

**UNIT PAPER ON
TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM IN
MASS COMMUNICATION**

Robert B. Reed

Spring Arbor University

COM 504 Communication Theory and Worldview

Fall 2004

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to describe technological determinism in media in the movie *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999) from the perspective of three theorists: McLuhan, Postman, and Chandler. The problem the movie addresses is how to determine what is real when reality exists only in our minds, based on our perceptions and experiences, electromagnetic impulses in our brains which can be simulated and stimulated by machines.

The movie opens in 1999, as a computer hacker named Thomas Anderson, code-named Neo, discovers that what seems to be normal life on Earth is merely a virtual reality known as the Matrix, created by machines to keep people happy while they are used to provide energy for the machines in the “real world.” He is recruited by a rebel leader, named Morpheus, who believes Neo is the One prophesied to defeat the machines, and free humanity from their control. Morpheus shows Neo that the 1999 “reality” is an illusion, and that the “real” world of 2199 is really a dreary, dark place that resulted from human attempts to overthrow the machines that they had come to depend on. Freedom and hope for humanity lay in choosing the real over the computer generated, or drug induced, illusion.

Discussion

This movie is a prototypical example of technological determinism: people create machines to simplify their lives and serve them, and in the process, create increasingly smarter machines until the machines become smart enough to overthrow the humans. McLuhan believed that human inventions caused cultural change; in the movie the cultural change was that the machines defined “reality” for people to keep them happy until the

machines needed their energy. Though McLuhan was interested primarily in how tools and technology affected communication, he said, “We shape our tools and they in turn shape us” (Griffin, 2003, p. 344). He also believed “that the way [people] live is largely a function of the way [they] process information” (Griffin, 2003, p. 344) and “the primary channel of communication changes the way we perceive the world. The dominant medium of any age dominates people” (Griffin, 2003, p. 345). This movie takes this notion to its ultimate conclusion, as no medium can be more direct or dominant than direct control of perceptions by plugging directly into peoples’ brains. McLuhan & Fiore make a statement that is especially applicable to this movie: “Survival is not possible if one approaches his environment, the social drama, with a fixed, unchangeable point of view—the witless repetitive response to the unperceived” (1967, p. 10). *The Matrix* fits McLuhan’s definition of a cool medium, as the person participates completely in the experience of the message, by living an illusion that he or she thinks is real life.

Postman’s view of a society totally used by its tools is clearly demonstrated in this movie. He says,

Television always recreates the world to some extent in its own image by selecting parts of that world and editing those parts.... [Recreating historical events] with fictional overtones... is dangerous ... because it blurs an already blurred distinction for viewers between illusion and reality.

(Postman, 1990).

Postman (1996) viewed a proper human response to technological manipulation in a way reminiscent of the conclusion in the movie: “If students get a sound education in the

history, social effects and psychological biases of technology, they may grow to be adults who use technology rather than be used by it.”

Chandler (2000) says that technological determinists view technology as transforming society at all levels “including institutions, social interaction and individuals.” *The Matrix* especially fits Chandler’s description of technological autonomy, in which “technology is presented as an independent, self-controlling, self-determining, self-generating, self-propelling, self-perpetuating and self-expanding force. It is seen as out of human control, changing under its own momentum and ‘blindly’ shaping society” (2001). Chandler (2001) cites Jacques Ellul’s description of uncontrolled and unregulated technology leading to unintended consequences, replacing human autonomy in “complex interdependent technological systems ... being shaped by technology itself rather than by society.” Mclaughlin says that Ellul sees “Technology, [as] symbolic of a cancer which as it grows increases the fundamental danger to its host, in this case society.”

Conclusion

This paper has presented an analysis of the movie *The Matrix* from several different theoretical perspectives in mass communication. It points out the problems of deception, as people blissfully live their lives in an illusion until they are destroyed to provide power for the machines. While some have found the Matrix to be a messianic analogy, I believe that the intentional messianic analogies presented are tantalizing enough to lead Christians to be deceived (Copland, 2002). The movie shows the power of deception in people’s lives, whether they are self deceived, deceived by drugs, or by the technological advances of their ancestors. The technological determinism shows the unintended consequences of what can happen when technological advances are not balanced by self-imposed limitations, rather

than “because we can.” Ethical restraint in technological development becomes a key factor in preventing the future destruction of the human race by its own creation. The conclusion of the movie is biblical: “Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32), but the freedom described is not the freedom of the Scriptures (knowing Jesus personally), but is instead a drab, dark, dreary existence free from mind control, but also free from the beauty and pleasure that this illusory mind control gives.

References

- Chandler, D. (2000). Technological or media determinism. Downloaded November 3, 2004, from <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/tecdet/tdet02.html> .
- Chandler, D. (2001). Technological or media determinism: technological autonomy. Downloaded November 3, 2004, from <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/tecdet/tdet06.html> .
- Copeland, C. (2002). The Matrix as Messiah Movie. Downloaded November 7, 2004, from <http://awesomehouse.com/matrix/> .
- Griffin, E. (2003). *Communication: a first look at communication theory*. Boston: McGraw Hill Higher Education.
- Mclaughlin, G. (n.d.). Jacques Ellul: the present and the future. Downloaded November 3, 2004, from <http://www.umsl.edu/~rkeel/280/class/gregtd.html> .
- McLuhan, M., & Fiore, Q. (1967). *The medium is the message*. New York: Random House.
- Postman, N. (1990). Television and the decline of public discourse. Interview with Robert Nelson. *The Civic Arts Review* Vol. 3, No. 1, Nov. 1990. Downloaded November 3, 2004, from <http://car.owu.edu/Vol.%203%20No.%201.htm> .

Postman, N. (1996). Neil Postman ponders high tech: Q&A forum on PBS online.

Wednesday January 17, 1996. Downloaded November 3, 2004, from

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/forum/january96/postman_1-17.html

Wachowski, A., & Wachowski, L. (Writers and Producers). (1999). The Matrix [Motion Picture]. United States: Warner Brothers.