

Under The Matrixscope

The Many Colors

Of The

MATRIX

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The Matrix trilogy was a feature film project conceived, developed and released over a period not less than 7 years between 1996 and 2003. As a result, audiences gradually came to realize that brothers Andy and Larry Wachowski had artistically captured the central timeless questions at the very center of the struggle for power and freedom since the classical periods of Greece in the west and Hinduism and Buddhism in the east. In 2007, Entertainment Weekly cited the Matrix as the #1 science-fiction film of the past 25 years. The movies have also been cited extensively in the National Course in Philosophy of Computer Science – proceedings from the conference. The Wachowski's likely knew that audiences would be many years before disentangling the interwoven strands linking myths and thought experiments borrowed from classical literature. After all, no sooner are we introduced to a conflict in the dialogue between pawns, bishops and knights than something explodes with cars crashing and fight sequences to stimulate our senses. This is why it is advised that first time viewers not examine too closely. Simply enjoy the extravaganza. It will sink in easier. In this Article we will look at one of the most easily overlooked aspects of the making of the trilogy. In doing so, we will also have a firmer grasp on the cultural and psychological wisdom expressed throughout.

Matrix enthusiasts with an interest in how the films were made are aware that the Wachowski's chose to use blue-tinted lenses to shoot sequences in the "real" world and green-tinted lenses for sequences in the Matrix.¹ This in turn required the use of both green screen and blue screen special effects. The bias of the green lenses would make green screen ineffective, and the same was true for blue. Upon closer examination it can be seen the logistical difficulties in production and expense this would impose suggests that the decision was not spurious. There was actually a good reason for using these different lenses, and once we take that into account we no longer need to become literary scholars to understand the movie. But we do need to put on our psychologist's thinking cap. Although many shades and hues can be seen throughout trilogy we will pay special attention to the sharp contrast between the real world (blue) and the Matrix (green).

Consider the gestalt artwork of M.C Escher, or Salvador Dali. Their works are typically characterized as optical illusions, when they are in fact mind benders. They show us how the mind organizes information. We can see more than one image, and in more than one way, not because the ink and canvas move, but because our minds move. We bend the alternating images. They do not bend themselves. Minds bend reality. We can readily see this in artwork. But let me briefly show you the power and speed of your own mind to bend meaning in letters, syllables and words.

[begin misspelled paragraph]

Stduies hvae bene dneo in wihch all of the lettres of wrods wih fuor or mroe letetrs wree scrmabled in a mesasge, levaing olny the fisrt and lsat letetrs in palce. Intersetingly, msot redaers hvae litlte or no dififculty undertsanding the mesasge. Thees stduies illutsrate taht gievn the redaer's familairity with the lanugage, the mesasge need not 'mkae' sesne, becuase unconsciously the redaer is actaully the mkaer.

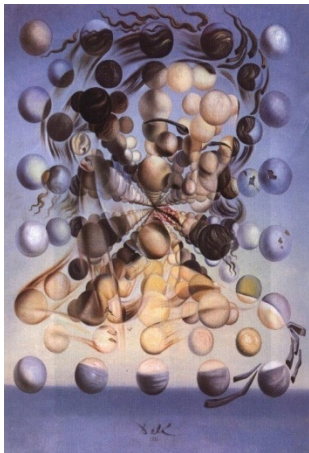
[end misspelled paragraph]

*“Good! Adaptation...Improvisation. But your weakness is not your technique...You’re faster than that. Don’t **think** you are. **Know** you are.”*
~Morpheus

In the example above your mind deftly and quickly reorganized the information until it made sense to you. The most fascinating thing about consciousness is that we are most often unconscious of it. After all, as Morpheus might ask, do you think that is air you are reading? Despite the noises of city streets and bright neon lights we casually walk and negotiate obstacles all while conversing on our cell phones just as easily. When asked by Ken Wilbur what he wanted audiences to think about when watching the Matrix, Larry Wachowski replied with an audible smirk, “Everything.”

“The whole of science is nothing more than a refinement of everyday thinking. It is for this reason that the critical thinking of the physicist cannot possibly be restricted to the examination of the concepts of his own specific field. He cannot proceed without considering critically a much more difficult problem, the problem of analyzing the nature of everyday thinking.”
~Albert Einstein

This brings to my mind the cliché that one often sees the world through rose-colored lenses. If we start from the premise that both the Matrix and Zion represent the separation of body from mind, and are really just two different ways of looking at the same world,



then we can imagine the kind of conflict that emerges between different cultures. Confusion stems from the fact that the movies operate at once on different orders of consciousness – the individual and the collective. Neo is the central protagonist, because he is the only one who gradually comes to converge the two worlds into The One world. Everyone both in Zion and the Matrix notice something about him, which is why he appears priestly when in the Matrix, and why people gather to bring him gifts in Zion. When the natives of Zion place gifts at his feet, they do not see a battle weary warrior in rags. They see that sharply-dressed scholarly figure that stands up to tyranny. He at once denies knowing anything, yet seems to know everything.

Despite the special effects and futuristic trappings all science fiction speaks to contemporary audiences. Television sets are seen frequently when in the Matrix due to the fact that television makes things and events larger than life itself – *hyper-reality*. In fact, Morpheus uses an antique television to update Neo before his training. During one escape scene Neo, Trinity, Switch, and Apoc find themselves at Cypher’s mercy in a room filled with television sets. Later, Neo and the Architect are in a room filled with television screens. The Matrix represents the realm of the communal mind where people see in their neighbors only the “projection of their digital selves.” Celebrities and even the consent of the governed can be manufactured. Television is a centralizing technology, because it sets that larger context whereby our lives are given meaning. By contrast, the Internet is democratizing and decentralizing technology that provides a level playing field for political engagement at the individual level; therefore, the astute computer hacker is a threat to centralized authority. This has been a recurring theme since Matthew Broderick starred as a mischievous youth in *War Games* (1983).



Who is Agent Smith? He is Neo’s opposite, but in what way? Just as the natives of Zion and the helpless citizens of the Matrix are opposites. So, what makes Neo different? It starts when in addition to Neo’s deftness in handling agents, he is capable of jacking in and out of the Matrix at will. To understand this we have to ignore the wardrobe, technical apparatus and background trappings of the movies and realize that the People are in conflict with themselves. They live one way (blue) while dreaming another (green). Fear is the wedge. Those few people who have escaped the *agentic state* of thought control must still evade the sentinels, which are militant in nature; therefore people live self-repressed dual lives publicly as waiters, office workers and the like, while cheering and even assisting the rebels under their breath.ⁱⁱ The sentinels are the physical manifestation of the agents (long arms of the law). Each and every player is potentially either a sentinel (soldier) or agent (demagogue). Everyone wants the same thing (peace), but we do not believe in ourselves. The first casualty of war is truth. The second casualty is trust. The “middle” class are politically disengaged, but are gradually disappearing. The world is more sharply divided into ‘us’ and ‘them’, haves and have-nots, those who want change and those who don’t; hence, revolution is, inevitable. The word “inevitable” is repeated often by Smith.

*“You are either one of us, or one of them...
...A sentinel for every man woman and child in Zion?
Sounds like the thinking of a machine to me.”
~Morpheus*

Right between Reloaded and Revolutions Neo actually stops a sentinel in his tracks. Then immediately passes out, not to recover until Trinity risks all to free him from Mobile (Limbo) Avenue. At about the same time Agent Smith has somehow escaped the Matrix into the body of Bane (curse). So, what’s happening here?

“Something’s Different.”

~Neo

Worlds are colliding. Lenses are merging for Neo and Smith. Smith and Neo represent the same person living in two worlds. Ultimately, either Neo or Smith will have the last Logos (Greek for Word). Aboard the Logos Neo and Bane (Smith) fight. But notice there are no martial arts here. The fight is more visceral and brutal. This is a battle for survival, for the Self.

“That’s it, Mr. Anderson. Look past the flesh, look through the soft gelatin of these dull cow eyes and see your enemy.”

~Bane

As a result, Neo loses his eyes and is left only with his ‘I.’ Neo has just made a significant transition following his conflict with Bane. He now knows how it must end. Where he once saw the universe digitally, as somehow comprised of atoms, bits, symbols and words, he now sees the universe as a continuous field or whole – a sea of light. This is exactly how the theoretical physicist grasps Relativity – as a field of perception. As the Buddhists would say, once one has mastered technique the goal is to have no technique. Neo has separated from symbolic order of things. Now, he is ready to face the Smith that rules the communal mind in a public battle. But Trinity must get the Word to the Deus ex Machina, which is as far as she can go. Her very name expresses the convergence of mind, body and spirit. The Deus ex Machina is the story teller within. Neo jacks in at will. Here, the spectators (Smith clones) see Neo and Smith as the projections of their digital selves and the battle seems like that occurring between titans on television. It could be argued that the fight sequences on the Logos and in the stormy streets of the matrix are actually the same fight seen from different lenses or perspectives – one public, the other private. Smith was always right, as Neo acknowledges in his final moments. But Smith had no idea how right he was. Throughout the trilogy Smith had been the Teflon demagogue in the eyes of the public with not a hair out of place. Neo already knew his truisms and logic could not challenge force. So, he only needed to show the world what it would take to leave Smith covered in mud. In that crater the fight was now beneath even the respect of the clones. And the “inevitability” of their convergence revealed a paradox at the Heart O’ The City over mind-body dualism.

“Why, why Mr. Anderson? Why do you do it?”

~Agent Smith

“Because I choose.”

~Neo

The question all along had been over Fate v. Free “WIL.” Do we really have a choice? The answer is yes, but only after having shed our fear. The difference between the demagogue and the philosopher is most clear in how each faces mortality. Smith becomes confused. Neo doesn’t acquiesce under Smith’s silver tongue. One cannot kill the other, because they are the same person fighting himself. They can only merge. Now Smith is

afraid, and in a blinding flash of light all becomes whole. The prophecy for both Smith and Neo was the same, except that for Neo it would be self-fulfilling, while for Smith it would be self-defeating.

Reality, whatever it is, is all there is. You can deny it, or you can embrace it, but you can't escape it. That is the choice. The long history of philosophy is said to be mere footnotes of Plato. In particular, Plato's Republic and the Allegory of the Cave, which has taken many



forms in historical literature to the Brain in a vat hypothesis today. The poetic irony in Plato's 2,500 year old allegory is that it has clearly presaged the modern cinema. In it Socrates poses an interesting thought experiment: Imagine people chained to the floor deep within a cave. All are made to face a wall on which is a ceaseless dance of flickering shadows. At the mouth of the cave is a fire, and atop and in between this fire and the prisoners is a walkway with a procession of people and objects. It is their shadows that are cast on the wall. It is no great leap to recognize the similarities in this scenario and the modern cinema, if we simply recognize that the chains are the cinematic trappings of color, action, drama, musical score, etc... But what Socrates wants to know is just exactly what happens when one prisoner escapes this prison for his mind and exits the cave? He will find a much brighter, larger more colorful and varied world – natural philosophy. So then what will happen if he returns and descends into the cave, stands between the wall and his fellow prisoners waving his arms to alert them of this larger world? Will they listen, or will they call for the usher (Agent Smith)?

The point being made at the individual order of consciousness is that the mind (subject of consciousness) and the external world (object of consciousness) are mediated by our physiology. That is to say, either reality is just excited neurons, or there is an external reality "mediated" by our neurons. Even a brain in a vat requires a vat. Metaphysics and epistemology represent the investigation into how we can know of an external world. That there is an external world we have no doubt. What it is, however, we can never know through direct anecdotal experience alone. Take for example James Clerk Maxwell. Following in the footsteps of many investigators of that "invisible fluid" known as electricity, he correctly deduced that Electricity, Magnetism and Light were related phenomena. Maxwell's famous equations introduced the world to the Electromagnetic Spectrum, and light became this vast band of frequencies, out of which our eyes can detect only a very fine rainbow of colors. The universe is a sea of light, just as Neo concluded, and this understanding has made modern astrophysics and particle physics possible. Through mathematics (kung fu) we come to know reality in ways otherwise completely undetectable to sense experience, because reality isn't in the objects being observed. Rather, it is in the kinds of time-space relationships we can imagine and reduce to the symbolic order of mathematical systems.

*"I want to show you a world without borders or boundaries,
where anything is possible."*

~Neo

We as individuals struggle at once for both our individuality and acceptance. The golden thread of reason associated with the metaphor of the labyrinth or Matrix in Greek mythology requires that we follow the Wachowski's white rabbit through the fundamental questions of knowledge, conduct and governance. The first question concerns how we know what we know, and can we really know anything? Once we wrestle with this question, perhaps over many years we come to express and except a certain body of knowledge and ways of investigating and knowing. From there we examine human behavior and address questions of nature and nurture. Out of this we arrive at an ethos, or realm of ethical conduct, which can be understood in terms of etiquette, custom and law. Only after these questions have been thoroughly considered can we even begin to discuss governance.

*"O King, for traveling over the country, there are royal roads
and roads for common citizens; but in geometry there is one road for all."*

~Menaechmus (4th century BC)

when asked by his student Alexander the Great for a shortcut to geometry.

Links of special interest

http://www.idt.mdh.se/~gdc/PI_04/proceedings.pdf

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gestalt_psychology

<http://daphne.palomar.edu/design/gestalt.html>

http://www.ideologiesofwar.com/docs/rk_think.htm

<http://leonardo.info/isast/articles/behrens.html>

<http://www.usask.ca/education/coursework/skaalid/theory/gestalt/gestalt.htm>

The Many Meanings of The Matrix: an interview with Larry Wachowski

<http://www.matrixfans.net/symbolism/meanings.php>

This link is included, because it displays an astrological chart in reference to the biography of Salvador Dali. The significance of the chart is the symbol for Pluto, which is also the map of The Matrix city.

<http://www.astrotheme.fr/en/portraits/V5w9Rfu55p7k.htm>

“It represents dictators, sadistic people, violent characters, is instinctive and powerful but also mysterious with hidden strengths.”

ⁱ <http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Theater/9175/neo/matrixcolors.html>

ⁱⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milgram_experiment

Stanley Milgram’s Obedience to Authority was the groundbreaking psychological study in the 1960’s-70’s that explained how an “agentic state” is imposed on ordinary citizens to suppress individuality and augment conformity to authoritarian ideologies. Milgram found that individuals who were more educated and independently minded were also more resistant to imposed authority when called upon to defy their own conscience, while those who were less educated and given to suggestion could be made to act with extreme prejudice and violence towards people with whom they are unfamiliar.