42

View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture

title:

“Why Use Old Code to Mirror Something New?” Retrofuturism in Queer Science Fiction Film

author:

Jędrzej Burszta

source:

View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture 42 (2025)

URL:

https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/42-science-fiction-images-otherness/why-use-old-code-to-mirror-something-new

publisher:

Widok. Foundation for Visual Culture

affiliation:

SWPS University

University of Warsaw

keywords:

science fiction film; retrofuturism; queer theory; nostalgia; cyberpunk

abstract:

The article examines the intersection of retrofuturism and queer theory in science fiction film, using The Matrix Resurrections (2021) as a central case study. I argue that retrofuturism, which concerns past visions of the future, has become increasingly prevalent in SF cinema. While often linked to nostalgia and to a broader tendency in late capitalist culture, a queered "retrofuturist impulse" can offer progressive possibilities for speculative cinema. The Matrix Resurrections creatively reinterprets the original trilogy's retro style and the cyberpunk genre through a queer sensibility. The film critiques nostalgic rehashing of a "future-past" by depicting "old code" as a restrictive loop, while using retrofuturist aesthetics to explore queer themes and politics. I posit that queer retrofuturism can repurpose familiar SF tropes to envision hopeful and progressive futures, demonstrating how "old code" can mirror something new—a queer futurity resurrected from a "lost future."

Jędrzej Burszta - Cultural studies scholar, ethnographer, Assistant Professor at the American Studies Center, University of Warsaw. In 2019 he received his doctoral degree in cultural studies from the SWPS University in Warsaw for a dissertation examining the queer history of American science fiction literature. His research interests include American popular and alternative culture, speculative fiction, retrofuturism, queer studies, ethnography of memory. Between 2017 and 2019, he conducted ethnographic research as part of the international project "CRUSEV: Cruising the Seventies". Recently, he co-edited with Tomasz Basiuk and Agnieszka Kościańska the volume Odmieńczość: obywatelstwo seksualne i archiwum (WUW 2024). He is currently PI in the research project "Psychedelic Culture in Poland: Practices and Discourses" (2024–2026).

"Why Use Old Code to Mirror Something New?" Retrofuturism in Queer Science Fiction Film

Introduction

Popular culture constantly faces its past glories. But continual referencing of the past has long burdened especially the future-obsessed genres; even the term "retro" had "entered common parlance in the early sixties as a linguistic spin-off of the Space Age."[1] Popularized in reference to early Apollo's retro rockets, the phrase "retro" initially seemed to express American culture's obsession with the space race to the moon, symbolizing a techno-optimistic yet ultimately short-lived era of ostensibly rapid technological advances. Although retrofuturism never congealed into a unitary movement, we should consider this phenomenon primarily through the lens of its multiple forms, media, and tonalities, evolving in part chronologically, as the invoked future-past became more and more distant in time. In her sweeping overview of the broader retro revivalism in Western culture, Elizabeth Guffey notes that "by the late 1970s a fashion-conscious yet highly irreverent version of 'retro' crept into English, where its meaning remained fluid and vaguely negative; for many it represented a desire to recycle the past in a somewhat exploitative manner."[2] In the 1980s, the retro not only stabilized its meaning as an evocation of postmodernist hegemony in thought and style, but also darkened in tone. The brightness and hyper-stylized chic fashion of domesticated space age technology gave way to the coldness and artificiality of synthwave music, and to pessimistic visions of corporate-controlled futurity, most vividly encapsulated in the newly christened cyberpunk movement. Once again tying retro with science fiction (SF), cyberpunk boasted grim, neon-lit urban

sprawl dotted with branded skyscrapers, derelict space stations, and street-smart computer hackers replacing the space colonizers of the 1960s "lost future" as new cultural heroes of the speculative imagination.

Turning attention to SF—undoubtedly *the* privileged genre for exploring the retrofuturist impulse—it is important to emphasize that we should not envision retrofuturism simply as a stable and defined reproduction of a particular visual iconography. On the contrary, if we consider retrofuturism in SF as both an aesthetical code and a mode of storytelling, we can offer its broad definition as "a practice that specifically exploits the tensions between ideas about the future from our historical past—either actual predictions or fictions of the time—and notions of futurity expressed in contemporary narratives."[3] Naturally, in visual narratives, the retrofuturist mode most often privileges evocations through certain objects, icons, and signs that have become remembrance markers of outmoded, "vintage" SF imagery. As Paweł Frelik notes, these archived and mostly digitized images of old futures, in addition to their placement in the intertextual repository of the SF imaginary, undergo gradual transformation—and frequently also commodification—into distinct historical styles of SF through the labor of authors and fans alike. As what he calls "sf's visual megatext" expands, incorporating images and visions of the future, so does the genre's historical awareness.[4] Sharon Sharp specifies that this mode of speculative cinema "uses iconic imagery of previous visions of the future, such as jet packs, homes of tomorrow, ray guns and other space age manifestations of technological progress, because our sense of the future is often infected with a sense of nostalgia for imaginings of the future that never materialized."[5]

Turning attention to how SF cinema currently invokes the retrofuturist impulse offers a chance to reflect on the connections between the SF's striking visuality and its ideological

dispositions. Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay writes that "[w]hile retrofuturist aesthetics are all over the place, it is retrofuturist politics, one where the future stems from an alternate past, that is the key to understanding much of the fissures in the contemporary fantastic."[6] In what follows, I wish to examine how these temporal displacements of futurity tied to pastness seem to have gradually—yet at an accelerating pace—colonized much of the fantastic imagination on screen. Acknowledging the major shift that occurred in the genre in the early 1980s, when SF films "ceased to only depict the cutting-edge dreams of the moment in which they were articulated and also revisited past images of the future,"[7] I begin with a brief discussion of how the cancelling of futurity ties with the haunting of pop culture by nostalgia for recently lost futures, invoking several examples of recent retrofuturist SF films. Next, I ask how queer theory can subvert the rhetoric of retrofuturism, and if we might consider some of these unrealized dreams of the past as cultural works that challenge the critique of the nostalgic impulse in SF as a model of conservative, commercialized, self-serving politics. In order to propose a queering of retrofuturism as a productive framework for reflecting on the transformations of the SF's visual megatext, I offer a reading of *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021), the fourth entry in the groundbreaking transmedia franchise, focusing on the film's evocation of retrofuturist images and tropes that are not derivative or backward-looking. Instead, we can read them as a formulation of queer politics moving beyond nostalgia to reveal potential sites for resistance located in a past that, until now, never fulfilled its dream of a better future.

The Slow Cancellation of Futurity

Alien, 1979. Dir. Ridley Scott

In *Ghosts of My Life*, his influential collection of essays dissecting the state of retro-paralysis affecting Western popular culture in the early 2000s, Mark Fisher offers a perceptive and characteristically lucid rundown of the regress of social and cultural imagination into a state of unresolved melancholy for "lost futures." Borrowing a phrase from Italian writer Franco "Bifo" Berardi's anti-capitalist writings,[8] Fisher refers to what he sees as the dominating structure of feeling percolating through the here and now as "the slow cancellation of the future," a process accompanied by "a deflation of expectations" in the realm of politics.[9] He laments that "[t]he 'jumbling up of time,' the montaging of earlier eras, has ceased to be worthy of comment; it is now so prevalent that is no longer even noticed."[10] Fisher feels particularly disheartened with the state of popular music of the time, endlessly reproducing "old" and "dead" styles from (imagined) pasts. Importantly though, he connects his observations to the still-newly emerging realities of digital capitalism, with its profusion of archival materials no longer ephemeral or temporally distanced but readily available for listening, sampling, revisiting, and re-membering. In other words, the culture of cancelling the future did not only look backward stubbornly—it referenced past luminaries, crown achievements, and influential fashions that never came to be, where indeed we now celebrate "lost futures" as "pop nostalgia."

It seems tempting to apply Berardi's and Fisher's reflections on these late capitalist temporal pathologies of imagination to a cultural field that epitomizes future-oriented reflections, namely SF. Indeed, we can argue that since the 1980s at least,

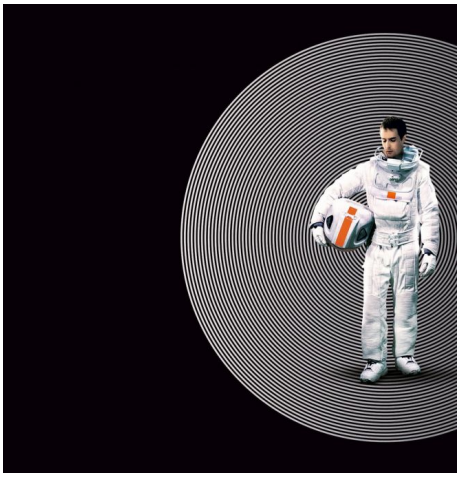
and ever more so as the new century began to unfold, speculative cinema has been increasingly engaging in enacting lavish and often visually stunning albeit decidedly retrofuturist SF narratives built around past visions of futurity. In part, this ever-accelerating backward momentum that seems to dominate much of today's SF imagery, especially when surveying the landscape of mainstream Hollywood productions, can appear as yet another outburst of a more general crisis of imagination—a surrendering to rehashing and repurposing past genre glories as a procession of sequels, prequels, spin-offs, all derivative continuations of past successes incessantly re-haunting cinemas across the globe. In this view, "retro" becomes a market-driven commodity appealing to fan nostalgia, smuggled as a fresh take on beloved film franchises. Ridley Scott's much-awaited return to the bleak space future introduced in *Alien* (1979) assumed the form of a surprisingly "glossed-up" vision of its past in *Prometheus* (2012), envisioning a prequel in many ways radically departing from its original iconography and set design—which, in part, might have led to audience's alienation. In turn, the most recent midquel, *Alien: Romulus* (2024), confidently backed the franchise into a familiar corner of its acclaimed aesthetic. Set between the original and its *original* sequel, *Aliens* (1986), Fede Álvarez's entry into the landmark SF horror franchise both in tone and visual style, reintroduced the dystopian "cassette futurism" vision of corporate-sanctioned cosmic horror. The film's iconography teems with cues and signatures locating the picture in this specific retrofuturist timeline: rusted 1970s computers, corroding spacecrafts, and an empty and abandoned space station eerily reminiscent of the original Nostromo—all in all, an invitation for modern audiences to reenter the dystopian "used future" once charted by Ellen Ripley, in which the alien appears as a haunting apparition stuck in this future's pastness.

Fisher's observations on pop culture's obsessive revival of the

1970s apply to the SF genre as such, as it stands today in its mainstream cinematic productions. In many ways, SF cinema wallows in "the eternal 1970s," arguably an important period in its literary history,[11] while at the same time a decade that ends with a blast from the past. *Star Wars* became an unexpected blockbuster hit in 1977, and a touchstone for much SF cinema since, all the while proving that capitalizing on nostalgia for the genre's recent past—in this case, the pulp space operas of the 1930s, among other references—can become "the order of the day."[12] Today, the franchise has mastered hyper-stylized ways of turning its own familiar iconography into endless nostalgic fodder, with few notable exceptions, including *Rogue One* (2016) and the streaming series *Star Wars: Andor* (2022–2025). Especially the latter offers a politically progressive excursion into the galaxy far, far away, disguised in the retrofuturist aesthetic of the 1970s.[13]

Retrofuturism in Recent Science Fiction Film

Setting aside these retro revivals of past cinematic box office successes, the resurgence of SF retrofutures also manifests itself in the growing list of original productions not necessarily fitting the blockbuster label. As a mode of, or disposition for, engaging with visions of the future imagined in the past, retrofuturism seems to have become quite prevalent in SF cinema of late. A provisional list of retrofuturist—or, to say the least, "retro"-adjacent—SF films from the last decade or so would have to include several titles invoking a spirit of "lost futures." Duncan Jones's minimalist masterwork *Moon* (2009) imagines a corporate lunar base manned by a single cloned worker as



Moon, 2009. Dir. Duncan Jones

technologically reminiscent of 1970s space iconography, while its loose follow-up sequel, *Mute* (2018), offers a visual callback to 1980s cyberpunk in its reimagining of Berlin as a neon-drenched city of unrealized dreams. The prescient narrative about mundane artificial intelligence (AI) stealing a straight man's heart in Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) is tellingly set in a pastel-hued near future that melancholically blends warm analog textures with mid-century designs and sleek fashion. *Tomorrowland* (2015) brought optimistic retrofuturism to the screen, while in the same year, Ben Wheatley's adaptation of J.G. Ballard's 1975 novel *High-Rise* invoked a more pessimistic feeling about the legacy of neoliberal policies through the depiction of a brutalist building mixing aged futurism with moral decay. Most recently, the whimsical and surrealist *Poor Things* (2023) smuggled a steampunk-inspired alternative Victorian past to cinemas, while Wes Anderson's no less quirky *Asteroid City* (2023) revived 1950s atomic age aesthetics together with its accompanying space age optimism.

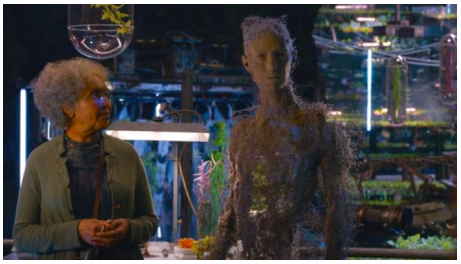
Indeed, it seems that retrofuturism, considered as a trope for world-building in SF cinema, has become part of the alleged imagination crisis in terms of SF's potentiality to still imagine new visions of futurity. Naturally, much enjoyment in fans' engagement with these retrofuturist visual narratives certainly stems from an affective pact with the audience—at least those "in the know," SF aficionados—informed and knowledgeable about the genre's history enough to recognize visual signs, callbacks, and re-uses of used futures from the expanding visual SF megatext.[14] But what about those communities of practice within the SF field who still turn to the genre in search of other modes of imagining futurity? This especially applies to queer audiences, realizing not only the bleakness of present-day politics, but also, or even more so, the politics of the past. Contrary to SF literature, SF filmmaking has remained a genre fairly resistant to queer considerations.

In her *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility*, Alexis Lothian rightly points out that mainstream SF cinema has rarely produced works that would offer futures with queer representation, or even semblances of queer sensibilities, as opposed to the more avant-garde, low-budget realm of independent speculative film.[15] However, scholars have paid relatively little attention to the relationship between the creative modeling of retro-futures and the practices of queer speculation in visual culture. I understand queer speculation here as characterizing alternative models of sexuality and, more broadly, as narratives that encompass non-normative modes of being, embodiments, radical politics, and community- and alliance-building with equal significance. These stories reflect on desires, pleasures, intimacies, and alternative kinships; they upset the heteronormative status quo by imagining different sexual cultures and representations of queer characters, and by exploring many deeply political aspects of "queer ways of life" in their multiple configurations, shapes, temporalities, or discontinuities.[16]

The question of how the retrofuturist mode can productively unite with queer sensibilities and politics is neither easy to answer nor obvious. From the narrative point of view, "retrofuturism can have progressive and regressive ideological implications,"[17] therefore posing a challenge: how to bridge these two seemingly divergent perspectives—the backward gaze of retrofuturist imaginings and the forward-thinking utopian horizon of queerness? In his essay on retrofuturism in SF film, Joe P.L. Davidson defines a more progressive strand of narratives that he proposes to call "hopeful retrofuturism," which "may approach past visions of technological futurism in a critical fashion, recuperating retrofuturist images, motifs and features that retain a hold on the world and discarding those that are no longer relevant, thus separating the unsustainable ideological

content of old dreams from their emancipatory elements."[18] Following Davidson's notion that retrofuturism does not have to uncritically evoke "lost futures" while abandoning any gestures toward political change, I now turn attention to an example of an SF film that is both retro and queer.

Queering Retrofuturism Beyond Nostalgia



The Matrix Resurrections, 2021. Dir. Lana Wachowski

An interesting case of a recent SF production that engages in a critical retrofuturist reimagining of a past-future is *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021), the fourth entry in the groundbreaking transmedia franchise. In a rather surprising turn of events, after years of shutting down any sequel rumors, returning director Lana Wachowski—*sans* her sister, Lilly, who opted not to return to the co-director's chair—decided to step back into the cyberpunk world boldly introduced in *The Matrix* (1999),[19] one of the most influential SF narratives from the 1990s, and later tail-ended by two immediate back-to-back sequels: *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) and *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003).[20] The fourth entry, although it managed to cleverly side-step some of the obvious failings of a returning franchise, failed to meet the expectations of many fans and critics. Released in cinemas during the pandemic years, the film was neither a critical nor a commercial success, but it did end up finding an attentive audience among queer fans of the fantastic almost immediately.

Academic scholarship has consistently read the Wachowski sisters' cinematic work through a queer perspective, in relation both to the *Matrix* franchise and to their later output, which includes other SF narratives: *Cloud Atlas* (2012), *Jupiter Ascending* (2015), or the openly transgressive streaming series *Sense8* (2015–2017).[21] Therefore, we should perceive Lana

Wachowski's first solo film not as an outlier, but as a confident continuation of past queer explorations, especially when considering her self-clarified intention for the first film to function as a "trans metaphor."[22] Indeed, both "resurrected" protagonists of the original trilogy find themselves once again trapped in the fake reality of the Matrix, living in wrong bodies and under false names: Neo as Thomas Anderson and Trinity as Tiffany. In her reading of the film as a complex trans allegory, Terra Gasque writes that "both Trinity and Neo act explicitly trans in their language, physical presentation, and interactions, all while still maintaining the mask of cisgender heteronormativity established in the first films."[23] Gasque considers the film as a visual metaphor for the neoliberal system's exploitation of queer people, who are nonetheless able to oppose it by the film's end through collective political action. Lana Wachowski explores the issues of identity, body, and self-image throughout the entire film—in a significant shift, the characters no longer travel between realities through phones, but through mirrors. In the end, although the fourth film seems to be once again centering its plot on the romance of a heterosexual couple, their characterization in terms of gendered politics is more subversive, as "the relationship between Neo and Trinity is queering—and thereby changing—the Matrix' inherent binary structure."[24] However, I want to offer a reading of the film that eschews a focus on the characters and plot, and instead turns a critical eye primarily on the visual design, which, I argue, follows a queered retrofuturist impulse.

At first glance, *The Matrix Resurrections* is not an obvious or overt invocation of the retrofuturist mode outlined above. However, as I argue, it creatively engages with the idea of "past as style" in two ways signaled by the film's title: as a resurrection of the original trilogy's "dead" styles and fashions, and as a resurrection of cyberpunk as a retro-future that is still ongoing, forward-thinking, and not relegated solely to pastiche, irony, or

self-indulgent fan nostalgia. Regarding its evocation of the broader cyberpunk mythos, the fourth entry in the *Matrix* series seems to self-knowingly admit that the once prolific subgenre of SF was essentially "retro" since its inception. Even the exemplary film narrative that introduced the stylish and bleak imaginary of rain-drenched and electricity-buzzing Los Angeles of the near future-now past of the year 2019, *Blade Runner* (1982), builds its arresting aesthetic on visual elements incorporated from other "dead styles" such as film noir.[25] Aldona Kubus acknowledges that in terms of its temporal shifts, "cyberpunk depicts the present as the future and the past," and these hauntological affordances posit this SF form as, "to a large extent, a retrospective genre."[26] Later movies and television series reproduced and canonized these elements of cyberpunk's visual megatext as a recognizable cyberpunk aesthetic. As part of a wider cultural formation, not only was cyberpunk "the supreme visual expression of late capitalism,"[27] but it also relied on outmoded technologies even as it came to dominate, for a time, Western imagining of technology-driven futurity.

This doubled resurrection of older SF styles seems most pronounced in the visual design of the fourth film. *The Matrix Resurrections* is keenly aware of its heritage, engrossing its audience, already from the opening scenes, in a self-referential recreation of the original's famous sequence of Trinity first learning about Neo's existence in the Matrix. In the sequel, a new character named Bugs (Jessica Henwick) enters what at first seems like *the* Matrix but quickly turns out to be a simulation stuck in an endless loop running on what "looks like an old code," to cite Bugs's comment. This "old code" is indeed a simulated computer reality of the Matrix retrofuture, taking the form of a dark neo-noir cityscape. Awash in the green tint of computer coding as imagined in the late 1990s, the simulated reality of the machine-controlled virtual environment is reimagined as a trap—for the viewers and characters alike—as Bugs proceeds to

fight off swarms of agents in order to liberate one of the programs, now embodying Morpheus (Yaya Abdul-Mateen II), which remains stuck in the loop. Liberation from old code becomes tantamount with freeing from the grips of self-indulgent nostalgia for the familiar cyberpunk aesthetic, signaling the film's reluctance, it may seem, to simply feed on the general audience's cultural memory and on SF fans' proclivity for enjoying emanations of well-known futures from the genre's past. The film thus posits the opening sequence as a critique of retrofuturist expectations, a pastiche in the sense proposed by Fredric Jameson, who famously diagnosed it as one of the postmodern conditions of culture; *The Matrix Resurrections* literalizes this phenomenon as re-coding of a dead style that has become an empty imitation.[28] As Morpheus comments, "we're all trapped inside these strange, repeating loops."

The Matrix Resurrections, 2021. Dir. Lana Wachowski

The theme of personal liberation, carried from the original trilogy, is the film's guiding narrative trope. The new cast of characters, plugging into the virtual system from the real world, embark on the task of freeing both Neo and Trinity from an updated version of the Matrix. After their apparent death in *The Matrix Revolutions*, the surviving machines resurrected the two protagonists, who now live in a simulated reality while unaware of their true identities. Neo is a computer programmer responsible for creating a successful trilogy of *Matrix* games, and Trinity is living a domesticated life of a wife and mother; in the new twisted simulation, the two lovers are strangers to each other, meeting only in passing in a vintage coffee shop cheekily called Simulatte. Interestingly, in contrast with the retrofuturist neo-noir loop from the opening sequence, this updated version of Matrix proper visually represents more of a near-future extrapolation of an American city from the early

twenty-first century. It is not futuristic but, ironically, quite realistic and marked by normative sexual politics. Gone are the cyberpunk visual tropes, replaced with a more glossed-up vision of urban life—a vision more in line with today's tech-dominated world, only refashioned as shiny and clean, saturated with a warm color palette and soaked in sunlight. This virtual reality remains controlled by corporations, but in a more subtle fashion, represented mostly through invasive signs, brands, and logos punctuating the public spaces of the unreal cityscape. It is a cozy near future only if we accept the bleakness of our own present, the film seems to suggest, clashing this "new" artificial "straight world" with the more queer-aligning, material "real world" explored in the film's second act.

After Neo finally awakens in a pod and learns about his true identity and past, he is welcomed once again to "the real world," which turns out to be almost the same retrofuturist postapocalypse that others once expected him to save. Sixty years have passed in narrative time, but although the Machine War ended as a result of his sacrifice, the future is still grim. Unplugged from the system, Neo arrives in the city Io—a new settlement established after the destruction of Zion, humanity's safe haven from the original trilogy. Despite the dystopian surroundings, Io represents a more utopian arrangement within the Matrix world, a city built on the alliance between humans and machines—including synthients, a new hybrid form of AI.[29] It bears some resemblance to the industrial underground setting of Zion, a city quite reminiscent of a late-1990s vision of a bleak cyberpunk "rave" urban life yet exhibiting elements that place it within a different retrofuturist aesthetic—one that is also nostalgic, but for a different imaginative timeline. The city Io seems to belong to a more idealized and utopian vision of futurity, once again harkening back to SF's "eternal 1970s," in which technology blends with nature, and "good" machines coexist in harmony

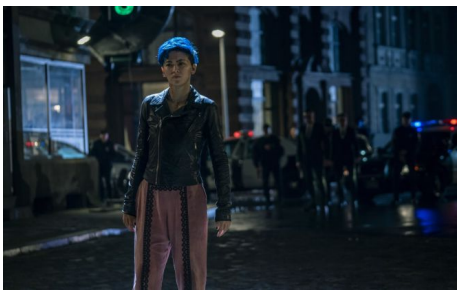
with humanity. Io abounds with plants and open spaces, has a blue sky above, and remains drenched in artificial sunlight. When guided through this new progressive utopia by its elder leader, Niobe (Jada Pinkett Smith), Neo gets to taste a strawberry—a symbol of how the union between nature and technology brings benefits to the human inhabitants of Io, who are able to reclaim seemingly lost pleasures. This represents another callback to the original film, in which the desire to taste food was one of the reasons for Cypher's treason. In an interesting world-building decision, *The Matrix Resurrections* replaces the dystopian past-future of Zion, a city of scarcity and carnal pleasures, with a more joyous lost-future of Io, a city of sustainability and communal cohabitation. It is possibly a queer world in the sense proposed by Michael Warner, one in the making by social actors engaging together in their non-normative ways of life and survival, including more-than-human alliances with plants and machines that now form part of this utopian setting.[30] Both nature and technology blend in the queer/retro world-making of Io, representing a minoritarian-oriented social world aligning with José Esteban Muñoz's influential conceptualization of a queerness as a utopian horizon of possibilities: a world in the making—or, in this case, re-making—through more hopeful performances and political arrangements.[31] And yet, the new city's design, while signaling the progress that took place in human-machine politics during Neo's absence, is also a callback to the optimism of retrofuturist concept art of urban utopian ideals from the mid-twentieth century. But as Davidson argues, "precisely what makes retrofuturism retro is that it understands that the utopias it draws upon are old fashioned, anachronistic and untimely."[32] At the same time, this anachronism in portraying the real world, despite its seemingly dystopian setting, brings it even closer to more fully realized queer utopia formed by a minority of humans

and machines.

These fascinating movements between different strands of retrofuturist visualities grow complicated upon the presentation of new characters, the residents of Io who join Neo when he returns to the Matrix to free Trinity. The crew of Bugs's ship Mnemosyne comprises both humans and synthients, representing a ragtag set of rebellious misfits. As outsiders, they realize the artificial nature of the virtual reality that machines have imposed through the Matrix, not unlike the original crew of Morpheus's ship Nebuchadnezzar. Gasque notes that "[t]his recognition of alienation and subsequent inability to reintegrate into the system is parallel with the feelings of outsiderness described by queer theorists,"[33] but although the fourth film clearly draws a parallel between the two crews supporting Neo, the new incarnation more evidently appears as a queer(ed) cohort. Although they act mostly as background characters, and thus their characterization remains limited, they nonetheless exude a decidedly queer sensibility, including some queer-coded members such as Lexy and Berg, who show affection for each other—even if the film never confirms their non-normative sexuality.[34] Their queerness, however, emanates a kind of atemporal quality, also connected to the film's creative reshuffling of retrofuturist tropes. When they return to the Matrix in the film's third act, accompanying Neo in his mission to save Trinity, the Mnemosyne crew's visual presentation is, by and large, a homage to the then-futuristic fashion from the 1999 original. Bugs, Lexy, Berg, and "new" Morpheus all wear variations of the 1990s hacker chic—sleek leather, trench coats, and minimalistic sunglasses—coupled with make-up and hair styles strongly reminiscent of the era. Once futuristic, this fashion now becomes retro-chic; but its choice stems not only from nostalgia. It also reinforces the original's connection between cyber*punk* and queerness, as "the leather jackets and

motorbikes that recur in the original trilogy are often used for queer coding."[35] In terms of fashion, props, and set designs, then, nostalgia and queerness seem like two forces at work that do not contradict each other, perhaps because of the ironic distancing from its "old code" the fourth film emphasizes in almost every scene and dialogue. As Guffey reminds us, one hallmark of retro in culture is the tendency to ironically reinterpret the past—especially the one that is recent.[36]

Conclusions



The Matrix Resurrections, 2021. Dir. Lana Wachowski

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that these different modalities of retrofuturist nostalgia are so prominent in a film whose key narrative trope is that of suppressing memories. What makes *The Matrix Resurrections* a more thought-provoking invocation of past iconic imageries—an exemplary of the retro mode not becoming reactionary or self-serving—is that these appeals to an "old future," the influential urban-cool aesthetic of *The Matrix*, serve to explore tensions present in queer politics. Lana Wachowski's film bends the retrofuturist spoon in a queer angle.

Curiously, *The Matrix Resurrections* ends not with the expected destruction of the machine-run system that literally enslaves humanity, but with the pair of protagonists—now both granted superpowers that allow them to freely manipulate the simulation—expressing a desire to change the Matrix from within. The film closes with Trinity remarking that she would like to "paint the sky with rainbows," which Rebecca Gibson generously reads as a "deliberate nod toward the queerness of the entire franchise."[37] Gasque concludes her reading by acknowledging Wachowski's creative reinterpretation of the Matrix mythology in

order to "demonstrate how social and sexual minorities might creatively enact not total revolution from without, but a series of small, subtle changes from within the system to make it a little bit freer and more equitable for all."[38] Perhaps she suggests that the Matrix's future allows for re-fashioning so as to mirror the queer utopian human-machine-plant arrangement from the seemingly retrofuturist "real world" represented by the city Io. But the decision to remain in the Matrix also expresses a wider concern for SF world-building—namely, the idea that returning to a seemingly "lost future" from the past does not foreclose the prospect of bringing political change. The film resurrects a cyberpunk vision of futurity, disregarded as "dead style" only to, ironically, posit it as still in the making through an engagement with queer sensibilities. Thus, it follows a queered form of nostalgic impulse, one that is retro but hopeful—in other words, both backward- and forward-looking in its insistence on the possibility of bringing a past/future utopia to life, regardless of its ultimate achievement in the digital or material reality of the Matrix future. In this way, the fourth film in the series succeeds in offering an intriguing answer to the question posed by one of its characters, one that we could apply to SF cinema as well: "Why use old code to mirror something new?"

By turning attention to the film's creative interplay between nostalgia and queerness vis-à-vis its use of various retrofuturist iconographies, I hope to have offered a reading that might further solidify the queer potential not only of the film itself, but also of queer retrofuturism at large, whether hopeful or not. In the current landscape of SF cinema, the pervasiveness of retrofuturism poses a significant challenge for critical evaluations of the genre's ideological positionalities and ambitions—especially since SF studies have long ignored the genre's visuality, as opposed to its narrative tropes and lofty conceptual stakes, despite the visuality's importance for our understanding of the cultural work SF does on screen.[39] Focusing

on either explicitly queer narratives or those that we can read from a queer perspective offers a chance to locate a retrofuturist impulse that fills out the emptiness with new meanings. These seemingly used-up motifs, icons, and visual codes, if transposed through a retrofuturist queer lens outlined in this article, may perhaps reveal more hopeful and progressive past-futures hidden from sight. As Lothian suggests, "while science fiction's visual iconography often provokes nostalgia as it grows more dated, these images thrown forward out of past political imaginaries [can be] felt [as] astonishingly current."[40]

1 Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011), xxx.

2 Elizabeth Guffey, *Retro: The Culture of Revival* (University of Chicago Press, 2006), 14.

3 Paweł Frelik, "The Future of the Past: Science Fiction, Retro, and Retrofuturism," in *Parabolas of Science Fiction*, ed. Brian Attebery and Veronica Hollinger (Wesleyan University Press, 2013), 207.

4 Paweł Frelik, "Gazing (Back) in Wonder: Visual Megatext and Forgotten Ocularies of Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* 43, no. 2 (2016): 228.

5 Sharon Sharp, "Nostalgia for the Future: Retrofuturism and *Star Trek*," *Science Fiction Film and Television* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 25.

6 Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, "Utopianism After Utopia," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 33, no. 3 (2023): 158.

7 Joe P.L. Davidson, "Blast from the Past: Hopeful Retrofuturism in Science Fiction Film," *Continuum* 33, no. 6 (November 2, 2019): 731.

8 Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *After the Future* (AK Books, 2011), xxx.

9 Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* (Zer0 Books, 2022), 8.

10 Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 6.

11 See Andrew M. Butler, *Solar Flares: Science Fiction in the 1970s* (Liverpool University Press, 2012).

12 Rob Latham, "Our Jaded Tomorrows," *Science Fiction Studies* 36, no. 2 (2009): 344.

13 See Fiona Moore, "Workers' Playtime: Andor, Nostalgia and Admonitory Retrofuturism," in *Andor Analyzed. Part 1: The Roots of Rebellion in Star Wars*, ed. Jamie Woodcock (Red Futures, 2024), 110–21.

14 Frelik, "The Future of the Past," 210–11.

15 Alexis Lothian, *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility* (NYU Press, 2018), 175–76.

16 For more on how I understand the queer politics of the fantastic see Jędrzej Burszta, "The Joy of Queer Science Fiction Reading, or: Will Queers Destroy Science Fiction," *Przegląd Kulturoznawczy* 59, no. 1 (2024): 5–20.

17 Sharp, "Nostalgia for the Future," 26.

18 Davidson, "Blast from the Past," 735.

19 For more on *The Matrix* as a cyberpunk narrative see Stacy Gillis, ed., *The Matrix Trilogy: Cyberpunk Reloaded* (Wallflower Press, 2005).

20 *The Matrix* represents a transmedia franchise stretching beyond the cinematic tetralogy that includes the animated series *The Animatrix* (2003), the *Enter the Matrix* video game (2003), and comic books (2003–2004). The creators have announced a fifth film, with Drew Goddard as the director and Lana Wachowski as the producer.

21 For more on queer readings of the Wachowskis' oeuvre see Cael M. Keegan, *Lana and Lilly Wachowski* (University of Illinois Press, 2018); Cáel M. Keegan, "Tongues without Bodies: The Wachowskis' *Sense8*," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 3–4 (November 1, 2016): 605–10; Anna Kurowicka and Agnieszka Kotwasińska, "Readings in Queer Pleasure: *Jupiter Ascending* Revisited," *Science Fiction Film & Television* 17, no. 1 (February 2024): 105–27.

22 Catherine Shoard, "The Matrix Director: I'm Glad Film Recognised as Trans Metaphor," The Guardian, August 6, 2020.

23 Terra Gasque, "Renovating the System: *The Matrix Resurrections* and Trans Resistance to Neoliberal Integration," in *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Science Fiction,* ed. Lisa Yaszek, Sonja Fritzsche, Karen Omry, and Wendy G. Pearson (Routledge, 2023), 59.

24 Andy Porter and Jessica A. Albrecht, "Nonviolent Utopias: Heroes Transgressing the

Gender Binary in *The Matrix Resurrections*," *Feminist Media Studies* 24, no. 8 (November 16, 2024): 1871.

25 Still, Frelik is adamant about the necessity to distinguish between elements of "retro" and "retrofuturism" present in the visual design of *Blade Runner.* See Frelik, "The Future of the Past," 213–14.

26 Aldona Kolbus, "The Present of the Dead: Spectral Ideology in *Altered Carbon*," in *Sex, Death and Resurrection in Altered Carbon,* ed. Aldona Kolbus and Łukasz Muniowski (McFarland & Company, 2020), 157.

27 Graham J. Murphy and Lars Schmeink, "Introduction: The Visuality and Virtuality of Cyberpunk," in *Cyberpunk and Visual Culture,* ed. Graham J. Murphy and Lars Schmeink (Routledge 2018), xxii.

28 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991), 18.

29 Porter and Albrecht, "Nonviolent Utopias," 1869.

30 Michael Warner, "Introduction," in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory,* ed. Michael Warner (University of Minnesota Press, 1994), xi–xvi.

31 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* (New York University Press, 2009).

32 Davidson, "Blast from the Past," 740.

33 Gasque, "Renovating the System," 58.

34 Rebecca Gibson, *Cyborgs, Ethics, and the Matrix: Simulations of Sex and Gender* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 130.

35 Sam Moore, "*The Matrix Resurrections* Challenges Its Own Queer Themes," Digital Spy, January 18, 2022.

36 Guffey, *Retro*, 10–11.

37 Gibson, *Cyborgs, Ethics, and the Matrix,* 168.

38 Gasque, "Renovating the System," 58.

39 Frelik, "Gazing (Back) in Wonder," 228.

40 Lothian, *Old Futures,* 177.

Bibliography

Berardi, Franco "Bifo." After the Future. AK Press, 2011.

Burszta, Jędrzej. "The Joy of Queer Science Fiction Reading, or: Will Queers Destroy Science Fiction." Przegląd Kulturoznawczy 59, no. 1 (2024): 5–20.

Butler, Andrew M. Solar Flares: Science Fiction in the 1970s. Liverpool University Press, 2012.

Chattopadhyay, Bodhisattva. "Utopianism After Utopia." Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts 33, no. 3 (2023): 152–76.

Davidson, Joe P.L. "Blast from the Past: Hopeful Retrofuturism in Science Fiction Film." Continuum 33, no. 6 (November 2, 2019): 729–43. https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2019.1668352.

Fisher, Mark. Ghosts of My Life. Zer0 Books, 2022.

Frelik, Paweł. "Gazing (Back) in Wonder: Visual Megatext and Forgotten Ocularies of Science Fiction." Science Fiction Studies 43, no. 2 (2016): 226–36. https://doi.org/10.5621/sciefictstud.43.2.0226.

Frelik, Paweł. "The Future of the Past: Science Fiction, Retro, and Retrofuturism." In Parabolas of Science Fiction, edited by Brian Attebery and Veronica Hollinger. Wesleyan University Press, 2013.

Gasque, Terra. "Renovating the System: The Matrix Resurrections and Trans Resistance to Neoliberal Integration." In The Routledge Companion to Gender and Science Fiction, edited by Lisa Yaszek, Sonja Fritzsche, Karen Omry, and Wendy G. Pearson. Routledge, 2023.

Gibson, Rebecca. Cyborgs, Ethics, and The Matrix: Simulations of Sex and Gender. Palgrave Macmillan, 2024.

Gillis, Stacy, ed. The Matrix Trilogy: Cyberpunk Reloaded. Wallflower Press, 2005.

Guffey, Elizabeth. Retro: The Culture of Revival. University of Chicago Press,

2006.

Jameson, Fredric. Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. Duke University Press, 1991.

Keegan, Cáel M. Lana and Lilly Wachowski. University of Illinois Press, 2018.

Keegan, Cáel M. "Tongues without Bodies: The Wachowskis' Sense8." TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly 3, no. 3–4 (November 1, 2016): 605–10. https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3545275.

Kolbus, Aldona. "The Present of the Dead: Spectral Ideology in Altered Carbon ." In Sex, Death and Resurrection in Altered Carbon, edited by Aldona Kolbus and Łukasz Muniowski. McFarland & Company, 2020.

Kurowicka, Anna, and Agnieszka Kotwasińska. "Readings in Queer Pleasure: Jupiter Ascending Revisited." Science Fiction Film & Television 17, no. 1 (February 2024): 105–27. https://doi.org/10.3828/sfftv.2024.5.

Latham, Rob. "Our Jaded Tomorrows." Science Fiction Studies 36, no. 2 (2009): 339–49. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40649965.

Lothian, Alexis. Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility. New York University Press, 2018.

Moore, Fiona. "Workers' Playtime: Andor, Nostalgia and Admonitory Retrofuturism." In Andor Analyzed. Part 1: The Roots of Rebellion in Star Wars , edited by Jamie Woodcock. Red Futures, 2024.

Moore, Sam. "The Matrix Resurrections Challenges Its Own Queer Themes." Digital Spy, January 18, 2022.

Muñoz, José Esteban. Cruising Utopia. New York University Press, 2009.

Murphy, Graham J., and Lars Schmeink. "Introduction: The Visuality and Virtuality of Cyberpunk." Cyberpunk and Visual Culture, edited by Graham J. Murphy and Lars Schmeink. Routledge 2018.

Porter, Andy, and Jessica A. Albrecht. "Nonviolent Utopias: Heroes Transgressing the Gender Binary in the Matrix Resurrections." Feminist Media Studies 24, no. 8 (November 16, 2024): 1863–76. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2266584

.

Reynolds, Simon. Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011.

Sharp, Sharon. "Nostalgia for the Future: Retrofuturism and Star Trek." Science Fiction Film and Television 4, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 25–40.

Shoard, Catherine. "The Matrix Director: I'm Glad Film Recognised as Trans Metaphor." The Guardian, August 6, 2020.

The Matrix Resurrections. Warner Bros., Village Roadshow Pictures, Venus Castina Productions, 2021.

Warner, Michael. "Introduction." In Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory, edited by Michael Warner. University of Minnesota Press, 1994.