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## 6.2: The Meatrix

### ***The Meatrix: Resonant Reversal on a Counterpublic Screen***

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Neo: The Matrix?

Morpheus: Do you want to know what IT IS? The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us, even now in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.

Neo: What truth?

Morpheus: That you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else you were born into bondage, born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. A prison for your mind. Unfortunately, no one can be told what the Matrix is. You have to see it for yourself. This is your last chance. After this there is no turning back. You take the blue pill, the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes. . . . Remember, all I'm offering is the truth, nothing more.

Wachowski and Wachowski, *The Matrix*

*The Matrix* series of films, with a worldwide box office gross over \$1.6 billion (Nash), has spawned innumerable parodies, tributes, and cultural references. For example, the MTV Movie Awards spoofed both of the first two *Matrix* movies in the opening of the shows, first in 2000 with Sarah Jessica Parker combining a parody of her own *Sex and the City* HBO television series with a *Matrix* plot, then again in 2003 with N'Sync singer Justin Timberlake and *Dude Where's My Car* co-star Seann William Scott interacting with film imagery from follow-up film *Matrix Reloaded*. Lesser-known *Matrix* mimicry includes items found on the World Wide Web, such as [The Fanimatrix](#), a 16-minute tribute film produced by amateur actors and film-makers in New Zealand; [Matrix Fart](#), an edited medley of *Matrix* scenes dubbed with various farting noises; and [South Park Matrix](#), an unlicensed use of South Park cartoon characters, taken from a South Park video game, to reenact scenes of *The Matrix*.

The most widely distributed *Matrix* allusion, however, is a short piece of animal rights activism known as [The Meatrix](#). Mirroring portions of plot and character from the original *Matrix* film, *The Meatrix* is a four-minute animation that argues against factory farms. The film's distributor summarizes:

Instead of Keanu Reeves, *The Meatrix* stars a young pig, Leo, who lives on a pleasant family farm . . . he thinks. Leo is approached by a trenchcoat-clad cow, Moopheus, who shows him the ugly truth about agribusiness, complete with a send-up of the "stop-motion" camerawork immortalized by the Matrix. The mix of humor, pop culture references, and an important message clearly resonates with a wide swath of the web-using public. (GRACE)

The following essay explores the computer animation *The Meatrix* to show how cultural reference utilizes resonance, counters the norms of a dominant public, and becomes the center text for a distinct counterpublic on the public screen. The essay thus begins by introducing *The Meatrix*, as well as concepts used in developing the analysis. First, the unique qualities of computer animation, discussed as "viral flash activism," are considered

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through the concepts of public and rhizome. Second, the concept of counterpublic is placed in conversation with the work of Kevin DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples. I argue that rhizomatic dissemination of the text functions by engaging our highly visual culture on a counterpublic screen. Third, specific elements within the animation itself show how cultural norms are challenged without repulsing the viewer, at once attracting and contesting. *The Meatrix* makes use of the culturally pervasive *Matrix* narrative, imagery, and characters to attract and challenge an audience. The essay concludes that this sort of “red pill activism” is fertile ground for rhetors and scholars alike.

### **Enter *The Meatrix***

*The Meatrix* was released through its own [website](#) on November 3, 2003. In its first week on the World Wide Web, *The Meatrix* was viewed by 350,000 people. One hundred and fifty-two thousand viewers watched it on a single day in the first month. After six weeks, there had been 2.5 million viewers from around the world. After two months, the animation had been seen over 3 million times. As of January 2005, over 5 million individuals have seen *The Meatrix*, with 5,000 new viewers every day. Currently, the count has exceeded 20 million viewers. What's more, *The Meatrix's* viewers have come from over 30 countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and more exotic locales such as Bangladesh and Slovakia (GRACE).

*The Meatrix's* unprecedented success has led its sponsors, the Global Resource Action Center for the Environment (GRACE), to create “action pages” not only for its primary U.S. audience, but also for the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada, as well as a more generalized “international action page.” The animation has been translated into nine languages, with subtitles produced for over 30 languages. *Meatrix*-based merchandise has also been made available in response to a considerable number of requests (GRACE).

The unusual popularity of *The Meatrix* has not gone unnoticed. *USA Today's* online “Web Guide” listed the video first among its “Hot Sites” on November 5, 2003, just two days after the release (*USA Today*). The next day, *The Meatrix* was reported in print in the “Living” section of *The Boston Globe* (Beam). Similar reports would soon surface in major papers and small publications from Seattle, Washington, (“Meatrix’ Revolting”) to Appleton, Wisconsin (Lundstrum). Internationally, a U.K. website dedicated to film reporting led its November 11 “News” section with a *Meatrix* review (EmpireOnline); Wales’ “National Newspaper,” *Western Mail*, carried a story on December 1 (Staff); and the French newspaper *Liberation* featured an article on *The Meatrix* December 19 (Lechner). *The Meatrix* would receive a second round of media attention in January 2004 after a case of mad cow disease was reported in the United States (Belasco “Web Site Feuls Debate over Beef Supply; Belasco “Animal-Rights Animation; Stevenson; Liskey). This renewed attention to *The Meatrix* led to another spot in *USA Today*, this time in the daily “Hip Clicks” column (Matheson).

The fact that an animated spoof garnered such a wide audience and was featured in worldwide media reports certainly warrants consideration by those interested in contemporary rhetoric. *The Meatrix* joins a growing list of popularly disseminated computer animations circulating on the World Wide Web. Prominent in this group are the [JibJab](#) animations, particularly their animated spoof on the 2004 Presidential election, “[This Land](#).” For those of us with interest in alternative, dissonant, or marginal forms of rhetoric, however, *The Meatrix* is especially fascinating. This is because *The Meatrix* is not just a clever movie spoof, a humorous piece of cultural kitsch to spread around the workplace; *The Meatrix* also maintains significance because, along with its humor, kitsch quality, and cultural status, it has also been carefully crafted to spread an explicitly pointed message.

[Free Range Studios](#) (formerly Free Range Graphics), the public relations team responsible for creating *The Meatrix*, describes this type of message as *viral flash activism* (Free Range Studios “Flash Movies”). They describe their form of computer-generated Flash animation as “the most powerful publicity tool available to non-profits today” (Free Range Studios “Flash Movies”). The phenomenal audience response lends credence to Free Range’s claim. *The Meatrix* produces just what every non-profit activism organization, not to mention every for-profit corporation, wants: public attention. Like the image events described by DeLuca, *The Meatrix* generates

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its rhetorical impact by appealing to the norms of mediated culture to attract the attention of its audience. It is precisely this public attention that is addressed in this essay; in an era of communication explosion, the greatest prize for a social movement organization like GRACE—or businesses like GRACE’s oppositional agent, industrial farming—is the interest of large numbers of people. This being the case, texts like *The Meatrix* can offer insight into the creation of publics, show us what qualities are present that attract public attention, and help us to understand how such forms of discourse are functioning in the world.

### **Creating *The Meatrix***

In early 2003, the publicity management and creativity firm Free Range Studios invited proposals for their first “Free Range Flash Activism Grant.” Free Range Studios, self-described as “creativity with a conscience,” had made themselves a highly sought-after company for their ground-breaking work with groups like Greenpeace, Amnesty International, and The Sierra Club. The grant was eventually awarded by Free Range founders Jonah Sachs and Louis Fox to GRACE from a field of over 50 proposals (GRACE).

GRACE is a non-profit organization based in New York, New York. Their efforts are divided between several “projects,” including a Nuclear Abolition Project and a Sustainable Energy Project. Most of GRACE’s resources, however, are used for their [Factory Farm Project](#) and the associated campaign, Sustainable Table. The Sustainable Table campaign is primarily focused on the internet-based [Eat Well Guide](#), a directory of retailers and restaurants “offering meat raised sustainably outside the factory system.” *The Meatrix* has become the primary means of promoting Sustainable Table and the Eat Well Guide (GRACE).

GRACE provided Free Range Studios founder Louis Fox with “background material” from which he drew inspiration for *The Meatrix*. GRACE documentation notes that Fox’s “decision to spoof *The Matrix* was based on the similarities between the film and today’s corporate system of agriculture” (GRACE, “Film Biography”). Fox produced *The Meatrix* using the popular computer animation programming tools Macromedia Flash MX and Adobe Illustrator. Flash, a vector graphics based animation program, creates “Flash files” generally embedded into websites and viewable through the Flash browser plug-in. *The Meatrix* is a Flash file that plays automatically when a user opens the website. Upon completion of the animation, the viewer is prompted to “click here” and switch to GRACE’s “action page.”

The page [www.themeatrix.com/action](http://www.themeatrix.com/action) acts as a gateway to Grace’s Sustainable Table, Eat Well Guide, and related materials. Although revised several times since the original release of *The Meatrix* in 2003, the action page was designed as a stepping stone between *The Meatrix* and the Eat Well Guide, headlined with “Stop The Meatrix, Fight Factory Farms Now!” in *Matrix*-styled lettering. A large block below the headline introduced the Eat Well Guide, implored viewers to “buy meat from family farmers,” and offered a simple “GO” link to the Eat Well Guide. Other “action” and “information” websites were briefly described and links provided but these were made clearly secondary by their placement on the page, their relative size to the Eat Well Guide, and their lack of graphic interest. Information about *The Meatrix*, GRACE, and Free Range Graphics was also supplied in a web-sidebar and in the bottom third of the webpage. Notably, the most prominent graphic elements within the sidebar—both in visual impact and hierarchic position—were links to “Sign Up for News, Actions and Updates” and to “Send *The Meatrix* To Your Friends!”

While we might be tempted to categorize the links on the action page as “the point” of the animation, I would caution against such enticement. Although the connection between *The Meatrix* and an increase of traffic on the associated websites listed on the action page is plain, the rhetorical function of *The Meatrix* itself should not be limited only to the role of intermediary. *Meatrix* creators Free Range Studios certainly don’t see their work that way when they describe the qualities of Viral Flash Activism: “With the click of a button, thousands of viewers pass the movie on to friends, family and co-workers. At no extra cost, your message continues to travel around the web reaching an ever-expanding audience” (Free Range Studios). GRACE, as well, perceives *The Meatrix* as more than a conduit to their other websites. This is evident in their move to take *The Meatrix* to non-internet audiences. *The Meatrix* has been screened in film festivals, shown at county and State fairs, and aired as a public

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service announcement in movie theatres.

Indeed, even independent evaluation of *The Meatrix* focuses on the importance of the animation itself, as opposed to the possibilities it offers for increased web traffic on associated sites. *MarketingProfs.com*, besides describing *The Meatrix* as an example of “doing it ‘right’,” laud *The Meatrix* creators for their understanding of “the nuances of the individual’s interaction with modern media” (Goldhammer and Zimmer “Enter the Marketing Meatrix”). Especially interesting from these marketing professionals’ perspective is their own discernment of the need to be aware of multiplicities inherent in the consumer audience. “Consumers belong to multiple networks, have multiple identities and participate in multiple communities,” they write, “they decide to pass your message along or to kill it” (Goldhammer and Zimmer “Enter the Marketing Meatrix”). Their view of marketing is described as *Fresh Baked*; companies succeeding in the contemporary media market, the Fresh Baked, “realize the sheer delight people have in being connected with each other and the market power derived from being connected. These companies enable connections and truly participate in them” (Goldhammer and Zimmer “Fresh Eye for the Marketing Guy”). As uncomfortable as some readers—as I am—may be with crediting PR executives with insight into an interconnected populace, I use their analysis here to point out that changes in the dominant forms of communication are not only being surveyed in academic circles, but are evidently being considered by, and applied to, rhetors as varied as small nonprofits and companies creating worldwide advertising campaigns.

Instead of concentrating on the conduit properties of campaign texts like *The Meatrix*, organizations like GRACE and Free Range Studios perceive value in the so-called “viral” quality of a popular text. In such a case, the choice to “Buy Meat From Family Farmers” by clicking the Eat Well Guide link is no more valuable than a choice to “Send The Meatrix to Your Friends.” Thus, the creation of an audience, a public for *The Meatrix*, is an essential feature of the text.

### Publics and Counterpublics

Michael Warner describes three senses of the word “public” in its noun form. 1) *the public*, “a kind of social totality . . . the people in general”; 2) public as “a concrete audience”; and 3) *a public*, “the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation . . . a text public” (Warner *Publics and Counterpublics* 413). A public associated with a text like *The Meatrix* clearly falls within this third sense, a public; more precisely, *a counterpublic*. Explained as a “modification” of Habermas’s public sphere analysis, Warner defines counterpublics “by their tension with a larger public” (Warner *Publics and Counterpublics* 56). It should be made utterly clear, however, that a counterpublic does not simply oppose *the public*, or act as a singular opposition to a singular dominant public. As Phaedra Pezzullo notes, in agreement with Robert Asen and Daniel Brouwer (Asen and Brouwer), public and counterpublic should not be taken as binary oppositions, but as multiple. Pezzullo writes, “When public dialogues reflect a multi-faceted negotiation of power, it is particularly important to recognize the complexity of various public spheres without reducing conflicts to mere binaries” (361).

The multiple in public and counterpublic understanding clarifies Warner’s definition of the counterpublic as a “kind of public,” following many of the guiding principles identified for publics while remaining subordinate and critical to the norms of a dominant culture (*Publics and Counterpublics* 56). In other words, the counterpublic is at once a multiple composition of texts in circulation, a product of the same social processes inherent in all publics, and simultaneously a particular type of public that is at once subordinate to and in conflict with a dominant public.

*The Meatrix* has a public, a general group created through interaction with the text. Its public is, by way of *The Meatrix*’s subordinate and conflictual relationship with dominant ideology, a counterpublic. Taking these propositions separately, I will first explore *The Meatrix* public through Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome and the contextual condition of *The Meatrix* in discourse. Second, I will look at *The Meatrix* as a means for producing a counterpublic, reading the text closely and attempting to show how *The Meatrix* functions by appealing to, and contradicting, resonant cultural fragments.

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### ***The Meatrix as a Public***

Warner writes, “The making of publics is the metapragmatic work newly taken up by every text in every reading” (*Publics and Counterpublics* 12). There is little doubt that *The Meatrix* can be read as a text, so too are the millions of individual viewers translatable as readers of the text. What is more significant to consider is the *work* being done to *make* a public. How is it that *The Meatrix* has a public? A public, Warner writes emphatically, “exists *by virtue of being addressed*” (“Publics and Counterpublics” 413). Unlike the common notion of a public, which exists *to be addressed*, we can consider publics’ existence *because* they are addressed. *The Meatrix* doesn’t address *the* public, in the sense of a national or worldly unity, nor does it address a concrete audience, like a movie theatre audience. In this case *The Meatrix* addresses a public, and that public consists precisely of those who have been addressed. Warner writes:

The idea of a public, unlike a concrete audience or the public of any polity, is text-based—even though publics are increasingly organized around visual and audio texts. . . . Often the texts themselves are not even recognized as texts—as for example with visual advertising or the chattering of a DJ—but the publics they bring into being are still discursive in the same way. (“Publics and Counterpublics” 414)

Once we recognize the textual quality of something like flash animation—and come to realize that, although it is released to an indeterminate possible public, there must be a public that is formed when viewers are drawn to the text—then it is an easier step to see that the public is indeed text-based, generated through association with text. To clarify this situation in relation to *The Meatrix*, one only need look at the means of distribution and viewership. The so-called viral distribution of Flash activism translates into creation of a rhizomatic viewership of the text. Although at first *The Meatrix* was distributed to a definite list of GRACE members via email, (GRACE) this was soon supplemented with a combination of press coverage, links, and email forwarding.

Re-casting the viral as the rhizome, we move from distribution—as in dispersal of the viral—to creation—in the making of a public. Deleuze and Guattari offer the rhizome as an alternative to the constricted, arborescent forms of Western thought: the root and the radicle, or fascicular root. Professing that “the multiple *must be made*” Deleuze and Guattari offer a model based not on the “sedentary point of view” of history but a “Nomadology,” “a logic of the AND” (*Thousand Plateaus* 3-25). Such a perspective is incalculably useful in thinking about a public for *The Meatrix* because the formation of such a public appears in a historical model only as a chaotic whirlwind, a random distribution rather than a specific public creation. The rhizome as a model is appropriate in its characteristics of free connection, linear dimensionality, and circulation. Deleuze and Guattari summarize the rhizome:

Unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature. . . . It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overflows. It constitutes linear multiplicities with *n* dimensions. . . . Unlike a structure, which is defined by a set of points and positions, with binary relations between the points and biunivocal relationships between the positions, the rhizome is made only of lines: lines of segmentarity and stratification as its dimensions, and the line of flight or deterritorialization as the maximum dimension. (21)

*The Meatrix*’s public too develops in a rhizomatic (rhizome-like) manner. Let me return to the description of distribution now but revisit it as a rhizomatic creation of a multiple public. Although we could historicize the process from an original email distribution and press release, we would soon discover the rhizomatic qualities of this public formation incoherent to the genealogical project. From a small distribution of individual emails and press releases to 350,000 viewers in one week simply cannot be reasonably traced. From one freestanding website to 27,000 webpages linking to *The Meatrix* in a single month cannot be traced. From *The Meatrix* website to the 20 million viewers cannot be methodologically traced (GRACE). “The rhizome is altogether different, a *map and not a tracing*” (Deleuze and Guattari 21). Projected as a map, the rhizome creation of this public can be better observed.

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Rather than a beginning and an end we draw instead on middle. At any given moment *The Meatrix* public grows in innumerable directions with varied lines of dimensionality. One dimension of line connects individuals through the viral distribution of email. One sends to many, others receive and resend (forward), individuals email individuals, some ignore, others persist, resending, re-forwarding. In true rhizome form, however, the medium is never singular: some individual receives several forwards and post to a blog, others will read the blog, some will activate the link. Another line might connect a newspaper article to a viewer. This viewer now enters the public and may choose to begin a new line with an email or a "Hot Clicks" listing in an electronic publication. Message boards and listservs, *Meatrix* merchandise, State fairs, a radio interview (Gellerman), and a Google search for "Mad Cow" can all form new, rhizomatic, lines of flight.

The creation of a public rhizomatically infers other qualities of Weber's public. First, Warner writes that "a public is a relation among strangers," inasmuch as we address much of our discourse to strangers as a function of the modern world ("Publics and Counterpublics" 417). Such is certainly the case of a public constituted rhizomatically through flash activism. While some lines would connect friends and co-workers, and others might connect better-known publics like distribution lists or readership, *The Meatrix* itself is not expressly created or distributed with these individual people in mind. The text cannot anticipate the movement of the rhizome; not even after its publication can we trace the development of its public—we can only map.

Not only is *The Meatrix* created without a predetermined public, other features of the public are similarly indeterminate. Warner notes, "The existence of a public is contingent on its members' activity, however notional or compromised, and not on its members' categorical classification, objectively determined position in social structure, or material existence" ("Publics and Counterpublics" 417). This is discernible in the variability seen in some of the perceptible lines of flight in *The Meatrix* public. For example, *The Meatrix* is linked predictably by the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) website, but it is also linked on blogs, open forums, and university listservs. However, even without the usual structural identifications such as category, social position, or materiality, the construction of the public can be theorized: "a public is constituted through mere attention" (417). Warner writes:

Because a public exists only by virtue of address, it must predicate some degree of attention, however notional, of its members. . . . The cognitive quality of that attention is less important than the mere fact of active uptake. Attention is the principal sorting category by which members and nonmembers are discriminated. (417)

So it is that bloggers, forum users, and listserv recipients are all members of *The Meatrix* public: all are strangers; none are neatly classifiable as a "target audience" or members of an expected, concrete public audience; and all of them exist within that public because of their attention, "however notional," to the text. Cognition, understanding, and depth of consideration are not the defining characteristics, however, only the attention. While this seems incongruous with the intentions of a politicized text like *The Meatrix*, it is nonetheless very much a condition of our contemporary society. In a world full of texts and discourses calling our attention, "Our willingness to process a passing appeal determines which publics we belong to. . . . The direction of our glance can constitute our social world" (417).

It is in this light that we must also consider that *The Meatrix* alone does not create a public, for a public remains a space of discourse, not a space of singularity. "No single text can create a public," Warner writes, because "texts themselves do not create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time" (417). Superficially we may not recognize *The Meatrix* as a concatenation of texts through time. *The Meatrix* is undoubtedly a singular text, yet the technological formats of its dissemination are not isolated to expressing only the single text, but also their own text, a running commentary throughout the rhizome. Again it is clear that there is no singular historicity to this commentary; one is not entering into a conversation in the usual or expected sense, but texts are circulating throughout a public; the public is communicating. There are other texts involved in creating this public too: they include emails and forwarded emails, websites linking to and from *The Meatrix*, news reports, web reviews, "Hot Clicks"-type listings, word of mouth, and word of academic publication. Warner writes: It is the way texts circulate, and become the basis for further representations, that convinces us that publics have

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activity and duration. A text, to have a public, must continue to circulate through time, and because this can only be confirmed through an intertextual environment of citation and implication, all publics are intertextual, even intergeneric. (417)

While it may seem at this point in the discussion that *The Meatrix* public is remiss of political agency, removed from definitive direction in its discourse or too loose in its creation to show signs of social *movement*, I believe that two important points need to be considered before we jump to such a judgment. First, we must keep in mind that this is not a read of a social movement per se, nor is it a read based on an idealized vision of public discourse. Rather, this is an attempt to understand textual circulation as it happens, to map out the distribution of a text in its creation of a contemporary public. Consider again the perspective of the marketing reporters and their “Fresh Baked” approach: *The Meatrix*, for them, is an example of “doing it right” because the text works across the multiple audience and because it is successful in generating a public through the inconsistent networks of modern life.

This brings me to the second point of consideration: *The Meatrix* has a public, and that public is reading a text. While we have explored the creation of the public, we have yet to even begin to contemplate the text itself. What’s more, we have so far only considered the overarching qualities of *The Meatrix* public as a public; by now moving on to discuss *The Meatrix* as a *counterpublic* we can discern what qualities the text contains, which are facilitating the creation of a public that exists as subordinate and critical.

### ***The Meatrix* as a Counterpublic**

Much of our contemporary discourse is based on texts, or fragments of texts, which inundate the social individual in a deluge of signs. Given that much of our contact with contemporary texts involves the act of looking (i.e., interactions with visual texts), some rhetorical scholars are recognizing the importance of images in public discourse. DeLuca’s explanation of image events details the cluttered condition of our rhetorical environment, providing recognition that simplistic models of communication like the transmission of message from sender to receiver hardly represent the way we experience public discourse. The glance within white-noise-like arrays of signs, fragments filtered through the stream of piecemeal messages, sound bites, and spectacles have created a need for ways of reconceptualizing the public sphere.

DeLuca and Peeples’ recast of the public sphere as the public screen is one such reconception. Bracketing their work as “supplement to the public sphere” (145), DeLuca and Peeples support a move from the idealized model of dialogue to the concept of dissemination, where “communication as dissemination is the endless proliferation and scattering of emissions without the guarantee of productive exchanges” (130). DeLuca and Peeples begin with the premise that new technologies like television and the internet have “fundamentally transformed the media matrix that constitutes our social milieu” (131). These “technological transformations,” they argue, “‘have constructed an altogether different cultural context” (131). Together with shifts in the ad-driven newspaper market toward highly graphical layout designs and the explosion of new “ad spaces” on everything from women’s bikini bottoms (Night-Agency) to the human forehead (AdAge.com), we can plainly see that the television- and internet-driven social environment has evolved to visual saturation. DeLuca and Peeples write:

The public screen is a constant current of images and words, a ceaseless circulation of television, film, photography, and the Internet. These technologies’ speed, stream of images, and global reach create an ahistorical, contextless flow of jarring juxtapositions. The public screen promotes a mode of perception that could best be characterized as ‘distraction.’ (DeLuca and Peeples 135)

While DeLuca and Peeples choose an analysis of mainstream press coverage of the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) protests in Seattle to demonstrate the possibilities for alternative rhetors to enter into discourse with *the public*, a study of *The Meatrix* and the public screen can show how an alternative text generates its own public, a public. *The Meatrix* exists within a contextless visual atmosphere where perception is based in distraction, and dissemination on the public screen offers no guarantee for productive rhetorical exchange. What is demonstrated by *The Meatrix*, however, are the possibilities for alternative rhetors to enter into

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discourse outside the mainstream press, to engage a public through a rhizomatic dissemination of screen image, and to produce a counterpublic. Thus, melding the theory and terminology of Warner with DeLuca and Peeples, we can consider rhetorical engagement with a *counterpublic screen*.

What distinguishes counterpublics, for Warner, is the “conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment” (Warner *Publics and Counterpublics* 63). Aware of a subordinate status, counterpublics, in tension with larger dominant publics, are produced as marginalized publics that exist as contradiction, dissent, and/or repudiation. Warner writes:

A counterpublic, against the background of the public sphere, enables a horizon of opinion and exchange; its exchanges remain distinct from authority and can have a critical relation to power; its extent is in principal indefinite, because it is not based on a precise demography but mediated by print, theater, diffuse networks of talk, commerce, and the like. (*Publics and Counterpublics* 63)

The following analysis looks to *The Meatrix* as a text productive toward a counterpublic, utilizing a counterpublic screen as a means for rhizomatic dissemination of a message of dissent. In so doing, it will also be shown that this counterpublic makes noteworthy uses of the contemporary textual atmosphere to attract attention.

### Reading *The Meatrix*

In order to draw the attention necessary for producing a public, *The Meatrix* primarily makes use of allusions to prominent cultural norms. As a counterpublic text, however, *The Meatrix* maintains conflict with the norms of the cultural environment through contradiction and repudiation of those allusions. Such tactics, I argue, can be thought of as *resonant reversal*, a rhetorical strategy of juxtaposing allusions to prominent instances of cultural resonance with contradictory messages of opposition.

*The Meatrix* unabashedly references a prominently resonant text, *The Matrix*, starting with its name. *The Meatrix*, in fact, was released just two days before the release of *Matrix Revolutions*, the third film in the highly publicized and popular *Matrix* film series. Any doubt of this allusion is quickly eliminated in the opening moments of *The Meatrix*. The opening title, “What is The Meatrix,” uses the same highly distinctive and recognizable font as the *Matrix*.

The allusion to *The Matrix* connects *The Meatrix* not only to a popular set of major motion pictures; it also enters *The Meatrix* into dialog with mainstream culture. *The Matrix* in this case ironically acts as a marker for cultural norms. I say ironically because the surface narrative of the *Matrix* films purports to question what we take for the “real world.” As a point of reference for *The Meatrix*, however, the *Matrix* films become the representative of cultural norms, the real world, while *The Meatrix* plays the role of dissenter. I am not implying that *The Matrix* is not a contrarian text. What is ironic here is that the culturally resonant features of *The Matrix*, widely incorporated into contemporary culture, themselves become points of mainstream cultural resonance. The graphics, characters, and plot elements referenced in *The Meatrix* are taken out of the original context and do not carry with them the contrary notions ascribed within a reading of the film in whole. It is because of their commercial, branded popularity that these decontextualized elements are resonant to most *Meatrix* viewers. Thus, we find that allusion to *The Matrix* functions to draw the attention of a public *and* to set a referential marker for contradiction. In other words, reference to the popular narrative and characters of *The Matrix* film not only attract interest but also become a representative of mainstream culture; *The Meatrix* will contradict the mainstream representations in a way that destabilizes our senses.

The visual representations of characters within *The Meatrix* exemplify this dual attraction and contradiction. Take, for example, Moopheus, a reconstruction of *Matrix* character Morpheus, played in the film series by Lawrence Fishburne. Moopheus, like his exemplar, sports a black overcoat and “armless” sunglasses and speaks in a deep, monotone voice. As a point of reference, however, the resonant reversal becomes clear when the viewer realizes that Moopheus, although standing erect, is a cow. We can consider this move resonant because there is an obvious reference to the popular movie character. The introduction of the bovine Moopheus is also a reversal because it transfers the character, and the story’s narrative, from the human to animal realm. The

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anthropomorphic Moopheus representation of Morpheus transfers the cultural resonance of a human story to a contradictory setting where nonhuman affairs are central. This reversal is clear when we consider that the rhetor explicitly seeks to contradict the cultural norm of human-centered inconsideration of animals and animal products.

This same use of characters for resonant reversal is also manifest in *The Meatrix* other principal, Leo. Although his position in the narrative and character name clearly reference Keanu Reeves' *Matrix* role as "Neo," "Leo" appears to have little, if any, physical resemblance to the film character. Instead, Leo is portrayed as a simple-minded, stout and smiling pig. Like Neo, Leo the pig begins the story unaware that his reality is false and that the existence of a "real world" is made present only through Moopheus/Morpheus's intervention. As a reversal, however, Leo does not live the dark, lonely life of a self-questioning computer hacker in present day New York City. Instead, Leo lives the idyllic life of a farm animal: happily eating slop from a trough in a spacious country barnyard. The contradictory reversal here plays further on the irony of the reference by suggesting that the barnyard is as false as the computer-generated "reality" of the *Matrix*.

Animals and humans do have a common fate in their respective "real world" lives in *The Meatrix* and the *Matrix* respectively. The narrative of *The Matrix* reveals that humans in the real world have become a source of energy for their masters; they are "food" for the robots. Cows, chickens, and pigs in *The Meatrix*'s real world are not only similar as a food source for their masters, but they are also similar in treatment as industrial resources. Of course, as the consumers of this food source, the viewers in contemporary culture become the robots.

This representation of Leo the pig and his barnyard environment also references two other markers of cultural resonance. First, the happy talking pig and his animal friends reference the tradition of animated cartoons. Children and adults alike have been exposed to the phenomenon of cartoons. Whether in the form of Bugs Bunny, Huckleberry Hound, or Porky Pig, Americans are not only familiar with the talking cartoon animal, they are also comfortable with the benign images of simplistically rendered characters encountered on Saturday morning television. This is similarly true of feature film pig and farmyard representations, animated or not, in movies like *Babe* and *Charlotte's Web*. Second, as those two films illustrate, Leo's barnyard calls upon the cultural norm of America's small farm. *The Meatrix* draws on the common cultural perception of farm animal life represented in movies, children's books, and toys. The child-like innocence of this idyllic image resonates with viewers, attracting their gaze while setting up the opportunity for reversals.

Most of the balance of *The Meatrix* is based on presenting resonant reversals of the cartoonized idyllic barnyard life. It could be said, in fact, that the answer to the question posed in the title of *The Meatrix*, "what is the Meatrix?" is the idealized barnyard itself. *The Meatrix* is meant not as a fictional representation, however, but as an allegorical account of the false image presented as real in common cultural representations.

Moopheus: "Do you want to know what it is?"

Leo: "OK."

Moopheus: "The Meatrix is all around you, Leo. It is the story we tell ourselves about where meat and animal products come from. The family farm is a fantasy, Leo. Take the blue pill and stay here in the fantasy, take the red pill and I'll show you the truth."

*Leo takes the red pill. They go through a crazy transition. And land in a huge bleak factory farm pig barn, pigs in gestation crates as far as the eye can see. Leo finds himself standing in one.*

Moopheus: "Welcome to the real world." (FreeRangeGraphics.com *The Meatrix Transcript* 1)

The ceremonial taking of the red pill scene reprinted here mirrors Neo's introduction to the "real world" in the original *Matrix*. Although this exemplifies a further use of resonant attraction via reference to the feature film, it is simultaneously the beginning of a series of resonant reversals turning the happy-farm cultural image on its head. Visually, the "real world" of the factory farm balances itself between maintaining the innocent feel of the cartoon and disrupting the viewer with dissonant images.

Take, for example, the images of chickens that accompany Moopheus's description of "cruel conditions" in factory farms. One image uses resonant reversal by taking the idealized cartoon depiction of the barnyard hen and placing it in cramped, heavily barred and tiered cages, with apparent feces on the floor and spots of blood scattered on the bodies of the birds. One of the chickens lies upside down with its neck bent back, head hanging

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out of the cage, and the cartoon sign for death, Xs for eyes, indicating the condition of the carcass.

Although such a description of the image indicates the gruesome conditions of real factory farms, the image is lightened by the comic quality of the animation. Unlike more realistic genres of animation, such as the often brutally violent and realistic Anime style of Japan, the cartoon style used in *The Meatrix* always tempers the horrific. This is, moreover, what allows explicitly violent material in well-known animated series like *Tom and Jerry* and *The Road Runner* to be culturally acceptable for children's programming.

Particular care is present in *The Meatrix*'s application of the cartoon style to introduce otherwise repugnant scenes of factory farms. This is perhaps the exceptional genius of *The Meatrix*; although gruesome photographs of maltreatment and poor conditions in factory farms have been readily available for years, the sickening quality of the images often repulses the casual viewer. *The Meatrix*, however, introduces the concepts and conditions in a format that is not only acceptable but draws viewer attention. On the other hand, the use of resonant imagery of barnyard cartoon animals in scenes of pain and suffering also contradicts the cultural norms. Take as an example the images used to portray what Moopheus describes as "systematic mutilation, practices such as debeaking chickens." Here the cartoon image is shown only in silhouette; a human body holding a cartoonized chicken by the neck places its beak into an apparatus, pulls a lever, and cuts the beak from the chicken. Although the image disrupts the normal understanding of barnyard life and introduces the viewer to a horrifying practice, the scene is also visually palatable, allowing the attention to be maintained and the concept to be absorbed.

Further reversals of the barnyard norm continue throughout the body of the animation. Moopheus describes antibiotic use and environmental pollution while images of "super strains" of "disease-causing germs" and stream and air pollution caused by "12 million pounds of excrement" are portrayed as cartoon contradictions. At one point the rather childish sound of defecation accompanies images of a rural countryside, where factory farm pollution turns the river from blue to brown and the sky from yellow to grey. The combinations of cartoon humor and idyllic country scenery are thus used as referential points upon which serious issues can be placed in contradiction.

Finally, the idyllic cultural norm of the family farm is itself obliterated—by a giant cycloptic robot with waving tentacle arms. The robot not only plays into *The Matrix* image of the human harvest depicted in the film, the "Agri-corp" label is reminiscent of cartoon-world's all-in-one corporate provider "ACME." Moopheus narrates as the Agri-corp robot moves through a pastoral countryside stomping out the traditional symbol of the family farm: a red barn and a white-fenced animal pen. Each of the family farms is systematically replaced as the robot squats over the site of the former barn and seemingly defecates out a plain grey warehouse representative of the factory farm. The sky darkens ominously as the Agri-corp robot moves through the scene, growing larger as it approaches the screen:

Moopheus: That is the Meatrix, Leo. The Lie we tell ourselves about where our food comes from. But it's not too late, there is a resistance.

*(Moopheus is joined by another pig, and a chicken. All wearing black overcoats and sunglasses).*

Leo: Count me in.

*(Enraged Leo jumps up out of the crate and freezes in "bullet time" a la The Matrix)*

Leo: How do we stop them Moopheus?

Moopheus: *(Addresses the user in the foreground)* We are going to spread the word. But it's you, the consumer who has the real power! Don't support the factory farming machine! There is a world of alternatives!

*(He holds out his hoof with a large red pill in it).*

Moopheus: Click here and I'll show you what you can do to escape the Meatrix. (FreeRangeGraphics.com *The Meatrix Transcript 1*)

The final image of *The Meatrix* has Moopheus looking toward the viewer, large red "pill" in hoof, "Click Me" printed in large black letters beckoning the viewer to mouse-click on the hyperlinked pill. This red pill acts as a final resonant reconnection to *The Matrix*. In the original film, Keanu Reeves' Neo character, like Leo the pig in

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the opening of *The Meatrix*, is given a red pill by Morpheus to show him “just how far down the rabbit hole goes.” Taking the red pill is a decisive moment for Neo, who is also offered a blue pill, which would allow him to fall asleep, awaken in his own bed, and continue to live in the false reality of the matrix. On the other hand, Neo can take the red pill and find out the “truth” about the matrix. Morpheus informs him that “no one can be told what the matrix is; you have to see it for yourself.”

So too is the case with Moopheus and his red pill. The hyperlink to GRACE’s “action page” (described above) is also a choice: the viewer can choose to ignore the link, accept the entertainment value of the animation, and, presumably, remain in the matrix. On the other hand, the viewer can follow the hyperlink to the GRACE action page and browse the information available there. I would like to suggest, however, that in this case the viewer has already taken the red pill, whether she chooses to click on the link or not. I would suggest that there may have been a choice made, but that choice was in pointing the web browser to *The Meatrix* animation in the first place. As we have seen above, the viewer of *The Meatrix* has been exposed to words and images that already demonstrate the rhetorical points GRACE seeks to express. Not only has the viewer been exposed to the concepts of animal cruelty, pollution, and destruction of family farms, *The Meatrix* has also presented these concepts within the norms and in contradiction to the norms of resonant culture. The resonant reversals evident in the animation posit the viewer in a situation where their attention has been attracted by resonant features, and their perception has been challenged by contradicting cultural norms. The use of visual imagery to accomplish this task makes use of the contemporary rhetorical environment, the public screen, as a means to produce a public. As a text that stands counter to the norms of resonant cultural features, however, this could be described as making use of a counterpublic screen. Furthermore, the visualized format of flash animation works in harmony with the image-laden rhetorical environment. In the world of distraction, it appears that no one can be told what the Meatrix is, but you can see it for yourself.

### Red Pill Activism

This text is in some ways an example of a prominent form of contemporary discourse; it is distributed through the network of a technologized culture, and it is the focal point of rhizome-like public creation. Yet it is also a unique artifact, highly successful in gaining attention in a rhetorical environment of distraction and rhetorically prodigal in its use of both resonance and reversal. This “red pill activism” demonstrates not only a form of contemporary discourse, but also a possibility for marginalized rhetors to enter into discourse outside *the* public screen. Through an engagement with a counterpublic screen, red pill activism can create a public through address, disrupt the norms of resonant cultural references, and produce tension with the dominant culture. This counterpublic discourse is based not on the idealistic notions of reasoned dialogue and productive engagement but on the dissemination of text and distracted attention. That is not to say that this form of communication is some new ideal, but to admit that it is a function of our social environment. As such, it is not only worthy of our attention, but also may be critical for our understanding how rhetoric functions in the fragmented, visual world.

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