



What is to be Done?

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Everywhere we turn, the intolerable has become a permanent state of daily banality. This turning is our cue to investigate crisis-media, in between and within ourselves. What is to be done? There are those who yearn for the dictates of a set of transcendental principles, or the stricter enforcement of an existing moral law. Nothing could be more detrimental. Remember that the Bush apparatus invaded Afghanistan, attacked Iraq, showered bombs accompanied by the twin war cries: Human Rights! Democracy! There are others who would immediately decry such a move: once you disable transcendence, what are you left with? “You have flattened out the terrain”, they would say, “to the point where anything goes”. Nothing could be more absurd. To be done with morality is not to be done with ethics. To subvert transcendent judgment is not to end the possibility of immanent evaluation (i.e. to refuse the *a priori* distinctions of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ is not to disable the investigation of ‘good’ and ‘bad’). This essay sets up certain concepts of the term ‘crisis’, primarily what shall be called the ‘anxiety of incipience’, while simultaneously evaluating the problem of machine-becoming, or the non-human as posed by two films, *The Matrix* (most significantly in the first film of the trilogy), and Quentin Tarantino’s recently released *Kill Bill, Vol. I*. This is done keeping in mind an inheritance, however bastardized, of voices and echoes from Western philosophy, in posing one of its oldest questions; namely, the relationship between ethics, aesthetics and politics, the three great books of Aristotle. This, then, is an essay of philosophy, in the most traditional sense of the term.

Virtual, Potential, Possible, Actual, Eventual

There are constantly overlapping distinct levels of being in which we participate. The ‘we’ is quite open here: it could include a human being, a particular combination of words, a sack of rice, a horse, a bicycle, a gesture, a computer, a police report and so on. Call these intersecting levels: the virtual, the potential, the possible, the actual and the eventual (moving in two divergent and related series: the virtual-potential and the possible-actual-eventual). For our purposes here, it is sufficient to work seriously with only the latter concepts: the potential, the possible, the actual and the eventual (the virtual being the whole composed of infinite singularities). These cannot be ‘defined,’ but their relations can be mapped: the potential requires conditions of possibility – a concrete assemblage – to be captured and brought into the actual. And so something (a memory, a particular strand of amoebae, a legal document, a particularly virulent form of political association, etc.) can lie dormant, subsisting at the level of potential; particular conditions of possibility might wrench it into the actual.

However, what re-appears is never the 'same'. Difference precedes repetition. This is a theory of becoming, of the evented-ness of the everyday: specific movements and particular combinations produce the singularity of events in conjunction with apparatuses of capture and blockage in relation to a whole that is open. This is an ontology of movement: difference precedes repetition; movement precedes stasis. Change and instability, chaos and complexity, contingency and unpredictability: these do not catch us off guard; rather we learn to work with the fact of their open limits, as scientists have been learning to do for some time now.¹ What accompanies this is less a set of moral principles and more an ethics of becoming, of potentialities. Politics is the relationship between the actual and the eventual, less what we 'are' in our separateness (the source of 'identity' politics, each of us sealed off in our hermetic particularities) and more what we are in the process of becoming, or what we might enable differently, becoming-together, in our relatedness. This is post-finalist, non-dialectical, non-Hegelian, anti-vanguardist. Have I been understood?

'We are in Crisis!'

Let us move closer to the immediate matter at hand. At the level of potential, the mass 'media' does anything but mediate. It directly instills and effectively circulates politically and morally operative affect. Then a 'crisis' of media is not a crisis of 'representations'; rather it is a crisis within and between ourselves. Altogether now: We are in crisis. Of this there is no doubt, regardless of who the 'we' are, or what the 'crisis' is. Right and left, liberal and conservative – almost anyone with an opinion is ready to make such a declaration (this should worry us, too). There are those who seek to put an end to this state of crisis. This is comical. If things take a turn for the worse, it turns tragic, or at its worst, it becomes horrifying (as is the case with 'final' solutions). There are infinite forms of crisis, and since we do not know in advance how things will turn out, the valence of the term need not necessarily be negative. At any given step, it is crucial to be able to sift the good from the bad in attaining the specificity of the problems invoked, the plane of immanence being constructed. And equally, to recognize that there will be no end to this fragility – this, if anything, is the one constant – for person, place, animal, thing. (Can we say that the affective desire to be invulnerable, to be rid of all threats, to be 'safe' whatever the cost, is what convinces ordinary Americans into war, even those who are not interested in oil or money? This would then be the nation's primary social sickness, one that is aging it rapidly, eroding the possibility of freedom, the first premise and promise of its constitution. What cure does this require, and who among us is fit to administer it?).

Three Varieties of the Crisis: Accident, Erosion and the Anxiety of Incipience

Let us put it differently, bringing ourselves more firmly into the realm of the ordinary: at any given point (and a point is always one on a series), between any relation-assemblage (a couple, a group of people working in an office, a political party, a farmer tending crops), at the level of potential there is a set of crises that might happen. The rains might not come, a bomb might wipe out a building, funding for a program might suddenly be withdrawn, an accident might result in a death, etc. These are big contingencies, a 'what if...' unpredictability. Different from these, and more difficult to spot, are the smaller crises that take

place at the level of the ordinary or the everyday in the realm of possibilities and actualities: unmelodramatic, uneventful, those that arrive almost unnoticed. This is the realm of something that 'might...begin to happen' through a process of erosion, entropy or decline. A creative collaboration might gradually wither, the loss of one element might slowly make a larger assemblage less joyful, banal repetition might dull a set of words, a niggling problem might start that will explode at an unnameable future date, an alteration in external conditions might render an older set of excitements redundant. Crises such as these require constant alertness to the level of the possible-actual (towards the eventual): the realm of possibilities within oneself and others, an attentiveness to the unnoticeably shifting contours of the everyday. This is why for Cavell, as for Deleuze, love, or philosophy, or revolution, is an ongoing journey requiring constant work, and not something that ends happily ever after, all at one go. And so we must keep turning the ground on which we walk, since in most cases the ice is thin; our conclusions being findings, rather than permanent foundations, temporary points of rest ('finding as founding'): a junction of interactions (a *sara?*) rather than a fixed address.

But what we are centrally concerned with here is a crisis of another kind, related and distinct from the first two varieties, albeit equally difficult to spot – subsisting at a different level from either accident or erosion, both of which remain at the level of the possible, as outlined above. This third form of crisis is at the level of potential, which has not yet made it into the realm of the possible: not one but rather a mess of crises – inarticulate, vaguely proto-formed – that subsist below the level of consciousness. Diagnosing these requires intuition or perhaps foresight (*divyadrishi?*) as much as attentiveness, since the realm of potential demands a different mode of engagement than the possible-actual. With *The Matrix* we will attempt to delineate one such not-yet fully formed crisis, taking it to be a source of nervousness: call this the anxiety of incipience. Rather than being about 'uncertainty' per se, this has more to do with the constitutively vague and nervous certainty that things are rapidly changing, moving in ways over which we have very little control. This is the realm of affect, ontologically prior to cognition (thus it is completely beside the point whether any existing persons, or the people who brought these films into actuality ever thought of them in this way). A different but related point: with a crisis or an attempted diagnosis of its form comes a certain horror of the actual – we might even call it revulsion – a dismay with the way we find the world as it presently exists. This is an impulse to be found in philosophers as different as Marx, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, and we find its presence in different forms, both within *The Matrix* and *Kill Bill*. Let us map the trajectory of these questions, starting with *The Matrix*.

The Anxiety of Incipience

Bodies, organic and inorganic, are involved in productive combinations. Call these combinations machinic phylum. A human body, a horse and a saddle are a particular combination that at a certain point in history created a new form of war. A different combination and a different set of possibilities reside in a man, a spade and a piece of land. Or a hand and a ball point pen; an eye, a camera and a situation; a screen, an interface, fingers and a brain. All of these are machinic phylum, vaguely or sometimes quite specifically dateable events

in world history. Every time a new machinic phylum is produced, it alters the world ever so slightly. When it occurs (in nature, in technology, in art, and where else?) we can say that 'newness' has come into the world. In modernity, such alterations are taking place at an exponentially advancing speed (witness the effects produced by the internet and digital technologies in less than a decade). 'The modal conversion of the human has sensibly begun'. This has always been the case in varying degrees. These conversions, often unnoticeable in their ubiquity, occasion anxieties about speed, survival and adaptation that percolate between different points, lines and surfaces.

Keeping this in mind, let us come to *The Matrix* series, among the highest grossing Hollywood films of recent years. These films set off a not-so glamorous set of debates in philosophy departments across Europe and America. It was, after all, the cinematic articulation of the central concern of scepticism, or sceptical doubt regarding reality (How can I be certain of this world's presence to me? Or of its nature, and who controls it?), the advent of which in Descartes inaugurates modern Western philosophy. But let us enter *The Matrix* from a completely different angle, starting not from philosophy's internal emergencies (which are not completely different from those of other domains, say religion or politics – who is in charge of this world? – this is everyone's question and no one's, from Pope John Paul to Noam Chomsky. Whose answer will assuage our suspicion?), but rather let us take cinema's anxiety regarding itself and its own survival, since this is what *The Matrix* is potentially about.

Every mass-produced technological upheaval affords us a form of pleasure specific to its machinic capabilities. Thus, the printing press yields the novel. The machinery of the industrial revolution, in conjunction with other visual technologies, yields the cinema. This sort of a major aesthetic pleasure-form (with its specificity, its own artistes, publics and forms of criticism) is yet to be invented for the internet, which in itself, as a technology, is qualitatively different enough from most of what preceded, or informed it, as ingredients. As yet we don't know what that art form might be. But we can conjecture based on possibilities. We might say, for example, that it will have to combine two different kinds of present experiences, both of which are still at a highly nascent stage. The first is the high-end 'virtual reality' video game in which you plug in and participate. As of now, participation in this form still requires the interface of a screen. This node will develop to the point where you can close your eyes and plug into it directly, without a screen. Doing this will both require and enable a significant shift in the image-brain/matter-neuron interaction around which cinema, or television for that matter, are structured. But there will have to be a second, equally important aspect of this art form-to-be. One might notice that people don't like to be alone in an aesthetic experience; they need either the imagined community of the novel or television, or the physical audience of a cinema hall: some kind of an actual collectivity in either case with whom this experience is shared as it takes place. To negotiate this desire, our future art form will then have to combine the possibilities offered by the high-end virtual reality game with the present actuality of the internet chat room, i.e. the possibility that one could interact with 'others' whom we believe to have some kind of empirical existence, and with whom (once we are outside this game/art form) we could possibly discuss our experiences or the story/events that took place. Perhaps I could log on from

India and enter a story line with a friend in Brazil. Or alternatively, I might enjoy the present anonymity of the internet chat room, mingling with total strangers. We realize immediately that this art form-to-be is not very different from 'the matrix' that we see in these films (with wires attached to your head, you plug in and move into a different world – interestingly, in the films you need a phone connection, an old style land line, to get out of the matrix i.e. to unplug the modem?). In effect, this internet art form-to-be will require a new man-machine relation; a new machinic phylum producing a new set of human capabilities. But it does not yet exist. What kind of collaborations will such an art form require to produce its conditions of possibility? One can only guess but some key participants will have to be computer scientists, mathematicians, neuroscientists, web designers, new media artists, fiction writers and so on.

But why is *The Matrix* so anxious about all this? Perhaps because it is still cinema. Cinema responds nervously to the arrival of the internet. This is a cinema of crisis, anticipating a shift internal to its trajectory of existence. Once this new internet art form, this fictional net-world, is invented, mass-produced and circulated within the circuits of capital (as some kind of an apparatus that we could bring home, from say, a supermarket), using which people from distant parts of the world might connect and experience a story together, cinema will lose its special place as a form of affective experience in modernity; a position already eroded considerably by the advent of television (several films a generation earlier already responded to that arrival) as a globally available, domestic apparatus, as well as accompanying material shifts the world over in the forms in which film is publicly available. This is then the crucial anxiety *The Matrix* virtually senses: the digital world of the internet and the potentially impending 'death' or loss of privilege of cinema as a material-aesthetic-technological-affective-popular form. In this experience of loss (of privilege, of an assured audience), in this crisis-ridden concern with its own survival, cinema comes closer than ever to philosophy. And this in, the first instance, is the cause of the unnatural affinity between *The Matrix* and Euro-American departments of philosophy, a point not unrelated to the threat of scepticism. This, then, is the anxiety of incipience.

Total War

It is time to insert a new variable into the discussion, Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill*. Martha Nussbaum's recent book, *Upheavals of Thought*, is a mediocre exploration of the question of compassion. Despite the non-stop carnage in the film, or precisely because of it, Tarantino can be seen to take up the exact same question, beginning from an inverted premise: *Kill Bill* is a universe completely without fellowfeeling and with relations of pure enmity. One of the first spoken sentences in the film is a voiceover while Uma Thurman is driving the stolen jeep. She remembers the teaching of her trainer, the sword-maker from Okinawa: "The first rule of war: you must banish all compassion for the enemy". This is a film about total war, "The state of emergency has become the rule rather than the exception. We are now living in a permanent state of exception" (Agamben's revival of the darker Cabalistic Benjamin seems to have struck a chord in the post 9/11 American academic left). Indeed, we are not asked to mourn even one of the many spectacular and violent deaths in the course of the film.

We might notice two regimes of the image in *Kill Bill*: (a) the documentary real (the

facial close-ups of a battered Uma Thurman, her flashbacks, the police investigating the church in Texas where the mass murder took place, the comatose body at the hospital) and, (b) the comic fictional (karate films, Japanese animation art, techno-science special effects). Like many of the real wars around us, the momentum of *Kill Bill* is structured around an original injustice or wound. In the film, this first wound is the mass murder in the church, the attempted killing of Uma Thurman, compounded by the many humiliations she subsequently undergoes, followed by the slow, determined process by which revenge is exacted. Our preliminary identification with her (she is our narrative hook into the world of this film) is guided by this original wound, as its description is placed in regime (a), of the documentary real. Notice that the character played by Lucy Liu, whom she murders, also has a first wound (the murder of her parents by the head of the Japanese mafia), but this is narrated in regime (b), of the Japanese manga, since she is not our primary character.

The question of culpability, of punishment, haunts this world of war and of politics, democratic or otherwise. Who among us has a theory of forgiveness, whether it can be given, and in what way? In which cases is retaliatory violence justifiable? To right what wrong are you willing to stake your life? These are the central questions of a revenge narrative, as they are of 'humanitarian interventions' or of 'just' and 'unjust' wars, so much back in vogue amidst the stupidity that crowds American international relations theory. At some stage in the film, as Uma Thurman begins her murderous rampage, regime (a) and (b) begin to blur. *Kill Bill* is a film about war, inasmuch as war is about cycles of violence – as the victims of yesterday become the killers of today – part victims-part perpetrators (Is this also the story of Israel?) – leaving an opening for an equally violent future to come. In *Kill Bill* this opening is in the beginning of the film with the murder of the first 'enemy' in her own home, the black woman from the 'deadly viper squad' (which Uma Thurman used to be a part of, and which attacked her after she left it). There is an uneasy conversation, followed by a fight, in which each tries to kill the other. The killing takes place as the murdered woman's daughter accidentally bears witness to the act. Uma Thurman turns to the girl (whom we know from the previous scene is four years old, Lucy Liu's character was eight when her parents were murdered): "If you want to settle the score when you grow up, I'll be waiting for you," she tells the girl. Is Tarantino the patient, or is he the doctor of a sick America, and a sick world?

Two Varieties of the Non-Human: Machine-Becoming and the New Human

The second question of philosophy: What is it that distinguishes a human being from, say, an animal or a machine? (Consciousness? Compassion? Thinking? Are these satisfactory answers, or is the question not good enough?) Keeping this in mind, let us bring the two films together. *The Matrix*, like *Kill Bill* is about re-inhabiting a space of devastation (in the former, machines have taken over the world; in the latter, an attempted world has ceased to exist). Both re-inhabitations require that a war be waged. In both films, the wars are 'just' inasmuch as our sympathies lie on one side of the combat, the other side being inhuman, or non-human. The war against machines in *The Matrix* is fought to protect the human form of life. How is this battle waged, and what will lead to its resolution? Precisely by using, and in being used by, machines, and in Neo finding a new form of human life, part human-part machine, with a new set of capabilities. So, in *The Matrix* the proper defence of the human

form of life involves becoming part machine. There is a parallel to this in *Kill Bill*. Uma Thurman's character used to be part of the deadly viper squad, an elite corps trained to kill without compassion with great skill and technique – a group of machines, we might say. In leaving the squad, and getting married in a small church in Texas, she was attempting in some way to attain a human form of life. At this point, the deadly viper squad arrives to kill the entire marriage party, including her. She survives the attack and must exact her revenge by re-learning all her 'deadly viper' skills, including the forgetting of compassion. In other words, by becoming part-machine again. But this slight shift of emphasis – becoming something 'again' – makes all the difference in the world (and this is what philosophy, like politics, is all about: slight shifts in emphasis. As has been pointed out, in a given situation whether you place greater emphasis on 'liberty' or on 'equality' will determine whether your position is that of a liberal or a socialist. What are you willing to compromise?). In *Kill Bill* there is an exacting set of past skills to return to, but no world to re-inhabit. Not so in *The Matrix*: here there is no 'past' set of skills to return to, no ideal to which a return must be desired. Rather, something new must be 'found' because there is a world to re-inhabit. Neo is 'newness': *The Matrix* cuts a line of flight of becoming. *Kill Bill* has no becoming, no passages, nothing but a series of fights: visual-aesthetic clichés wholly without a soul. One could say that world history, as also its present, is composed of a series of fights. Or that the world has lost its soul. Or that people now speak in clichés. But what then is the value of pouring further clichés into that world? How do you distinguish the world's dehumanizing of its inhabitants from your depersonalizing of them? How do you know whether your asserted impossibility of love (of conversation), or of life, is anything more than an expression of your distaste for the difficulty of its tasks? To say that all these terrible things are common in our world (and commonly deserved, if you are inclined to think so) is not news and to spread its commonness is not art. Or rather, it is not art inasmuch as it is precisely that – 'news' – particularly, if you watch TV in America, a fascinating and vicious beast, unique in the world as far as I have seen. 'We need reasons to believe in this world': *The Matrix* struggles with this question, *Kill Bill* scorns it. None of this could have been said about *Pulp Fiction* or *Reservoir Dogs*, Tarantino's earlier films, in their wonderful intonations of speech and camaraderie, their reinvigoration of the gangster B-film genre, in their respective lines of flight from the aesthetic past they invoked.

The Question Concerning Technology

Re-entering the problem from a different angle, let us return to the question of 'crisis-media'. Central to the whole concept of 'crisis' is what was earlier called the 'horror of the actual': a dismay with the way we find the world as it presently exists. As aesthetic forms, the above films (since that is what they are, films and nothing more; but neither are they anything less) bear a certain relation to their surroundings: previous films, other forms of image circulation, television, video games, comic books, science fiction, technological developments, their own conditions of possibility, the world as an open totality (the world as a whole). In relation to its surroundings, *Kill Bill* faces the question of the image glut – everywhere we look we are surrounded by images of violence till we do not know how to tell the difference between provocation and titillation, how to prioritize the claims of suffering or whether we

actually care that the world exists at all, in its difficulties. In this regard, as a relation to the image, this film fails to sustain any possibility (let alone potentiality) inasmuch as it faces this question not with sorrow, but with derision. In a word, *Kill Bill* faces no crisis. No crisis – no necessity. No serious necessity, then no possibility of freedom (since without gravity there is no walking). *The Matrix*, on the other hand, is a film about ‘crisis’ at every level. It poses the question of the image glut not as one of effects (‘images are proliferating’, ‘there is a lot of violence’), but rather it moves to causes: the question concerning technology. The battle within *The Matrix* between weaker man and stronger machines can be brought into actuality as such: Human beings are thrown into a world where technology has far outpaced our capacity to think about it, let alone handle it with ethical or pragmatic competence. The fact that one can now watch the news or be instantly aware of events in faraway places does not mean that we have begun to think any better about them. The fact that we are in touch with people in distant places faster than ever before doesn’t necessarily mean that very many good conversations are taking place. The fact that the human genome is now open to perusal doesn’t mean that thought and life have entered a better relation. How does *The Matrix* address this question? Clearly, it cannot ‘answer’ it. This was the disappointment many people incipiently felt with the final part of the trilogy, (appropriately called) *Revolutions*. There was no final answer. Should there be one? At the very least, we can witness the enormous suggestion present here at the level of potential. Once again let us ask, how does *The Matrix* approach this question? The suggestion: by putting itself into crisis, in relation to the past of its enterprise and the world as a whole, sensing thus the portent of the new, the arrival of newness and the anxiety of incipience. Will the emergent net-world, the potential (not-yet possible) art form-to-be have its internet version of the documentary film? In both genres of fiction and non-fiction, sitting in India, I could possibly make friends; inhabit a world together with someone in Brazil whom I don’t yet know, releasing a truly post-national solidarity. In many ways this is already happening: to begin with, the emergence of something such as the World Social Forum. Is this a call for an alternative form of ‘globalization’? Well, partly, but that is not the whole story: no dichotomy is more uninteresting than that of the ‘local’, as held in opposition to something called the ‘global’. Or another relevant question: Is this an unabashed celebration of the internet, of the arrival of new technologies? Not really, because it is equally a mourning – keep in mind that a man, a spade and piece of land is equally a machinic phylum as is a group, a laboratory and a strand of DNA. We were always, and still are, part-machines, parts and wholes, in formation, in expression, in production. It would be more appropriate to say that this is an attempt to calculate the possibility of inhabiting ‘proper’ machinic phylums, since what inheres in the portent of the new, in the anxiety of incipience, constitutes both a threat and a possibility.

This is also a Marxist essay. To say this would appear as a joke to some but I am wholly serious. The term machinic phylum enters a region already inhabited by its progenitor concept: ‘modes of production’. Unfortunately, many of those on the academic left might have a predictable knee-jerk reaction. “Ah!” they will say like automatons, with a profound and conspiratorial air, “but all this merely reflects the logic of late capitalism which demands the constant hyper-production of novelty”. And to whip up a moral fervour with this repetition they will invoke the latest newsworthy example of suffering. All right then, what is

your relation to newness, to change, to movement? Do you have anything to offer but negations? Is this not your foremost crisis, to have nothing to say but “No”, to be reduced to a guilty conscience? But then I say, as I said above, that I am partly you, trying to make a tentative step towards ontological positivity. And this is an intricate walk – between the positive and the negative, surplus and lack, affirmation and negation – each needs the other (unfortunately we have too much of the latter and none of the former, having learnt only how to subtract and not to add). And we would walk better if we were not so quick to trip each other at every step.

To spot, connect and create as many points as possible is making ourselves aware of the matrix, as Neo begins to see it, in fragility, under threat. All we are asked to do (and this is anything but simple), is to remain responsive, patient, alert and attentive: to remain in touch with ‘crises’ to come, those that are already taking place among us, most honest to the specificity of the enterprise in which we actually participate, and those in which we might, potentially, possibly, eventually. To put ourselves into crisis at as many points as possible, to create and sustain new planes of contact, this is already a lot of work. But we are not exhausted. And when we are, we will be joyful, since it is only a temporary point of rest. This is revolutionary-becoming rather than a grand plan for a final redemption. Nothing would be worse than a world completely without crises: a total peace worse than the present state of total war. To rue the possibilities of crisis and the anxiety of incipience is to be disappointed with thinking itself, to negate life in its potentialities. Because it is only in relation to the un-thought that thought can move to find its temporary bearings. Don’t forget.

NOTES

1. I see the views regarding *The Matrix*, *Kill Bill* and the ‘anxiety of incipience’ as new. Everything else in this text is directly plagiarized from a resonating conceptual line that moves through Spinoza, Nietzsche, Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, Stanley Cavell, and the very recent work of Brian Massumi, William Connolly, and Veena Das, amongst others.