***Free Your Mind* – 'The Matrix Now': Liveness and Artisanal Labour**

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Keywords: Liveness, Cinema, Artisan, Labour, Performance, Adaptation, The Matrix

Abstract:

Free Your Mind (Sandy, 2023) was a dance adaptation of the Wachowski's 1999 film *The Matrix*, positioned as a response to current anxieties and excitement around AI. Here I offer the aesthetic context of a range of post-cinematic live performances. Theoretical contexts are from film theory and studies of contemporary labour. By contrasting explorations of contemporary screen-based labour and consumption with the visible, physical work of live performers emphasised in the show, this article is intended to show how live performance can

be offered as a luxury to audiences more accustomed to screens. The paper also includes reflections on what this means for culture more broadly.

Introduction

Free Your Mind (Sandy, 2023) was a live adaptation of the Wachowski's 1999 film *The Matrix* led by film director Danny Boyle and hip-hop dance theatre company Boy Blue. It was produced by Factory International and performed as the opening show at Aviva Warehouse, Manchester, in 2023 – a venue built on the former site of Granada Television studios (Robb, 2024).

> Free Your Mind recreates some of the film's most iconic scenes through hip-hop choreography combined with immersive set design and visual effects, provoking visions of an alternate future. (Factory International 2023 [Press release])

As well as taking place at a location freighted with a recent history of media production, the wider industrial history and post-industrial reality of Manchester was explicitly referred to in the script; with the city referred to as 'home of the machine'. *Free Your Mind* was explicitly positioned as a response to current anxieties and excitement around artificial Intelligence and 'Big Tech', both within the show and its promotion; the press release stating that:

> Created for Manchester, the birthplace of the world's first industrial revolution, Free Your Mind explores where the digital revolution has the power to take the world. Free Your Mind journeys from 1999, the year *The Matrix* was first released and the moment before people's lives were irrevocably entwined with technology, to the

> present day, where the Metaverse is about to engulf the world. (Factory International 2023 [Press release])

The answer to an obvious question 'why now?' is seemingly answered by comparing a time before general reliance upon the internet (the late 1990s) to our present, portrayed as including an emergent, subsequent shift into a 'metaverse'. The show's programme claims that '*Free Your Mind* is a bold, large-scale call to action. It asks: is this progress, or is this system failure?' (Factory International 2023: 1). *Free your mind* is indeed a contribution to the discourse on AI but it isn't any critique or call to action delivered by the show that I find most relevant or interesting in terms of our contemporary moment. Rather, it is the methods with which the show represents versions of familiar images that I will argue offer illuminating examples of how media consumption is currently developing and what Mark Deuze calls 'media work' (2007). Like Deuze, I am focussed on the *how* of presentation rather than the *what* of the content. *Free Your Mind* has many other things to offer audiences and critics, but it is its specific kind of post-cinematic liveness that overlaps with a possible status-quo developing for live performance in the near future.

Figure 1. Boy Blue's performers break out of the matrix, in Free Your Mind. Photograph © Tristram Kenton, October 2023

I will contextualise the show's liveness, which is evidenced by the visible labour of the performers, as existing within a chain of cinematic hypertexts; with the post-cinematic live adaptation functioning as prestige, luxury version of a commercially controlled piece of intellectual property. In the context of burgeoning AI tech that *Free Your Mind* sets for itself, this particular live experience might allow us to consider the value of performers' labour more broadly. Labour of many kinds seems as if it is or will soon be squeezed by AI and automation (to cite just one example of this discourse: John Thornhill's piece in the Financial Times titled 'Superfluous People vs. AI' [Thornhill 2024]). This includes creative labour; as Lev Manovich says:

> when people talk about the great successes of AI in recent years, the examples used are the same tasks defined at the field's start many decades earlier: natural speech

> understanding, automated translation, and recognition of objects in photos. […] AI now plays an equally important role in our cultural lives and behaviours, increasingly automating the processes of aesthetic creation and aesthetic choices (2018)

A live version of a well-known set of cinematic images offers aestheticized labour as an upgrade to an existing cinematic text. I will argue that, complementing the film and show's story in which the difference between human and machine is central, live performance of this post-cinematic kind has the *visible labour* of the performers as guarantee that what the live audience is seeing is not produced by AI software; that there is a human behind it. This kind of labour, I will argue, can be termed 'artisanal labour'.

Theoretical Groundings

Labour, Value and Luxury

My focus is on particular uses of visible, live labour, taking place at the same time and in the same space as the audience. Connecting labour with value is, of course, a feature of Marx's analysis of capitalist economics: the exchange value of a commodity at least in part derives from the amount of labour necessary to produce it; 'what is the value of a commodity? It is the objective form assumed by the social labour that has been expended in its production' (Marx 1957: 583 – a complex and contentious set of relations [see Elson 2016] that can only be present in a simplified form here). In the nineteenth-century economies that Marx experienced, production was immanent in the European cities. Factories, docks and canals tangibly connecting metropolitan consumers in centres such as Manchester to both the production of goods and trade in commodities, even those that originated in distant colonies.

Work has been transformed by relatively recent technological change. Post-industrial societies have moved away from bodily labour in to what is often called 'immaterial labour' (eg. Lazzarato, 2010). Screen and software-based production would seem to remove bodily, physical labour from value production, at least from cities in the Global North like Manchester.

For Franco 'Bifo' Berardi 'the digitalization of the labor process has made any labor the same from an ergonomic and physical point of view since we all do the same thing: we sit in front of a screen and we type on a keyboard' (2009: 76). This applies to much of film production too and entirely animated digital cinema has no 'material production'. The physical labour of actors, but also carpenters; plasterers; painters, has been displaced by the immaterial labour of digital animators. Of course, bodily labour is not actually eliminated but displaced (Sholette 2011; Berardi 2009), within long, globalised supply chains – but it *is* largely taken out of the view of consumers in the Global North. More recently again, AI-based automation seems to announce the possibility of the 'means of production' simply producing value on its own, without labour.

Dancers on stage are not a typical example of wage labourers; it could not be said of performers that the value of their 'labour power' 'is just as different from its function, labour, as a machine is from the work it does' (Marx 1957: 587). For example, the performer/worker's body, personality and training is intrinsic to this form of work. Mark Tungate connects luxury, with authenticity and then with 'craftmanship' (2009: 25). In making the point that many luxury brands have lost a genuine connection with craft, he calls these neglected workers 'the last artisans' (his initial example is leather workers): by the 2000's 'most Italian luxury companies had swapped artisanal methods for factory production

lines', with design work being done on computers (2009: 27). In luxury goods, artisanal labour is clearly a sign of value. The specific signifiers in the production of leatherwork may be visible stitching evidently done by hand or in advertising copy and/or imagery, rather than directly witnessing labour; in other luxury products the artisan worker may be directly present with the consumer, such as in some upscale kitchens, cafés and bakeries. This will be the basis of a designation of 'artisanal labour' for these live performers.

Screen Barriers and Screen Work

If a live adaptation of a screen text offers new versions of cinematic images foregrounding visible labour, it connects bodies, screens and work. How can we describe the current normative relationships between these? In order to account for the proposed added value and prestige of a live, temporally and spatially present version of a screen image, we first need an account of how screen experiences changed perception and also changed the nature of labour. In 1926, novelist Virginia Woolf wrote an essay on the cinema:

> We see life as it is when we have no part in it. As we gaze we seem to be removed from the pettiness of actual existence. The horse will not knock us down. The king will not grasp our hands. The wave will not wet our feet […] Further, all this happened ten years ago, we are told. We are beholding a world which has gone beneath the waves. (Woolf, 1993: 55)

As Woolf poetically points out, in the cinema our bodies are not sharing space and time with the bodies we observe on screen. Woolf was born in 1882 and came of age before cinema and moving images became ubiquitous. She is therefore describing a new relation to events, objects and people, as someone to whom cinema's 'screening' by temporal and physical

absence is much more striking than it is to anyone today. What Woolf is describing – as a ‘non-native’ to cinema – is completely banal today. As Mark Deuze writes, ‘nowadays we are not just using media in a digital age; we are in fact living in and through media’ – media which now tends to defy all boundaries and has become immersive and omnipresent (2007: 233). In *The World Viewed*, Stanley Cavell describes a subjectivity that becomes the norm in the age of cinema. Elsewhere, he writes that ‘[f]ilm takes our very distance and powerlessness over the world as the condition of the world’s natural appearance’ (quoted in Rodowick, 2007: 54). A durable myth about early-cinema is that the Lumiere brothers terrified Parisian spectators with an image of a train hurtling toward; people are supposed to have jumped out of their seats in order to avoid being crushed (Cousins 2011: 23). But in fact, the crucial moment is when those spectators realise that they will not be killed, that they are screened; that they are merely *viewing* a world that they are not part of.

By the twenty-first century, our first experience of something or someone is now often a remote and mediated one; increasing amounts of our lives are of a ‘world viewed’, from one side of the screen barrier. Screens have become the loci, for many, of both work and leisure. Jonathan Beller writes that ‘a social relation that emerged as “the cinema” is today characteristic of sociality generally’ (Beller 2006: 1), using the term ‘screen/society’ (2006: 282), to signify the ‘convergence of media and society’ (Beller 2006: 283). In *The Cinematic Mode of Production* (2006) he argues that we can regard consumption of screen-images *as labour*, explained by an ‘attention theory of value’ (2006: 284). A formative relationship of contemporary capitalism to cinema is not peculiar to Beller’s work – in *The Age of Access*, for example, Jeremy Rifkin (2000) argues for Hollywood as a prototype for ‘networked production’. In Mark Deuze’s *Media Work* he argues that work (at least in the West) ‘cannot be understood without an understanding of […] the way all elements of work are organized in

media as an industry' (2007: x). Beller goes further: for him, the screen – during leisure as well as work – is always a site of exploitation: 'Cinema […] television, video, computers, and the internet, are deterritorialized factories in which spectators work, that is, in which we perform value-productive labour' (2006: 1) and are paid 'in fun' (ibid., 13)

Liveness and Post-Cinema

I will argue that all my examples used to contextualise *Free Your Mind* are distinctly post-cinematic examples of luxury. Screen-based media is by now completely quotidian and ubiquitous – available anywhere; easily and cheaply. Live performance can be regarded as a luxury version of a recorded, digital, cinematic commodity precisely because of its liveness, which in my examples is proposed as an added, prestige element.

Philip Auslander's *Liveness* (published the same year as *The Matrix* was released: 1999) discusses the place of live performance in our heavily 'mediatized' culture. For Auslander, liveness as a specific quality only appears with the invention of recording. However, there is, now, no 'binary opposition of the live and the mediatized' (1999: 3); this is always undermined by the inevitable contemporary hybridity of live and mediatized elements. Live performances are recorded; amplified; include live feeds and digital graphics – as abundantly illustrated within *Free Your Mind*. Although we might casually think of live performance having ancient origins, for Auslander the 'live' only comes into being with recording, in the late nineteenth century (1999: 56). By this logic, a singer performing a song unamplified on a stage in 1850 would not be doing so 'live', whereas the same singer doing the same in 1860, after the first sound recording, would be performing 'live'. 'Liveness', then, is essentially modern and appears in the nineteenth century, alongside cinema; part of the major shift in perception that Woolf wrote about (above). He argues that contemporary liveness has a

currency based on live images and sounds being perceived as ‘genuine’: ‘the common assumption is that the live event is “real” and that mediatized events are secondary and somehow artificial’ (1999: 3). When a live performance, today, seeks to recreate cinematic images, liveness and the direct temporal and spatial presence inherent to it has the reverse effect on audiences as the cinema had on Woolf: the horse can perhaps knock us down; the ‘king’ could grasp our hand, because the performance is not screened off from us; and this is now novel. We are invited to enjoy the performers’ work unobstructed by a screen, as audiences more accustomed to a remote, ‘screened’ experiences.

Beller regards theatrically presented cinema as ‘a precursor to television, computing, email, and the World Wide Web’, which all preserve the main functions of cinema (Beller 2006: 13). In *Post-Cinematic Affect*, Steven Shaviro calls our current period ‘post-cinema’:

> we are now witnessing the emergence of a different media regime, and indeed of a different mode of production, than those which dominated the twentieth century. Digital technologies, together with neoliberal economic relations, have given birth to radically new ways of manufacturing and articulating lived experience. (2010: 2)

Shaviro aligns post-cinematic media contemporaneous mode of value production:

> Just as the old Hollywood continuity editing system was an integral part of the Fordist mode of production, so the editing methods and formal devices of digital video and film belong directly to the computing-and-information-technology infrastructure of contemporary neoliberal finance. (2010: 3)

The media of these two periods (cinematic and post-cinematic) both reflect the political/economic make-up of the societies they exist within.

Andrew Darley's understanding of how spectators engage with new media genres (particularly digital and hybrid ones) 'is one which, broadly speaking, involves the idea of 'passivity' (2000: 4), and he suggests 'it is possible to discern a distinct diminution in concern with meaning-construction at the level of textual production itself'; spectators are instead engaged 'at more immediate and surface levels. And I dare to suggest that such engagement entails something of a shift in sensibility towards far more involvement with surface appearance, composition and artifice' (2000: 4). Although *Free Your Mind* does claim to be a 'call to action' (Factory International 2023: 1), it is its surface liveness that is most striking. According to Lev Manovich, we are now 'increasingly automating the processes of aesthetic creation and aesthetic choices' (2018). Computer programmes incorporating AI have come to threaten even the place of immaterial labour within cultural production, including filmmaking (for example Saura, which creates video from text prompts), and distribution (for example, the algorithmic curation within Netflix). What Darley identified at the turn of the century potentially meets current trends towards AI produced culture neatly. Without (or with much less) human ideation involved in the creation of the work, what sense does it make to pick over the 'meaning-construction'?

Analysing and Contextualising *Free Your Mind*: Methods

Free Your Mind is an unusual and complex work. The show, and all others mentioned here, can be regarded within different frames (for example although I will use it in a specific sense, I suspect Boy Blue might still reject the idea of luxury when applied to their work). It would

be also reasonable to analyse *Free Your Mind* from the perspective of performance studies or dance studies. However, because I regard *Free Your Mind* as being post-cinematic (and I believe this is how the company ask audiences to engage with it) film theory has been a primary theoretical lens with which to analyse specific aspects of the show that offer versions of already-seen screen images 'recreated' on stage, as the show's press release promises (Factory International 2023).

Using a range of examples, I'll establish the live adaptation as a category of luxury product within this screen-centric context. I don't regard *Free your mind* as completely new in its use of liveness and labour in the production of adapted screen images. Other examples include large-scale, theatrical spectacles (sometimes called 'arena spectaculars') such as *Batman Live* (Heinberg 2011) and *Walking with Dinosaurs Live* (Brown 2007) and I will refer to these below (elsewhere I have written about a live version of *Ben-Hur* [Whitby 2022]) and I will also refer to the proposed value of labour within the promotion of theatrically presented cinema.

Since part of my focus is the specific *value* of the show, it is logical to look at how the show is promoted; how it is packaged and sold to prospective audiences. For that reason, I will refer to a press release and a media appearances by the creators as well as direct observations based on having attended the show in November 2023. The show does exist in several mediated, recorded and digital forms including a TV broadcast version made for the BBC (*Free Your Mind: The Matrix Now* 2023), as well as social media posts and promotional online videos. However, these materials attempt to illustrate and record – not replace – the very liveness of the original performance; that quality unavailable to a remote viewer. Therefore, these materials also serve to underline the exclusivity of the live experience;

something that this show shares with other recent live adaptations (particularly a trailer for *Batman Live*, discussed below [the Realm Cast 2011]).

Observations on the show

Founded by composer Michael 'Mikey J' Asante and choreographer Kenrick 'H2O' Sandy, Boy Blue specialise in hip-hop and street dance productions, aiming to bring young people into the arts from underrepresented groups (Anon. www.boyblue.co.uk. [n.d.]). The project builds upon Boyle and Boy Blue's previous work together within the opening ceremony for the London 2012 Olympics, in a segment called 'Frankie and June say thanks to Tim' (Boyle 2012). In this rather more positive portrayal of networked sociality young people, choregraphed by Sandy, thank Tim Berners-Lee for having 'invented the internet'; Berners-Lee was also part of the performance.

The Matrix (1999) has become a contemporary fable, describing human beings enslaved within a digital fantasy world; a cyber-punk world in which characters move in and out of the eponymous, simulated image-world. Jonathan Beller describes it as a 'late-capitalist social-realist film' (Beller 2006: 7). A cinematic source text and a film director, Danny Boyle, as its major figurehead suggest that the show is a child of the screen rather than live mediums. The live show was explicitly and loudly post-cinematic in various ways, referring to the original film and film language in general throughout. As already mentioned, the show's press release foregrounds that status the show 'recreates [..] some of the film's most iconic scenes through hip-hop choreography' (Factory International 2023 [Press release]). The show does not have an obvious plot and is, rather, a set of vignettes from the wider narrative world of The Matrix franchise – it would make little sense without some prior knowledge of the hypotext. Use of audio clips from the film, particularly Lawrence Fishburne's expository monologue as

Morpheus and Hugo Weaving's as Agent Smith, means that the film is made directly present in the room. A dancer playing Agent Smith acts out famous lines from Weaving; an example of the live image serving familiar cinematic material.

Figure 2. Agent Smith's monologue: dance sequence with audio excerpts from the original film. Photograph © Tristram Kenton, October 2023

The phrase 'free your mind' is another quotation from Fishburne's character, from a scene in which Keanu Reeve's Neo is being released from the simulated world of the matrix. Having this as the title might suggest (much like the trailer for *Batman Live*, discussed below) that the show represents an exit from the screen world, into the 'real', live world. As part of its 'call to action' (Factory International 2023) the show extends the film's lexicon to include logos of tech giants, folding these iconic brands (via Gareth Pugh's costume designs and in the on-stage screen's animations) into the simulated world inside the matrix. Another scene

also shows dancers enthralled in smart phone screens as the Morpheus character explains the predicament humanity finds itself within; *Free Your Mind* is sometimes more literal than the original 'social-realist' Matrix (Beller 2006: 7).

The show builds towards the staging of two iconic fight scenes from *The Matrix*. Famous for the use of 'bullet time' photography – which gives the appearance of extreme slow-motion with a sweeping mobile camera – coupled with stylish use of CGI, these climactic scenes would seem like the hardest to recreate on stage. Yet surely they *must* appear, recreated in some form before the show ends? These are some of the least surprising sections of the show – gravity defying jumps and slow-motion are simulated by dancers being held up by multiple others (again emphasising the physical effort of the performers); cinematic sound effects are played out on speakers to emphasise body blows, superimposed much as they are in cinema.

The show was filmed and broadcasted by the BBC and an intro with some of the creative team firstly emphasised the intensity of rehearsals and the bodily aspect of the dance performance. Boyle describes watching 'humans in synchronicity with each other' (*Free Your Mind: The Matrix Now*, 2023) during rehearsals, whilst choreographer and dancer Kenrick 'H20' Sandy states that what he would like people to take away from the TV broadcast is 'hard work'. This would be a strange focus for promotion of the original film: in using standard cinematic language and more-or-less naturalistic acting, filmmakers usually seek to erase the mechanics of representation, even in a fantastical sci-fi setting. It does, however, reflect Boy Blue's emphasis on their work training and supporting young performers; their status of becoming-performers helps centralise their work.

For the audience, the sounds of performers' breath as they exert themselves, as well as their boots striking the floor, are intentionally perceptible parts of both the live show and the TV version. Moreover, whilst the show starts in a more standard auditorium, the 'warehouse' space used for the second act brings the now standing audience near a catwalk-like stage, meaning that we are very close to the labouring bodies of the cast: indeed; we cannot ignore their 'hard work', happening in front of our eyes (Sandy in *Free Your Mind: The Matrix Now*, 2023). Whereas the famous fight sequences in the film are clean, smooth and screened from the audience, the live, luxury version is noisy, sweaty and visibly hard-won.

Artisanal Performance as Luxury Version

How do these post-cinematic instances of visible labour intersect with broader trends in adaptation, cinema and luxury? Let's consider an example of a contemporary body in the global North; that of an audience member at *Free Your Mind* in Manchester, for example, in 2023. At work and at leisure, this body primarily encounters other bodies firstly via screen images, which present themselves in a continuous stream. Indeed, they would need to engage with some form of screen media to know that the show existed in the first place ('living in and through media' [Deuze 2007: 233]). They are likely to work via a screen; even if they undertake precarious gig-work, this will be initiated and controlled via a screen. This body is subject to what Franco 'Bifo' Berardi calls the 'derealization' of our current moment 'we can see an effect of de-realization: the social, linguistic, psychic, emotional impossibility of touching the thing, of having a body, of enjoying the presence of the other as tangible and physical extension […] [t]he word "de-realization" refers […] to difficulties experienced by the animated body in reaching the animated body of the other: a pathogenic separation between cognitive functions and material sociality' (2009: 109).This is the reality that *Free*

Your Mind hopes to reflect, and question, in a 'call to action' (Factory International 2023) via the visible labour of the performers on stage. The show's liveness means that it promises something extra, compared to screen-based entertainment or sociality.

Tiago Valente has written that brands must evolve the idea of luxury:

> In its origins, the concept of luxury was determined by exclusive, rare and expensive materials, exceptional craftsmanship and iconic design. It was about acquiring something that only a select few could afford and displaying it as a symbol of wealth and status. (Valente 2023)

The core of luxury is the kind of limitation within a particular product or service, be that rarity of materials, expense, geographical location, purposely limited production – these are what makes a luxury exclusive. In the case of live performance, there is a mixture of factors: the experience is limited by time and space (unlike the digital image, that can be seen anywhere), by the labour of the performers, which is sometimes simply expensive and others necessarily carried out by specific individuals. Consumption of these products may also be 'displayed' to others as a mark of prestige or committed-fan consumption, especially in the form of online posts. Whilst photos were forbidden during the show, there were multiple installations and 'frozen statue'-style performances around the building on the night of the show, again referencing the acrobatic fight choreography and time-stretching effects of bullet-time in sections of the original film. These aspects could point to the kinds of 'theming' that Mark Gottdiener analyses in *The Theming of America* (1997) and could be another area to explore in other studies, accounting for the elements of the show that extend out from the stage and into other areas of the venue.

Figure 3. Installation in Aviva Warehouse front of house area on night of Free Your Mind, based on a scene in the original film and intended for audience members to pose for their own photos.

(Author's own photo)

Figure 4. Static performance at Aviva Warehouse in front of house area during the interval of Free Your Mind (Author's own photo)

It almost always requires more money and more effort to see a live performance than a film or TV show. Many things account for this added value, but the main one that is advertised is visible, live labour – and this labour that must be carried out by trained, specialist performers. *Walking with Dinosaurs Live* (Brown 2007) brought large-scale puppetry to arenas around the world and depicted dinosaurs, familiar not only from museums and books but now, perhaps most dominantly, on screen. The show includes many devices that function as signifiers of artisanal labour and therefore value. For example, rather than the digital animation in the original BBC series (*Walking with Dinosaurs* 1999), achieved through many hours of work at computers, we see performers carrying foam-puppets, with just their legs sticking out of its stomach. Rather than realistic animated imagery, the artisanal version encompasses parts of the live performers' bodies, as proof of the images' liveness and specialness.

'Artisan' food or drink may be made from similar raw materials, offer comparable nutrition and may even be bought from the same retailer – however, the word 'artisan' connotes special human expertise and attention paid to the making of the product by the consumer. Visible, artisanal labour in a live experience similarly implicates the bodies of the makers by highlighting their spatial proximity and physical effort. This makes a limited and inherently exclusive version of imaginal material also available in more mundane, digital form. Like the dusty hand of the baker demonstrating that the loaf of bread was indeed 'hand crafted' by artisans rather than mixed and baked in an automated factory, the body of the artisan performer can reassure an audience that what they are watching is presented 'AI free'. Although a digital image can be reproduced and, with generative AI, infinite variations

quickly produced by prompted software, ‘flesh’ is limiting and therefore capable of signifying a kind of ‘luxury’. In the Global North human labour appears to be becoming novel and extravagant (even if this is only an appearance); its consumption a mark of distinction. Much as Mark Tungate’s artisan leather workers (2009: 25) provide a level of authenticity and therefore luxury, the live performer also represents authenticity (Auslander; see above [1999: 3]) – and again, it is visible labour that not only creates the product, but also becomes the signifier of its relatively high value. Of course, other areas, for example sport or contemporary art, also highlight the work of specialists, of particular, trained bodies. However, it is the adapted and post-cinematic nature of the product that means the performers can in these examples be called ‘artisans’: the 'product' is fixed; it is a recreation of part of (ie. images from) an existing commodity (a film). In common with Tungate’s ‘last artisans’, the work the performers carry out is likely to be meaningful in other ways for them – his workers are part of traditions, are expressing creativity and skill, and this is surely what the word ‘artisan’ connotes.

Free Your Mind is not ostentatiously luxurious like a super yacht or even an haute couture garment; the show is absolutely not intended only for social elites. Its luxuriousness is relative to the ordinary, quotidian experience of the original film – most likely watched on a screen at home or even on a mobile device, today. It does cost more than a cinema ticket or streaming rental, but any sense of prestige and exclusivity comes via its being rooted in a specific time and place. Tungate suggests that the word ‘luxury’ should not to denote extremity of wealth, but rather ‘a sense of moderation and taste, of saving up for the best instead of squandering on the disposable’ (2009: 228).

The touring arena show *Batman Live* (Heinberg 2011) also took content already familiar from the screen and offered a live version. A video foregrounds and promotes the show's relation to screen-media; in a computer composited image, the video apparently shows a moment from the show, with the various characters frozen mid-action, and the camera moving around them in a manner reminiscent of the bullet-time technique made popular by *The Matrix* (the Realm Cast 2011). The camera glides towards rows of transfixed spectators who appear to be extremely close to the action; a smiling middle-aged man, an awe-struck young girl whose eyes widen slightly. The trailer emphasises the stage setting of the action; every shot bristles with stage lighting, shining at the camera. The frozen moment that the video shows suggest that this recorded image is withholding something. What is absent is the 'liveness' of the show. The trailer's halted-ness is a tease; "if you were here with us, you'd see what happens next." The trailer is a medium-specific pun: a halted image made to promote a live experience, pointing out that the live version *could not* be paused. The advert's pitch is that the viewer would be fully satisfied if they were physically present at the show, consuming the special, luxurious and live version of the story. Again, the trailer emphasises the performers' bodies and the acrobatics they will perform in the show; their specialist, live labour – experienced during time spent in their physical presence. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu writes that:

> The antithesis between quantity and quality, substance and form, corresponds to the opposition […] between the taste of necessity […] and the taste of liberty – or luxury – which shifts the emphasis to the manner (of presenting, serving, eating, etc) and tends to use stylised forms to deny function (1979: 6)

Although we are certainly in different cultural landscapes than those surveyed by Bourdieu's researchers (in 1960s France), the performance shares what Bourdieu finds in 'bourgeois'

cultural consumption. It removes consumption of screen images from the everyday, putting the adapted, recreated image into the 'separate universe' (1979: 6) of the live venue. Recreating screen images on stage is difficult (if not impossible, if the aim to match the cinematic effects of editing, camera movement, post-production and CGI). Artisanal performances like *Free Your Mind* employ 'stylised forms', such as the many dancers holding up a person performing a gravity-defying stunt from the film.

The worker-made-visible as a marker of distinction has extended to cinema presentation too. In the UK, the Picturehouse chain is an upmarket version of cinema presentation; tickets are above average price and programming often reflects international and 'arthouse' trends (although the company is also property of multiplex provider Cineworld). In short videos screened before features, the company has highlighted workers' physical labour in the cinema's building. Shots of projectionists working on screenings (a role that is increasingly automated) are cut together with images of bar workers, chefs and front-of-house staff writing on chalkboards. This material labour, presented as consumable 'experience', is part of an extra offer that supposedly sets this chain above the rest. The aim is to sell Picturehouse screenings using a pseudo-materiality; as somehow artisanal and handcrafted, in a time when the content is likely to be created by an international group of networked immaterial labourers and the work of the projectionist might most often consist of little more than initiating an automated sequence of digital files. Viewed on the online platform Netflix, for example, a video appears by way of invisible software, hosted in some faraway and unseen server (although probably maintained via online 'ghost work' [Gray and Suri, 2019]); at Picturehouse, the adverts suggests, a film – that may well be that same material – is presented by expert labour, by a group of 'real' workers, and 'by hand'; it is a (relatively) prestigious and valuable version of theatrical presentation.

Accounts of computerised, informational and immaterial labour can be misleading. Gregory Sholette writes that ‘somewhere on this planet a different workforce toils on a Fordist assembly line in order to make immaterial post-Fordist labor possible in the US, EU, and other developed nations’ (2011: 19). Immaterial labour does not literally replace physical labour; it primarily changes its global distribution. For those who enjoy a Western, immaterial ‘good-life’ [Sholette 2011: 19). As Grafton Tanner writes, consumers ‘do not see where their smartphones come from’, with conflict zones and toxic materials occluded, since they arrive ‘in pristine condition, as if delivered from on high’ (Tanner 2020: 1). Indeed, the same appears to be true of AI, which so far still necessitates a lot of labour. As well as the specialist work of software and hardware engineers, human labour is needed in the Global South in order to facilitate apparently automated processes, in what Mary L. Gray and Siddharth Suri call ‘ghost work’ (2019). The “magic” of AI turns yet more workers into Sholette’s ‘dark matter’ – unseen, unvalued and hyper-exploitable. These characteristics simply underline how ‘imaginal’ current production is (re. Beller) – it doesn’t matter how work gets done, what matters is how it *appears* to be done.

The body *appears* to be increasingly removed from labour (at least in the Global North), with more work either becoming immaterial, cognitive and screen-based, or (apparently, even if not actually) entirely automated. Service work, such as supermarket checkouts and ordering at fast food restaurants is now routinely done by using a screen rather than interacting with a person; another body. The body; the performer, in shared time and space with the viewer, is far from the most practical, cheapest way of presenting an image and is therefore made visible (in ‘stylised form’) as a marker of extra, luxury value.

Conclusion: 'The Matrix *Now*'?

'The Matrix Now' is the heading of a page in the show's programme. The 'now' can be read as having two meanings: it refers to the recreation of parts of the film for the contemporary moment but also to the liveness of the show – with performances happening 'now', in front of the audience, rather than the recorded performances in a film.

Are cultural products breaking out of a Debordian 'spectacular' regime (1970) simply on the merit of their liveness; their temporal and spatial limits? If a performance builds upon controlled narrative material, imagery and modes of production rooted in cinema, perhaps not. Following Shaviro's logic, live performances that demonstrate significant connection to cinematic originals, despite having radically different modes of distribution, might also be considered post-cinematic, if they still 'belong directly' to contemporary economic 'infrastructure' (2010: 3).

Perhaps a hierarchy begins to emerge. If we want 'more Matrix', we can either revisit any part of the franchise itself, we might choose to generate a 'new' image by prompting Midjourney or Soura, or, if we are able to access it, we might attend *Free Your Mind* – all the same, what we get is versions of Warner Brothers' intellectual property, by now originated more than a quarter of a century ago. In the prestige version, 'artisans' bring those images back to us, in physical space. But in all these examples that image still has to be from within the screen; even the 'new' AI image will be made from data sets made up of existing ones (as of 2023, including material from *Free Your Mind*, of course).

Is *Free Your Mind* unique, or cynical; can it be dismissed as simply a commercial product rather than a work of art? No. Rather, it stands within an emerging and heterogeneous group of productions that defy easy categorisation; and nor does their audience expect one. Seemingly contra to Bourdieu's thesis in *Distinction*, Deuze writes that in today's digital, media-saturated societies '[p]eople like individually and collectively to experience and express culture across and between traditional cultural hierarchies of taste, and do not essentially consume or produce culture grounded in a meaningful context' (2007: 45). It would be perfectly possible to argue that *Free Your Mind* entices audiences in with familiar images and then offers other elements alongside. However, we do see a slide into reliance on 'nostalgia' related content all over the UK's cultural life, for example in live performances such as *ABBA Voyage* (largely without the working bodies of live performers, who are replaced with animation on screens; another variation of post-cinematic live and themed event) (ABBA 2022-2025). Grafton Tanner discusses many examples of 'pre-recession' nostalgia, and the proposed relevance of *The Matrix* (made by way of an elision of sci-fi general AI and current machine learning, algorithms and tech) may be another (2020: 56). The body of the artisan performer, working in front of us, assures us that what we are watching is special, relative to the familiar screen version. A century ago, Virginia Woolf saw life 'as it is when we have no part in it' on the cinema screen and beheld 'a world which has gone beneath the waves' from ten years before (1993: 55). At Aviva Warehouse, where a TV studio once stood, recreations of familiar images break out of the screen, insist on their own liveness and claim relevance.

Does this attest to the prescience of the original film or inertia in culture since? Lev Manovich writes that '[t]oday people around the world create, share, and interact with billions of new digital artefacts every day', and therefore that '[w]e need new methods for

seeing culture at its new scale, velocity, and connectivity' (2018: 19). 'The Matrix Now' does not offer this in any significant way. Deuze also aligns decontextualised consumption of media with difficulties to act to improve material conditions (2007: 45). Whilst Darley recognises the significance and obvious affinity between the culture he is concerned with and the 'damning' critique of 'spectacle' offered by Guy Debord (1970), he also proposes that such work tends to generalise and 'their global ambition obliterates any sense that locality may still exist as an important consideration' (2000: 189). Arguably, *Free Your Mind*'s situatedness in the city of Manchester does allow the show to be a 'local and global' spectacle (Darley, 2000: 188). However, that such a high-profile venue (the 'largest arts project to open in the UK since the Tate Modern in London' [Stead & Gawene, 2024]) needs to rely on IP translated into performance may reflect a reduced confidence of cultural producers in the UK. AI images, IP material and new luxury versions of the latter are all arguably taking up space that could be used to develop entirely new things.

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