



The Drinking Matrix: **A Symbolic Self Interaction**

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When our class began to get more in depth and interesting, I learned something about myself. Watching the movie *The Matrix* was extremely fascinating, but the discussion after the movie proved to me to be of more value. The concept “Know Thyself” almost exploded before my very ears. The movie brought up theories and ideas which never occurred to me. I left that particular class that night with a feeling of confusion and doubt. Do I know myself? Do I know who I really am? Before this class I thought I had a firm grasp on knowing myself. The fact is John P. Hewitt, the author of our textbook *Self and Society: A Symbolic Interactionist Social Psychology*, and the movies we have watched have opened for me a window to escape, leaving me with a choice. I can remain in this cave and accept my false “I” who misses the whole picture. Or, I can slowly work myself out of this created cave of uncertainty.

I believed I had a firm grasp on who I am. Life experiences no doubt have made me a mentally tough individual. A way of noticing one’s own positive and negative traits is through time. I have traveled numerous times around the United States during which I had a great deal of time for self reflection. I have met all sorts of individuals and have acquired many positive characteristics and left behind numerous

flaws. Yet it wasn’t until *The Matrix* that I realized how much more there is to know. During the film the concept “residual self-projection” was introduced. A residual self projection is an individual’s image constructed by outside forces. It makes an individual believe that he is fine with the surrounding conditions, hence becoming incapable of empowering himself. I now feel as if I am also in some sort of capsule and think of myself as blinded, controlled, and manipulated by outside factors. I feel that unhealthy urges are weights holding me down from getting to know the real “I” within. I am enslaved to an evil alcohol addiction. All Morpheus wanted is to free the minds of individuals enslaved to Matrix. Through the words of Morpheus I realize that I am a drone enslaved to evil corporations profiting on my weakness, and my weakness is preventing me from knowing my real “I.”

The way I acquired these characteristics may be explained by the **Learning Theory** in social psychology. At a young age through **model learning** I witnessed alcohol as a progression to fun. **Operant conditioning** made it obvious, and now **classical conditioning** has me craving for a drink when I hear the word “bar.” At the bar a process begins to take form that can best be explained by **Exchange Theory**. Social relations have been developed with other heavy drinkers as a way to maintain beneficial encounters. “Exchange relationships develop in an established social world that shapes the way people depend on one another and exchange benefits” (Hewitt 15). Even if I’m broke I know that either friends or the bartender will make me drunk. It’s a wonderful yet vicious cycle. In this world that I have created, while the money lasts, my friends and I all look out for one another. The money issue goes through phases, but always comes down to sharing.

There are other **phases of the act** that play parts in my life. After not smoking all day, I rent a movie to keep my mind occu-

ped. When I see a smoker in the movie inhaling, I receive an **impulse** to light up. My internal urges **motivate** me and then **manipulation** takes flight. I'll walk to a neighbor's home and ask for one. I might return to the movie, but unfortunately at this time I might not enjoy the movie until **consummation** is complete. Usually once an impulse is aroused, consummation becomes the next step. I am working towards laughing at that smoker in the movie, while I proudly enjoy my health.

Working towards good health isn't that easy. I have **social objects** that prevent me from achieving my goal. Sometimes I question who my friends are. I have chosen my friends because we all have a great deal in common. Yet, with that said, it doesn't seem to be enough. Without alcohol something is off and the situation isn't as fun and exciting as it could be. Time to ponder over these issues with a broken leg has given me a chance to **step off stage**. Not being around a crowd concentrating on drinking has helped me notice a few things. A social object is not simply peer pressure imposed from outside, but an object created by myself. I do have a **social bond** with my friends. I am beginning to see this bond as artificial. Everyone craves attachment to others. Bonds need to be constantly reinforced through tests. This new test I am proposing demonstrates differentiation within my group. Hewitt claims that a need for personal identity within the group is appropriate.

Alcohol and cigarettes hold the **attention** of everyone I know. That's not to say I can't have fun without them; I'm saying that I won't have as much fun—which is a horrible thing. The notion of **self as object** helps clarify my position. "It is not only the corporeal existence of the person that we have in mind when we talk about the self, but also, and more importantly, a great many intangible attributes and characteristics. ... in short, whatever kind of objects their own acts indicate them to be" (Hewitt

58). Seeing self as object involves concentrating attention on ourselves, because we can be our own object and desire to achieve some goal. Some people are alcoholics because they are insecure or anxious. I have excuses and explanations of why I live the life I do. Yet, as of lately those excuses do not seem to work as well as they did one year ago. In the hour-long documentary ***Multiple Personalities: the Search for Deadly Memories***, one of the patients, Gretchen, makes an excellent statement. Gretchen and I both suffer from the same disease, though caused by different factors. We both cope with it, but in different ways. Yet, I feel we both try to block out and alter our selves to deal with some sort of pain. In one of Gretchen's calmest moments she stated that "we are so good at hiding ourselves." She used a journal as a mechanism to communicate among her selves in order to understand and move beyond her problems the way I am using this paper to elevate my life. The notion of self as object helps me step back from my selves and my groups to predict the potential worsening of a disease.

This disease has ruined many relationships. A few years ago my **role** as a boyfriend did not fit an ex-girlfriend's definition. She would get mad that I would leave the apartment to get drunk. In many **situations** I knew she would disapprove of my actions. I would wait for her to fall asleep before I went into the apartment after a long night of drinking. Sometimes she would find me the next morning still sleeping outside the front door. She left me for good one morning because she predicted that I won't change. She helped me view myself as what I was and somewhat still am. By pretending I am not a drunk, I was **role making**; the problem was that I could not really adjust all my behavior—because I have a problem. My **line of conduct** (Hewitt 69) stopped for almost nobody. Unfortunately that sweet girl had to deal with my antics. I usually didn't remember how

bad and belligerent I got, so I never really began **role taking**, the role of someone who has a problem. Once I did, I began going to meetings and **talking out** my problems. Talking is the best way to analyze a dilemma. Talking with someone allows the problematic person an outlet to express his or her deepest fears and concerns. Somehow, though, one day I missed the bus to the next meeting and hopped back on the wagon.

The excerpt "From the Author" from the book *All and Everything* by Gurdjieff introduces an interesting notion of **Real Man** using the symbol of a coach driven by a horse and coachman, with a passenger in the box. "I," the passenger is supposed to have control over the whole organism, over my life. The "I" tells the coachman (my consciousness) to direct feelings (the horse) so as to lead the coach to its destination. When my horse has feels like drinking and smoking, the "I" in me has difficulty dealing with the coachman. I do not always have complete control over the system, including the reins, the shaft, and the break lever linking my physical, emotional, and intellectual selves to one another. Therefore, my "I" is not always in control—three sheets to the wind so to speak.

I have been involved in many **actions** that have become embedded in the memories of friends and strangers. My actions have caused certain **emotional reactions** in anyone I encounter. I am always a friendly and considerate person, but feel I am expected to produce comic situations for others. "We experience emotion because of our participation in social interaction" (Hewitt 74). I find this to be completely true and also find myself observing the emotions I feel and generate during social interaction. I thought I had my friends fooled to a degree. None of us are really fooling anybody because we all notice how much the others drink. We've never talked about these issues but I imagine we all have deep issues to resolve. No one would guess this, but I'm not all that happy a person these days.

My inside tells a much different story than what I project externally. What I find odd is how I'm coping with a broken leg. I have never experienced continuous physical pain until recently. To add, besides my folks I haven't seen anyone and have only talked to a few people for weeks. I'm extremely lonely, but haven't been drinking. The opportunity is there, but I find myself day after day hatching more and more out of a shell that I have constructed. I'm learning that if I'm strong enough to surpass this unfortunate mental/physical situation without the booze, then I should be ecstatic about simply talking to someone and walking around.

According to Hewitt, I might have low **self-esteem** and **motivation** problems. I don't think my low self-esteem is necessarily the main problem. As far as motivation is concerned, I admit that alcohol does motivate me. It doesn't matter what's going on when I get motivated, because I won't remember it any ways. Admitting that I have low self-esteem probably wouldn't help me. Hewitt's reference to low self-esteem does describe a part of my problem. My problem is perhaps an arubix cube with many different sides that nearly nobody has figured out.

I am only one person and this is the life I live in the State of New York. I am also part of something bigger in the country, or even globe as a whole. I'm part of many problems that are not just personal or local, but national and global. My **self image**, how I view myself in everyday life, points out flaws in my identity. When I begin to drink, drinking overwhelms my situated identity. A lot of other factors hold my attention while I have a drink in hand, but when I've started and become cut off (a sign that my alienated horse has taken over), I become uneasy and focus my attention on obtaining a drink. Sometimes I can't stop myself, and as a result begin to realize that in contrast to other people I have an addictive personality. I no doubt have a

lifelong **personal identity** beyond my situated selves; I am a unique and unusual character. But I associate with a group of kids that behave as unpredictably as I do. **Social identity** “places the individual as a member of a social category that differs from other categories” (Hewitt 107). My friends and I are certainly noticed for our social identity of having a lot of fun wherever we go, but at the expense of our health.

When a new day starts, I can’t always be honest when discussing the night before. To some I could brag about what I did or what happened, but to the majority of acquaintances I have to lie about my life. I am too ashamed, especially when meeting someone new, to admit some of the things that has happened to me. **First impressions** do not come around again, and so I practice regularly putting **limits on the choice of stories** I report. Everyone does in some form; I just abuse this option so much that I get dizzy.

With the act of breaking my leg I have broken the habit of inebriating myself on a daily basis. I am working on not letting habituation become concrete and cement my “role” in defining myself in situations. My use of **cognitive frames for role making and taking** have allowed me to assume and predict how future actions will affect others and myself. **Probability** is the category that for me stands out beyond the rest. It helps me to assume and predict how others will react to my potential hiatus from drinking. I know that I won’t necessarily be in the loop any more. I will still hear about the things that happen on a Tuesday night, but when I no longer create the stories that are being told it proves I have made myself scarce. Although I shouldn’t be, I am concerned with **means and ends**. I want to feel healthy, but see my associates as a hurdle. At the same time I desire fun and stimulation and need others to accomplish that. It shows me that means and ends question hiatus.

I see myself performing **aligning ac-**

tions. Drinking or not drinking I always seem to try to make my behavior desirable. With my group of friends, on Friday and Saturday nights especially, I will need a strong **motive talk** to explain why I am not partaking in their ritualistic drinking. I have previously projected to them an identity and expectation of doing so, therefore the act of someone asking me if I am thirsty is nobody’s fault but my own. I’ll have to deal with that, but my group will have to deal with my **disclaimer**. Sometimes people outgrow each other and begin to take on other interests. If my main hobby is no longer drinking, I’ll seem to slowly slip away without much notice from the crowd. I would never give the crowd my **account of clarity** when they have been drinking, for I know that it wouldn’t go over so well. Not involving myself to the degree in which I am doing so now will invite a variety of reactions. In the long run, nobody will lose sleep over it.

Symbolic Interactionists believe there are wider **constraints on social interaction** beyond personal ones. However, in my life, I have the power to make up my own mind and decide what is best for me. The only power I know I have over others is the ability to empower myself to make my own decisions. My acts also have the power to manipulate someone subconsciously. The **interpersonal roles** I have created with the people with whom I interact repeatedly will undoubtedly continue to produce subconscious expectations in others about me. I might also continue to make roles subconsciously. Conversely, if I redefine my situation and modify the reality around me, I might no longer feel a need to be constrained by a particular lifestyle, which in turn may trigger others to notice their potential power to do the same. My role **alter-casting** may induce others to modify their conduct. The way I act toward them will begin to constrain their conduct. In a sense, I’m giving them an opportunity to awaken from the hellish nightmare of a life that has

become habituated to a liquid.

I frown and look down upon my own past actions in this period of sobriety. I usually put myself through horrible **routine and problematic situations**. Not eating to save and spend money “elsewhere” became ritualistic. My routine “requires little self-conscious control” (Hewitt) and leads to problematic confrontations mostly with myself but sometimes with others with whom I interact. I feel like a hypocrite because I will eventually fall back into my old routine. Currently I have been awakened. The movie *Awakenings*, about the real life based story of Dr. Sayer’s catatonic patients coming alive for a short period, showed patients that do not symbolically interact on the outside, but inside are nevertheless amply aware. Their awareness becomes brought to life for a period of time. The patients just sort of snap out of it, similar to the way I have awakened due to a leg injury. The patients also struggle to maintain their freedom, but find themselves falling back into a constant state of prior horror. Certain diseases are very difficult to cure. I find it especially difficult to say good-bye to an element of my life that I have had a love-hate relationship with for so long. I know that I have a choice as opposed to Dr. Sayer’s patients—a choice to alter future situations from problematic to non-problematic. Along my recovery some people will notice the changes I have brought upon myself; I hope to cast them along, knowing helpful others will make the struggle easier. In a sense I would be forming a **boundary line**—like the woman in the movie, who was constrained by a routine floor pattern. Once the constraints were removed with the “will” of a helping hand, she was able to move beyond prior limitations and restrictions. This paper may be that helping hand “I” am giving myself.

The mental line I have begun creating for myself has laid the ground work for new boundaries. New subdivisions of social life will help emphasize and distin-

guish those I can more closely identify with. Setting boundaries is a major step to free myself of negative habituations. I get to pick and choose what may become a new beginning. The **problematic boundaries** and ways which have created uneasiness and a lack of happiness in my life need to be changed. I need to redraw my floor plans. I need to focus and concentrate on resolving my current dilemma. Social **Problem solving** starts with me. Defining and acknowledging the problem lets me become aware of my position in society. Most people are unaware of my situation, but I am myself aware of my social classification, and how my conduct is burdened by and burdens society.

My everyday social actions and interactions cause mixed internal emotions. There is a **social order and disorder** that I am very much a part of and which allow me to get caught up in familiar negative ways. People who are classified as drug and alcohol addicts are burdened with a horrible connotation. We are considered symbolic representatives of social disorder. We are **labeled** negatively even though we might be otherwise making valuable and positive contributions to our community. People create images from prior experiences and forever label an act as correct and another act as wrong. It is difficult to maintain one’s individuality when people label and stereotype you. Conversely, individuals and groups may question inherited stereotypes and labels. I do feel fortunate that such people speak their minds. Their questioning of particular roles empower actors to change and make a difference.

Society treats people well or badly, as being normal or abnormal. We label others and thereby perpetuate a social order. The social order then implies a distinction between **deviant** and “normal” people. People use the term deviant when they themselves are not pleased with the actions of another. I consider myself to be a deviant. I perceive myself as a threat to myself.

I am also a threat to society. I own an automobile which can be deadly to myself and to others. The act of my friends' taking away my car keys proves there are **variable responses to similar acts**. Driving while intoxicated is not something to consider lightly. It is an object that has a social meaning beyond personal choice. My intention to drive is perceived by most as deviant, thus forcing them to involve themselves in my decision-making. When an actor creates a scene where others perceive the situation as harmful, other members of society make an effort to role take and eliminate a potential threat.

Overconsumption is a threat that is highly overlooked. In a way, I also suffer from **Affluenza**. Drinking is a way to overconsume to achieve temporary happiness. The act of consummation fills an emptiness that lurks within. Each time happiness is achieved, time wears the notion thin. Corporations want to "brand and own" people in order to lure them to their product. The millions of dollars spent on advertisements have helped persuade me to choose my poisons. People are slaves to consuming. Every time I own a bottle that bottle is actually owning me. I need to come back to it, to feel a sense of happiness. Drinking is consuming an idea of happiness. Several people in the documentary *Affluenza* began to awaken. People began to realize that the life they were living was dangerous. These objects of luxury hid the problems waiting to come. Those people did not notice that it is their actions that produce society. We create and re-create social structure through our actions towards our selves and society. This is processed through our minds because we create symbols and give these symbols value and power. I feel that certain people, myself included, created insignificant meanings within a world taken for granted. *The Matrix* tells us symbolically that the world we take for granted is artificial and that we should begin to question our everyday life.

I first took the movie *The Truman Show* for what it is; a movie. However, I found the concept new and extraordinary. The intensity of the notion of life as a show faded after a few days but left a lasting impression. *The Truman Show* is another symbolic portrayal of our artificial world. Others create what one processes as reality, when in reality the individual is fooled. It is "reality" for Truman until his moment of clarity. In a sense, Truman begins to uncover the truth and "learns how deep the rabbit hole goes." The audience in the film watch the "Truman Show" and become so much incorporated into the show that their own lives become an appendage of its episodic doses. Likewise, the War in Iraq became the biggest reality TV show that I have ever seen. On every channel during all hours of the day anyone was able to turn on the television and witnessing hell on earth. The television coverage of the war controlled viewers. People planned eating and sleeping arrangements around the TV, the way people in the Truman Show lived their entire lives. Viewers consumed an idea or notion of happiness, struck with Affluenza. It appears that all people suffer from forms of habituation. I almost feel now that even exercising every other day at three in the afternoon can become an element in a person's life which in fact will wind up owning them and manipulating all aspects of their everyday lives. The producers of the show have complete **social control** over Truman. Manipulating him into becoming habitually frightened of water and in a sense "grounding" him to a specific area demonstrates the producer's power. Rebellion comes into play as a direct result, though, and Truman responds in a deviant way by going against the norms others have constructed.

I feel that this course has helped me question my every day life and how social meanings have become embedded in **significant symbols**. This course is another step towards uncovering constructed asso-

ciations. I now realize that until I uncover these constructed associations, I can not discover myself. I am unable to discover myself because I continually perpetuate associations which do not question and problematize my habituated conducts. I need to fully awaken—but not just dream that I am awake. My unconscious impulse is a weed infecting my motivation. Lately my “I” seems to be gaining control over and directing my coachman. I have had a firm grasp of the reins and have had my sights set on a better looking and feeling tomorrow. I have decided not to let habituations permanently define who I am in a given moment or situation. I know that every act is due to an impulse. I feel that my urges will no longer easily overwhelm my perceptions and manipulations. These are the factors preventing me from partaking in intentional consummation. My inner dialogue, understanding, and questioning of who I am take place through symbolic interaction. Role taking and making, constraining and liberating, would not exist without symbolic interaction.

I was not grown to be a cash crop. As I am writing I am gathering new conceptual building blocks to find myself. As a result of this course I have climbed higher to taste a plateau of happiness beyond habituation. Breaking a leg, ironically, helped me climb on the path of breaking a habit—symbolically speaking.

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