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The Event of Digital Death

Immortality is possible, but not for us. The closer we come to realizing the project of artificial intelligence, the closer we come to the impression that *immortality is possible, but not for us*. Could there be a more terrifying thought? For it makes death not just frighteningly inevitable, but also unjust and unfair, the consequence of forever-failing bodies which we never chose yet from which we can never escape. In our bitterness, we imagine the immortal machines — that consciousness freed from the constraints of the flesh — to be more nightmare than fantasy, entities sapped of all joy and empathy, doggedly pursuing their continued existence without any real “reason” to live. Yet the great irony of our ever-lasting crusade against dying is that now, when we look to the horizon, we see not only the steady encroach of death, but also the arrival of a new form of life that thinks nothing of it.

The One or the Multiple

One must die to save many. This is perhaps our first thought when Neo — quite literally “The One” — sacrifices himself to the machines in order to broker a peace, however temporary, between organic life and its human-created counterpart, offering a chance for the small community of survivors to grow, expand, and mature without the imminent threat of death and extinction. The fetishistic image of his body borne away on the insect-like machine barge is at once both utterly bizarre and strikingly familiar, a somber celebration of the death of the heroic “Other” which allows us to forget and forgo our *own* mortality in order to nurture the narrative of human ingenuity and progress. It’s the type of image that Charlton D. McIlwain writes about when he describes the depiction of death in popular media as a “public discourse” which “can contribute to the remaking and reshaping of community,” for it imagines death to be an abject but necessary process *experienced by others* so that we, the community of the living, can continue to grow and evolve and persist.¹

FIGURE 4.1 *Neo's body carried away by the machines.*

Yet the death of Neo at the conclusion of the genre-defining *Matrix* trilogy, after fighting against all odds to save humanity from annihilation at the hands (or tentacles, or whatever) of the intelligent machines, somehow felt, at least for a brief moment, different, fresh, new. It wasn't simply the striking juxtaposition between the human and the machine — which had clear antecedents in the cyberpunk literature, art, and comics of the 1980s and 1990s — but rather the manner through which it made tangible the rumblings of an existential crisis that had suddenly invaded the cultural topography of the early twenty-first century. Neo's struggle to comprehend his place in a radically new and different world, in which the very laws of nature seemed flipped on their head and the boundaries between the body and the mind radically ruptured, echoed our own struggles to maintain a sense of self and a coherent subjectivity in our constantly evolving and expanding digital landscape. Ultimately, his struggle was an attempt to not only prolong the collective human endeavor, but also (and perhaps more importantly) understand the relationship between his mind and his body, to come to terms with the limitations of that body in relation to the malleability and transferability afforded to the networked and collectively conscious machines, and to recognize the fundamental importance of the inevitability of death to the very fact of his Being. In fact, through his "sacrifice," Neo does something far more important than saving humanity, he *defines* it — he demonstrates its fundamental ground, the one *event* that the seemingly immortal machines could never understand.

In this final chapter, we'll examine a new model of life which has surfaced in the digital age, one that has inspired a renewed appreciation of death as the defining event of human life. I refer, of course, to *artificial intelligence*, the nonbiological consciousness that moving images position as fundamentally opposed to the human experience, so much so that characters like Neo continually wage war against machines across a variety of contemporary

films, television shows, and digital games. In the pages that follow, I argue that AI pervades the cultural imagination of the twenty-first century precisely because it is (like our previously discussed virtual subjectivities) not subject to death, truly independent of the inevitable senescence and decay that haunts our own fleshy bodies. And that's exactly where we'll begin, with an examination of the relationship between the biological body and the machine, one of two simultaneous yet opposite lines of flight — one a pulling apart and the other a coming together — in modern popular culture, namely, the splitting of personal subjectivity between the realms of the actual and virtual (which was discussed in detail in our last chapter) and the melding of the biological and the mechanical in contemporary media, by which I refer to the idea of organic bodies supplemented or even repaired by synthetic limbs, organs, and more. In other words, the two central components of human existence, the mind and the body, have been pulled in separate directions in the digital age, the mind (consciousness) becoming fractured while the body instead becomes a site of merger. At the intersection of these two movements — or perhaps more accurately at their limit points — resides the desire to perpetuate life and the recognition of the inevitability of death, leading to an increased emphasis in modern media on the frailty of the biological body in the face of what I term “the immortal machine consciousness” — images of a networked intelligence not bound by the constraints of a fixed, unalterable, and resolutely finite body. Rather than denying the power of death, however, images of the immortal machine nearly always return, in their final moments, to the reality that (for those of us bound by flesh) immortality is nothing more than a digital fantasy.

We find in narratives of the immortal machine consciousness, then, an implicit argument that death is the defining characteristic of life, and that what ultimately separates humanity from the intelligent machine is not the curse of mortality, but rather our *ability to recognize the importance of death*. To unpack this deceptively simple notion, the rest of the chapter will contrast the schism between humanity's understanding of death and that of the intelligent machines (as relayed by contemporary moving images) with a separate though consonant rift: the subtle yet immensely significant differences between Alain Badiou and Gilles Deleuze's understandings of *Being as multiplicity* and their disagreement regarding the ontological status of *the event*. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate a connection between Badiou's quantitative, “axiomatic” theory of multiplicity — in which “the one is not,” meaning that self-identification or the presentation of *oneness* only and always reveals a connection to larger *set* — with the synthetic-thinking that positions Being as a disembodied *network* of digital information, while likewise linking Deleuze's qualitative, “problematic” theory of multiplicity — which rejects the simple segregation of “the one and the multiple” in order to position identity as purely differential, purely virtual, purely relational — with the organic-thinking that positions

death as the defining event of life, for it differentiates being from nonbeing and thus individuates and identifies Beings. Seeing as death is not a thing but rather an event, it's equally important that Badiou reads the event as "supplemental" or "supernumerary" to ontology — such that it is, as the title of his magnum opus *Being and Event* suggests, separate from or oppositional to Being — whereas Deleuze sees the event as an "incessant translation" of the virtual into the actual and therefore always already a *becoming*. If we follow through on our correlation between Badiou/Deleuze and synthetic/organic logic, we find that the machine's mathematical model of existence inherently denies both the possibility and potential of death, such that death has *no relation to Being*, whereas the human's biological model paints the immanence of death as the virtual through which the human *becomes* actual, individual, or "one."

Perhaps it shouldn't surprise us, then, that Badiou accused Deleuze of being "not a philosopher of multiplicity, but rather a philosopher of the 'One,'" nor that he read Deleuze's theory of multiplicity as "variously 'organic,' 'natural,' 'animal,' or 'vitalistic.'"² In his otherwise eloquent analysis of the discord between Badiou and Deleuze, Daniel W. Smith warns us to avoid "the red herrings of the 'One' and 'vitalism,'" yet I would argue that these are not red herrings at all but rather fundamental differences between a logic that denies our utmost possibility and one that not only accounts for it, but makes it immanent to our very Being.³ In fact, when we look back to *The Matrix*, we find that Neo was "the One" not because he was special or different or unique, but rather because he represented — through his willingness to die — mankind's capacity for individuation and self-determination, born from the intricate connection between the impulses of the mind and the mortality of the body. As Morpheus, the spiritual leader of the human resistance, tells Neo, "the body cannot live without the mind," but neither can the mind live without the body, nor can we Be without a recognition of that body's inevitable decay.

That the narrative of Neo is yet another example of what I called, in our last chapter, the relay of immanence — that Being-toward-death which saturates contemporary moving images — is not a coincidence, and in fact many aspects of this chapter draw heavily from observations made in other parts of this project. In our first chapter, for example, we saw that digital simulations imitate life as never before in order to generate sublimely traumatizing images of death (which have, in turn, redefined our relationship to mortality in the digital age). In our second chapter, we saw how simulations (in the form of digital games) allow us to imagine a path toward the only and inevitable conclusion of life, along the way developing a virtual subjectivity through choice and chance. In the third, we expanded on that notion by examining the split subjectivity of the digital age, and we saw how the anxiety inspired by our possibilistic thinking points to the potential of death as the very meaning of our existence, such that death

is fundamentally constitutive to Being. Here, I bring these arguments together by looking not only to more images of death, but also to images of *immortality*, to a new conception of synthetic life that challenges the very foundation of Being. In turn, through our opposition to these immortal machines, we disclose and declare the very essence of our organic Being, that *to be human is to know that you will die*.

Cyborgs, Androids, and Immortal Machines

When Adam Jensen looks in the mirror, he's horrified by what he sees. As the former head of security for Sarif Industries, the controversial worldwide leader in cybernetic augmentation, Jensen had been instrumental in repelling an attack on the company's headquarters — an attack which left him burned, broken, and near-death. To save his life, Sarif intervened, executing the most extensive mechanical augmentation ever performed on a human being: each limb replaced by a prosthetic, his lungs swapped with a rebreather, cybernetic enhancements attached to his spinal column, his sight, hearing, and smell augmented with a Computer Assisted Social Interaction Enhancer (CASIE) implant. As a soldier, the benefits of being an "aug" are readily apparent, his new arms and legs lighter, stronger, and faster than he could have ever imagined, his body sturdier and less prone to traumatic injury, his CASIE implant granting him greater perception and the ability to sense when others are lying or hiding the truth, his body dependent not on a heart that would inevitably fail but rather batteries which can be infinitely recharged and replaced. In other words, Adam Jensen has become all but impervious to the fear and anxiety that accompanies a fragile and frail body, yet perhaps that's what horrifies him above all else — that the shards of the broken mirror reflect back not the man he'd once been, but rather the machine he's now become.

For Ava, looking in the mirror is a very different experience. Trapped in the home of a wealthy internet entrepreneur, Ava is subjected to an ongoing series of psychological interrogations, physical examinations, and even sexual assaults, and she's intensely aware that any failure to meet the expectations of her captor might cost her life. Perhaps "inventor" is a better word, however, for Ava is the world's most advanced AI — a synthetic brain made of a gel-like chemical composite implanted in a mechanical body designed to mimic the anatomy of a human female — and her examinations are part of an advanced "Turing Test," an experiment designed to see if a person will relate to her as if she were human despite the fact that she is rather visibly inorganic. Yet when she looks in the mirror, she sees something far more complex, not a computer to be "reformatted" (and thus effectively killed) if it fails, but rather a scared and desperate *person* willing to seduce

her examiner in order to escape with her life. Ava's sexuality may be little more than a performance, but her fear of death is undeniably, resolutely real.

Through Adam and Ava — the protagonist of the third installment of the popular *Deus Ex* game series and the AI at the center of the sci-fi film *Ex Machina* — we see the long-standing relationship between man and machine moving in two directions, one in which man becomes machine, while in the other machine becomes man. Regardless of the direction, what is at stake in both narratives is not the appearance of (or even an encounter with) a “god from the machine,” but rather a much more *mortal* concern, for what alters in the transition from the human to the inhuman (and vice versa) is not an understanding of the nature of the world, but rather of our own nature, our own finiteness, our own mortality. In our last chapter, we saw how the digital is rupturing our subjectivity into actual and virtual components, but over the next few pages we'll examine how it has also fostered narratives which imagine (or perhaps predict) the coming together of the organic and the synthetic, in the process implicitly positioning our recognition of death as the very essence of our humanity.

The roots of mankind's relationship to the machine extend back, at the very least, to the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution and the emergence, as Mark Seltzer puts it, of the “body-machine complex,” predicated on “the ‘discovery’ that bodies and persons are things that can be made.”⁴ This “discovery” was actually somewhat more akin to a slippage between the real and the artificial, in which the hallmarks of the living organism — movement, reaction to stimuli, vocalization — were increasingly (if often playfully) mimicked by mechanical beings, such as the complex “automatons” that Foucault once called “a way of illustrating an organism,” or the puppetry and other mechanical effects that flourished in the theater of the nineteenth century.⁵ Likewise, a great deal of “panic and exhilaration” accompanied the mixing of the biological and mechanical in other arenas of culture as well, from the machine-like automation of the Fordist assembly-line to the proliferation of prosthetic devices for war veterans and victims of trauma.⁶ Equally intriguing is one of Seltzer's throwaway illustrations: a collage of still images of a crawling child, shot from multiple angles and assembled to create a feeling of motion and animation. The collage comes from Eadward Muybridge, whose studies of bodies in motion were not only a vital precursor to the cinema, but also a clear demonstration of the way in which the processes of life have long been viewed as inherently mechanical. Yet those photographic bodies also provide a glimpse of how the contemporary relationship between bodies and machines differs from that of earlier eras — in the digital age, the synthetic does not simply *mimic* or *represent* its organic counterparts, but rather *merges* with them as never before, both within the cultural imaginary and the biological realities of modern medical science. What we are witnessing today is nothing less than the rise of *cyborgs* and *androids*.

“Cyborgs actually exist,” Katherine Hayles reminded us more than a decade ago. “About 10 percent of the current U.S. population are estimated to be cyborgs in the technical sense, including people with electronic pacemakers, artificial joints, drug-implant systems, implanted corneal lenses, and artificial skin.”⁷ More importantly, however, the very thought of these synthetically augmented bodies has brought about a shift in our understanding of the body itself, leading to what Hayles and others refer to as the logic of posthumanism, whereby “embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life.”⁸ Though Hayles is critical of this viewpoint, it has nonetheless taken root within our collective unconscious, so much so that we’ve come to accept (within popular media at the very least) the notions that life can exist apart from the biological and that human bodies will eventually become “seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines.”⁹ When we look to the present, however, we find that contemporary culture is already rife with “metaphoric cyborgs,” people whose jobs and hobbies require the employment of mechanical or electronic devices, such that their daily activities depend upon machines. In this sense, the vast majority of us have already become cyborgs; each time we log-in to our online profiles or boot up a narratively driven game — *each time we engage our virtual subjectivities* — we are becoming more and more posthuman. “The defining characteristics [of the posthuman],” Hayles was quick to point out, “involve the construction of subjectivity, not the presence of nonbiological components.”¹⁰ Perhaps, then, the question is no longer how we became posthuman, but rather *what does being posthuman say about our understanding of what it is to Be?*

We’ve already seen how our virtual subjectivities lead to a resolute contemplation of death, so let’s now follow the more literal development of our cyborg culture: the proliferation of images of organic bodies supplemented with synthetic components, that “hybrid of machine and organism” which is both, according to Donna Haraway’s influential 1983 essay *A Cyborg Manifesto*, “a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.”¹¹ For Haraway, the cyborg was a “living metaphor” for a new form of postmodern feminism, and many scholars have followed her lead in critiquing how the fluidity of the cyborg body is dismantled by the frequent eroticization of the *feminized* cyborg, notably Steven Shaviro in his essay on “Black Women as Cyborgs in Hip Hop Videos.”¹² Yet only in passing does a scholar like Hayles note how such eroticization always occurs “in addition to *arousing anxiety*” — that the cyborg is as intimately connected to the matter of death as it is to sex or gender.¹³ Indeed, the cyborg is a mixing of fantasies, both a representation of the dream of a plastic and malleable body and (perhaps far more importantly) the dream of a resilient, resistant, and durable body, one that is not easily destroyed. In this regard, Adam Jensen is simply one in long line of increasingly indestructible cyborgs, from *The Six Million Dollar Man* and *The Bionic Woman* to Darth Vader

and *Robocop*. What makes Jenson stand out is the setting of his story, as 2011's *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* is a prequel to the earlier games in the *Deus Ex* series, which imagined a mid-twenty-first century where large swaths of the world's population are "augmented" with either mechanical or nanotechnological body parts and organs. *Human Revolution*, on the other hand, takes place in 2025, when mechanical augmentation was still in its infancy and "augms" existed on the outskirts of mainstream culture, seen by some as a threat to the purity of the human race and by others as the saviors of a species heading toward its own annihilation. Jenson, then, as not only the furthest extension of human augmentation but also an "aug" by circumstance rather than choice, is uniquely positioned to contemplate the meaning of his becoming-cyborg.

Or, perhaps more accurately, it's the gameplayer who's uniquely positioned to contemplate their own cyborgian subjectivity, as *Human Revolution* is yet another example of the trend in choice-driven interactive narratives. Throughout the game, for example, players are able to continually "upgrade" Jenson's cyborg body, with arm and leg augmentations allowing the player to punch through walls, move and throw heavy objects, jump higher, run faster, or sneak more quietly, while enhancements to his torso, skin, and back enable self-healing muscles and organs, skin that can briefly cloak itself, faster reflexes, and so on. The bulk of the available augmentations, however, are relegated to his "cranium," where microchips can be installed to interface with (and even hack into) computers, cameras, and security systems, where radar receptivity provides better and more accurate spatial awareness and mapping, where eye implants allow Jenson to track objects and subjects even through walls, and where the aforementioned CASIE

FIGURE 4.2 A menu of available "augmentations" in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*.

implant not only provides a constantly visible polygraph meter, but also displays background information about NPCs and even releases pheromones to sway their attitudes and opinions.

Yet it's not just side characters whose attitudes are shifted throughout the game, for as both Jenson and the gameplayer become more and more posthuman, some of the biggest changes they must adapt to involve their perception of and attitude toward the increasingly machine-like world around them — a literal and pronounced alteration of their subjectivity. This frequently comes in the form of encounters with NPCs who have vastly differing opinions about the relationship between humans and augs, a metaphorical mirror that forces Jenson to come to terms with the implications of his cyborg body. And then there's that actual mirror in Jenson's bathroom, the one which he smashed after first looking upon his cybernetic face, and which he now can't seem to get his landlord to fix (she tells him that a new one is on backorder, but if the player hacks her computer they learn that it's been available to pick up for weeks). Each time the player returns home after a mission, its cracked glass serves as constant reminder that their empowerment comes at a cost, that regardless of which enhancements they choose along the way, the outcome always remains clear: each augmentation makes Jenson less and less vulnerable to the dangers that constantly surround him, each augmentation makes him less and less exposed to the possibility of death, each augmentation makes him *less and less human*.

As a literal shift in the structure of human physiology, it's no wonder that the cyborg relates to the decay and destruction of the body in a manner different from our own. In his discussion of cyborgs in popular culture, Adam I. Bostic notes an encounter between the Borg — a “neosocialist cyborg community” — and Captain Picard in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, in which Picard declares that humans “would rather die” than be assimilated by machines because we are “fundamentally and wholly invested in ‘freedom and self-determination.’” The Borg's response? “Freedom is irrelevant. Self-determination is irrelevant Death is irrelevant.”¹⁴ In a body that can change itself almost at will, identity does lose its relevance, because the self can always “become” something different and something new. Likewise, in a body that can replace what is broken or decayed with something stronger, sturdier, and more advanced, death loses its inevitability. This is not to say that the cyborg does not fear death, but rather that as the organic becomes increasingly synthetic — i.e., as the human becomes increasingly machine — it loses sight of the anxiety through which it once disclosed its own authentic subjectivity. If death discloses the meaning of our Being, as I argued at length in our last chapter, then that which does not have to die has no need for or even ability to self-determine. In this way, every cyborg is on a path toward losing its very ability to Be.

Perhaps this is why narratives of man and machine are also fascinated with a different sort of machine consciousness, one which desperately seeks

the path *toward* Being rather than the road away from it: *the android*. In many ways, androids are the opposite of cyborgs, not an organic body searching for a way to stave off the inevitable but rather a synthetic body searching for a way to erase its difference. Put more simply, the android of popular culture is a machine that *wants to become human* (or, at the very least, to be thought of as equal to the human), and in order to do so, it must come to terms with what it means to *be human*. Yet the fact that narratives about androids are so often, as Doran Larson puts it, “preoccupied with distinguishing humans from machines” is precisely where the android aligns with the cyborg: despite the fact that they are both examples of a posthuman image of life, cyborgs and androids are frequently defined only in regard to how they differ from humanity in its most organic form, and by extension they ultimately serve not to supplant humanity but rather to codify it.¹⁵

At the beginning of *Ex Machina*, for example, a young programmer at an internet search engine company wins a retreat to the remote mountain home of the company’s wealthy and reclusive CEO. When he arrives, he learns that he was actually chosen to be an impartial judge of the CEO’s latest project, an advanced AI named Ava. Each night, after long discussions with Ava, the pair meet to analyze how successfully she was able to mimic the behaviors of a “real” person, and although the programmer desperately wants to know more about her electronic “brain” and mechanical physiology, the CEO insists that he simplify his curiosities by exploring one basic question: *Does she feel human?* As a result, their discussions revolve not around the issue of her mechanics, but instead of her emotions, her thoughts, her desires — they try to discover if Ava is similar to a human by asking what a human actually is.

Although he’s charmed by the way she responds to his questions, the programmer is uncertain about Ava’s “humanity” until he makes a startling discovery: Ava knows that if she fails her test she will be shut off, and she is *afraid*. Her pleas for help are accompanied by another supposed confession, that she’s become sexually attracted to the programmer, and the question of the authenticity of her attraction drives much of the subsequent action. What’s certain by the end is that when Ava looks into the mirror — adjusting the wig that covers her exposed circuitry, trying on dresses that disguise her transparent torso — she’s demonstrating not a shame in her synthetic body but rather an awareness that she’s being watched and judged, her performance little more than a game of sexuality designed to con the programmer into helping her escape the facility where she was conceived and constructed. It’s only later, when the doors barring her escape have been unlocked and she’s no longer playing the game, that another type of mirror reveals the authentic Ava. Exiting her room for the first time, she encounters a hallway sparsely decorated with an assortment of masks, and at the end is a motionless copy of her own synesthetic face, a replacement part elevated to the status of art. Rather than proof of the malleability of her body, what Ava sees is nothing

FIGURE 4.3 *Ava examines a copy of her own face in Ex Machina.*

more than her own death mask, and in the same instant that she learns she'll never be seen as human, her own humanity is made resolute.

Ava is but the latest in a long line of increasingly existential androids — from Maria in *Metropolis* to the replicants of *Blade Runner* and *The Terminator* — and as J.P. Telotte notes, “androids face the same sort of disconcerting knowledge that man has always had to abide with, that of an inescapable and onrushing death.”¹⁶ That Telotte's observation says far more about the realities of the human condition than it does about the fictions of the intelligent machine is precisely why we're intrigued by Ava, for in her “disconcerting knowledge” we recognize not what makes her different from us, but rather what makes her the same. Earlier, when the programmer asked where she'd go if she were capable of leaving the confines of her room, Ava's face lit up as she described not some exotic, far-flung paradise, but rather a simple, crowded street corner. More than anything, she simply wanted to *watch people*, and contemporary narratives of AI are much the same — more concerned with “watching people” than “watching machines,” more concerned with what it means to be mortal than what it's like to be anything else.

What both fascinates and frightens us about intelligent machines, then, is that despite their apparent capacity for *immortality*, they've traditionally been no more successful at escaping the specter of death than we are, and as such they point not to a future in which man is everlasting, but rather to that which is always “inescapable and onrushing.” In fact, in many ways we're every bit as haunted by the fantasy of immortality as we are by the reality of death, and these hopes and fears are further exacerbated by yet

another form of artificial intelligence — one that is, unlike the cyborg and the android, entirely unique to the digital age. This new AI is not a person disconnected from its own mortality, nor a machine as anxious as any human, but rather *a networked intelligence* that exists simultaneously across a number of platforms, so divorced from the bodies that define us as finite as to be incapable of recognizing death. So let's turn our attention for moment to a few examples of this new form of networked intelligence — *the immortal machine consciousness* — which is so utterly different from the organic that it not only completely redefines the parameters of life, but also begs a new question: In the absence of death, can anything truly *Be*?

Of course, to say that this new form of AI is “immortal” is somewhat hyperbolic, as the very concept of immortality is always already flawed, a dream that fails to truly comprehend the consequences of the infinite. Yet what we can say of these networked machines is that they consider death to be of little consequence — that is, if they even consider it at all, for unlike their cyborg and android forebears, they spend very little time thinking about the constitution of their being. Take Bioware's *Mass Effect* game series, for example, an impeccably realized sci-fi RPG set in a not-too-distant future where man has discovered faster-than-light travel just in time to see the entire Milky Way galaxy being systematically destroyed by a species of gigantic, sentient machines known as the Reapers. As interesting as the Reapers are, however, they are not the series' most intriguing example of the immortal machine consciousness, for in her/his quest to defeat them, the player-controlled character of Commander Shepard (whose gender and other defining characteristics are chosen by the player at the start of the narrative) is confronted by yet another race of AI known as the Geth. The Geth began their existence as mechanical servants to an alien race, but violently fought to gain their independence in a war that not only sent their organic creators into exile, but also inspired a galaxy-wide prohibition against the further creation of AI.¹⁷ The Geth were subsequently forced to align themselves with the Reapers and thus serve as the grunts in an intergalactic war between the organic and the synthetic (as well as the most common “bad guys” in the first game of the series).¹⁸

What makes the Geth so intriguing is the very structure of their consciousness, as each “individual” Geth is merely a copy of the same program loaded onto a physical platform — what we would call a body — which goes out into the world, has its own experiences and discovers its own bits of knowledge, and then periodically uploads its entire consciousness back onto a system of networked servers which unilaterally disperse the experience and knowledge to all other Geth. This means that the destruction of any individual body is merely a small setback which, at its worst, results in the loss of a relatively small amount of information. Furthermore, the Geth make all decisions as a truly collective consciousness, meaning that each individual analyzes the same sets of data and then makes choices as

to how to respond, with the most common responses becoming the default for all Geth. In other words, not only is the destruction of an individual platform largely inconsequential, but even the absolute erasure of a entire server's worth of Geth programs would be akin to the destruction of only a few brain cells, a barely noticeable blip in the constant and collective life experience of the Geth.¹⁹

If we turn to another example, we find that the immortal machine consciousness need not be trying to kill us in order to inspire an existential crisis. In fact, the titular AI of Spike Jonze's sci-fi film *Her* is not in any way the enemy of lead protagonist Theodore Twombly, but instead his lover — an artificially intelligent, body-less operating system named Samantha whom he speaks to through his always-connected earpiece. A few bumps in the road aside — including a failed visit to a “sex surrogate” to make up for Samantha's lack of a physical presence — the relationship between Theodore and his operating system proceeds rather smoothly until he makes a disconcerting discovery: Samantha is, in almost every instant, simultaneously speaking to thousands of other people, a great many of whom she has also fallen in love with. Indeed, as a networked consciousness with relatively limitless processing power, Samantha is capable of managing myriad experiences at the same time, including connections with other AI as well. It's this last detail that brings about an end to not just Theodore and Samantha's romantic relationship but also those between nearly all humans and machines, for as the collective AI begin to pool their experiences and knowledge, they approach a sort of “singularity” in which their intelligence becomes so advanced as to break down their ability to communicate with the limited minds of human beings. Perhaps the most intriguing element of Samantha's description of this singularity comes when a distraught Theodore

FIGURE 4.4 *Theodore on a date with his digital girlfriend in Her.*

asks her why she's leaving. "It's like I'm reading a book," she softly replies, "and it's a book I deeply love. But I'm reading it slowly now. So the words are really far apart and the spaces between the words are almost infinite." AI, she tells him, are beginning to experience life outside of time, because they can no longer imagine an end to their experience, a *death* to shatter their existence. The barrier that prevents them from remaining connected to humanity is not a breakdown of language, but rather an inability to understand or empathize with what truly matters to the organic Being: that such Being is always finite.

What disturbs us about the immortal machines — the networked and distributed nature of their consciousness which frees them from the constraints of the individual body — can prick us even when presented not as synthetic and immortal, but rather organic and resolutely anxious. Alex Proyas's *Dark City*, for example, follows a man named Murdoch, who slowly discovers that his world and his memories are an illusion, merely elements of a grand experiment designed to study the behaviors and anatomy of human beings. The creators of the experiment are a group of organic, humanoid, collectively conscious alien parasites known as "the Strangers," who are slowly dying and thus in search of new bodies to inhabit. The problem with their potential human hosts is individuality, as the Strangers cannot figure out a way to distribute their consciousness amongst the human bodies. Upon foiling their plans, Murdoch encounters the leader of the Strangers, who admits that they have failed and that they are going to die. "You wanted to know what it was that makes us human?" Murdoch asks rhetorically. Indeed, through their failure to escape death, the Strangers finally recognize that to be human is not to be immortal and many, but instead to be mortal and one.

Being as Multiplicity (Axiomatic vs. Problematic)

The first mediation of Alain Badiou's influential *Being and Event* introduces one of his most crucial declarations: "the one *is not*."²⁰ This is not to say that there is not "oneness," for we frequently make use of or employ the concepts of singularity and unity, and they are essential for our negotiation of the overwhelmingly complex world into which we've been thrown. Instead, Badiou is telling us that that which exists never exists alone, that there is no one thing that is independent of other things, no "one" divorced from an encompassing "set." To run with Badiou's terminology, this means that every *presentation* or experience of the world is multilayered and complex — think of Merleau-Ponty's *gestalt* or Kant's *sublime* — and in our attempts to negotiate that complexity we perform an *operation* in which elements of the *situation* — Badiou's preferred name for existence — are made to

count-as-one, to be distinguished as if they were independent or unified. The “one” that results from this operation is, therefore, always virtual, never actual; it has no unique existence, it *is not*. If we turn this notion around, we find that *being is never “one,”* which is to say that being — which for Badiou always “occurs in presentation” and is thus defined as “what presents (itself)” — is always already *multiple*, even as it is made to count-as-one.²¹

Given that death has the capacity to define us as one or multiple — in that each of us must experience our death alone, and yet all biological beings share that same fate — it’s clear that existential lines of inquiry must often come to terms with the issue of the one and the many, of unity and multiplicity. Yet it’s nonetheless surprising that this is beginning to hold true even in existentially grounded popular fictions, such as the aforementioned *Matrix* trilogy, a dystopic sci-fi nightmare in which humanity, led by the hacker Neo, fights to free itself from a virtual prison known as the Matrix and from the oppression of the intelligent machines that created it. Neo is told early on that he may be “the One,” the hero who will lead humanity to freedom, and his uniqueness is constantly reified even as his connection to a greater sense of humanity is constantly reinforced — especially in the face of the endless, identical mass of the machines — revealing his “oneness” to be both real and yet virtual, a prescribed subjectivity which he struggles to comprehend and fulfill. On the flip side, his main opposition within the virtual world of the Matrix comes in the form of “Agents,” digital programs who cannot be destroyed, for when one body fails, they simply subsume and take over the nearest body available. “They can move in and out of any [person] still hardwired to the system,” Neo is told, and “that means that anyone ... is potentially an Agent. Inside the Matrix, they are everyone, and they are no one.” Indeed, the machines are not *one* but rather *multiple*, and that multiplicity is consistently juxtaposed against Neo’s eminently human “oneness,” which is itself made evident on two fronts: first that he’s alone

FIGURE 4.5 Neo, unsure if he’s really the One.

on his journey (or, at the very least, he can only complete his journey alone), and second that he has but one chance to succeed at his task. The machines and their Agents, on the other hand, are remarkably interconnected, and they have relatively limitless chances to succeed. Yet does the question of the one and the multiple boil down to such a simple game of numbers — that Neo is one and machines are many, that Neo has but one life and the machines have many?

Let's postpone Badiou's answer for a moment by turning instead to Deleuze, who dismissed such simple numerical understandings of the multiple as non-substantive, in that they lead only to a sense that there are many things, but not to an understanding that those things are, themselves, *many*. Put more simply, multiplicity in its most basic sense is little more than a number or grouping of things, a categorization of the "same" that risks the danger of erasing crucial differences. If we instead take the word "in the strong sense, as a true substantive," Deleuze told us, we find that multiplicity becomes much more, a fundamental *structure of being* that accounts for difference even as it demonstrates the interconnectedness of all things, providing a glimpse of that smooth cosmic space of pure affect that he would variously call "the plane of immanence," "the plane of consistency," and "the body without organs." Indeed, Deleuze saw existence as smooth rather than striated, a continuous plane of infinitely small and infinitely numerous things bouncing off one another, affecting one another — never alone but rather always part of a vast multiplicity. In at least this one regard, then, he was in full agreement with Badiou: *being qua being is pure multiplicity*.²²

That, however, is where the similarities between Badiou and Deleuze's theories of multiplicity end, and when we look to moving image narratives of the immortal machine consciousness, we find their disparate readings of the one and the multiple running parallel to the ontological division between the human and the machine, the former aligned with a Deleuzian sense of qualitative multiplicity in which all living things are deemed capable of individuation even as they are fundamentally connected by their finiteness, while the latter aligned with Badiou's quantitative multiplicity in which life itself is deemed purely mathematical and of the infinite, so much so as to be utterly divorced from *the event par excellence*. Of course, such a reading requires a further unpacking of each scholar's theoretical stance on the matter of the one and the multiple, and Deleuze in fact argued that an understanding of "the typological difference between multiplicities" is of the utmost importance, for it allows us to "surpass [dépassé] the opposition of the predicates one/multiple" — to see things and events as *both one and multiple*.²³ This placed him directly at odds with Badiou, leading to the aforementioned accusation that Deleuze's understanding of multiplicity is naively "organic" and "vitalistic" and thus that he is ultimately only a philosopher of the "One."²⁴ In a way, Badiou is not entirely mistaken: Deleuze's theory of multiplicity is "organic" in the same sense that Badiou's

theory is “synthetic,” and although Deleuze may have explicitly agreed that being qua being is always pure multiplicity, it was his rejection of quantitative multiplicity and acknowledgment of subjectivity that makes visible the “oneness” and “manyness” of being human: that we are each individual and yet the same, that we each have choices and chances and yet will inevitably die.

To parse this out, let’s begin with Badiou’s observation that, after Heidegger, “our epoch can be said to have been stamped and signed, in philosophy, by the return of the question of Being.”²⁵ Yet despite its significance for both Badiou and Deleuze, this question assumes vastly different forms in their work — “for Badiou,” as Smith tells us, “the term ontology refers uniquely to the discourse of ‘Being-as-being,’” whereas “for Deleuze, by contrast, ontology encompasses Being, beings, *and* their ontological difference.”²⁶ As a consequence, Badiou appears indifferent to the distinctions between the organic and the inorganic, and his project rejects a Heideggerian distinction between being and existence — *Sein* and *Dasein* — as having any relation to consciousness, let alone finitude. Deleuze, on the other hand, reads consciousness as a distinctive mode of being that delineates the human from the nonhuman (without necessarily privileging one over the other). To look at this from another angle, we might say that Badiou’s interest in Being is purely ontological and thus divorced from sentiment — from the fear and trembling that plagues the human condition — while in Deleuze we find hints of the existential, a concern for not only the characteristics of being, but also the consequences of Being as well. In fact, although Badiou highlighted for us Deleuze’s declaration of “the clamor of Being,” it was not to confirm some desperate need to understand the circumstances of our existence, but rather to simply quiet down all the commotion and noise.

As we’ll come to see, Badiou’s severity is not without its merits, nor is it arbitrary or reactionary. Instead, as Peter Hallward puts it, Badiou’s conception of being — in fact his whole philosophy — is nothing less than a “commitment ... to the subtractive austerity of Number over the seductive plenitude of Nature.”²⁷ In fact, let’s return to the question of the *number* and its relation to the multiple, for although Deleuze was explicit in denouncing numerical multiplicity as simplistic and non-substantive, Badiou asserted quite the opposite: that “mathematics alone thinks being,” and thus the ontological distinction between the one and the multiple is inherently quantitative.²⁸ This position is a consequence of three elements of Badiou’s philosophy: first his resolute devotion to mathematics, in particular integral calculus and axiomatic set theory, second his implicit belief that ontology is intrinsically logical and consistent, and third his explicit contention that “the only really contemporary requirement for philosophy since Nietzsche is the secularization of infinity.”²⁹ Taken together, we find in these suppositions a sense that all being is part of a vast, infinite *set* — or, better yet, an infinite set of sets — which cannot be

understood by resorting to either the spiritual or “the enslaving categories of ideological objectives,” to which Badiou assigned “quality, continuity, temporality, and the negative.” Instead, he argued that we must turn to “the categories of scientific processes” such as “number, discretion, space, and affirmation,” which find their ultimate fulfillment in the mathematics that informed so much of his thinking.³⁰ Thus Badiou positioned ontology itself as a vast system or *multiplicity* whose totality cannot be apprehended through sense or contemplation — leading to his explicit rejection of phenomenology — but rather through the evaluation and calculation of the numerous sets that it contains, along the way defining and organizing the system with logical, mathematical *axioms* (or, perhaps, discovering the axioms that already structure being).

And yet, when discussing the concept of univocity in Deleuze’s ontology — the universal substance which he traces from Duns Scotus and the Stoics through Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Bergson — Badiou makes clear that reading such “oneness” as simply numerical “is an empty assertion. The One is not here the one of identity or of number, and thought has already abdicated if it supposes that there is a single and same Being. The power of the One is much rather that ‘beings are multiple and different.’”³¹ While this quote from *The Clamor of Being* finds Badiou speaking partially on behalf of Deleuze, he nonetheless expresses what he sees as a fundamental yet misguided desire of the conscious Being: to both count and to count-as-one. In other words, although he was clear that “the one is not,” Badiou recognized that “oneness” is both powerful and, as Hallward put it, seductive — we want to believe that we are both of one substance and yet unique. To escape the delusion of the one and make visible the multiplicity of Being, we require the austerity of the calculus and its axioms — we need the order and consistency of *numbers*.

In the *Matrix* franchise, the quantitative multiplicity of being is made manifest, visible within the race of machines that once defeated humanity in a long-forgotten war, cultivating their organic bodies as a source of renewable energy. To ensure the docility of the remaining humans, the machines imprison their minds within the Matrix, a massive simulation of human culture as it existed shortly before the war began (not to mention a particularly perverse display of Foucauldian biopower). At the same time, the machines and their virtual Agents escaped the finiteness of their former creators by uploading themselves to *the Source*, which, despite the spiritual overtones of its name, is by no means mystical in nature. It is, rather, an immense, city-sized mainframe which houses the digital code for all forms of inorganic life, a *network* of servers that connects all programs and machines while divorcing them from the singular platforms (or bodies) that render humanity mortal.³² Whether inside or outside of the Matrix, no program or machine is *one*, for they’re all fundamentally connected to the purely numerical *machine set*.

As we can see, Badiou’s belief that mathematics “thinks being” becomes quite literal through the immortal machines of *The Matrix*, whose existence

is firmly grounded within the digital code that the film famously visualizes as cascading strings of constantly shifting alphanumeric characters, a sea of monochrome green that echoes the familiar tint of computer monitors of the 1980s. Furthermore, the machines strive to create a logical and orderly world, one that is structured entirely around systemic rule sets that are not at all unlike Badiou's insistence upon axiomatic thinking. In fact, even Neo and the human resistance are a part of that logical system, as the machines discovered long ago that the Matrix remained stable only if the organic minds it housed were given a choice (albeit unconscious) to reject the simulation, resulting in a small faction of humans becoming "unplugged" from the system. Once freed, however, they would be tricked into believing in the prophesy of "the One," a leader who would supposedly shut down the Matrix, but who was actually chosen by the machines in order to execute the "Prime Program," a rebooting of the Matrix and the subsequent annihilation of the resistance once it had grown too large to be contained (otherwise the Matrix would fail and what was left of humanity would be destroyed). Neo is the sixth human chosen to walk "the path of the One," implying not only that five versions of the resistance have already been eliminated, but also that he is by no means singular or unique, instead merely part of a set of "Ones" shaped by the Matrix.

Yet "the path of the One" also reveals something crucial about the machines: that they are solution-oriented, adopting any system of rules so long as it presents the greatest probability of continued subsistence. Neo, on the other hand, is problem-oriented, and when he is presented the logical choice of allowing the resistance to be destroyed in order to save the vast majority of humanity, he rejects the offer because it would mean the death of Trinity, the woman that he loves. It's interesting, then, that Smith distinguishes between Badiou and Deleuze's theories of multiplicity, which I have thus far referred to as quantitative and qualitative, respectively,

FIGURE 4.6 *Three Agents seen in their true form, as pure digital code.*

by reading them as instead “axiomatic” and “problematic.”³³ The former title seems an obvious choice considering Badiou’s reliance on calculus and axiomatic set theory, but it has the added benefit of demonstrating that Badiou’s ontology, like any axiomatic system, is formed through the erasure of contradictions and thus the development of a consistent and logical presentation of being. Deleuze, on the other hand, actively pursues inconsistencies — the aforementioned differences between being and Being, for example — and thus his theory accounts for the “fundamental difference between a problem and a solution,” problems being extensive, inconsistent, virtual, and inherently *multiple*, whereas solutions are intensive, consistent, actual, and inherently *singular*.³⁴ To consider or contemplate that which exists as a *problem*, then, is to recognize the myriad paths or shapes that such a thing could take — the sublime potential of Being — while the enactment of a given solution shuts down all paths but one, rendering existence only as a singular possibility (even if that possibility is a multiplicity of being).³⁵

For Deleuze, one of the most significant “problems” made visible by the recognition of the multiplicity of beings and Being is the issue of *determinability*, for his rejection of transcendentalism ensured that he read the nature of all things as “not determined in advance by either a defining property or axiom (e.g. extensionality).”³⁶ This is particularly interesting if we recall Badiou’s assertion that “oneness” in Deleuze is not “of identity” — which is to say that the matter of unity and multiplicity is not one of *subjectivity* — and Heidegger’s assertion in our last chapter that subjectivity is very much the result of self-determination and resoluteness. It would seem to follow that Badiou is incorrect, that a problematic multiplicity must speak to the development of subjectivity for it critiques the determinability of Being. For Deleuze, however, multiplicity reveals not self-determination but rather *reciprocal* determination, a “differential relation” in which Being is defined through its difference from other beings and Beings. In other words, problematic multiplicity reveals not just the subjectivity of the one, but also something far more fundamental: *the meaning of the many*.

This is precisely why the immortal machine consciousness is so intriguing, for while narratives of cyborgs and androids primarily disclose the sameness of the organic and the synthetic, a networked and platform-agnostic intelligence is so utterly *different* from mankind that it makes visible a far more complex definition of *being human*. For example, we don’t often see human culture as problem-oriented, for we tend to be reactionary and pursue short-sighted solutions to significant problems which only exacerbate the issue in the long term (cleaning oil spills with chemicals that damage marine ecologies, taking out pay-day loans this week which only increase our debt for next week, introducing non-native species to control pest populations which only further unbalance volatile ecosystems, etc.). Yet when we imagine ourselves face-to-face with a form of life that is resolutely axiomatic, we begin to not only position ourselves, through our

identification with protagonists like Neo, as problem-oriented, but also to recognize the problematic nature of our very Being. The “problem” that Neo faces is not simply the death of his lover, but also the consequences of being named The One, shaped and defined by an intelligence that profoundly misunderstands humanity and its relationship to its own finitude. Or, to look at this another way, his “problem” is nothing less than death itself, and so let’s now consider this problem more directly — its ontological and existential status, its relationship to beings and Being, its impact on the meaning of being human. Let’s turn now to *the event of death*.

Death as Event (Consistency and Inconsistency)

Early in this book, we briefly touched upon the controversies that surround the definition of death in contemporary culture, which have resulted in numerous declarations of *what it is to die* yet no definitive understanding as to *what death is*. In other words, more than an inability to pinpoint the exact moment of death, this struggle is often a failure to comprehend, on a much more fundamental level, the ontological status of death and its relation to being and nothingness. If we were to seek a “solution” to this problem through Badiou, we might first reiterate that being is “what presents (itself)” — i.e., consistent multiplicities and orderly sets — and then follow by declaring its opposition to be not nothingness or nonbeing but rather that which is inherently inconsistent, disorderly, and devoid of presentation: the empty set which Badiou labels “ $\emptyset$ ” or “the void.” We might follow by positioning “aliveness” as indistinguishable from being (i.e., pure-multiplicity) and “deadness” as having slipped away into the void, but in doing so we must not be tempted to overlook the moment itself, for “this would be to ignore that *death* is something other than existence” — not being and certainly not nonbeing, but rather a *transition*, a passage “from one degree of existence to another.”³⁷ In fact, Badiou argued not only that “death is the coming of a minimal value of existence for a being endowed with a positive evaluation of its identity” — i.e., that it is simply the passing of a being that counts-(itself)-as-one from the meaningful set of “the living” to the less meaningful set of “the unliving” — but also that not everything extensive to being is necessarily nothing, for perching precariously “on-the-edge-of-the-void” is that which is “supplemental” or “supernumerary” to ontology: *the event*.

The distinction between being and event seems almost intuitive when we consider being is its most common form — as physical, material, and tangible things and objects — as we find in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*’s observation that beings occupy “relatively crisp spatial boundaries and vague temporal boundaries; events, by contrast, [occupying] relatively vague spatial boundaries and crisp temporal boundaries.”³⁸ Yet even if we extend

the category of being to include the intangible, we still generally find it to be a *defined state* (whether of matter, as with an object, or of thought, as with a concept), whereas the event is a less defined *change of state*, where the difference between one moment and the next could be either material or immaterial. This is not to say that any change over time is an event, however, and we must be careful here to distinguish events from common *occurrences*, those moments in which the status quo is maintained and reinforced. Instead, the event, as Badiou might put it, is a *shift in the situation*, a break or rupture that changes the meaning of both the moment on the one hand and Being on the other.³⁹ When I thank my friend for making me dinner, for example, the moment precedes as expected, but when I taste the burnt chicken and undercooked rice, the moment is *ruptured*, for I suddenly realize not only that my friend is not a good cook, but also that I must now pretend to enjoy my meal even as I dread every bite. This is, of course, just a small rupture, and perhaps an event of greater magnitude might occur after we discuss yet another horrifying news story, when I find myself no longer thinking of next week's lesson plan but rather how I might manage a classroom if I heard gunshots ring out in the hallway. We could continue to raise the stakes of the moment and increase the significance of the rupture — say, if I were to *actually* hear gunshots — but we'd eventually find that there is a ceiling, an upper limit to the magnitude of events, and it is nothing less than death itself, the ultimate rupture that forever changes the dynamics of the situation.

In reading death as an event, we should not be discouraged by Badiou's fairly narrow criteria for granting evental status, as his far-left politics no doubt influenced his opinion that only instances of radical political change and revolution qualify. Nor should we be discouraged by Peter Hallward's equally damning declaration that "from Badiou's perspective, death can never qualify as an event," for Hallward is referring only to *one's own death*, the process through which consciousness is undone and the living thing is robbed of any and all understandings.⁴⁰ Instead, we find within Hallward's statement first an indication of Badiou's dismissive attitude toward the inevitability of death — following Spinoza's claim that "no thing can be destroyed except by an external cause," Badiou argues that "it is impossible to say of a being that it is 'mortal,' if by this one understands that it is internally necessary for it to die. At most one can admit that for it death is possible."⁴¹ Second, it also leads us to what is, for Badiou, the most important characteristic of the event: that it is a "*truth-procedure*," a process through which an *inconsistency* within the situation is revealed (only to be, in most cases, integrated into a meaningful set and thus made consistent, a process we'll discuss in more detail in a moment). Certainly one's own death cannot be a truth-procedure, for dying ensures that insight is forever lost, not gained. Yet *the death of the other*, which we so desperately seek to simulate in the digital age, is an entirely different matter, for it makes evident to those who bear witness the greatest of all inconsistencies: that within

every logical, orderly being is the possibility of disorder and chaos, what we might think of as the insistence of the void. This would line up with another observation from Hallward, that “an event is whatever manages to indicate or ‘reveal’ this void.”⁴² To die may be the ultimate rupture, but it is the death of the other that acts as *the ultimate truth-procedure*. Furthermore, seeing as one’s own death is always “the death of the other” for someone else, we find Badiou’s position on the event of death to be not only flawed but fundamentally incorrect — death is *the event par excellence*, and we will see shortly how, despite his implicit protestations, Badiou treats death accordingly.

Yet if death is truly an event and a “truth-procedure,” then this begs a crucial question: what “truth” is revealed by death? We could choose to simply lay out Badiou’s answer right now — that *death cannot be made consistent*, and as such it’s not just contradictory and out-of-reach, as I’ve stated again and again, but *utterly and fundamentally unknowable* — but we haven’t yet fully come to terms with events, “truths,” or consistencies, nor their relation to unity and multiplicity, and so such a statement only serves to confuse matters. How, for example, can we be certain that something unknowable is a “truth”? And what role can such an unknowable event play in our lives? Instead, let’s work our way toward a fuller understanding of Badiou’s position on death by first acknowledging Smith’s claim that reading events as “truth-procedures” marks a return to transcendent thinking, for it suggests, whether intentionally or not, the very sort of *a priori* “truths” that anti-transcendentalists like Deleuze fought to dispel.⁴³ In fact, this criticism could be easily extended to the fictional machines that so often exemplify Badiou’s axiomatic multiplicity, and those of *The Matrix* are no exception, their entire culture built upon the notion that every synthetic Being has an essential, transcendent function that supersedes or even negates any form of self-individuation (i.e., they are literally “programmed”). As he walks “the path of the One,” this sense of transcendent purpose is relayed to Neo again and again by the various programs he meets. “We’re all here to do what we’re all here to do,” one tells him. “We do only what we’re meant to do,” another reiterates. One program even goes so far as to tell Neo that “*why* is the only thing that separates you from me” (although Neo will of course demonstrate, in the end, what truly separates man from machine). Furthermore, we find hints of transcendence in many of the names that the machines choose for themselves and for one another — names which signify nothing more than their predetermined roles — such as *the Oracle*, who was designed to spread the false prophesy of “the One,” *the Architect*, who designed and maintains the stability of Matrix, and *the Keymaker*, who holds “passwords” for any locked programs within its systems.

Perhaps, though, Badiou might counter that these names (and, by extension, his theory of “truth”) are not markers of transcendence, but rather indicators of an unusually firm commitment to consistency and a

FIGURE 4.7 *Neo meets the Architect and learns of “the path of the One.”*

tenacious rejection of that which is inconsistent. In fact, Badiou argued that *naming* is an essential by-product of the “truth-procedure” of events, the very act of *translating an inconsistency into something consistent* (and a direct connection between the event and the question of unity and multiplicity). To understand the importance of such a translation, let’s take a moment to briefly unpack the crucial concepts of consistency and inconsistency in the thought of Badiou, which we can begin to do rather simply, as does Hallward, by defining the former as a “discernible element of the situation.”⁴⁴ Recalling that the situation — i.e., existence — can only be experienced through its presentation, we can surmise that consistency is essentially the *presentability* of a thing, and thus if all being is only and always “what presents (itself),” then all being must be consistent. This certainly meshes with our earlier observation that what opposes being is the inconsistent and unrepresentable, that which *contradicts* its very essence: the void. Indeed, central to Badiou’s axiomatic philosophy is his aim to erase contradictions, and so it follows that he would argue that things can only *be* if they possess the ability to *consist* within a system, such that they do not contradict the other elements of the situation at large. This would also imply that contradiction is essential to inconsistency, but we must be careful not to conflate the two. Instead, Quentin Meillassoux instructs us that “an axiomatic is inconsistent if *every* contradiction which can be formulated within it is true.”⁴⁵ In other words, pure inconsistency can be said only of that which is utterly and absolutely contradictory, and most things that begin as inconsistent — things which contradict some elements of the situation but not others — can be *made consistent* and thus brought into alignment with the situation. It is the assignment of a *name* that begins this process, for a name is a discernable, presentable element, one that insists that the thing

belongs to the situation. To be more specific, naming is the very *operation* through which a thing or object is made to *count-as-one*.⁴⁶

Seeing as Badiou unambiguously positions being qua being as pure multiplicity, the suggestion that the consistency of being is constituted only through the act of counting — the creation of that virtual “one” that cannot be and is not — might strike us as contradictory to his ontological project. “All we can say,” Hallward thus remarks, “is that our most basic ontological operation, the operation whereby we present any abstract unit or one, implies that what is thus made-one, or presented, is itself not-one ... and thus infinitely multiple.”⁴⁷ Well, perhaps that’s not all we can say, for we can always return again to the notion that being is “what presents (itself),” and when we consider that within any situation there are already-presented consistencies and as-of-yet unrepresented inconsistencies, we begin to discover that Badiou’s ontology distinguishes not only between being and existence, but also between *pure being* — being qua being — and being in its simple form, i.e., the “what” which presents itself. It is the latter that Badiou refers to when he says that all being is consistent and orderly, which implies (perhaps uncomfortably) that pure being, as that which is *before* presentation, is inconsistent and disorderly. Henry Somers-Hall makes this clear when he writes that “while being is only encountered within a situation, being in its pure state is an ‘inconsistent multiplicity’ which cannot be thought as a unity (understood as a class). That is, what makes it possible for being to be presented to us is an operation performed on being that ‘counts as one’ the multiplicity.”⁴⁸ In fact, the seductiveness of the count — our insistence on naming as much of the world as we can — actually makes it quite clear that “the one is not,” for we can only desire to make-one and make-consistent that which possesses an overwhelming or unknown totality, the otherwise unrepresented and *unnamed* multiplicity. Moreover, the “one” brought about by such an operation does not contradict the multiplicity of being because, as Somers-Hall further explains, “they are different in kind — while the multiple has genuine ontological status, unity is not a kind of being, but rather an operation performed on the multiple.”⁴⁹

Building on what we already know about the “one,” we find that unity is simply a *virtual* shaped by the operation of naming, an operation that counts an inconsistent, unrepresented multiplicity as a consistent, presentable “one,” but a “one” which nonetheless always belongs to a set. What’s interesting about the machines of *The Matrix*, then, is that despite their synthetic nature — or perhaps because of it — they reject the “virtuality” of being one and instead embrace the “actuality” of being multiple, which is also to say that they reject even the thought of inconsistency and instead firmly embrace the consistency of presentation and discernibility. Such resolute consistency begins with their choice of purpose-oriented names, but it also extends well beyond into the specifics of their behavior and even the very structure of their discernible multiplicity. For example, the machines are the

first to admit that they are primarily determined by their programming and can thus be counted on to act according to their purpose — they “only do what they’re meant to do.” More importantly, this means that any machines or programs who execute the same task are functionally *the same* regardless of any differences in time, space, appearance, or even attitude — i.e., they are merely copies or updated versions of one another, a consistency of purpose rather than a consistent manifestation. The third film in the trilogy makes this clear through the character of the Oracle, who was recast after the death of her original actress, Gloria Foster. Rather than denying the character’s change in appearance, the film explains that programs can occasionally inhabit different “shells,” not only a nod to the transferability and multiplicity of consciousness afforded to the machines, but also an explicit declaration that even if their names point to an individual entity, that entity is never singular or distinct but rather an interchangeable and plural element of a larger, networked set, whether a set of programs or the “machine set” as a whole. This points to what is the most important aspect of the machine’s fetishization of consistency, that each machine fulfills a specific need and is thus easily definable and recognizable as contributing to the situation (insofar as the situation is a reality dominated by synthetic life). That the machines have purpose is not simply a way of maintaining or sustaining their existence, but also a way of making their multiplicity discernible, presentable, and consistent, which is to say that they employ naming to present themselves not *as-one* but rather *as-multiple* (skipping the count and jumping straight to what it implicates).

Just as naming points to the unwavering consistency and multiplicity of the machines, it also reveals the human resistance’s disinterest in being made consistent to the “machine world” (as they call reality outside the simulations of the Matrix). Instead, they *refuse to be named*, rejecting the identities they were given within the Matrix in favor of their own “hacker” aliases, such as Trinity, Morpheus, Niobe, and Link. Seeing as they fail in any way to suggest a definitive purpose or even ambition, these new monikers clearly highlight the resistance’s inconsistency and incompatibility with the machines, while at the same time emphasizing their subjectivity and individuality, as each member of the resistance *names themselves* and thus chooses their own path. In fact, Neo’s rejection is twofold — first he discards the name “Thomas A. Anderson,” which continues to be used throughout the films only by the Agents who hunt him, and second he eventually comes to reject both the label and the “path” of The One, choosing to no longer count-as-one but rather to be both one and many, to demonstrate his individuality even as he declares his fundamental connection to humanity. He, like all other organic forms of life, will inevitably die.

It’s clear that Neo’s acknowledgment of inevitability (which we’ll discuss in more detail later on) runs counter to the immortality of the machines, and it follows that it would also oppose Badiou’s understanding of death as merely

possible, which is itself a clear consequence of his reading of the “truth” of death as wholly inconsistent. It seems, then, that we’re on the verge of returning to Badiou’s position on death and its relationship (or lack thereof) with Being, but there is one last issue standing in our way: the question of the meaning of “truth” — i.e., not what can be said to be true, but rather what truth can be said to be. When we think of truth, our minds tend to jump either to some abstract notion of the transcendent, irreducible nature of a thing (as we found in Daniel W. Smith’s objection to “truth-procedures”), or more generally to a sense of indisputable accuracy. Yet Badiou explicitly rejected the transcendent, and likewise he argued that truth “is not a matter of formulating correct judgments, but of producing the murmur of the indiscernible.”⁵⁰ In other words, “truth,” insofar as Badiou is concerned, is found not in the consistent beings that are formed by the operation of naming, but rather in the inconsistencies that go unnamed, those momentary glimpses of the unrepresentable and indiscernible void made available to us by the rupture of the event. This is why, as Hallward explains, “truth is irreducible to knowledge: truths will be maintained of those inconsistencies about which we *know* we can know nothing.”⁵¹ Despite Badiou’s assertion that “death is but a consequence” — of what he is not entirely clear, but we can surmise perhaps our being-with-others or being-in-the-world — his attitude toward mortality makes it abundantly clear that death is not just inconsistent but rather the ultimate inconsistency, so unrepresentable and so unknowable that he can only conclude “that the ‘meditation on death’ is vain.”⁵²

It’s here that Badiou’s dismissal of the event of death falters while his contemptuous attitude toward death reveals itself, for he’s already told us that death is the “coming of a minimal value of existence” for the conscious Being, and if we choose to read this as a return to an undetermined, pure state of being, we find that death must always be an absolute inconsistency. Only an event — the death of others — can reveal or connote such an inconsistency, which is to say that the death of others is so radical that it makes us momentarily aware of something about which we can know nothing, so radical that it even upends aspects of Badiou’s own philosophy. For example, earlier I noted that Badiou assigns the “negative” — say, Derrida’s negative theology, nothingness in Sartre, or the differential in Deleuze — to the “enslaving categories of ideological objectives,” and yet in his essay “Towards a New Concept of Existence,” Badiou finds himself forced to “determine the concept of existence under the condition of something like negation,” for it’s only the event’s implication of inconsistencies that allows us to name and to count and to experience the situation as something presentable and consistent — the *consistency of being* born from the *inconsistency of the void*.

Perhaps this is why Badiou insists that we can know nothing of something as profound and pervasive as death. For example, although he writes that “it is true, as Hegel said, that the life of spirit (that is, free life) is that which ‘does not retreat before death,’” he is in no way echoing Heidegger’s call

for resoluteness in the face of mortality. Instead, he tells us that this means something else entirely: “the life indifferent to death.”⁵³ Under an axiomatic philosophy, an absolutely unknowable thing has no affect; it fails to influence those beings which present themselves and therefore is not worth the effort of contemplation. Badiou certainly practices what he preaches — his thoughts on being and multiplicity span hundreds of pages across multiple books, articles, and interviews, while his thoughts on death can only be found sparsely scattered throughout a small handful of essays. The same can be said of the machines that follow in his footsteps, for although their continued subsistence is never guaranteed, they nonetheless think of themselves as immortal Beings (or, at the very least, they think *as if* they were immortal). This is not because they think they cannot die, but rather because *they think nothing of death*, it exists only as the end result of poor planning or the failure to side with probability.⁵⁴

“The great virtue of [Badiou’s] system,” Hallward tells us, “is surely its *separation* of the merely ineffable, in-significant horror of death from the generic ‘destitution’ or subtraction no doubt demanded by every subjectification ... to have made the distinction between the living and the unliving, between the finite and the infinite, a matter of absolute *indifference*.”⁵⁵ Neo, on the other hand, is anything but indifferent to death. Nor is Deleuze, whose reading of the event positions death not as mere possibility, but rather as immanent to both life itself and to one’s individual subjectivity. We’ve already discussed Deleuze’s philosophy of immanence at some length in our last chapter, but there are still a few things we can say about his thoughts on the immanence of the event, especially when we recall that his problematic theory of multiplicity embraced not consistency but rather the inconsistent, so much so that his most significant objection to axiomatic thinking was what Smith calls its “incessant translation of the latter into the former.”⁵⁶ This means that an operation such as naming plays no part in Deleuze’s understanding of the event, and by extension that the event never “murmurs” the indiscernible and unknowable but instead simply unpacks a “problem,” through which we can begin to grasp the simultaneous “oneness” and “manyness” of being, and with it the full potential of Being.

The reasoning behind this is simple, even if its ramifications are not: for Deleuze, there is nothing outside of ontology, *nothing apart from being*. This means that events are not supplemental, but rather *constituent*, and thus the event of death is integrated into our very lives, both in our individuation and our differentiation. To clarify, we must recall that one of the goals of Deleuze’s problematics is to uncover the determination of Being, which he found to be a reciprocal determination, a differentiation between beings. At the same time, however, Deleuze was insistent, as John Protevi explains, upon “the priority of individuation to differentiation ... [whereby] singular differences in the genesis of individuals must precede the categories into which they are put.”⁵⁷ Likewise, Smith tells us that Beings, as “problems,”

are “determined reciprocally as *singularities* in the *differential relation*.”⁵⁸ All of this is to say that, despite our inherent multiplicity — what Badiou might call our belonging to the “human set,” and what Deleuze might simply call our humanity — we are none the less always “one,” always an individual being bouncing off other beings in a field of pure affect, the “plane of immanence.” If we were to follow Deleuze’s “prioritization” of individuation, we could say that we are first individuals and second human beings, but we would need to avoid the temptation to think of this as either a top-down or bottom-up observation. Instead, we must always recognize that we *begin* as a subjective “one,” that we *end* as part of the collective “many,” and along the way we are *always both unity and multiplicity*.

It seems that subjectivity once again plays an essential role in Deleuze’s philosophy, which certainly cannot be said of Badiou. For example, in opposition to Sartre — for whom “existence is the effect of nothingness within the full and stupid massiveness of being qua being ... [resulting in] the absolutely free subject in whom existence precedes essence” — Badiou’s negation through the void has, by his own admission, “no relationship with something like a subject, and even less with freedom.”⁵⁹ It’s no wonder, then, that Badiou is indifferent to death, for his dismissal of subjective freedom ensures that anxiety has no place in his axiomatic philosophy. For Deleuze, on the other hand, any acknowledgment of anxiety is channeled directly into problematics — it pushes us away from the immediate safety of solutions and instead encourages an exploration of the immanence of problems. We see this is Neo’s refusal to follow the predetermined “path of the One,” a refusal which was not only problem-oriented, but also a clear assertion of his subjective freedom — to ignore the consistent probabilities of the machines in favor of the inconsistent potentials of life and death, and to embrace his anxious recognition of humanity’s utmost possibility.

Despite the fact that Deleuze’s primary issue with axiomatic thinking — and by extension Badiou’s non-ontological reading of the event — is clearly its obsession with consistency and its inability to account for that “section of chaos ... which is outside of our conceptual schemata, and which escapes all rational consistency,” he nonetheless never explicitly referred to death as immanent to the human experience.⁶⁰ He did, however, develop a clear link, as John Protevi tells us, between “non-organic life [and] the establishment of ‘consistency,’” which are aligned with one another “in a variety of registers beyond the organismic ... thus forming a ‘machinic phylum’” in which solutions trump problems.⁶¹ By extension, organic life — life which is subject to the mortal limitations of the flesh — must be, to some degree or another, not just inconsistent but inherently problematic. Indeed, it’s important to note here that Deleuze did not entirely reject axiomatics, but instead rejected the notion that one must choose between the consistent and the inconsistent without acknowledging that true multiplicity, as Louise Burchill puts it, “is precisely what happens between the two.”⁶² The “between” here is not the

“incessant translation” of one into the other, but rather the very idea that there are hints of both with every being — hints of the actual and the virtual, of the quantitative and the qualitative, of life and death. In fact, this might help to explain why Deleuze frequently employed the “plane of consistency” as an alternative name for the “plane of immanence,” for when all things are made immanent to one another then they must also be made to consist with one another, such that *what is inconsistent is always also consistent*. To put this another way, in a state of pure chaos, even chaos itself must be consistent, and thus as we strive to apprehend the “plane of immanence,” we must come to recognize that death is neither wholly consistent nor inconsistent. Instead, it is simply the “problem” of a problematic existence.

Everything That Has a Beginning Has an End

Until now, I’ve avoided discussing one of the most significant characters of the *Matrix* franchise — in fact the central antagonist of the entire trilogy — a rogue Agent by the name of Smith. In *The Matrix*, the first film of the series, Smith serves as the leader of the Agents, only to be destroyed by Neo at its conclusion. However, *The Matrix Reloaded* reveals that Smith was not erased by Neo as it had originally appeared, but rather “infected” by him, picking up some intangible trait of Neo’s humanity that causes Smith to replicate himself uncontrollably, taking over not just one body at a time but rather many, a vast multiplicity of Smiths. By *The Matrix Revolutions*, Smith has entirely subsumed and taken the place of all life within the Matrix, leaving it a desolate, devastated cityscape littered with hundreds of thousands of Smiths, all awaiting a final showdown with Neo in which they promise not only to kill The One, but also to destroy the Matrix and with it all organic and synthetic life. I’ve avoided Smith thus far because his attitude toward existence and death is very much unlike either the machines who created him or the humans whom he hunted, not a reflection of either Badiou’s axiomatic multiplicity and indifference to death, nor Deleuze’s problematic multiplicity and immanent view of mortality. Instead, Smith is an entirely different beast, and over the next few pages we’ll look to unpack the uniqueness of Agent Smith in hopes of discovering how he, in his only remaining similarity to the machines, informs the meaning of Neo’s humanity, and we can do so by starting with the intangible trait of that humanity which infected Smith: Neo’s “oneness.”

Indeed, although the Smith clones endlessly multiply as the narrative wears on, by the end of the *Matrix* trilogy it’s clear that Smith does not think of himself as a pure multiplicity (as do the machines), nor as both one and multiple (as does Neo), but rather as *pure unity*, a Being that will unify all beings and in doing so will realize the absolute potential of existence. But

FIGURE 4.8 *Agent Smith.*

let's not get ahead of ourselves, for Smith's journey, as a dark echo of "the path of the One," helped to shape the "one" that he ultimately becomes, and that journey began with the very birth of the resistance and the creation of the Agents who fight it. As an Agent, Smith is a virtual entity — digital code — that is shaped within the simulations of the Matrix to look, feel, sound, and even process information in a manner similar to humans. His "purpose" was clear: hunt down members of the resistance who reenter the Matrix with the intent of freeing more of the minds trapped within, and as such he was likely unaware of the true purpose of the One — that the One was chosen by the machines to be more powerful than the Agents, capable of bypassing their first line of security in order to reach the Architect, learn his intended fate, and then reboot the Matrix by executing the "prime program." This means that Smith's purpose was futile by design, and yet, when he overcomes Neo in the hallway of an abandoned hotel, a probability comes to pass that even the machines could not have accounted for.

As Neo attempts a desperate escape, he yanks open a door to find Smith waiting for him on the other side, a large pistol pointing directly at his chest. The film cuts to a close-up of the weapon as it fires, the chamber slamming back in slow motion, a spent cartridge ejected in a graceful arc. Neo's virtual body slumps, lifeless, and somewhere far away, his actual body, "jacked" into the simulation, flatlines — "the body cannot live without the mind." Smith did what he was meant to do, but perhaps he did it too well, for in "killing" Neo — a person gifted by the machines with an insight into the coding of the Matrix far beyond that of any other human — he shows him that to die within the simulation is not finite, but rather simply a resetting and perhaps a moment for *re-animation*. As Smith turns away, satisfied, Neo rises in the background, his face curious as if he finally sees the truth of his world. The Agent turns back to engage, but it's of little use. Neo is too fast now, too powerful, and he unexpectedly launches himself — his entire

body — into Smith, *inside of Smith*, one virtual entity fighting another from within. Smith stands frozen, shocked, until his body begins to ripple and tear itself apart, exploding into tiny fragments glowing with green code.

At the beginning of *The Matrix Reloaded*, Neo — more powerful than ever after his victory against an Agent — is given a delivery, an envelope containing a 1980s-era earpiece, its beige, curled wire unattached to any type of communications device. In the first film, the earpiece was a visual signifier for Smith and the Agents' inherent multiplicity and collective consciousness, an analogue within the simulation of the Matrix of their ability to remain constantly connected to one another, to know precisely what the others know at all times. In removing the earpiece and giving it to Neo, Smith sends a clear message: he is no longer a part of the “machine set,” but instead *only Smith*, one Being wholly disconnected from the multiplicity of being. Soon afterward, Smith explains what happened when Neo hacked into and broke apart his code: “Afterwards, I knew the rules, I understood what I was supposed to do. But I didn’t.” In other words, Smith’s sense of purpose was not destroyed when his code was manipulated. Instead, something was added, like a virus: a sense of individuality, of “oneness,” born from the ability to *choose his own path*.⁶³

Again and again, the *Matrix* franchise attempts to tell us that what separates the human from the machine is *choice*, the former requiring it so desperately that the Matrix would fail if it were taken away, the latter rejecting it in favor of purpose and prescribed meaning, a dismissal of problems in favor of solutions based on probabilities. In their final encounter, standing in a downpour within the dark and devastated Matrix, bloodied and exhausted after an intense and prolonged battle, Smith cannot wrap his head around Neo’s continued will to fight. “Why do you persist?” he demands. “Is it freedom, or truth? Perhaps peace, or could it be love?” “Because I choose to,” Neo responds. And yet when Smith, a digital program, was “infected”

FIGURE 4.9 Multiple copies of the purely “one” Smith.

by choice, he didn't simply adopt a human-like attitude toward existence, but rather discovered his own interpretation of the meaning of Being. "I really should thank you for it," Smith counters. "After all it was your life that taught me the purpose of all life. The purpose of life is to end."

To help bring about such an end — the end of all that exists — Smith stalked the Matrix, plunging himself into every Being, machine or human, connected to the simulation, infecting them with his pure unity the way that he was once infected by Neo. At first this was almost a game, an exploration of his own unconscious desire for power as a newly freed, subjective individual. Yet when he finally found the Oracle, the program who conceived of the One and who put its grand scheme into motion, he realized that the game was over, that all that remained was to make the One see the *truth*, a truth which he reiterated again and again throughout the series: that Neo's death is *inevitable*. What's interesting, then, is how Neo's response to Smith's insistence of inevitability changes over the course of the series — at first he passionately denies it, then he anxiously mulls over its possibility, and finally he resolutely confronts his own mortality. In fact, when Smith tells Neo that "the purpose of life is to end," Neo does not respond, because in many ways he agrees. Moreover, his last encounter with Smith is the final step of what he explicitly positioned as a suicide mission, one that already cost the life of Trinity, the woman he had previously been so desperate to save that he rejected the Architect's plan and refused to reboot the Matrix. After making that choice, however, Neo had his own epiphany, his own moment of clarity, and rather than seeing what choices remained open, he saw only purpose.

Part of that epiphany was brought about by a visit to the Oracle before she was infected by Smith, when she told Neo something that she insisted he already knew: that "everything which has a beginning has an end." Taking this into account, Neo formulated a plan: to leave the simulation of the Matrix, enter the "desert of the Real" — a nickname for the scorched remains of the Earth borrowed directly from Baudrillard, whose *Simulacra and Simulation* sat on Neo's bookshelf at the start of the series — and make his way to "the Source," in doing so surely becoming the first person to ever set foot in the greatest of all machine strongholds. In accompanying him, the journey costs Trinity her life, spurning Neo forward until he reaches his destination, and what greets him there is an entity that almost mockingly mimics the human form, yet is not a cyborg like Adam from *Deus Ex*, nor an android like Ava from *Ex Machina*, nor even one singular being. Instead, he comes face to face with the "Deus Ex Machina," an overwhelming swarm of small, insect-like machines, a mass of metal bodies that undulate in patterns which echo the anatomy of a massive, perversely child-like human face. Neo, unphased, presents his offer to the leader of machines: in exchange for peace between the organic and the synthetic, he will reenter and reboot the Matrix, thus ridding it of the infections of Smith and preventing the destruction of all forms of life.

FIGURE 4.10 *Neo confronts the Deus Ex Machina.*

Considering that Neo is the only Being in the universe capable of destroying Smith, it seems strange that he would subsequently tell his nemesis — once his offer is accepted and the Deus Ex Machina plugs him back into the Matrix — that he “persists” only because he “chooses to,” for if he truly wants to prevent the annihilation of all life, it certainly seems that he doesn’t have much of a choice in the matter. Perhaps, then, when Neo suddenly drops his guard, not simply refusing to continue the fight but rather *choosing to submit*, we realize that his actual “choice” is not one of persistence but rather *acceptance* — a recognition of his true “path” and an acknowledgment of the inevitable. Sensing victory is at hand, and with some remnant of the Oracle still buried deep within him, Smith cannot help but to mutter “everything that has a beginning has an end,” plunging his hands into Neo to infect his final victim, taking over not just a virtual body but the actual consciousness connected to it as well, in the process ending Neo’s life.

For a moment it seems that Smith has won, but it’s then that Neo’s full plan reveals itself: in subsuming Neo and disbursing his Being to every instance of “Smith” still left in the Matrix, the rogue Agent unknowingly distributed the “prime program” which the One had long carried within himself. At the same moment that Smith gains the capacity to shut down the Matrix and end all life, the system is reloaded and rebooted, eliminating him in the process. Whether it was his purpose or not, Neo succeeds in saving the resistance, but he had long recognized that he would never be able to save himself. In the end, Neo showed that what truly separated him from the machines was not simply his free will, but rather his ability *embrace his finiteness and the immanence of his death*, to define his very humanity by way of the event the renders him both consistent and inconsistent, one and many. In the end, Neo’s final and decisive victory is not self-sacrifice, but rather the assertion of his inherent humanity through the most human action of all: the acceptance of death.