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A Glitch in the Matrix

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Abstract

This is a film review of *A Glitch in the Matrix* (2021), directed by Rodney Ascher.

Keywords

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Author Notes

John Lyden is Professor of Religious Studies and the Blizek Professor of Religion and Film at University of Nebraska-Omaha. He was been the Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film since 2011. He is the author of Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals (NYU Press), and the editor of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Film and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture. He also co-edited, with Ken Derry, The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservativism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars (Wipf and Stock 2018).

A Glitch in the Matrix (2021), dir. Rodney Ascher

Rodney Ascher's documentary revisits the venerable philosophical question: how can we know if the material world we perceive is reality, or just a construct within our minds? From the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna to the Anglican Bishop George Berkeley, the argument has been made that only minds and ideas exist, and that no proof can be given of a material world nor is there a need to posit one. Modern Simulation Theory has updated this view to suggest that we exist in a computer simulation and that our bodies as we perceive them do not exist. Instead, we may be no more than self-aware computer code, a product of some powerful species of programmers creating the world as we know it.

Ascher travels through the history of philosophy and religion in his treatment, referencing Plato's story of the cave dwellers who mistake the shadows on the wall for reality, and Descartes' hypothesis of the "Evil Demon" who may be deceiving him about the existence of the physical

world. Descartes made his argument that the world is real by discounting that premise, famously claiming that I cannot doubt my own existence, and since I know that I am not self-created, no God would allow such a deception of our senses to occur to us. But since *The Matrix* (1999) came out, just about everyone is familiar with the notion that we might be living in a computer simulation, and there is no general confidence that a good God would necessarily prevent this. As virtual reality and computer graphics improve, the argument just becomes more powerful.

Jean Baudrillard made the argument that we have come to a point in the modern world where we cannot distinguish reality from simulation, but he made this argument not to advance the suggestion that we are actually bits of software—rather, he was making a criticism of modern capitalistic media and its manipulative nature. Baudrillard in mentioned in this film, but his point is not the dominant one. Instead, we hear from a variety of individuals, many of whom appear in the form of their computerized avatars on screen, who literally believe their bodies are not real. Clips from films like *Total Recall* (1990), *Avatar* (2009), and of course *The Matrix* punctuate the narration, which suggest that Ascher may be having a bit of fun with us and not taking the argument totally seriously. Science fiction author Philip K. Dick infamously held that we are living in a fake reality, and we see vintage footage of him from 1977 explaining his theory, but it is widely believed that Dick's own paranoia and schizophrenia were determining his worldview—such as his belief that he was actually a first century Christian named Thomas.

Still, Ascher does not treat his topic as a joke. The film takes a serious turn in making the valid point that those who believe other people are not real but just part of a simulation may feel no ethical duties towards them, and may destroy them out of violent desires with the same lack of concern as someone who shoots to kill in a computer game. There are actual cases of those who have been desensitized by online play, and he lets Joshua Cooke tell his own story of how he

murdered his parents with a shotgun after repeatedly viewing *The Matrix.* Cooke repented after realizing what he had done, and has spent his life telling his story to others to help them avoid his fate. Although his lawyers wanted to enter a plea of insanity, in the end Cooke rejected this, choosing instead to take responsibility for his actions.

We may be part of a simulation, some of those interviewed conclude, but this does not allow us to escape ethical responsibility for our actions as there may be other real people in it with us. And even if we find this new form of philosophical idealism as unconvincing as its predecessors in its denial of physical reality, we should realize its negative potential as it may contribute to a dismissal of the "real" world we share. That may take the form of violence, or it may take the form of those who believe everything is "fake news" and they can construct their own reality out of whatever ideology they choose. Such perceptions may lead some people to reject the results of democratic elections and attack the US Congress; it may lead others to disbelieve in viruses. Baudrillard may be correct that we have lost the ability to tell what is reality.

The appeal of Simulation Theory is not only in its ethical escapism, however, but also in the notion that there is a consciousness guiding all this, and perhaps we can find the purpose of existence by waking up to the deception. Some of those interviewed admit to having been raised religiously, but now have abandoned that. I wonder if they are in fact still clinging to the religious desire for explanation, albeit with a Great Programmer instead of a traditional God. In the end, we can never really know if we have woken up sufficiently or not—and Plato and Nagarjuna knew this well, long before computers and virtual reality. We can only try to act with faith and live with compassion, even if it all is an illusion, if we want to make meaning in this life. Maybe that's the theory that the Master Programmer is testing. This film led me on this wild ride through such speculations, which are entertaining as well as relevant.