There's No Exit From the Matrix

"The Matrix Reloaded" is so dull, so literally ruled by Laurence Fishburne's trance-inducing Morpheus, that I had to reload the "Matrix" DVD to remember why I had been taken with all those streaming digits the first time around. But never mind. You can't argue with a $135.8 million four-day opening, which in itself validated the movie's premise.

It's the conceit of the "Matrix" films that most of mankind is plugged into a virtual-reality program conjured up by all-powerful machines to tease our brains while they loot our bodies for bioelectric power. AOL Time Warner, the powerful machine behind the films, pulled off a comparable feat by plugging the country into its merchandising program for "The Matrix Reloaded" to loot our wallets.

"As of Monday, April 28, there's 95 percent awareness of this movie," boasted its producer, Joel Silver, to Entertainment Weekly weeks before its premiere. In a country where two-thirds of the population cannot name any of the nine Democratic candidates for president, according to a CBS/New York Times poll, that's some achievement. It was certainly helped along by Entertainment Weekly itself, an AOL Time Warner publication that ran two cover stories on "The Matrix Reloaded" in a single month.

The genius of the P.R. strategy was its exploitation of the original film's geeky cult status as a thinking kid's kung fu extravaganza. "The Matrix Reloaded" would not be just another bloated Hollywood sequel but instead would have the philosophical heft to fuel a new generation of metaphysical Web sites. And so every puff piece about the film has emphasized that its creators, the siblings Andy and Larry Wachowski, do not give interviews — as if behaving like Thomas Pynchon would give their movie the gravitas of "Gravity's Rainbow." To second the motion, along came Cornel West, the Princeton professor who has a cameo in "The Matrix Reloaded" and is not at all shy about meeting the press. He told Time (for its cover story) that "the brothers are very into epic poetry and philosophy, into Schopenhauer and William James" and that "Larry Wachowski knows more about Hermann Hesse than most German scholars." This does not explain why the movie's multicultural orgy scene looks like a Club Med luau run amok, but maybe the inspiration for that was Kahlil Gibran.

So high-minded are the Wachowskis, the publicists assured us, that they even clamped down on "Matrix" merchandising. "The filmmakers did not want to alienate their fan base by selling out," one executive involved with the movie told The Wall Street Journal. Thus they strictly limited the sequel's ancillary products to an Enter the Matrix video game, action figures, sunglasses (featured in another AOL Time Warner magazine, People) and an animated DVD. They kept the movie's product tie-ins to a bare minimum as well: Powerade drinks, Cadillac, Ducati motorcycles and Heineken. Lest anyone think that such commerce constitutes a sellout, we were told that the Wachowskis drew the line by nixing Matrix-theme burgers at McDonald's. Siddhartha lives!

And so does AOL Time Warner. It is the most troubled of the media giants these days — crippled by
billions in debt, internecine warfare and a Securities and Exchange Commission investigation for fraud. But even in its weakened state, it has the Herculean resources to fix much of the nation's attention on whatever story it chooses to sell. Its pushing of "The Matrix Reloaded" is a fairly benign use of that enormous power: if you are sucked into a film and don't like it, the worst that happens is that you lose a few hours and the price of a movie ticket.

But the media giants that wield such clout don't always put it to such frivolous use. We are not just plugged into their matrix to be sold movies and other entertainment products. These companies can also plug the nation into news narratives as ubiquitous and lightweight as "The Matrix Reloaded," but with more damaging side effects.

This is what has happened consistently during America's struggle with Osama bin Laden. During the years when Al Qaeda's terrorists were gearing up for 9/11, the media giants were in overdrive selling escapist fare like the Clinton scandals, Gary Condit's sex life and shark attacks. They were all legitimate stories. But just as "The Matrix Reloaded," playing on a record 8,517 screens, crowded most other movies out of the marketplace last weekend, so those entertaining melodramas drove any reports of threatening developments beyond our shores to the periphery of the mass-media news culture.

The media giants took the same tack in banding together to push the administration-dictated narrative of Saddam Hussein — and with the same results. The networks' various productions of "Countdown: Iraq," though as ponderous as "The Matrix Reloaded," were so effective that by the time we went to war, 51 percent of the country, according to a Knight-Ridder poll, believed that Iraqis were among the 9/11 hijackers. It took the bloody re-emergence of Qaeda terrorists in Riyadh two weeks ago to recover the repressed memory that none of the 9/11 terrorists were Iraqis and that most of them were Saudis. And whatever happened to Saddam's arsenal, all those advanced nuclear weapons programs and biological poisons that George W. Bush kept citing as the justification for going to war? Well, sarin today, gone tomorrow. That laundry list of terrors, none of them yet found, vanished from the national consciousness as soon as the cable outlets of AOL Time Warner, Fox and NBC put their muscle behind The Laci Peterson Murder.

The power of the five companies that foster this sequential amnesia is increasing, not declining. In a vote set for June 2, the Federal Communications Commission is expected to relax some of the few ownership restrictions meant to rein them in. Companies like Viacom (which already owns CBS and Paramount) and Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation (which owns Fox and is on its way to controlling the satellite giant DirecTV) are likely to go on shopping sprees for more TV outlets. But who knows or cares? Though liberal and conservative organizations alike, from Common Cause to the National Rifle Association, are protesting this further consolidation of media power, most of the country is oblivious to it. That's partly because the companies that program America's matrix have shut out all but bare-bones coverage of the imminent F.C.C. action, much as the ruling machines in "The Matrix" do not feed their captive humans any truths that might set them free.

If there's a hero in our own Matrix saga, it may be Barry Diller, who is considerably more articulate than Keanu Reeves's Neo, if somewhat less schooled in the martial arts. Mr. Diller, who now runs USA Interactive, has been chairman of Paramount, Vivendi and Fox. With the exception of the semiretired Ted Turner, he is the only show business mogul who doesn't buy the argument that the advent of 500 TV channels and the infinite sites of the Internet ensure alternative entertainment and
news sources. He says that the 500 TV channels will still end up being owned by the same five companies, and that as broadband comes in, the companies that control the fast cable modems will dominate the Web, too. "We will be in a position where our society will be harmed," he said when we spoke last week.

In his view, this concentration of power explains much that has gone awry in our culture, from the decline of TV news to "why movies are bad." They're bad, he says, because they are now "20 rings of power removed" from the top decision makers of these vast companies. "No one cares about them," he says. "They are just commodities to deliver returns." Nor does he buy the argument that these media goliaths stay sharp by being forced to vie in the marketplace.

"The companies don't really compete with each other," he says. "They accommodate each other. Fox movies have to be sold to HBO. Warner cable has to take Fox because Fox has sports teams. They talk only to each other. They don't have to do anything else for anyone else alive." He believes that it would be impossible today for an independent producer like Norman Lear to break in with a TV show as unexpected as "All in the Family" or for a maverick to start a new network, as he did with Fox and Mr. Turner did with CNN. They'd have to cede their ideas to the big companies if they wanted them to fly. Once they did, their concepts would most likely be stripped of the idiosyncrasies that made them exciting in the first place. (You can see how that process works by recalling what CNN was like before Time Warner devoured it.)

But neither Mr. Diller nor anyone else is likely to stop this consolidation of cultural power unless the public knows or cares enough to protest. That hardly seems to be in the cards. We reward mediocre movies with record grosses. We reward tabloid news epics with high ratings. We reward dissembling politicians with high poll ratings. We expect our journalistic media to fictionalize the truth. As others have noted, the most dispiriting aspect of the Jayson Blair scandal may be that even the subjects of his stories usually didn't bother to complain about the lies The New York Times published about them; they just assumed it was standard practice. One way or the other, we all inhabit the Matrix now.