of Neil Gaiman's famous *Sandman* comics: a merciless dispenser of visions and justice. And taken as a whole, the crew of the *Nebuchadnezzar* calls to mind many such plucky assemblages. Perhaps the closest analogue in terms of an assortment of misfits voyaging among differing levels of reality for cosmic stakes occurs in Michael Moorcock's Second Ether trilogy that began with *Blood* (1994).

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It remains to be seen, of course, if the second and third installments of *The Matrix* trilogy invoke any additional icons and tropes from SF's vast printed heritage. But it surely cannot be denied that Larry and Andy Wachowski have succeeded already in transferring to the screen without diminution or betrayal some of the most prized ideas, scenes and characters from the immense corpus of science fiction.