

BEING IN THE MATRIX: AN EXAMPLE OF CINEMATIC EDUCATION IN PHILOSOPHY

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บทความนี้ได้ตรวจสอบเงื่อนไขของมนุษย์ดังภาพที่ฉายปรากฏในภาพยนตร์ไตรภาคเรื่อง “The Matrix” ยิ่งไปกว่านั้น บทความนี้ได้แสดงให้เห็นถึงการมีส่วนร่วมของภาพยนตร์ในการนำเสนอเกี่ยวกับด้านการศึกษาโดยคำนึงถึงบทวิพากษ์ที่มีต่อชีวิตร่วมสมัย ภาพยนตร์ได้สะท้อนถึงการคุกคามต่อเสรีภาพที่ผู้ชมประสบพบเห็นในโลกของความเป็นจริงในปัจจุบัน ซึ่งต้องพึ่งพิงเครื่องจักรและอุปกรณ์อิเล็กทรอนิกส์ต่างๆ ภาพยนตร์ได้นำเสนอตัวอย่างของปรัชญาประยุกต์ที่ทำให้เป็นที่รู้จักในวงกว้าง เนื้อหาหลักๆ ทางด้านปรัชญาที่ถูกใช้ในการดำเนินเรื่องได้แก่ - ความเป็นจริง การดำรงอยู่ ความรู้ ความเชื่อ เจตจำนงเสรี เหตุวิสัยและบทวิพากษ์ทางวัฒนธรรม - ภาพยนตร์ได้ทำให้เนื้อหาต่างๆ เหล่านี้เข้าถึงได้ในวงกว้างในหมู่ผู้ชมแม้ว่าในบางคราวการนำเสนอ จะทำให้ดูง่ายและมีความบกพร่องบ้าง ผู้เขียนก็ยังถือว่าผู้ศึกษาปรัชญาควรที่จะยินดีรับไว้พิจารณา

Abstract

This paper examines the human condition as portrayed in the film trilogy “The Matrix”. Furthermore it shows the relevance of the movie’s educational contribution with regard to its criticism of contemporary life. The film reflects current threats to freedom experienced by movie-goers in a “real” world, heavily dependent on machines and electronic devices. It provides an example of an applied popularized philosophy. It incorporates philosophical themes in the plot – reality, existence, knowledge, belief, free will, determinism and cultural

critique – and makes these themes approachable and palatable for a wider audience. I will argue that such contributions, though sometimes simplified or even flawed, should be welcomed by educators of philosophy.

“...you are not actually mammals... You are a plague.”

Agent Smith

Structure and Scope of this Paper

The following glance at the current problem of education and standing of philosophy as an academic discipline will be followed by a compressed narration of the trilogy's core plot. However, the narration will concentrate mainly on the first installment. This paper therefore will analyze the human being and its life or existence in the Matrix simulated world and in the underground real world (the “desert of the real”). After highlighting some philosophical themes in the trilogy finally ‘being in the Matrix’ will be compared with being in our present day to day life.

The three movies in the trilogy are “*The Matrix*” (1999), “*The Matrix Reloaded*” (2003), and “*The Matrix Revolutions*” (2003) directed by the brothers Larry and Andy Wachowsky. “*The Matrix*” – italicized and in inverted commas – refers to the movie trilogy; the Matrix -with a capital non-italicized “M” signifies the software-hardware-system in the films. All three movies contain action scenes (with very limited philosophical significance) and dialogues – some of which bear philosophical implications. Some of the statements in the movies' dialogues are based on the (partly misunderstood or misconceptualized) writings of the French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard.¹ However, I will not treat the heritage or reception of Baudrillard's philosophy in the movie, since my aim is to concentrate on the issues mentioned above. Besides that I will overlook logical inconsistencies in the movie's storyline; and – although this is an interesting issue in this trilogy – I will refrain from delving into the free-will/determinism debate. Also, as I identify and describe the “human existence” or being as portrayed in the trilogy, I will not explore being in the Trainstation, which is a plot device used to interface “real world” and

the Matrix.

What should be added here – but will not be discussed further since it departs from the “applied philosophy” thrust of my argument – are the further ontological possibilities for the Matrix: The Matrix could be a dream, thought, or thought experiment of a single person (which it was in a way since the initial stage of the plot of the movie emerged from a single mind – the one of its author): In such a scenario everything we see does not really happen as a story, but is the (recorded) projection of one single mind.² Alternatively, it could be imagined that there exist no minds or real human beings in and outside the Matrix – meaning that absolutely everything is a computer simulation, perhaps appearing on a screen for the entertainment of some external “whomever” or “whatever”.

Philosophy and its Education

Our present time (2009) is marked by economic downturns or slowdowns in different parts of the world across many industries and economic sectors. This slowdown impacts on education in so far as university programs which are seen by some as too costly are closed down to save financial resources. Philosophy, especially in some parts of Europe, Great Britain, and the US, is among the usual targets.³

There seem to be two important approaches advocated to combat this decline of the humanities in general and philosophy in particular:

One approach suggests that professional philosophers researching and teaching in the field must make philosophy more relevant to life. It must directly tackle problems which individuals face in day-to-day existence. Furthermore philosophy should more extensively and intensively pick up worrisome issues like globalization, human rights, environmental problems, security from (state) terrorism, and health issues like HIV and AIDS. Besides that, so the argument goes, more philosophical literature should be accessible and palatable to non-philosophers and even non-academics.

The other approach to combat a decline of humanities in general and philosophy in particular addresses the private and business sectors. The general public and especially corporate executives must now, in this time of economic crisis, be made to understand that many values such as the 'good life' are not mainly related to cash-in-hand pragmatics. Instead the 'payoff' might be, in the long run, perhaps in the mid-range, and perhaps even sometimes immediately (but rather unnoticed). These higher values from a liberal education contribute to the welfare of human beings and societies in manifold and subtle ways. Philosophy – it is argued – provides such benefits. Examples of philosophical issues discussed, compared, challenged and applied are the meaning of life, ethical questions related to medicine, life and death, terrorism, war and peace, and of course problems which concern truth, knowledge and reality in media and virtual reality.

From my own experience of researching and teaching philosophy while living among different cultures, I have come to endorse both the above mentioned arguments: I agree, on the one hand philosophy must be presented as relevant to people's lives and pertinent to their problems. On the other hand, awareness of philosophy's importance and relevance to the public and the corporate world must be increased. Philosophers who tackle topical problems in their research contribute to narrowing the gap between academia and the public. Authors and artists who try to popularize philosophical approaches (even if they have misunderstood or misrepresented a philosophical concept or a philosopher) yet contribute to this objective. My point is that – bluntly speaking – it is more important for people to like thinking about philosophical issues than it is for them to 'get it right' from the onset in all its subtleties.⁴ If those individuals at least begin along the path of thinking more deeply, then there is a good chance they will eventually discover their misunderstandings. To give an example from another field of study: If someone draws my attention toward an environmental issue by an intriguing yet faulty ecological explanation, she has at the least succeeded in drawing my attention. Perhaps my interest will draw me along to a deeper understanding of issues concerning the threats to nature which might even lead to my adopting ecologically sustainable practices in day-to-day life.

After highlighting a few pertinent issues in the education of phi-

losophy as an academic discipline nowadays I now want to elucidate certain elements in the Matrix trilogy's plot.

The Plot

It is the year 2199 and the majority of humanity is enslaved by a machine-computer-system, called the "Matrix" – a "*neuralinteractive simulation*" of a world which no longer exists (Wachowski 1998, 39).

The Matrix gives and takes: Most humans are not born anymore but "planted" in "fields" and then maintained in tube shaped pods: "*Human beings are no longer born; we are grown*" (Wachowski 1998, 41). Those containers are filled with a conserving and life maintaining liquid. Certain parts of the human bodies are fitted with flexible pipes and wires (the scene recalls human embryos) so that the computer-machines can use human body-heat and bioelectric energy to maintain themselves and the software programs of the Matrix. Hence, the Matrix 'takes'. However, each human mind is supplied with a vivid computer simulation – one which encompasses a more or less individual life and life history in a more or less familiar world and world history – the world of humanity before the machines. But this familiar world exists only as computer program inside the Matrix and thereby only as sense data for the mind in each human being. Hence, the matrix 'gives'.

While the majority of 'humanity' is trapped in this machine-computer-world and the individuals are deceived with life-simulating-software programs, there exists also a small minority of "free" human beings. These humans are free in the sense that they are not trapped (anymore) in the Matrix. But they are rebels, and have won only a rebel's relative freedom. They can only operate underground, in this case quite literally, deep beneath the surface of the earth in the "real" world. The hub of this reality is an enclave-refuge named Zion – a cave like city which, despite the relative liberty of the human beings there, heavily depends on life supporting technology; for example, machines which recycle or produce oxygen, water and electric energy (Wachowski 2001, 40-42). The government of Zion also has a number of spaceship-like hovering vessels which are used to locate and 'rescue' certain people deemed likewise rebellious, who were

born and raised in the locked computer machine world of the Matrix. The government of Zion plans to ultimately destroy the Matrix thereby liberating humanity.

Flashbacks in dialogues during the first part of the movie explain how the Matrix was established:

In 1999 humans had somehow lost control over their machines and computers. The “Matrix” emerged, which, by bringing the majority of humans under its control, brought an end to humanity’s wars and the destruction of nature. Some remaining free humans attempted to cut off the machines’ solar power supply by darkening the sky, which led to an almost entire destruction of nature. It also led to the machines’ shift from solar power to human bio-electric and human bio-heat power (thereby initiating the enslavement described above). Human lives thus are reduced to lives which are comparable to those of cultivated plants: “*human beings are no longer born; we are grown*” (Wachowski 1998, 41).

Now, the year 2199, the rebels intend to defeat at least some of the Matrix’s programs and destroy parts of the system within the Matrix itself. According to a “prophecy” there will emerge a crucial figure – “the One” (whose Name, as we will see later, is Neo) – who will free the whole of humanity from the Matrix, thus ending the war between Zion and the Matrix. This prophecy was made by the “Oracle”, a woman who is in fact a program, not a human mind, and is part of the Matrix. The “Oracle” program *perpetuates* anomaly and *is* itself a rebellious anomaly, and as such (in spite of being a program *in* the Matrix) sides with the rebels. This ‘yin and yang’ principle (this splinter of rebellious irregularity embedded within the rule, order and suppression of the Matrix) is, mirrored on the rebel side by a “freed” human traitor (Cypher) – who betrays his comrades because he prefers to be “*reinserted*” into the Matrix to lead a life of simulated pleasure – since “*ignorance is bliss*” (Wachowski 1998, 61).⁵

As the plot progresses, “the One” (Neo) is freed by rebels from

the Matrix (the important two characters are Trinity, the first mate of the hovercraft Nebuchadnezzar, and Morpheus (Gr. god of dreams) its captain. Morpheus:

"When the Matrix was first built there was a man born inside that had the ability to change what he wanted, to remake the Matrix as he saw fit. It was this man that freed the first of us and taught us the truth; as long as the Matrix exists, the human race will never be free. When he died, the Oracle prophesied his return and envisioned that his coming would hail the destruction of the Matrix, an end to the war and freedom for our people. That is why there are those of us that have spent our entire lives searching the Matrix, looking for him". (Wachowski 1998, 43-44)

His new ('neophyte') name in the real (underground) world is Neo (Gr. "New"; symbolically meaning new to the real world – also an anagram of 'one'), which was also his pseudonym as a hacker in the Matrix. His 'real name', as a Matrix program – and software programmer – was Thomas A. Anderson. Morpheus begins to tell Neo the truth about existence inside and outside the Matrix. One of the philosophical dialogues in the first part of the trilogy focuses on the notion of existence, being, reality and life. The dialogue runs between Neo and Morpheus, the man who searched for him and freed him from the tube shaped pods, and life in the Matrix.

The philosophical content of this dialogue is part of the following section in which I turn to the identification and description of the human condition in the trilogy, concentrating primarily on the first installment (mostly utilizing the narrative of the dialogues). I will approach the human condition through the concept of "being" (that is human existence) in the Matrix: In the hardware, in the software, and in the "real world" (the desert of the real).⁶

Being in the Matrix' Hardware

To use the modern IT jargon, the Matrix can be thought of as analogous to both software and hardware. The hardware provides the foundation for the Matrix' software programs. It is comprised of the Machine Mainframe, which includes the 'engine' and 'control centre' of the Matrix; all the mechanical entities and machines which physically "plant", breed, maintain, exploit, and 'recycle' human beings; the physical security systems of the Matrix (e.g., the "sentinels" or "squids"/"crabs"); and all other physical but non-human aspects of the Matrix. However, it could be argued that the 'human batteries' are part of the hardware as well, since the human body is an essential element of the Matrix like the torchlight's battery. Although the torch is still a torch without the batteries, yet it is not a functioning torch.

Inserted in the Matrix, the human being is deprived of its full 'humanity'. The body is reduced to a cultivated plant or a milk-producing cow, a fixed animal. Unlike in Nietzsche's definition (*der Mensch ist das "nicht festgestellte Tier"*) the human being in the Matrix' hardware is not an "undefined" and "unfixed" but a defined, confined and fixed animal. He has no "homesickness without home" ("*Heimweh ohne Heim*"), but he has a simulated home without homesickness.⁷ This is signified by a forced separation of body and mind (to be discussed further in the next section); the spatial fixation of the body: like an embryo it is 'fixed' in and 'connected' to the womb of a mother, but in the Matrix the energy flows from the smaller to the bigger entity not vice versa; the exploitation of the body for power generation; forced dependency; forced germination/procreation; and forced life termination – as though the Matrix 'plays God', deciding when further abuse is no longer productive for the Matrix (I will later compare these concepts to our own developed world). Software programs have to take care of the brain's function and the mind's representations in such a way that the mind supports the body to continue its energy producing activity. The human being in the Matrix – so Morpheus – is a battery for maintaining the Matrix' power supply.

The imprisonment and exploitation of the human being is a terrorizing act. The human body is forced to produce energy until it is not efficient any more; only then will the body be 'freed' – not liberated, but

recycled: It will be dissolved for the continuing nutrition of the remaining bodies connected, life-long, to the Matrix. So the cycle of terror is limitless in time, never seeming to end.

Being in the Matrix' Software

The Matrix is a prison – a computer generated and controlled dream world. It is omnipresent, and it maintains (almost) complete surveillance. According to Morpheus:

“The Matrix is everywhere, it’s all around us, here even in this room. You can see it out your window or on your television. You feel it when you go to work, or go to church or pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth... you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else, you were born into bondage, kept inside a prison that you cannot smell, taste, or touch. A prison for your mind”.
(1998, 29)

The Matrix' software produces an illusion via neural-interactive-simulation programs. These are a) different person-programs which only appear as human beings to those who are “plugged into” the Matrix (that is to say, without corresponding to a ‘real’ human); b) simulations of all the lives of ‘individuals’ (including attitudes, perceptions, thoughts and emotions) of those plugged into the Matrix; and c) the rest of the Matrix' simulated world, some kind of operating system. For each human plugged permanently into the Matrix a program exists (cf. *b* above) which simulates life (lifestyle, life history, human interactions, emotions etc.). But not necessarily for each simulated life or program does a ‘real’ human being exist: Some programs (cf. *a* above) do not correspond to a human being, but are only programs (eg, the original Agents, the Oracle, the Architect, Sati etc., see Wachowski 2001, 49-50). Here it might be cautioned that what I have just described is an interpretation – one that could be challenged by saying that group a) programs do not exist, and that only group

b) programs exist. This would mean that for every program which simulates the life of a human being also a human body-counterpart exists. However, I will not pursue that further since there is little evidence for either strand of argumentation. Moreover, the issue is of minor significance to my purposes (see “Scope and Structure” above).

One salient aspect of the human existence in the Matrix is the condition of the human mind. The mind - that is, of a human permanently plugged into the Matrix - is overridden or ‘highjacked’ by one of the Matrix’ programs. The ‘real’ human being is deceived by this program which simulates everything normally thought, felt, perceived and/or dreamed. The majority (ninety-nine percent) of humans accept this since from their point of view, unaware of the simulation, they believe that they quite obviously have choices in their world. But the one percent minority which does not accept the projection of a Matrix-program into their minds are detected by the matrix as a threat - a systemic anomaly creating the possibility of rebellion (Wachowski 2001, 120). Those members of this one percent anomalous minority have very strong feelings that there is something wrong with the ‘world’ in which they ‘live’. They are not in a position to distinguish clearly between dreaming and being awake; or between real and unreal. Says Morpheus: “*What is real? How do you define real? If you’re talking about what you feel, taste, smell, or see, then real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain*” (Wachowski 1998, 39). In one of the early pieces of dialogue Morpheus challenges Neo’s perception of reality: Reality is nothing more than electrical signals; reality is not real, it is like a dream: “What if you were unable to wake from that dream, Neo? How would you know the difference between the dreamworld and the real world?” (Wachowski 1998, 31). While the other ninety-nine percent of human beings in the Matrix take this dream (or more technically, these electronic signals) - for reality, humans of the one percent anomalous minority try to wake up from what they suspect could be a dream. Early in the first film, the imperative “wake up!” appeared to the yet-naïve Neo on his computer screen - apparently written by someone outside the Matrix in the real underground world (perhaps Morpheus or Trinity). At that time Neo’s initial aim was simply to find out what people really meant when they spoke of the Matrix.

Being in the *Desert of the Real*

The “desert of the real” is the environmentally destroyed planet earth. Human beings live in the ‘bowels’ of the planet in an underground world situated in the crust or even mantle of the earth – since the surface is uninhabitable due to the lack of sunlight, unbearable climate conditions and environmental destruction. The real world has become a desert: The “desert of the real”.

As already mentioned above, human beings are of two groups. The humans plugged permanently into the Matrix are more parts of the Matrix than they are parts of the ‘real world’. They are physically, but even more so mentally incorporated into the Matrix, and most importantly, do not know *anything* about the ‘real world’ and their physically paralyzed, embryonic, bath-tub-bound existence. Beings – either unplugged from or born outside of the Matrix – can survive, but there are essential conditions for their survival:

a) Protection from the Terror of the Matrix:

The Matrix’s strategy is to fight the one percent anomaly by destroying it. Thus the Matrix pursues this goal with software and hardware terror. Hardware terror is executed by “sentinels” which are programmed to physically destroy humans living in the real world. To protect themselves most humans of the real world live in the underground enclave Zion. Some of them venture outside the enclave on hovering metallic vessels or crafts. Both the enclave and the hovering fleet are equipped with weaponry for self-defense from the terrorizing physical attacks initiated by the Matrix’ sentinels.

Another danger imposed on these real-world humans by the Matrix is on the software level in the virtual world of the Matrix: Now and then, these human rebels will reinsert themselves into the matrix software world in order to pursue their goals. The Matrix is programmed to protect its software with the help of “agents”: Agents are “*sentient programs. They can move in and out of any software still hardwired to their system. That means that anyone that we haven’t unplugged is potentially an Agent. Inside the Matrix, they are everyone and they are no one*” (Wachowski 1998, 63). Agents protect the Matrix: They try not to

let people escape, at least not as alive humans (rather metamorphosed, as agents). Agents cannot be defeated by humans – except by the One, Neo (he seems not only to transcend human abilities – at least when being plugged into the Matrix, and later also outside the Matrix – but also the abilities of the Matrix software itself). Agents are ‘killer programs’ whose intention is to eliminate the one percent anomaly in (and in later installments of the trilogy, also outside) the Matrix.

Agents pose a threat to rebels when they are plugged into the Matrix, but this is not simply a virtual threat to the human mind, but also a physical threat to the body. Consider, Neo: “If you are killed in the Matrix, do you die here?” Morpheus: “The body cannot live without the mind” (Wachowski 1998, 52). As we see later, not only does Neo as human and superhuman transcend the programs of the Matrix, but also a Matrix program transcends the mind of a human outside the Matrix. This happens when Agent Smith duplicates himself by assimilating the human Bane (a rebel who was temporarily plugged into the Matrix) thus ‘overwriting’ his mind with the ‘Smith’ program. Later this ‘Smith’ program will be transferred outside the Matrix (via telephone transmission – a plot device in the movie) into the biological body of Bane. This is how a real human being’s mind – although the body being outside the Matrix – was overwritten by the program Smith. The body is still real, but the mind is a program coming from the Matrix. Thus, a new element is added to the human condition. Now, a person, in this case the ‘person’ “Smith/Bane”, can be divided, body from mind, in this case, into body-Bane and mind-Smith. “Smith/Bane” transcends the Matrix’ programs, due to the fact that the program Smith transcended the Matrix’ limits by ‘overwriting’ a so far free human mind, not by killing Bane but by transgressing from the Matrix into the “desert of the real” and by assimilating him. Here the Matrix transcends itself and, if left unchecked, would have entered into the next stage of terror: Overwriting the minds of the rebels, the one percent anomalous minority *outside* the Matrix (if not stopped by Neo).

b) Machine-Man-Symbiosis:

Another element of the human condition in the real world is the machine-man symbiosis (this point was raised when explaining the plot above). Human survival is absolutely dependent on the reliable function-

ing of life-support machines which recycle and produce water, oxygen and electricity. While these machines would, of course, not exist without humans, it is also true that human life – at that stage of human history in the film – is impossible without those machines.

c) Political Structure and Social Network:

Just as in all times since the dawn of humanity, people outside the Matrix now have to defend their lives; but not against hungry beasts or neighboring cannibals. Instead they battle terrorizing machines. In both circumstances the political structure and social network – in ancient Greek times, for example, the polis; and in the film trilogy, Zion – provides this organized defense. Thus the human condition outside the Matrix is primarily characterized by challenge and terror. The citizens of Zion experience a war-like situation due to the terrorizing threats of the Matrix. Life is not idyllic but constantly in danger.

Educational Values of “*The Matrix*” Philosophical Implications

The creators of the movie trilogy “*The Matrix*” try to tell us that the Matrix is a consequence of a combination of two human ‘cultural achievements’: The invention, production and wide distribution of high-tech machines and artificial intelligence on the one hand; and the related consequence of unsustainable consumption and the destruction of nature, on the other. The Matrix is an almost omnipresent and omnipotent Frankenstein: An autopoietic daemon, invented and invited by the human race, which will not stop until a ‘superhuman’ being will stop it. It evokes the image of the brooms being stopped by the master sorcerer in Goethe’s poem *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*. The Matrix’ agents, the Smiths, are like the mythical dragons which multiply their heads once the neck is cut by the hero’s sword. But not the human being made the consequent, consistent and systematic attempt to save the planet – which he destroyed. Here is a twisted retribution: The Matrix, paralyzes nature’s destroyer and abuses the human race as humans had abused nature before. For humans the Matrix is an evil God or a machine-Devil. For nature, machines – artificial creations like those which had previously destroyed it – now

become the unlikely ally, since the human race is the terminal disease of the planet by both accounts. To take it one step further, perhaps the human race is even a *sexually transmitted* disease, since overpopulation and the accompanying destruction of nature were only possible by human procreation.... until the Matrix stops this procreation and replaces it by artificial but controlled and systematic fertilization. Consider the words of Agent Smith:

I'd like to share a revelation that I've had during my time here. It came to me when I tried to classify your species. I've realized that you are not actually mammals. [...] Every mammal on this planet instinctively develops a natural equilibrium with the surrounding environment. But you humans do not. [...] You move to an area and you multiply and multiply until every natural resource is consumed and the only way you can survive is to spread to another area. [...] There is another organism on this planet that follows the same pattern. Do you know what it is? A virus. [...] Human beings are a disease, a cancer of this planet. You are a plague. And we are... the cure. (Wachowski 1998, 97-98)

Human's terror on nature is avenged by the Matrix. In a way the Matrix is not so different than humans: consequent and systematic, intelligent, creative, highly developed, almost unbeatable and unstoppable, powerful, destructive, bellicose and mainly concerned about its own well being.

But the philosophical lesson goes deeper than the insinuation that it might be too late to save nature. Related to this environmental ethical issue, the movie trilogy also presents philosophic-anthropological implications: It suggests Friedrich Nietzsche might be right in stating that the human being is the dark cloud which has to be overcome by the superhuman, which in Nietzsche's allegory is a "flash": "*Der Blitz aus der dunklen Wolke Mensch*" (Nietzsche 1988, 17). Further, it suggests Sade and Hobbes might be right in their "negative anthropology": Human nature is

essentially evil, or at least bad (exceptions might prove the rule).

Moreover, the Matrix trilogy suggests a not-so-obvious epistemic line of thought in showing that the act of believing might transcend rules, laws and knowledge. If we take this idea one step further, the implications are for a positive constructivism: Especially in the recent economical world wide crisis, it seems that many people have lost faith in the possibility of the “good world”. The Matrix trilogy – in contrast to the undercurrent implicit human negativity – suggests it is precisely more faith that maybe needed – not necessarily in God, gods, or variations of that theme, but faith in the simple fact that many things in which we believe, which also potentially can be achieved will one day be achieved in fact. Faith is an essential ingredient to change reality. Current placebo research provides strong evidence for the assumption that belief can alter reality.

On the other hand the film also teaches us something of the relativity of reality, truth, and knowledge. Who really knows if what we perceive is less real and less true than it appears to be? Who can say if representations in the media mirror the truth or are a type of “simulation” based on lies? Especially the new media can deceive professionally.

Furthermore, one also finds a dimension of cultural critique implied in the depiction of humans permanently plugged into the Matrix. The Matrix could be compared with today’s autopoietic systemic conglomerate of medical and chemical industry, insurance companies, banks, investment firms, transnational corporations with their well researched marketing and advertising strategies – which enslave a number of average consumers and workers, who are working to earn enough money to buy the products they help to produce. Addicted to consumption intensive lifestyles, bound by contracts with insurance companies and banks, the average worker-consumer is nearly as paralyzed in his situation as the bodies trapped in the Matrix’ bath-tubs. Furthermore, entertained by meaningless soap operas, sitcoms, sport games, videogames; dependent on tax generating (and thus legal) drugs like junk-food, sweets, coffee, alcohol and sedatives or neuroleptics; the average consumer-worker is not unlike the deceived human plugged into the matrix: Nothing more than an addicted, sedated, paralyzed, infantilized being, unaware that there might be a world beyond the cave of this autopoietic systemic conglomerate, from which there is still a possibility to wake up.

Of course, one must understand that “*most of these people are not ready to be unplugged and many of them are so inured, so hopelessly dependent on the system that they will fight to protect it*” (Wachowski 1998, 53). Since for them “*the Matrix can be more real than this world*”. (Wachowski 1998, 87). The film even suggests that a higher power is needed to end wars and destruction of nature; and that seems only to happen if humanity is enslaved.

With such ideas this mainstream Hollywood product, manages to deliver to the audience one of the central issues of the Western philosophic tradition in a palatable way; we still – or even more today – live in Plato’s cave: Glaukon: “...*they are strange prisoners*”. Socrates: “*Like ourselves...*” (515 a-b). The embryo-like as batteries abused prisoners in the tube shaped pods who are connected to this exploiting system are not strange aliens, but they are not so different from us: more trapped, deceived and exploited than they and we think.

As we face the current gradual decline in interest and investment in the humanities, and the concurrent rise in interest in shadows on caves’ walls (or simulations on screens and monitors), I am reminded of the punch line in a dialogue between the two elderly men, Statler and Waldorf, who sit in the theatre box of the “Muppet Show”. The lesson of this scene can be applied to the Matrix and many other movies as well (but with a perhaps less negatively ironic undercurrent!): Statler: “*Do you think this show is educational?*” – Waldorf: “*It will drive people to read books!*”⁹ One could add: Some movies will lead people to think more deeply, or: some shadows on the wall might remind us of a corresponding reality.

Endnotes

¹e.g. Simulacra and Simulations (1988).

²Compare the theory of solipsism; the theory according to which one can not definitely know if other minds – besides one’s own – really exist, since it could be argued that everything that we perceive – including other individuals – is not real, but a projection of our own mind.

³In the beginning of 2009 the threat of the closure of the Philosophy Department at the University of Liverpool kick-started a discussion about the importance of academic Philosophy and about the inapplicability of some assessment tools which have been developed for sciences in the humanities.

⁴It is clear that the Wachowski brothers are not professional philosophers but directors with a certain liking for philosophy. Perhaps many professional scholars wouldn't be good movie makers either. Slavoj Žižek is stereotyping the "ideal spectator" of "*the Matrix*" as "an idiot" due to its naïve immersion in the film and its innocent detection of some philosophical content (2008, 242-243). From an educational point of view such an "ideal spectator" is in fact ideal due to the education progress the spectator made while and after watching that movie.

⁵Daniel Weberman agrees with Cypher: it is better to go for the simulated better choice than for the real choice which promises to be worse, since in a Matrix-like situation it is ultimately impossible to tell the difference between the real and the simulation of the real (2005, 227-235).

⁶According to Baudrillard the "desert of the real" is a reality which is almost deserted by real entities, but full of simulations some of which no longer have real counterparts. We are living the in world of the hyperreal: a model of the real almost without originals (1988, 1).

⁷For Nietzsche's concepts of "Heimweh ohne Heim" and "das nicht festgestellte Tier" as anthropological categories compare Grätzel (2003).

⁸as "Smith/Bane"; see below.

⁹For those who have not seen this "show": Statler thinks that the show is so bad that people might even start again to read books instead of watching the show... hence, the show has educational value – at least indirect.

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