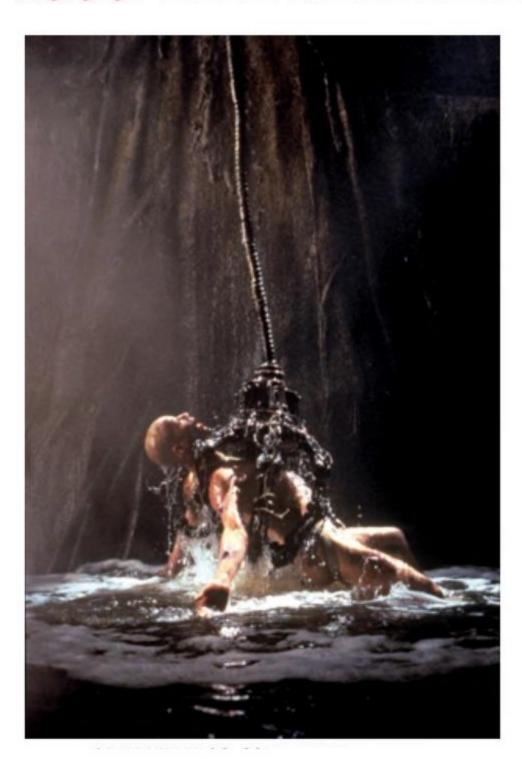# 1999 THE MATRIX

Take one part Hong Kong martial arts epic, one part dystopian science fiction film, one part *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* and throw in a little postmodern French cultural-critical theory in the form of Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation,* and you have a recipe for . . . a serious Hollywood hit?

An unlikely scenario, to say the least, but when *The Matrix* opened at the close of the last millennium, it captivated audiences with its cyberpunk-inflected tale of Neo, a computer programmer who learns that "reality" is, in fact, an elaborate construct generated by sentient machines. The goal: to keep humans unaware of the fact that they are being harvested as energy sources.

Though *The Matrix* bore marked similarities to such films as *The Truman Show* and *Dark City,* it was nevertheless idiosyncratic—its uniqueness enhanced by a

then-surprising use of "wire fu" effects borrowed from Hong Kong cinema (and choreographed by a veteran of that genre). These involved the now familiar shots of characters floating through the air while they fight and dodge ammo using another effect called "bullet time," in which space seems to warp and time slow. Revolutionary at the time, these devices have now been copied so much they've become visual clichés.

But the core of the film was its philosophy, driven by the aforementioned *Simulacra and Simulation,* a dense text that the directors, the Wachowskis, made their actors read before they even cracked the script. A sample: "Simulation . . . is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal." (In the film, Neo hides his forbidden software in a copy of the book.)

The Matrix's improbable success has led to video games, comic books, and two sequels—in addition to a quasi-religion called Matrixism. ("We must cause as much disarray in this fake world with the intentions to bring down those bastard machines and be free at last," according to its official website. Okay, so it's not the Dead Sea Scrolls.)

Since the days of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, SF has often been heralded for successfully predicting the future, and no film of the last millennium has been more prescient regarding the simulacra we're all now mostly living in. No, Apple Inc. isn't a sentient machine—yet—but the hyperreality of smart phones has become more "real" than the real. And it's becoming "realer" all the time. This past April, YouTube announced plans to create live-streaming 360-degree videos on phones and browsers, bringing us, according to *Wired* magazine, "one step closer to *The Matrix.*"