

TRANSCENDING MENTAL BOUNDARIES:  
PSYCHEDELIC DRUGS AND DEMYSTIFICATION IN *THE MATRIX*

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## Introduction

*The Matrix* trilogy visualizes the concept of an ideology veiling the “true reality” of a society in the form of a computer generated simulation called “The Matrix.” This simulation is “fed” to the imprisoned humans to prevent them from realizing that they “are no longer born,” but that they are “grown” into bondage by sentient machines. These machines started using the humans’ body heat and electrical activity to generate the required energy for their own subsistence after the humans scorched the sky to cut off the machines’ solar energy source.

The popularity of *The Matrix* (1999), *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), and *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003) has made the trilogy widely studied by literary, philosophical and religious scholars. Mattias Ågren demonstrates the trilogy’s popularity by analyzing *The Matrix* for its allusions “in four works of contemporary Russian prose fiction” (249). In this, he argues that “references to *The Matrix* are made in order to benefit from the film’s eclectic mythological concepts and transpose them to the literary realm” (Ågren 249). Alternatively, Mark Gallagher has studied the films for their stereotypical representations of masculinity, and Cerise Glenn and Landra Cunningham used *The Matrix* trilogy to “[formalize] a definition of the magical Negro” to demonstrate how it “reinvent[s] traditional black stereotypes of mammy, jezebel, and Uncle Tom” (135). In contrast to these one-sided literary analyses, Jason Haslam argued that “simply seeing the film as such a reproduction of [white male] dominance would miss out on some of the nuances that *are* created by its explicit mediations on the nature of subjectivity and of ideology ‘itself’” (94). Haslam starts to pick up on the trilogy’s philosophical references and these were elaborately studied in a collection of essays listed in *Taking the Red Pill: Science, Philosophy and Religion in The Matrix* (2003). This book analyzes the film in relation to the “nature of reality,” “postmodernism,” “Buddhism,” “mythology,” “human freedom,” “artificial

intelligence,” “simulation,” and religion (ix-x). Slavoj Žižek, in turn, critically studied *The Matrix* for its philosophical inconsistencies. Žižek argued that the paradox is in the fact that “the desert of the real” that Morpheus shows protagonist Neo is not “the ‘true reality,’ but the void which makes reality incomplete/inconsistent, and the function of every symbolic Matrix is to conceal this inconsistency” (1). These inconsistencies are elaborated upon by Chris Falzon who studies the dialectic *interaction* between philosophy and film centered on *The Matrix*. In this he discusses how “the film offers a vision of escaping the flesh, of leaving the body behind” into virtual reality in a similar way to how philosophers Plato and Decartes, but also the theologians Augustine and Aquinas, seemed to be obsessed with such “escapist fantasies” (Falzon 109). For all these philosophers, transcending into the immortality of the self as the “mind” or the “soul” is prevented by the self being trapped inside the human body and the transcendence could therefore only succeed by dying (106).

What scholars have not done, interestingly, is to take the part of Neo taking “the red pill” literally. The first *Matrix* film visualizes that the veiling simulation that covers “the desert of the real” can be uncovered by swallowing the red pill. Literally, it would thus suggest that there exists a pill—or a particular substance encapsulated in a pill—that shows reality in its “true” form after consuming it. Resistance to the enslaving machines leader Morpheus gives Neo the opportunity to see the complexity of their multilayered reality firsthand. Morpheus explains Neo that “this is your last chance, after this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill, the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill, you stay in wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.” The depth of the “rabbit hole,” a reference to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) that symbolizes the portal to the fantasy “wonderland,” constitutes in *The Matrix* the astounding reality that Neo was unable to

experience thus far. After swallowing the red pill, Neo goes through a process of “rebirth” where his sense of “reality” as he knew it is stripped down until only the naked “true reality” remains.

In contrast to the scholars that studied *The Matrix* trilogy, the religious sect “Matrixism” focusses on “the red pill” symbolism and has built its tenets around it. In effect, two of their tenets specify “acceptance of the use of psychedelics as sacrament,” to “see the truth and to be freed from the matrix,” and also “recognition of the semi-subjective multilayered nature of reality” (1). Here the fact of the red pill as a psychedelic drug is recognized and consequently sacramentalized in a similar fashion as the Indians of the Native American Church do. These Indians use peyote—a cactus containing the psychedelic drug mescaline—as a sacrament to transcend beyond their own ego-reality to experience religious worship more directly and vividly (Huxley 56). In addition, a user on a forum for psychonauts—people that explore and examine altered states of consciousness—writes that *The Matrix* “is even an analogy for the psychedelic experience (and acid [LSD] for that matter). Neo's ‘birth’ into the matrix was very much like the seemingly instant onset of the drug on me. The movie is heavily laden with symbolism that you can really sniff out when you shift perspectives” (RushNerd). The “onset” of a “mind revealing” psychedelic—*psyche* means “mind” and *dèloun* means “to reveal” in ancient Greek—drug can be experienced in a similar way as Neo experiences. Since a psychedelic drug directs your perception to a meta-perspective, it reveals “reality” as a multilayered form in which the meta-reality is one “layer” separated from ordinary reality. For us humans, ordinary reality is made sense of in a symbolic order. This order links the visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory sense impressions to mental concepts that are articulated in words consisting of language symbols. Simply put, our reality is made sense of through, and thus determined by, an “ideology” as Karl Marx explained in 1846 in “The German Ideology.” According to Marx, “the

class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force” so that it can provide the ideal expression of the material relationships in an ideology that constitutes class division as the norm (253-54). Subjects of the ruling ideology thus have a “false consciousness”—as Marxist Friedrich Engels explained—that withholds them from realizing that what they believe are the eternal truths that constitute the reality of their society, are actually historical truths of their time (1). During the meta-perspective—facilitated by the mind revealing aspect of psychedelic drugs—this false “veil” of ideology becomes visible because in the meta-perspective one can reflect back upon the ideology that constitutes ordinary reality as such. Some people feel very disturbed by this mind revealing effect that shows that reality as such can have variable appearances and, in effect, feel their psychedelic experience as a “bad trip.” In extreme cases, such a person might not know when or what is reality anymore and henceforth might experience his trip like a “psychoses.”

Psychologists, but also the philosophical writer Aldous Huxley, realized in the early 1950s already that the “mind revealing” effect of psychedelic drugs could be experienced as what psychology calls a “psychotic state.” In effect, psychotherapists used psychedelics to mimic, understand, and treat psychoses from the mid-1950s onwards until they were prohibited by the “Controlled Substances Act” of 1970 (Neil 39). The prohibition was based on the “high potential for abuse,” the lack of “currently accepted medical use in treatment,” and the “lack of accepted safety for use of the drug or other substances under medical supervision.” The prohibition of these schedule I drugs demonizes their consumers into criminals, which often results in custody, while schedule II-V drugs are legally prescribed in the name of medicine and psychiatry. Psychiatric prescription drugs of the latter category can in metaphor be seen as *The Matrix*’ “blue pill,” a pill that rather than transcending the user beyond his stigmatized “illness,”

keeps the user within the ruling ideology that constitutes his state of mind as an illness. Although this act shut down medical use and research temporarily, there has been an upsurge of empirical studies since roughly the start of the millennium that prove the value of psychedelics as an aid in treating “mental illnesses.” It appears then, that neuropsychopharmacologist Carl Hart is right in arguing that “much of what we [in the USA] are doing in terms of drug education, treatment, and public policy is inconsistent with scientific data” (4). Research thus proves that the widespread warning that “drugs are bad” is merely an ideological statement, rather than a protective statement by a “concerned” government.

In contemporary US society, the ruling ideology veils the fact that prohibition of psychedelics is actually a response to the cultural panic of the 1960s that surrounded these substances. This panic was fostered by the Manson Family and MacDonalld murders of the 1960s and was effectively capitalized upon in “hippy exploitation films” such as *Hallucination Generation* (1967), *Riot on Sunset Strip* (1967), and *I Drink Your Blood* (1970). The latter explicitly starts with “let it be known sons and daughters that Satan was an acid-head.” In effect, it enhances the panic while staying in line with the US puritan tradition by victimizing Satan as an LSD junky. Moreover, even the more celebratory *Easy Rider* (1969), a film that stars Dennis Hopper in pursuit of “America,” visualizes the use of LSD strictly as a horrifying experience. The domestic policy of the War on Drugs, thus, has led to a misconception that sustains a mismanagement—characterized by repressive symbolic policy measures—of psychedelic drugs from top to bottom throughout society. In effect, the political body not only impinges upon the consumers’ freedom of consciousness, but it also stigmatizes the debate on the medical, intellectual, and transcendental value of psychedelic drugs.

*The Matrix* trilogy, so far, has been widely studied for its philosophical and religious references. However, in this thesis I will offer a literary analysis of *The Matrix* trilogy in which I shall argue that the trilogy's significance lies not in its philosophical and religious references, but in its visualization of the psychedelic experience as an aid to reach beyond what Marxists call "false consciousness" to experience reality in its "true" form. To analyze the psychedelic experience, I will compare Aldous Huxley's transcendental mescaline experience described in *The Doors of Perception* (1954) to contemporary empirical studies on psychedelic drugs. To illustrate the contrary of a psychedelic experience, I shall argue that the legal "blue pill" drugs that withhold transcendence mimic Huxley's "soma" drug that sustains his dystopic *Brave New World* (1932). In this, I argue that *The Matrix* films both implicitly and explicitly criticize the US domestic policy of the "War on Drugs" by demonstrating that the policy's criminalization of psychedelics on account of "protecting" its citizens actually prevents them from transcending beyond the ruling ideology that prohibits *certain* drugs but allows for others. Transcending the ruling ideology, as depicted in *The Matrix*, facilitates thinking and reasoning beyond previously assumed boundaries that, in effect, can serve a beneficial role for both mental health and intellectual thought. In line with the recent upsurge of positive empirical studies on psychedelics as medicines and nootropics, *The Matrix* trilogy thus plays an important cultural role by visualizing the veil of ideology and by demonstrating the benefits of transcending it.

## **Chapter 1 – Psychedelics, Marx, and *The Matrix***

*The Matrix* visualizes altered reality experiences that both implicitly and explicitly refer to psychedelic drugs. According to one definition, psychedelic drugs are those "which, without causing physical addiction, craving, major physiological disturbances, delirium, disorientation,

or amnesia, more or less reliably produce thought, mood, and perceptual changes otherwise rarely experienced except in dreams, contemplative and religious exaltation, flashes of vivid involuntary memory, and acute psychoses” (Grinspoon and Bakalar 9). Another simply states that, “psychedelics affect every aspect of our consciousness” and consequently, they alter perception in such a way that the consumer experiences—just as in dreams—a different form of reality (Strassman 40). In effect, sensual input is experienced differently, and since it feels different from ordinary reality, there are no fixed preconceived interpretations connected to this sensual input yet. Everything looks, feels, sounds, smells, and tastes differently, and with some psychedelics such as LSD, there are even experiences of *synesthesia* where senses “blend” with each other. Consequently, a concept such as time can be felt as being sped up or slowed down, space may seem larger or smaller, and straight forms may seem roundish or vice-versa. The changes in these concepts make, in effect, a natural law such as gravity feel as though there is nothing “natural” (fixed) about this law. Currently, there are many psychedelic substances, and they all enable some of the aforementioned experiences in some degree. In 2010 there were approximately “350–400 psychedelics we know of,” but the most potent and famous ones are LSD; mescaline; psilocybin, to be found in a variety of “magic” mushrooms and truffles; MDMA, the psychedelic compound in ecstasy pills; ketamine, also known as horse tranquilizer; DMT, the psychedelic compound in the Amazon ayahuasca brew; and to some degree even Cannabis (Luke). Interestingly, the first reference to psychedelics in *The Matrix* comes early in the film already when Neo’s friend, Choi, asks him if something is wrong. Neo replies: “You ever have that feeling where you’re not sure if you’re awake or still dreaming? And Choi answers: “mmm all the time, it’s called mescaline, it’s the only way to fly.” As a result of the altered sense of gravity induced by the psychedelic effect of mescaline, an experience that feels

like flying is actually not unlikely to occur. Interestingly, this concept is also visualized when the resisters and the machines hack into the Matrix and jump so high that it seems that they are flying. Moreover, at the end of *The Matrix*, Neo literally flies away “promising ‘a world without rules and controls, without borders and boundaries, a world where anything is possible.’ His flying, like his words, suggest that humans need not be bound by their physical bodies” (Falzon 105). As Falzon exemplifies, *The Matrix* visualizes, just like psychedelics and other dreamlike states induce, a transcendence of bodily limitations.

A transcendence of bodily limitations unveils the ideological lens through which reality is experienced and henceforth allows for demystification of the “false consciousness.” In contrast to the idea that our ideological lens through which we experience reality “descends from heaven to earth,” Karl Marx argued that “we set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process” (253). Thus, the experiences of everyday life and the interpretation of these experiences are conceptualized and given meaning in the brain. Consequently, these meanings only exist in relation to meanings of other concepts and are thus completely relative. Similarly, in semiotics words only have a signified that has its meaning solely in relation to other words and their signified meanings; there is thus no real relation between the word and the material existence of its signified. The complete structure of all those meanings that come with beliefs and emotional value judgments, together, constitute the ideology of a person and hence determine how reality is experienced. Thus, when the way we sense and perceive and henceforth the way we act—our real activities and experiences in Marx’ words—changes under the influence of a psychedelic, our ideology that was determined by everyday life is not coherent with our new reality anymore. In effect, the “language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc.” all become detached

from the ideology that held them together (Marx 253). In the psychedelic state, reality is experienced as if it is for the first time. It is as if the psychedelic consumer is reborn just like Neo was after swallowing the red pill. Morpheus explains him that the Matrix “is the world that has been pulled over your eyes, to blind you from the truth. You are a slave Neo, like everyone else, you were born into bondage ... a prison for your mind.” Neo’s ideology keeps him distracted from the fact that the machines use his body to generate their energy; in the same way our Western ideology distracts us from the fact that we are “democratically” coerced into paying taxes that we have to work for in order to exist in this world. This “condition” to live, is, however, propagated, and generally experienced, as being the *rational* condition to our human existence. This “rationality” is what Marxists call the “false consciousness” that constitutes the ideological lens that its subjects interpret reality through. Thus, the re-experience of the “naked” reality (Žižek’s “void” of reality) as if it is for the first time—without the loss of memory—unveils the ideological lens because the naked reality has no meaning attached to it yet. Interestingly, this aligns with recent research that concluded that “in many ways, the brain in the LSD state resembles the state our brains were in when we were infants—free and unconstrained” (*ABC News*). Thus the psychedelic reality is experienced as the memory of ordinary reality, with a perception as free and unconstrained as an infant’s brain.

The unconstrained infant perception facilitates a dialectic mode of perception that leads to a demystifying process in which reality is seen in its “true” form—wholly subjective and multi-layered. In this, there is a constant questioning of one’s beliefs and assumptions that constitute the reality of his life. The question of what is real, and what is a “myth,” logically leads to the realization that everything you know is actually reality defined in conventionalized concepts. Because in the psychedelic state, everything *is* different, the notion of reality as wholly

subjective, dependent on the inner state, presents itself. In effect, there is no such thing as *the* reality, only *a* reality. Lana Wachowski, director of *The Matrix* trilogy, explains in an interview that

What we were trying to achieve with the story overall was a *shift*, the same kind of shift that happens for Neo, that Neo goes from being in this sort of cocooned and programmed world, to having to participate in the *construction* of meaning to his life. And we were like, well, can the audience go through the three movies and experience something *similar* to what the main character experiences? (Poland, italics added)

The Wachowski brothers succeeded very well in their attempt, and started Neo's "shift" early with Trinity explaining: "it's the question that drives us, Neo. It's the question that brought you here. You know the question, just as I did." Neo responds: "What is the Matrix?" When Neo, just like the audience, has seen what the Matrix is, it is as Thomas Wartenberg argued that "once we accept the possibility of the matrix doing what it does, we have to wonder whether we are not in the situation of the inhabitants of *The Matrix*" (150). In this, he explains that "*The Matrix* can be seen as doing something distinctively philosophical, namely unsettling our established habits of belief and action, getting us to call into question our taken for granted assumptions" (qtd. in Falzon 100). This is similar to what Descartes does by "making us think about our own situation, bringing us to question how ordinary assumptions about the world and what we think we know about it" (Falzon 100). Essential for this demystification process is as Morpheus explains Neo that "no one can be told what *The Matrix* is, you have to see it for yourself." Just like telling someone to question all his beliefs to realize that "true" reality is simply subjective and can be

perceived in various forms and thus constitutes of multiple “layers,” is far less effective than the process of a firsthand experience of such a person to come to this realization.

## **Chapter 2 – The Red Pill**

Aldous Huxley’s moments of transcendence during his mescaline trip resemble a firsthand direct experience of naked reality. Huxley writes in *The Doors of Perception* about various instances of transcendence that make him aware of elements of “suchness”—“the infinite value and meaningfulness of naked existence, of the given, unconceptualized event”—expressed in nature and captured by various artists (19). Neo-Marxist Louis Althusser criticizes Marx’s concept of demystifying the layer of *false consciousness* to see reality for what it truly is as being an impossible process. Althusser argues that “ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” and according to Althusser, it is impossible to make sense of these “real conditions of existence” without ideological concepts that give it meaning (294). Thus, in Althusser’s theory, stripping away the false (ideological) layer of consciousness would simply result in creating a new system of meanings (ideology) to be able to experience the real conditions of existence again. In this theory, experiencing “naked” reality would be impossible. Interestingly, Huxley’s mescaline induced state of being could arguably be called “ideologically free.” The things he sees—often distorted—often do not entail any conceptualized meaning yet. Huxley writes that he faced “a Last Judgment which after a long time and with inconsiderable difficulty, [he] recognized as a chair—I found myself all at once on the brink of panic” (43). Consequently he explains that “the fear, as I analyse it in retrospect, was of being overwhelmed, of disintegrating under a pressure of reality greater than a mind, accustomed to living most of the time in a cosy world of symbols, could possibly bear” (Huxley

43). Thus during his mescaline experience, Huxley perceives naked reality—“suchness”—without any system of meanings to make sense of it in symbolic terms. In effect, Huxley was confronted by the “last judgment” and although his experience was of “intenser beauty and deeper significance,” it did put him in a moment of psychosis (43). Huxley explains various other moments where he experiences the suchness of material existence: he finds it in a flower, the drapes of *Judith* (painted by Botticelli), van Gogh’s chair, and Vermeer’s paintings, but during these experiences, he feels nothing but awe for “this cleansed perception” (31). It is thus possible—under the influence of a psychedelic—to be in a state where the void of reality is experienced directly.

Although Huxley’s observations are primarily philosophical, contemporary research on psychedelic substances puts his experience in an empirical scientific perspective. Just a month ago, Robin Carhart-Harris et al. concluded from an LSD experiment that “the separateness of [the neural] networks breaks down, leading to a more unified system” in the brain and that, in effect, “many extra brain areas—not just the visual cortex—contributed to visual processing” (*ABC News*). Interestingly, a similar result was found in a 2014 study with psilocybin where Giovanni Petri et al. concluded that psilocybin causes an increase in the connectivity of the various brain regions (8). These results explain why Huxley hallucinated the “last judgement” when faced with a chair; the chair was not solely processed and interpreted by the visual cortex, but by a fusion of all the brain compartments. This psychedelic–mind revealing–effect accounts for the distorted image creation in the brain that can go as far as complete hallucinations. Because LSD makes the brain like that of an infant’s again, it then “also makes sense when we consider the hyper-emotional and imaginative nature of an infant's mind” (*ABC News*). Since a psychedelic causes

the entire brain to process visuals and make sense of reality, Huxley felt, just like babies often experience, overwhelmed by the image creation and responded hyper-emotionally.

Huxley's experience can be classified as a "mystical experience" that can ultimately lead to a state where the body feels split from the mind. The psychedelically induced mystical experience was in 1962 studied by Walter Pahnke. Pahnke gave half of the twenty participating theology students psilocybin before their Good Friday service and concluded that all "the persons who received psilocybin experienced to a greater extent than did the controls the phenomena described by our typology of mysticism" (220). The typology held that the psilocybin subjects all reported increased sense of: unity, transcendence of time and space, a deeply felt positive mood with a sense of sacredness, an experience that was paradoxical in that objectivity and reality interchanged, and which was allegedly ineffable, transient and gave persisting positive changes in attitude and behavior (Luke). The persisting positive changes are confirmed by Rick Doblin's follow up study in 1991 where "all psilocybin subjects participating in the long-term follow-up, but none of the controls, still considered their original experience to have had genuinely mystical elements and to have made a uniquely valuable contribution to their spiritual lives" (23). Huxley's experience was not in a religious setting, but was spiritual nonetheless; at several instances he transcends his physical being and experiences his mind split loose from his body. He writes that "I spent several minutes—or was it several centuries?—not merely gazing at those bamboo [chair] legs, but actually *being* them—or rather being myself in them; or, to be still more accurate (for 'I' was not involved in the case, nor in a certain sense were 'they') being my Not-self in the Not-self which was the chair" (15-16). Rick Strassman explains that this state occurs similarly with DMT, and writes that "we feel the body no longer exists, or that the mind and body have separated" (40). Furthermore, contemporary research on

psychedelics also explains this phenomenon, and states that “psilocybin caused a decrease of brain activity, primarily in the part called the “default mode network,” which, according to Carhart-Harris, is responsible for our sense of “self” and “ego,” but also “for the maintenance of cognitive integration and constraint” (2142). Thus with the “default mode network” activity decreasing, looking at material existence may feel like *being* the environment, rather than looking *at* it. Carhart-Harris also notes that “this finding is consistent with Aldous Huxley’s ‘reducing valve’ metaphor ... which propose[s] that the mind/brain works to constrain its experience of the world” (2142).

The “reducing valve” is shaped in such a form that is most effective for survival, however, by-passing the valve can be beneficial to relativize everyday hardships. Huxley explains that “most people, most of the time, know only what comes through the reducing valve and is consecrated as genuinely real by the local language” and that while schizophrenics are excepted, “in others temporary by-passes may be acquired either spontaneously, or as the result of deliberate ‘spiritual exercises,’ or through hypnosis, or by means of drugs” (17). The reduced valve is ideal for survival on this planet because it gives everything meaning and thus allows for an interpretation of the environment. In our Western society, we have gotten really good at conventionally conceptualizing our reality to our advantage. Westerners have property secured which, in effect, gives the assurance of a roof above one’s head and food and water within survival’s reach. Furthermore, we can survive on any part of the planet and be connected everywhere while we even have our human and civil rights protected in treaties that are enforced by global organizations. There are major downsides to the shape of this valve though, the survivability is extremely outbalanced and happens at the cost of many unprivileged ones. Furthermore, the consumerist production that is supposed to bring even more convenience into

our lives, also brings a lot of pollution that slowly extinguishes the flora and fauna of nature. In this overemphasis on “survival” on this planet, our science overlooks and even demonizes the fact that we are not solely highly advanced animals, but also very spiritual entities. Because only in our spiritual states, “as pure mind can we behold the transcendent Forms, things in their purest form” (Falzon 106). As argued before, the experience of material existence in its purest form allows for demystification that, in effect, allows for the insight that everything that constitutes reality is simply a concept relative to all other concepts. This insight is depicted in *The Matrix* when Neo asks “why do my eyes hurt?” and Morpheus answers: “you’ve never used them before” when he is freed from his simulated life. The “hurtfulness” of true reality is also captured by Huxley who writes “anything rather than the burning brightness of unmitigated Reality—anything!” (44). The naked reality might be shocking for a brain that is used to the symbolic valve at first, however, when the brain gets used to it, reflecting back on past hardships with the “cleansed perception” allows to put them in perspective. Negative feelings around these experiences are then completely relative to the inner state and thus completely subjective. In effect, alleviating the hardship and *being* happy merely requires a more positively accepting attitude towards the memory, instead of escaping the memory by actively trying to *become* happy in other ways.

### **Chapter 3 – The Blue Pill**

Contrary to mind revealing red pill drugs, Huxley’s “soma” numbs the brain down to such an extent that it withholds it from thinking critically and hence mimics the “blue pill.” To solve “the problem of happiness,’—in other words, the problem of making people love their servitude,” Huxley writes in *Brave New World (BNW)* that “since reality, however utopian, is something

from which people feel the need of taking pretty frequent holidays, a substitute for alcohol and the other narcotics, something at once less harmful and more pleasure-giving than gin or heroin” is a necessary precondition (xxiv). To sustain his dystopic society, Huxley created “*soma*” which allows you to “take a holiday from reality whenever you like, and come back without so much as a headache or a mythology.” It is designed to have “all the advantages of Christianity and alcohol, [but] none of their defects” so that *BNW*’s citizens will have both their spiritual and their sedative needs satisfied (Huxley 81-82). Protagonist Bernard Marx describes his mandatory every two weekly Solidarity Service during which he and eleven others partake in a ritual under the influence of the “euphoric, narcotic, [and] pleasantly hallucinant” soma (81). During the Service, the twelve participants sing and dance on drum music for the “Greater Being” to transcend their egos and become “Twelve-in-One” so that “I am you and you are I” (114-15). Bernard, however, is the only one who does not hear the Greater Being calling for him, and neither does he feel himself fusing with the other eleven into one. Bernard is highly discontent with the globally controlled world that he lives in and rather wants to be free to be *different* instead of being forced “to be part of the social body” (124). When talking to his date Lenina he tells her “I’d rather be myself ... myself and nasty. Not someone else, however jolly” (123). Lenina in response tells him that she does not understand him and asks “why you don’t take soma when you have these dreadful ideas of yours. You’d forget all about them. And instead of feeling miserable, you’d be jolly. *So jolly.*” (125). It appears thus, that soma is like the blue pill, it makes you forget about your problem and be jolly instead. Soma has a transcending element that makes you connect to other people more, though, the transcendence is in such a way that it reinforces the oppressing controlled dystopia instead of allowing you to transcend your ego to be able to reflect critically on your situation. In effect, soma keeps you within the dominant

ideology in a similar way that alcohol and nicotine do, but without the negative side effects. The latter two do allow for a moment of relaxation that makes social interaction easier, but they do not contain a psychedelic compound that facilitates a “cleansed perception” that allows for demystification.

To sustain a dystopic society that is completely geared towards consumption, it is crucial to have a drug that withholds critical thought. In Huxley’s eyes, a “really efficient totalitarian state would be one in which the all-powerful executive of political bosses and their army of managers control a population of slaves who do not have to be coerced, because they love their servitude” (xxiii). The Director of *BNW*’s “Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre,” clarifies that “liking what you’ve *got* to do,” is “the secret to happiness and virtue (38). Conditioning to make its citizens like what they have *got* to do is done during the fetus phase already. Every person that is “hatched” in the test tubes gets a certain amount of oxygen “fed” to create castes from Epsilons (least amount of oxygen) to Alphas (most amount of oxygen). Besides the caste conditioning, humans are conditioned towards their predestined jobs. In the Hatchery and Conditioning Centre it is explained that some of the babies that are predestined to become miners, spinners, or steel workers in the tropics are conditioned to “thrive on heat” (38). Moreover, some babies are predestined to do “repairs on the outside of a rocket in mid-air” (Huxley 39). These babies get their nutrition halved when they are upright, but get twice as much nutrition when upside down. In effect, “they learn to associate topsy-turvydom with well-being; in fact, they’re only truly happy when they’re standing on their heads” (39). In addition to fetus conditioning, *BNW*’s citizens get sleep conditioning (hypnopaedia) during which certain phrases are repeated for thousands of times until they feel as eternally rational truths. One of these phrases of hypnopaedic “wisdom” is that “wheels must turn steadily, but cannot turn untended.

There must be men to tend them, men as steady as the wheels upon their axles, sane men, obedient men, stable in contentment” (68-69). Similarly, in the *Matrix* are the wheels—the sentient machines—fueled by humans who are sanely, obediently, and contently (since they do not know better) living inside a simulation. Another expression of hypnopaedic conditioning presents itself when the Director reminisces about a girlfriend lost in a storm and says that “it upset me very much at the time. More than it ought to have done, I dare say. Because, after all, it’s the sort of accident that might have happened to anyone; and, of course, the social body persists although the component cells may change” (130). Everything is in service of “the social body” and even the “fact” that “everyone belongs to everyone else,” is *created* so that sexual desire can steadily be satisfied by polygamy (66). Monogamy would keep the pressure of sexual desire too high and, just like *thinking* critically, would result in an unstable society which is the ultimate deathtrap of consumerism.

#### **Chapter 4 – The “War on Drugs”**

The “War on Drugs” is fought by the USA on account of protecting its citizens, however, the policy rather reinforces governmental control than that it leads to the wellbeing of the American people. The “congressional findings and declarations” of the “Controlled Substances Act” include that “many of the drugs included within this subchapter have a useful and legitimate medical purpose and are necessary to maintain the health and general welfare of the American people and that “the illegal importation, manufacture, distribution, and possession and improper use of controlled substances have a substantial and detrimental effect on the health and general welfare of the American people.” Though these legalized drugs might “have a useful and legitimate medical purpose,” they only cure on a superficial level; instead of treating the *cause* of

the illness, they merely cure the ill *expression* of the cause. In effect, there is no medicating element that forces the ill person to reflect on his situation to find the source (personal or environmental) that causes the illness. Interestingly, the illegal psychedelic substances that supposedly “have a substantial and detrimental effect on the health and general welfare of the American people,” do have this self-reflecting effect due to their mind revealing compound. Moreover, researcher David Luke explains that there is an instance where someone even survived ten thousand doses of—supposedly “detrimental”—LSD. The prohibition of the substances has led to “street myths” that are perpetuated by the media and consequently resemble *BNW*'s hypnopaedic conditioning. Often these media sensationalize their product to sell better, which results in a distorted image revolving around these illicit substances. Carl Hart—who grew up in the ghetto and became a neuropsychopharmacologist—explains that these myths “had originally misled and misdirected me. Some of that, as we shall see, may ironically have helped me at certain times. But more often, it was a distraction, one that prevented me and so many others in my community from learning how to think critically” (Hart 8). Hart saw how his family, friends, and neighbors suffered from the notorious pitfalls of the ghetto where shoplifting and unplanned pregnancies were common and where marriages broke, children were displaced from home, and people were shot. Virtually all these pitfalls were ascribed to the “deadly” and “addictive” drug crack cocaine by the War on Drugs policy, and interestingly, Hart admits that he bought right into the demonizing rhetoric that was popularized by President Ronald Reagan and continued by his successors (16). Consequently, public opinion was redirected from these pitfalls as being related to poverty—influenced by racism and classism—towards a common enemy that was destroying the American society from within. Instead of victims of poverty, crack consumers became criminals and could henceforth be taken from the streets to be put safely

away in prison. Consequently, the prisons overloaded, and henceforth, drug criminals were not learning to cope with the roots of their problems to be prepared to enter back into society, but were simply separated from the *preferred* Americans. Those are the people that are not seeking refuge from everyday hardships in illicit substances, but rather adhere to the culturally accepted options that might include sugar, cacao, alcohol, tobacco, or even prescribed opiates, but certainly cannot include marijuana, crack cocaine, or MDMA.

*The Matrix* both implicitly and explicitly criticizes the War on Drugs since the only way to transcend the visualized dystopic simulation is by taking a pill. This simulation is designed in a symbolic code that contains, just like our computer programs, everything that exists and happens inside the Matrix. Elie Dering explains that “the green code symbolizes or signals that there is simulation, while suggesting that trained people can literally see through it” (141). In *The Matrix*, the resisters—and later Neo too—are able to “see through” the code; in our world Carl Hart became “trained” and learned to see through our codified ideology. He grew up “surrounded by people whose lives are limited by their own lack of knowledge,” but by studying and changing his environment he became able to separate myth from fact (7 Hart). Hart writes that while there is chemically no different drug compound in crack cocaine than in powder cocaine, crack is punished more severely as a result of the War on Drugs (160). This is an obvious example of governmental policies being incompatible with empirical evidence, but as Hart highlights, “unfortunately, many people—both blacks and whites—fell for the idea that crack cocaine was *the* key cause of our problems and that more prisons and longer sentences would help solve them” (19). These measures are merely symbolic and are akin to the USA’s “War on Terror” policy that fortifies security measures, while it creates potential fundamentalists by intervening in their society. Realizing these paradoxes is like seeing through the code to see such policies for what

they are—social control rather than protection of citizens. When Neo starts demystifying his ideology, Morpheus tells him: “I imagine that right now, you’re feeling a bit like Alice. Tumbling down the rabbit hole. You have the look of a man who accepts what he sees, because he’s expecting to wake up. Ironically, this is not far from the truth.” Consequently, Morpheus challenges Neo philosophically by asking him: “have you ever had a dream, Neo, that you were so sure was real? What if you were unable to wake from that dream, how would you know the difference between the dream world, and the real world?” In effect, Neo comes to the realization that he lived his entire life in an oppressive simulation and that Marx, just like the philosopher Michel Foucault, was right in claiming that “what counts as knowledge in a given era is always influenced, in complex and subtle ways, by considerations of power” (Duigman 1). However, after he took the red pill, Neo is able to give his own meaning to his reality and consequently chooses to *be* “the one.”

### **Chapter 5 – Transcending Boundaries**

*The Matrix* depicts that transcending the ruling ideology facilitates in thinking and reasoning beyond previously assumed boundaries. Cynthia Freeland criticizes the movie for “feed[ing] escapist fantasies of a mental reality where the elect few are unencumbered by rules,” but since the Matrix is such a perfect simulation, the brain will make the experience seem real rule-bound nonetheless (214). Consequently, the physical body will be limited and damaged when the mind thinks so. One is thus not completely unencumbered by rules when still dependent on physical well-being, however, since it is only the brain that is hacked into the Matrix, thinking something will result in doing it. Thus when you are able to *think* without boundaries, you are able to *act* without them as well. In the beginning of the movie, Neo is still limited by his ideology and

whereas Morpheus believes Neo to be “the one,” Neo says “this is insane, why is this happening to me? What did I do? I’m *nobody*. I didn’t do anything. I’m gonna *die*.” Though, when Neo starts believing, and thus *thinking* he is “the one” which, in effect, leads him to *reason* from the fact that he is “the one,” he becomes an extraordinary martial-artist that is able to fly. Also, when Trinity admits and expresses her love for Neo when he dies, she truly believes the Oracle’s prophecy that she would fall in love with “the one” and, in effect, Neo—as the invincible “one”—resurrects from death. Thus when they let go of their ideological boundary in which coming back from death is impossible, it becomes possible.

The boundary absolving–demystifying–effect of psychedelics can serve a beneficial role for both mental health and intellectual thought. Psychologist David Luke explains that “psychedelics facilitate disinhibition, loosening of the ego, and access to the unconscious and repressed memories.” The latter is effectively capitalized upon during MDMA assisted psychotherapy research with people suffering from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Rick Doblin, founder of MAPS–Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies–explains in “The Joe Rogan Experience” podcast that, the test subjects are only half of the time in contact with their psychotherapists. The other half is spent inside their own “trip” where they listen to music, reflect on themselves, and recover repressed memories. During this session there is no specific order and this freedom is given so that the patients will be guided by their own unconscious. Some will go to the trauma directly, while others go to childhood memories to build strength first. The cure is in the fact that MDMA causes serotonin–the peaceful happy hormone–to be released in the brain, so that patients can access repressed traumatic memories without suffering from *too* much pain. Consequently, the fear of the pain connected with the memory alleviates so that the trauma can be reflected upon, but still remains as something that

belongs to the past. In effect, the neural patterns in the brain will reconfigure according to the newly formed emotional associations with the memory that is induced by the peaceful undertone of MDMA. Similarly, a 2015 US national survey found that “lifetime classic psychedelic [LSD, psilocybin, mescaline] use was associated” with lower incidence of “psychological distress and ... suicidal thinking ... whereas lifetime illicit use of other drugs was largely associated with an increased likelihood of these outcomes” (Hendricks et al. 280). Moreover, Luke explains that psychedelics can also be valuable on an intellectual level. He explains that “psychedelic substances such as iboga, psilocybin, ketamine, and cannabis seem to be related to [neurogenesis], the production of new brain cells” (Luke). In addition, people on psychedelics report that they feel more drawn to nature as a result of feeling “a greater sense of connection with the outside world, with plants and animals” (Luke). These people realize that being in nature can have a soothing effect compared to—often stressful—urban environments and Luke explains that “schizophrenia occurs mostly in urban, more developed environments,” therefore, a “reconnection with nature can be probably quite useful as a treatment in itself” (Luke). A peaceful environment allows for both intellectual and psychological breakthroughs because a more relaxed state of mind facilitates a less judgmental—cleansed—perception in which creative thinking thrives.

## **Conclusion**

Thus, both *The Matrix* trilogy and Huxley’s works play important cultural roles in line with the recent upsurge of empirical studies on psychedelics as medicines and nootropics. By visualizing the veil of ideology and by demonstrating the benefits of transcending it, *The Matrix* forces the spectator to wonder whether he is not in a similar situation as Neo and whether the “red pill”

actually exists. Psychedelic drugs that the red pill alludes to ought to be viewed like a tool, and just like other tools such as cars, knives, computers, or medicines, there are various dangers that come along with improper use. Because the consumer of a psychedelic transcends his everyday experience of reality and, in effect, his everyday ideology, he is free to create his own morals, rules, and interpretations of his surroundings. In some cases this can lead to a total rejection of the world around him which can be experienced both as a “bad trip” and as “a state of enlightenment.” An extreme case like Charles Manson (“father” of the Manson Family), however, occurs when someone gets carried away in his own beliefs. He might have felt both at the same time—a state of enlightenment while rejecting the world around him. However, just because a tool can be dangerous with improper use, does not mean it has to be illegal altogether. Similarly, tools such as the aforementioned cars, knives, computers, or medicines can be very dangerous in the hands of people with harmful intentions, but particularly useful for most people’s daily lives. Psychedelic drugs are not substances that people should think lightly about, and simply take at random occasions to “maximize gains,” just like people should not use cars for every little distance they have to cover. The environment, the psychological state, and the intention in which the consumer goes into a psychedelic experience are very determinate factors and should be prepared well. In tribal civilizations this environment was often shaped in the form of a ritual that could take days at a time, but in our contemporary society the environment can be a psychotherapy session guided by an expert, a calm place in nature, or simply one’s own home. This tempering instead of maximizing aspect is sadly in sheer contrast to the capitalistic tendency to “sell” experiences. Instead of guaranteeing success, Huxley explains that “the full and final solution can be found only by those who are prepared to implement the right kind of *Weltanschauung* by means of the right kind of behavior and the right kind of constant and

unstrained alertness” (32). For him, “mescaline can never solve that problem: it can only pose it, apocalyptically, for those to whom it had never before presented itself” (32)

A psychedelic, thus, requires for a dynamic interaction with the substance, the environment, and the subconscious. Just like Ellie During explains that *The Matrix* “asks for *active* engagement,” and that Marx calls for an active demystifying to get rid of oppression, psychedelics give you the opportunity to actively create your own reality that “can turn out to be as supple as the Matrix” (132-149). The fact that the American government demonizes a change of consciousness induced by drugs indicates that there is a resilience to understand the reason *why* people want a change of consciousness in the first place. Part of it has to do with a longing for sedation from everyday hardships and boredoms, but also with the fact that many people feel a need to transcend beyond their own ego to become part of a larger social body. Some find this in religion, or politics, but the problem with these is that these social bodies do not promote critical thought to give power back to the individual. Just like a Marxist revolution that aims to redistribute the power over the masses, psychedelic drugs and other meditative states of mind allow the masses to seize back the power of creation. Just like God simply speaks a word to create a concept that consequently “spawns” into reality as he did with earth, does a cleansed perception allow to create any meaning the individual chooses to fill the void of reality with. The individual becomes “the one”—divinely creative. Perhaps the “religious” Matrixism cult is not that far off in their sacramentalized psychedelic ethos after all.

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