



**SOURIAU REVISITED BY *THE MATRIX***  
**A few questions about the status of the real in film fiction**

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About fifty years ago, Étienne Souriau's *filmology* tried to clarify film studies by an innovative separation among what he called the 'levels of filmic existence'. I found his analysis was based on common sense and that it deserved a quick reassessment in the light of current technologies and fiction exemplified in the *Matrix* trilogy. Souriau's vocabulary and concepts proved partly successful with such words as *diegesis* or *profilmic* he introduced for the first time in their modern sense, whereas other terms seemed less convincing, such as '*filmophanic*' or '*creatoriel*'.

Souriau's description was based on a careful separation of *time* stages in the making of a film and on a *spatial* distinction between the different status of the filmic text and performance. Before I confront his concepts with the current status of film reality, I will try to describe them with modern examples.

**A – Souriau's levels of analysis.**

My intention is to appropriate his description and to reorganise it after half a century of film history. He was careful enough not to offer a system but I found it more thought-provoking to reorganise his concepts as a whole. On the time axis, one reads *four stages* of film writing: a) the material used; b) filmmaking itself; c) the film as text; d) the resulting 'signified'.

**1 - Film material.**

The opening sequence of *Forrest Gump* gives a mainstream example of filming techniques: the sky and the bench are filmed 'on location' in Savannah (Florida) whereas the feather was artificially generated on a computer, then carefully painted and associated to Gump's shoe when it finally lands. But most filmmakers (particularly in Hollywood) avoided filming on location and re-produced an exact copy of the real in a studio: for Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, a whole artificial set was built in California as a reproduction of a real block of houses in Greenwich Village.

Souriau coined the words 'afilmic' for the real world as it is *before* (and outside) film (see Savannah or Tom Hanks' body) and 'profilmic' for the world which was specially made for the film (Jeff's building in *Rear Window* is only a copy of the actual New York referent.) But the word 'profilmic' soon assumed two meanings in relation to its double origin: 'pro' means both 'made for' and 'put in front of'. As a result, the same object can be both afilmic and profilmic: the bench existed in Savannah before the film (afilmic), but when it was put in front of the camera it became an object 'for the camera' (profilmic). All the same, the distinction proved useful because it separates two *functions* of the same object: in the real world / as a mere material for the filmic world to come – which is exactly what makes an actor's face a very complex object. Another distinction appeared very early with cartoons, where what is put 'in front of the camera' is in fact an already complete designed picture. Filming, in this case, is only *recording* a 'painted' world. A new step was announced with Mc Laren's directly drawing on the film itself, without the use of any camera. Films, as a consequence, can be made without either afilmic and/or profilmic objects. This is why I suggest a general distinction between 'filmed' objects (afilmic and/or profilmic), and 'generated' objects (without the use of the camera).

## 2 - Filmmaking: écriture

Although this obviously important phase was not included in Souriau's description, I cannot do without its four different stages:

a) *Scenography* comes before the camera is used and it consists in the choice of sets and actors and in the way the objects are arranged and the actors are going to move and act... Something not unlike the act of *mise en scène* in a theatre, but without an audience. This comparison, by the way, shows that in both cases the most stable element remains the actor's body, even when he wears a mask... I will come back to the question of landscapes.

b) *Filming* concerns camera movements and techniques (even in cartoons) and it is potentially totally different with computer generated pictures.

c) *Special effects* in their broader sense may be used at all steps (filming in front of a blue screen is the profilmic stage of an editing effect), but *morphing*, for example, shows that FX can be a mere transformation of real afilmic objects.

d) *Editing* has changed a great deal since Souriau's time. From the mere cutting of film rushes, to copying selected segments of analogical pictures, to the current all-digital editing pre-programmed by an engineer.

## 3 – Film text.

This is one of filmology's underestimated achievements. Souriau's concern with other arts led him to a closer description of the actuality of film texts. But *where* is the text, if any? Not unlike music, each performance uses a trace which cannot be read without a whole complex apparatus (the musicians or a projector) and, unlike music, a performance in a film theatre does not include variation and the film is fixed. In order to clarify this, filmology coined three words:

a) *Filmographic*. This was the only physical trace of a movie on celluloid *film* as it is kept in film archives. It could not be read without a (complicated) machine and it could not be modified by the spectator, only deteriorated by time. Analogic VHS and digital DVD desacralised it, but, so far, the average viewer cannot modify a film. He can only change its use by skipping scenes, using freeze or fast reading. Some machines allow him to zoom or to alter the frame.

The obvious step to come is announced by video games: the disc already includes several virtual stories and the viewer chooses his own partial movie. But one can easily imagine interactive movies whose colours, landscapes or faces could be chosen *ad libitum* by the spectator. The question would then be whether these alterations are already inscribed within the 'disc' or whether they are potential references given by *external* computer programmes (e.g. morphing processes). In this last case, any movie of the past could be modified at home... and Humphrey Bogart could be replaced by Jean-Claude Vandamme in Huston's *Maltese Falcon*!

b) *Ecranic*. This time the comparison with painting implied the actual but immaterial presence of the picture on a screen ('*écran*'). The two-dimensional picture is both seen as such and creating the involuntary illusion of a three-dimensional world.

Although it cannot be stopped, it still works as a painting and it obviously requires a pictorial approach. TV and computer screens did not fundamentally modify this level of analysis but they made it more comfortable, for example when one uses still pictures. In traditional movie-making what you see on the screen is usually related to the original filmographic existence of the film itself, even though this film is only the matrix for a digital copy. But this is changing very fast and today everybody *knows* that the 'original' is already a digital organisation of pixels.

c) *Filmophanic*. Even before this radical move towards abstraction, Souriau knew that a film does not exist without a viewer and his environment in a film theatre, or on a computer in a train... The filmophanic level describes the conditions of the presence of the movie in the spectator's mind. The real screen can thus be said to be each viewer's brain.

#### 4 - The signified

Souriau (re)introduced the word *diegesis* in its modern sense: it is the world within the film as it would be if it were a real complete universe. In other terms, the world as it is for the characters in the movie. The concept was successfully reinvested by Gérard Genette for literary studies but it brings a little more to film studies because it helps separate the two great statuses of objects: movies can be both a *re-presentation of the 'real'* afilmic world *and* the creation of an *artificial* diegetic world.

I will argue that a third level of reading could be introduced in order to explain how films can still be comfortably seen by the general public: *fiction effects* and *intertextual segments* offer a strong cement in these new buildings that would otherwise be too puzzling for the viewers.

**Souriau's vocabulary**

(Only words in *italics* belong to Souriau's specific terminology)

Material	Filmmaking (écriture)	Film text	Signified
The filmed world	Scenography	<i>Filmographic</i>	Re-presentation of the real
- <i>afilmic</i>	Filming	<i>Ecranic</i>	<i>Diegesis (creation of a variety of the real)</i>
- <i>profilmic</i>	FX	<i>Filmophanic</i>	
	Editing		Intertexts
The generated world			Fiction effects

**B – Souriau revisited by Matrix.**

*Matrix* comes after two long traditions and it uses technological evolution to illustrate them. The more obvious tradition is to be found in Science Fiction movies, particularly after *Star Wars*. But these films were rather long to invest what seems to be the essence of SF writing in Philip Dick's novels: 'La SF est astreinte à construire un monde et, de ce fait même, à induire une comparaison avec celui que nous connaissons.<sup>1</sup> It is from this implied comparison between several worlds that a whole trend of Science Fiction questions the character's and the spectator's illusions. *Matrix* goes further than most SF films by its reformulation of a radical hypothesis: is the Real nothing but a gigantic simulation?<sup>2</sup>

But movies did not wait for SF to visit the question of the reality of the real... and another tradition had already explored the relationship between the two sides of the screen. *Blow Up*, in 1967, already played with the illusions of photographic images. Its protagonist found himself alone with a real photograph he had blown up to a point where it could say anything: either the actual presence of a corpse (because we could see it as well in a London park) or its disappearance when the body was removed and the 'authentic' photograph failed to testify for its existence, since even an authentic photograph is not sufficient proof of the existence of its referential object. Woody Allen's *Purple Rose of Cairo*, far from SF motifs, and *Last Action Hero* reiterated the questions, this time for general or even young audiences.

<sup>1</sup> 'Science Fiction is bound to build a world and, as a consequence, to call for a comparison with the world we live in'. Alain Badiou: 121.

<sup>2</sup> See Elie During, in Badiou: 14.

Dick's stories insisted on the motif of *deceptive reality* unravelled by the protagonist which was developed in the movies they inspired.<sup>3</sup> In these plots, somebody seemed to have built the illusory world *on purpose* in order to deceive the characters and to afford an intriguing parallel between their condition within the diegesis and ours in the 'real world'. Plato's cave was providing the original pattern for all these films.

What I mean here is that the *technological* changes (digital images, DVD and the influence of video games) are not the only cause of the popular success of such films as *Matrix* - or of the merchandisation of Plato's motifs and themes. These films stress one of the possible uses of the cinema and seem to enjoy its philosophical possibilities as a means to question the reality of the Real. I will now try to follow some of Souriau's concepts to understand a few of the effects of half a century on filmmaking and story telling.

#### a) Materials.

The materials used to create a diegetic world cover a whole range of statuses, from a strong feeling of authenticity (documentary footage inserted in a fiction film like *Zelig* or *Forrest Gump*) to the obvious artificiality of the set (*Tron*). People *know* that current technology makes anything possible and they even sometimes tend to exaggerate or misinterpret the artificiality of landscapes or faces. This point would be worth a careful study that could lead to the fact that the status of objects in film depends largely on the spectator's gaze and on its appreciation of the *archè* of the picture, i.e. its technical origin.

The totally artificial world built by *The Matrix* is in fact the real town of Sidney made to look 'different', which may remind older spectators of Godard's *Alphaville* (or of Marker's *La Jetée*).<sup>4</sup> On the opposite end of the range, one would find Spielberg's shots of the real scenes of *Schindler's List*'s historical action in Poland. But such an authenticity goes beyond a realistic re-presentation of the place. It has become a photographic trace of the events, something that owes less to resemblance than to the presence of an absence, the aura of a relic (Relics do not resemble; they are a fragment of the real thing).

Between these two extremes (the real town used to build an artifice *versus* the real landscape photographed to capture a fragment of its aura) *Forrest Gump* offers a very interesting example of the permanence of the real in recent fiction films: when the idiot left alone by his girl friend decides to run from shore to shore across the USA, he watches large pictures of what Zemeckis considered to be the best landscapes in the country. These pictures

<sup>3</sup> See *Blade Runner*, *Total Recall* and *Minority Report*... But Weir's *Truman Show* belongs to the same *mise en scène* of deceptive worlds, this time for only one person. Its plot happens to be very close to Philip Dick's SF seminal novel *Time Out of Joint*, but the novel also announces *Matrix*'s idea of a lost 'desert of the real' since its present is hidden from the protagonist (a boffin) in order to make him plan rockets to the moon...

<sup>4</sup> In *Matrix* the green and grey dominant have become a sign of the illusion generated by the matrix, whereas in *Schindler's List*, the ecranic use of black and white pictures imply both a time distance (this was the way they used to film in the 40s) and a feeling of authenticity (most archives are in black and white).

– repeated as a sort of flashback at the end of the film before Jenny dies – were carefully filmed (at great cost) and they stand there for themselves, not *used* by the story, but on the contrary *celebrated* through the story in a neo-bazinian way. They are just the opposite of the frequent use of ‘historical footage’ in the same film: JFK’s image *is* authentic, but the plot and the ‘tinkering’ FX tend to derealise his image.

#### b) Texts<sup>5</sup>

On a *filmophanic* level, what seems essential here is that such films expect the spectator to *know* (maybe not at first viewing) the actual nature of each picture – *afilmic*, *profilmic* or merely electronically generated – with the same dexterity the reader progressively acquired in front of the written text. This may be wishful thinking, but it is the way films are meant to be seen today: on second viewing, when spectators identify New Zealand beyond the beautiful landscapes of *The Lord of the Ring*, an interesting *double status* of the filmed landscape can be approached, at the same time *afilmic* (New Zealand) and *profilmic* (the Hobbits’ world...)

In *Matrix*, the two main levels of reality seem to communicate through an old fashioned telephone wire.<sup>6</sup> This is a strong image of the nature of contemporary filmic texts. A whole world is carried on a simple electric wire, transformed into a long string of numbers. What we see as a spatial picture is in fact a series of yes/no information bits carried on the wire at extreme speed. Space, travelling under the guise of time.

The most striking image of the nature of the ‘text’ in *Matrix* is to be found in the several types of pictures watched by the passengers on board the *Nebuchadnezzar*.<sup>7</sup> On their screens, they can see the fascinating dropping green figures produced by the Matrix and these specialists (like musicians on a score) are able to read the signs with the same intensity as if they were immediate pictures of the real (‘Look’, says one of them, ‘here is the Woman in Red!’).

But they also can inhabit the improbable site of the dual status of illusion and reality: in the vessel, Neo and Trinity lie apparently sleeping and dreaming, while their ‘dreams’ (e.g. the Kung Fu fight with Morpheus) are to be read on TV screens by the whole group of passengers. What is relatively new here is that the levels of ‘reality’ *communicate* to such extent that a few drops of blood will trickle from the ‘dreamer’s’ mouth when he is seen to suffer on the screen. Thus, all screens communicate, all levels of reality are made to compete, and the new question is not a matter of truth, but of *choice* between several planes of reality. Obviously, the baddie here (called Louis Cypher, in memory of Lucifer?) has chosen to forget the ‘Desert of the Real’ in favour of a far more comfortable illusion afforded by the matrix.

<sup>5</sup> I must skip the filmmaking step for the moment.

<sup>6</sup> In fact things are a little more sophisticated. See Badiou: 183.

<sup>7</sup> This is the name of Morpheus’s space hovercraft in which rebels can see their ‘real world’, the Matrix world on a screen and the various occurrences of Neo’s fights in computerised intermediate worlds.

### c) Signified realities.

Once more, these films insist on the mobility between several statuses of the real. Beyond *Matrix*'s technological insistence on the multi-levelled status of the real, Hollywood films reiterate their study of *transient worlds* and of the magic instant when the character passes through reality thresholds: from everyday life to a dreamworld in the *Wizzard of Oz* or *Alice in Wonderland* (see the White Rabbit in *Matrix*). Or, in Hollywood musicals, from the dancer's love story to the moment he/she sings and dances on the stage. And, in most Hollywood flashbacks, from the narrator's 'present' point of view to the past story he tells.

The question then seems to arise from the huge popular success of films like *Matrix* in which all spectators are expected to transcend the complex illusions of Plato's cave: how can this fluidity between the Real and its manifold illusory versions afford *comfortable* entertainment to such a general public?

The first element of stability is a little perverted in *Matrix*: the character's faces – in fact the famous actors' faces! – travel unchanged between reality barriers, a convenient mark which Plato would have probably found unlikely. But the film introduces the disturbing duplication of Agent Smith as a sign of the ever-present threat of simulacra in the real world, since anybody in the diegesis offered by the matrix can become a Smith. This, again, is a narrative *cliché*: before *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, medieval iconography had introduced a multiplicity of similar occurrences of Satan's demons... When the diegesis is stable, on the contrary, the character's face can be altered, as in Coppola's *Dracula*.

*Matrix* is typical of the mishmash of *intertextual elements* in recent blockbusters such as *Van Helsing*, but it seems to use them for a purpose. Allusions to Alice's Rabbit, Zion (Jerusalem) and a Messiah, the Oracle and a whole net of significant names build a mythic atmosphere which is both part of a tradition of the genre and an attempt to go beyond it and to 'look at it' from a certain distance: this means that *Matrix* seems to use previous films and stories as a source of reflection.

The recurrent use of *narrative segments* and emotions seems to compensate the complex – even ambitious – use of a multi-level reality in films of the last decade. One may of course appreciate the philosophical implications of the use of the *body* as a means to unify a disjointed Real – what I would call a choreographic answer to Plato's puzzles<sup>8</sup> – but one may also note that it comes from the mainstream tradition of Hollywood storytelling.

This is only one of the numerous examples of the use of expected narrative segments in this film. *Matrix* is at the same time a 'commando' film, a conventional story of love and death and a typical example of self-revelation of the hero who has to 'become himself' in the great Hollywood tradition. It is, even more significantly, a quest for a *purpose* made to replace an illusory ready-made design (see Lieutenant Dan in *Forrest Gump*). What

<sup>8</sup> What Derrida calls 'la sagesse du corps'. Badiou: 14.

makes it more original than most other movies is that it deliberately uses these patterns in order to question them.

The last element of *spectatorial* (another self-evident word by Souriau) comfort lies in the filmmaking itself. Whereas technology makes it possible to invent totally different narrative lines, this film (and most blockbusters) uses the same visual 'grammar' as more conventional Hollywood films. On the other hand, some visual segments have become quite familiar, like the transformation of a man into a monster, or the way the fighters seem to fly backwards and upwards... The influence of Kung Fu cinema enhanced by technology has brought a familiar style to such films. Again, it is in the use of the story and the way it addresses its own status that *Matrix* brings something new: it offers a familiar universe within an unfamiliar reality status.

In *Matrix* the last word is given to the Oracle and it invites the spectator to 'believe' – not in a 'momentary willing suspension' in order to visit an alternative world (this would be poetry or literature) – but in order to reach the Real World. Nothing very new here in a time of prophets and gurus, but what is offered this time is only the Desert of the Real, to be loved and fought for, for the sake of its merely being real. The only point is *choice*, that is freedom. Or, more precisely, the fact that the rebels *know* that the common people live in an illusion. Man is but a weed, but he is the 'thinking' weed who knows he is a weed, etc... Of course. But, what if such knowledge itself was only one of the *Matrix's little tricks*? And again, the film is a reminder of the possible status of all films:

Le cinéma a le pouvoir de rendre visiblement incertaine la certitude du visible. [...] La question d'une mise en cause de l'image à partir de l'image elle-même, en direction de son au-delà fondateur, est la question du cinéma lui-même (Badiou :120 ; 128)

Which goes even further on the opposite direction of Bazin's call for a celebration of the Real:

C'est tout le principe de l'art du cinéma que de montrer subtilement qu'il n'est que du cinéma, que les images ne témoignent pour le réel qu'autant qu'elles sont manifestement des images (Badiou : 129)

This leads me to a momentary conclusion based on the importance of the theoretician's *purpose* rather than on the evolution of technologies in the last fifty years. After all, painting prepared the path to a strong feeling of the illusory nature of images and new technologies entail the mixing of photographic (argentic) pictures with generated ones (pixelic images share many features with painting). In a first move, photography helped to redefine painting. A century later, painting may help to understand the new status of the filmic image.<sup>9</sup>

In a purely descriptive move Souriau tried to avoid the question of the *intention* of theory. I find *Matrix's* allusions to Plato call for a clearer conscience of the intentions behind any gaze and that it could suggest a new line in Souriau's grid:

<sup>9</sup> Morpheus statement : 'the real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain' has something Gombrichian in it...



The *theoretical purpose* of film can be:

*Visiting or celebrating the Real* (André Bazin's tradition): the use of faces in *Matrix*

*Mastering form and art* (Rudolf Arnheim's and Eisenstein's traditions): Kung Fu ballets

*Understanding the way the mind works* (Stanley Cavell, Alain Badiou...): Plato's cave.

And, of course, *entertainment...* The lesson, if any, would be the possible coexistence of such *regimes* of the gaze and that the 'immediate' beauty of a photographed landscape is, *at the same time*, a challenge to its doubtful reality.

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