

A CURE FOR HOPE. SYSTEMATIC DEPRESSION IN SCI-FI COVERS

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Abstract: The Matrix trilogy, The Island and Equilibrium - all cult-movies of the science-fiction genre – incorporate the features of postmodernist discourse to debate on the complex interplay between human emotions, technological progress and the concept of control, amidst a wide array of dystopian visions. Depression seems to be a sine-qua-non condition of adaptation in these cinematic environments, yet the functionality of hope (as a source of rebellion, on the one hand, and as a key to survival, on the other) is never completely lost, being the only comprehensible element in an artificial existence. The present paper focuses on the tension between wish and resignation, against the background of sci-fi conventions.

Keywords: depression, control, artificiality, rebellion, dystopia.

The Matrix trilogy, *The Island* and *Equilibrium* all represent postmodern renditions of futur-noir, dystopian visions, bound in science fiction conventions and focusing on the complex interplay between human emotions, technological progress and the concept of control. One overwhelmingly present trait in all three visions of dystopia mentioned above is the existence of a variety of factors that, overtly or subconsciously, trigger the signs of depression. In *The Matrix*, the sordid understanding of the difference between the apparent normality of the digital world designed as a mental cage for the humans and the grimness of the real world, where the domination of the machines is so much more apparent. In *The Island*, the permanent suspicion concerning the very legitimacy of the all-too-orderly social environment and, eventually, the cruel discovery of the seemingly inescapable end. In *Equilibrium*, the permanent negation of everybody's feelings and the chemical treatment that allows for a systematic neutralization of the very desire to feel. Basically, each dystopian scenario provides the necessary tools to establish hopelessness, depression and psychological inertia. However, at least within cinematic boundaries, such extreme worlds generate extreme solutions, with surprising outcomes.

In *The Matrix*, the human race is being used as energy source by machines in what seems to be the worst nightmare of humanity – a world where humans are not masters, but tools. Enslaved by their own creation, with the senses tied to the artificial functionality of computer programmes, humans are forced to fight their battle inside the digital world created by the machine – a meta-universe populated by simulated visions – in order to preserve some degree of normality, albeit in a distorted definition, needed by the human psyche, but also in order to gain freedom in the much traumatizing real world. In *The Island*, entities that consider themselves as the last survivors of a planetary contamination – and, consequently, the very last hope for the survival of the human race – are in fact clones, meant to be sacrificed when the “master-copy” (euphemistically called “sponsor”) is facing a life-threatening disease. They are bound to unknowingly give their life in order to save someone else's. The grotesque plan of using human clones as organ donors is given an even more twisted appearance: the collective mind of the entire population of clones in the facility has

been implanted with a firm belief in an allegedly safe place, an island which is said to be the last uncontaminated heaven on the planet, described as an earthly paradise and reachable only after winning a special lottery organized by those managing the facility. In reality, those who are announced as winners leave the facility only to have their organs harvested. In *Equilibrium*, we are presented with a vision of a future where feelings are forbidden. Human emotions, claimed to be the root of all evil throughout history, are banned, and a half-robotic behaviour of all citizens in the ironically named land of Libria is the only consistent requirement, a behaviour rewarded, paradoxically, with the exact same things that would normally trigger feelings. “Sense-offenders”, the individuals who either cannot give up on their emotions, or willingly choose to feel, have to go through a summary investigation, an imitation of a trial, and then they are executed for their crime. The most authentic human reactions, the basic individual behaviours are nothing more than reasons for capital punishment.

The distinction between the real and the virtual is clearly cut in *The Matrix* (for the spectator, not for the characters themselves), with simulation exposed early on along the plot development, yet, within the constraints imposed by the former, most individuals chose the latter. Sleep in real life means common living in the digital world, whose only legitimacy is the one given by artificial perception.

As if constructing its plot according to Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulation, *The Matrix* displays a digital illusion meant as a trigger for adequate brain functioning, designed as a form of induced dream. At first, the interplay between dream and reality is confusing for the main character as well: based on the artificial perceptions fabricated by the machines, Neo regards his tapping into the real as dream, being unable to break off the connection to the digital. Torn between two realities and in the impossibility to completely believe in the authenticity of either, he is bound to enter a deep state of personal agony. His programmed identity and the one he senses are quite the opposite.

However, the illusion of utopia provided to humans is scaled down, as the machines have understood one thing about the human mind: it could not find perfection of any sort truly believable, so that perfection has to be attenuated in order to achieve credibility. The utopian ideals of humanity only achieve meaning if they are not reached; they have to remain a dream in order to be believed. Paradoxically, once transformed into reality, they have lost their substance and become inadequate. The virtual reality that people are to perceive as genuine needed a systemic adjustment, as if humans only aim for utopia, but cannot cope with any articulation of it. The computerized version of social perfection has to be extremely transformed, camouflaged by allegedly negative elements; flawlessness is simply not believable enough. The faulty representation of life, as opposed to the utopian one, is found to be more appealing – or at least more comprehensible – by the human mind. Along the borderline between simulation and illusion, the world rendered by the invisible binary code of the matrix is a mere extrapolation, since it has lost any connection with a model. People do not possess any valid memory of life on Earth before, and the machines have sketched it using fragmented bits and pieces of digital information. Humanity or artificial intelligence, neither one can create an objective interface between their own existence and an outside, inexorable reality; instead, each one tries to protect its own simulacrum while dematerializing the other. When the two worlds inevitably collapse, since they are inherently

bound together by an uncontrollable net of need and purpose, they suddenly become identifiable, self-conscious in a way that includes alterity – neither world can be replaced by the other, so they both have to continue their existence.

Each side's version of utopia undergoes a metamorphosis: for humans, from the social perfection provided in virtuality, to the mere survival of the species.; for the machines, from absolute, uncontested supremacy, to coexistence. The very premise of utopia encompasses a certain dose of virtuality for both worlds, as not even humans can survive without the use of technology, or, at least, the idealized illusion provided by it. There is no absolute objectivity in either version of reality; perception is inherently subversive, while the interface between the two allegedly separate and reciprocally exclusive realms is much too complex for an adequate apprehension, so that both humans and machines remain tributary to the same binary code, to the same collective hallucination. The intricate pattern of simulacrum makes both man and machine translucent, disarticulated, programmatically marginalized within each universe, irrespective of its definition.

Unable to relate to a coherent, stable perspective among the successively changing layers of reality, the individual is forced to change the cynical disbelief about the core of the surrounding environment into an anticipatory state of mind, a certain hope regarding the possibility of freedom. Freedom is, in "The Matrix", the ultimate goal of humanity, even if it means a dark, almost schematic reality, reduced to an enclave in the middle of an apocalyptic world. In this case, the desire for freedom means a deliberate departure from the idea of utopia, whether real or virtual. The possibility of rebirth, for a progressively decaying world, is no equivalent to any utopian vision, there is no correlation between the future of mankind and any viable potentiality of a normal existence – a normality shaped by the previous configuration of life on Earth.

What humans are basically trying to do is give up the already scaled-down illusion of virtual utopia provided by the machines in exchange for the actual survival of the species in its authentic form. They try to replace digital, artificial happiness with real misery, even though this means the dematerialization of all utopian visions. The sophistication of the virtual world does not correspond to the representation of happiness articulated by humans. Even when virtuality ultimately achieves the status of hyperreal, its authenticity is still questioned, while the neurosis caused by the loss of adequacy dissolves the experiential features of a seemingly lost reality.

Each reality is gradually dispersed, as the mechanisms of perception and signification are too abruptly transferred from one environment to another. Inside the matrix, the reality people take for granted is an elaborate combination of simulacra and illusion, specifically designed to prevent any individual from seeing beyond the multiplicity of simulation. The dominance of illusion is based on the humans' *need* for it, thus making the task much easier for the machines. Within this framework of absolute simulation and illusion, the individual is consistently absorbed into a meaningless series of events meant to hypostasize his existence as meaningful: this very contradiction eventually leads to Neo's awakening and concurrently his refusal to accept the illusion. The protagonist proceeds to deconstruct his reality – or the reality assigned to him by the machines – and succeeds in rendering his own simulation as transparent. His perception goes beyond the simulacrum itself to see the binary code to project it.

The implicit conflictual state persistent throughout the entire trilogy is basically articulated by the transfer from the man-machine dichotomy to a clash between utopian illusion and dystopian reality. As the former is reducible to a series of codes, humanity elaborates its trajectory towards the latter through cynical awareness and permanent inquiry. Neo's enlightenment is a mere sample of the firm separation from the illusion employed by machines to feed the human intellect. Passed over to all individuals, even to those in a state of unconscious denial of reality, revolt becomes an ideology, more meaningful than the concept of utopia, however successful its replication might appear.

Artificial intelligence rationally employs utopian conventions in order to create an environment that would be best suited for the human mind, yet the automatical construction of reality is irreducible to authentically human elements: humans will preserve their inherent identity, even if they are totally dependent upon the existence – and the will – of machines. The subtextual idea formulated through the constant clash between man and machine is that however elaborate computer programming might be, it cannot represent a valid substitute for *reality* in perpetuity: the human mind will eventually reject perfection in favour of the *feeling* of the real itself.

At first, the perspective is one-dimensional, there is no debate whether the seemingly real life of the protagonist is actually a fake, the only hints at a possibly self-delusional mechanism being provided by Neo's dreams that he finds as real as his day-time existence. Having to decide which one is true is difficult in a world shaped by virtuality, cybernetics and biotechnology. As opposed to the others around him, Neo already lives in a technology-driven reality, his life is deliberately linked to computers, to virtual reality; he is already on the borderline between the simulation offered to him as a substitute for the real and virtuality. His personal quest is to find freedom, even at the expense of happiness. The matrix becomes a prison for his thoughts – not a virtual one, but a real one, since its effects are more and more visible. However, he will end up sacrificing himself for a humanity imprisoned in virtual reality, not even knowing that its own dreams of technological utopia have turned the real world into a place of almost complete destruction.

Neo's day-time existence is basically a persistent simulation of a long lost reality, preventing him from perceiving his objective environment: a post-apocalyptic scenery, with humans kept suspended in a vegetative state so that the machines can harvest their electricity. Willing to verify his assumptions on his apparently real dreams, the protagonist tries to validate his existence through ethics, even by imposing his newly acquired vision of truth to the other captives of the matrix.

With virtuality as narrative, the plot of *The Matrix* is inherently based on the particular functionality of cyberspace – namely, the boundless digital simulation of the real, with shifting points of reference and a perspective blurred by a continuous metamorphosis of the digital self¹. The illusion served to the humans in “The Matrix” is double-coded. It is the *utopia of reality*, the tangible dream of having a real existence, yet it is not “utopian” in the literal meaning of the term, since the simulated dream is by no means flawless. On the contrary, it possesses all the faulty designs that human existence could have, from personal

¹ The concept of the “digital self” is more thoroughly analyzed in the chapter focusing in digital utopia.

issues to environmental degradation and pollution. It is exactly the sum-total of these rather anti-utopian features that makes simulation believable.

The discourse centred on technology generates a new definition of the hero – and, at the same time, of the wholeness of the human being. In order to be “complete”, the individual must have the ability to jack-in to the computer, or, better said, to the hyperreality generated by the machines.²

In a manner closely related to “The Matrix”, Michael Bay’s film questions the nature of reality through different layers of simulation. Gradually, the plot development unravels intricate levels of reality, only to eventually deconstruct them one by one along the trajectory to finding the ultimate essence of the real. The complex configuration of utopian and dystopian represents a labyrinthical structure within which the protagonists have to deal with their own manipulated perception, to get an ultimately objective perspective.

The whole design of the environment where the two key-figures enjoy their seemingly uneventful lives has paradoxical features, simultaneously utopian and dystopian; utopian, because of the perfect social order, the non-threatening environment, the ever peaceful atmosphere, the firm belief that all individuals living there benefit from a unique chance, that of being the fortunate few survivors of a horrendous, but never fully-explained planetary contamination. Perhaps the essentially utopian element is everybody’s hope to leave for the Island, an allegedly uncontaminated paradise. As for the dystopian features, mention must be made of the strict control, the excessive monitorization of everyone’s most intimate thoughts, and sheer helplessness in finding out more information about the world outside. Added to all this, there is Lincoln Six Echo’s almost paranoid conviction that everything around him is calculated, manipulated, simulated.

Paradoxically, reality itself, as one of the protagonists eventually discover, is much worse than any mind-controlled dystopian scenario imagined by the citizens of the colony: their entire microuniverse is actually a facility where clones are being bred in order to harvest their organs in case their “originals” need a transplant.

The transition between the controlled environment of the facility and the world outside is traumatic, as the interpersonal relationships inside the “social laboratory” have been scientifically manipulated in order to solve any possible existential dilemma, and true human nature has never been fully revealed or experienced by the agnates.³

The social senselessness ensured by the functionality of the entire facility is elevated to an utterly absurd degree, where the agnates themselves signal as soon as they have detected any distinct feelings or sensations taking hold of them, being taught to consider this a sign of illness, and to report to Dr. Merrick. The recurrency of the same dreams is the element that disrupts Lincoln Six Echo’s obsessively monotonous life – the obscure images

² Amanda Fernbach, “The Fetishization of Masculinity in Science Fiction: The Cyborg and the Console Cowboy”, *Science Fiction Studies*, No. 27, 2000, p. 244 - 45

³ The name given to the inhabitants of the facility. In a sense, the term is desired to be politically correct, since the agnates (clones) were supposed to live in a medically induced vegetative state, never to achieve any level of consciousness.

which appear in his dreams are beyond the artificial memories implanted by Dr. Merrick: „you’re human, but you’re not real”.⁴

The idealized image of the “Island”, interpreted by the agnates as their only chance to have a normal life, is the collective mental drug which gives them a reason to be, even though some of them, Lincoln Six Echo included, come to doubt it. He and a few others, even though having never experienced an existence within the limits of normality, somehow begin to question their daily routine, their indeterminate purpose in life, sensing the artificiality which has corrupted every single aspect of their imitation of life. The excessiveness of the efforts to keep all individuals in control, deliberately marginalizing their thinking and imposing unnatural limits to their emotional and psychological development, eventually supersedes its own purpose, and the parameters used in configuring their micro-universe are no longer useful in designing the utopia of conformity envisioned by Dr. Merrick. Imitation is no longer effective.

The neurosis of the daily lottery⁵ is suddenly not enough to regularize *all* natural impulses, to cancel *all* feelings. For the agnates, achieving utopia – being selected to go to the island – means death, in reality. But their unwilling and unsuspected sacrifice is, in fact, a morbid articulation of the utopia advertised so convincingly to the people outside, in the real world: immortality. Or, at least, life being prolonged with up to seventy years past its biologically possible span – obsessively chanted by the facility’s commercials for the “real people” outside, and kept secret from the “vegetating humans” inside.

Instead of conforming to the signification of refuge against the unknown – or against the “assault” of the unconscious, in Jungian terms⁶ – the island represents here a dystopia, a microuniverse where a simulated environment is being used as breeding grounds for individuals meant to be sacrificed to ensure the survival of their *real* doubles.

After a world war that had caused immense damage to humanity and nature, the newly created state of Libria manages to find a solution to avoid future potentiality for conflict: suppressing emotions, thought to be responsible for people’s desire to engage in conflict. Acting upon impulse is strictly forbidden, on one hand, and medically dishabilitating, on the other – every Librian is to take his dose of Proziom, thus eliminating the possibility of experiencing strong emotions.

There are two clearly delineated utopian visions at play in Libria: that of a senseless, but orderly social life, guarded against any struggle through medication and strict state control, and the one pursued by those who think that being deprived of their emotions is too high a price for social order. Emotions are the central element in both visions: forbidden, in the former, and aimed for, in the latter.

However, the seemingly indestructible utopia – owing its functionality to rigid military control, massive propaganda and a carefully designed cult of personality – is based upon the very element it seeks to eradicate: violence. Sense-offenders are subjected to

⁴ This is, in part, the explanation received by the two fugitives, after their escape, when asking questions about who they are – the one answering them is their only friend and help, a man who works as a computer technician in the facility.

⁵ By announcing publicly, in a lottery-like event, the names of the “winners”, supposedly going to the “island”, Dr. Merrick actually selects the agnates who are to be taken out of the facility and sacrificed so that their “sponsors” could go on living.

⁶ J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. Jack Sage, Routledge, London, 2001, p. 160

summary judgement and then cremated. Surveillance is used not to ensure the well-being of the Librians as much as to attain complete control over any possible social movement, in order to camouflage dictatorship through the simulation of order. On one hand, Librians are blinded by propaganda and the use of drugs meant to annihilate their individuality; on the other hand, any sense-offenders are terminated, and their execution is held secret, so that the veil of social perfection is not disturbed.

In this highly automatized society, with individuals forced to lead an emotionless life in order to integrate in the quasi-mechanized community, the façade of happiness eventually proves to be artificial; the desire to feel and the need to obtain freedom are the elements which overturn the precision of the system. Yet the victory of the Resistance, equivalent to the end of an emotionless existence, is ambiguous in its effect. The final scene, with all the telescreens, the symbols of oppression, being broken, and the bombs being detonated, stands for the reversibility of the processes that had led to the interdictions forced upon Libria in the first place. The sudden outburst of long-buried feelings causes chaos. The protagonist witnesses the irrevocable transformation caused by his actions. His motivation, that of freeing Libria from the ultra-rigid, senseless state machinery, essentially stems from his own feelings, newly discovered after having stopped taking Prozium.

A disarticulated combination of love, sorrow, revenge and hate – the exact same feelings feared for their allegedly destructive potential – is the element that ultimately triggers Preston's revolt. Yet, in order to accomplish his mission, the protagonist needs to resort to the alienating, machine-like behaviour he hates so much – processing his own sensations in a robotic, cold manner, thus being able to attain the necessary combat-mode needed to prevail. Initiating the final conflict, Preston transforms himself into the perfect product of his training. The binarism of his personality does not cause instability, the ability to feel does not represent a weakness: flawless self-control is not affected by emotions. In a retrograde behavioural spiral, he controls his emotions only to achieve the freedom not to suppress them anymore. He assumes his machinistic personality as a means, neutralizing his convictions, without affecting the already crystallized, organic need for individual freedom.

Extrapolating the protagonist's transformations, the entire Librian society surpasses the stage of projecting its emotions onto fuelling war, goes through a phase of forgetfulness and denial regarding all emotions, and eventually returns to the initial state: the violent riot in the end, seen through Preston's eyes, is a vivid substantiation of what seems to be a subversive, uncontrollable need for havoc. The amalgamation of feelings and ideologies is not levelled by a senseless dictatorship anymore, but its expression is consequently destructive.

In Libria, the state-approved utopia seems to complete senselessness, and each social convulsion has a debilitating effect on the image that the dictator wants to project. The dictatorship that progressively turns Librians into oblivious machines is actually based on a simulacrum: "Father", the central authority, and he is interpreted by the next in rank. In order not to disturb the apparent social obedience, technology enables the ever-present TV screens to show the image of the "Father" as if he were alive. By simulating his existence, the mechanisms of dictatorship become even more empowered, as the masses are permanently subjected to an overwhelming vision of authority.

Achieving control through media and over-saturation with the image of the “Father” is only one side of the whole plan, the other elements being the drug (Prozium), the police forces always ready to step in, and, last but not least, the fractured communication between individuals, so that no expression of revolt could get perpetuated within the largely submissive community. Progressively, the entire society is dehumanized through the imposed use of Prozium; the strategic diminishing of one’s capacity to feel transforms people into mechanistic entities, not willing to notice the subversive nature of the propaganda they are constantly exposed to, and not caring enough to even want to change. Their puppet-like existence is the “standardized” version of social dystopia, with individuals threatened with capital punishment by a manipulative police state, should they ever refuse the senselessness presented to them as bliss. The misrepresentation of societal order is camouflaged by the morally-disorienting effects of the drug.

The easier-to-handle generalized mediocrity of people – mediocrity, as far as their psychological and physical abilities are concerned – is maintained at the desired level by individuals with almost superhuman capacities, members of elite governmental troops and the products of highly specialized, secret training sessions. The discrepancy between ordinary people and the ones who are experts in keeping them submissive points towards the denied possibilities of evolution – the level of individual development attained by the Clerics means impossibility for all the others, simply because the system does not allow it. In Libria, the system can only be defeated from within, with one of the Clerics turning against the ideology that has created the premises for his own evolution; the system can only be destroyed by one of its products. The symmetrical perfection of senselessness politics is overturned by the very element that was supposed to regularize its social dynamics.⁷

From a temporal perspective, the societal development in “Equilibrium” is somehow cyclical, being permanently connected to the degree of articulating emotions. For a world where the overflow of emotional content caused mass destruction, utopia inevitably means the unequivocal disappearance of *all* emotions – a completely emotionless environment, thus protected from any potentiality for destruction. In a totalitarian world, where feelings are forbidden and “sense offenders” are executed, the new utopia is basically the reality before the dictatorship, when feelings could be expressed freely, no matter how disruptive. Paradoxically, both scenarios are equally violent in their functionality: the emotionless world uses murder as an instrument to preserve conformity and the façade of quiet social life, while its opposite systematically unleashes chaos and destruction. So, if peaceful existence is the ground criterium, the utopia of each world is malfunctioning.

These cinematic environments seem to regard the tendency towards depression as a necessary condition for their functionality, as if optimism, hope or serenity were destabilizing factors, overt threats to the norms of the system. From a psychological point of view, depression seems unavoidable within the repetitive patterns of dictatorship, manipulation and artificiality; paradoxically, however, depression also functions as a trigger for revolt, because it is not individually developed, but culturally constructed and socially induced, with the environment playing an instrumental part in the entire mechanism.

⁷ Symmetry is a powerful symbol across the entire movie, representing the oppressive state and its strictness.

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