

Theology and the Arts – Assignment 2.

A theological reading of *The Matrix* trilogy

Introduction

There is, here, a trap for the unwary. In seeking to offer a ‘theological reading’ of *The Matrix*¹ the temptation, as a Christian, is to draw parallels between the characters and stories to be found within those films and those we find within the Christian story; for example, to posit Neo as a messiah-figure analogous to Jesus who seeks to save humanity through his self-sacrifice. Having drawn out several such parallels one might be tempted to reach the conclusion that *The Matrix* was intended as a re-telling of the Christian story and, perhaps, that it could therefore be used as an evangelistic tool for introducing a film-literate culture to Christianity. Some writers have certainly taken that path.²

However, I would suggest that any theological reading of *The Matrix* which sees it simply as a mimesis of the Christian story is flawed. There are certainly archetypes and themes present which have strong echoes of the Christian story, and I will be looking at some of those below, but there are also clear resonances to be identified with many other faiths and philosophies; to try and force *The Matrix* into the Christian mould without at least recognising these other resonances, and where they may not fit into the Christian world view, risks doing violence to both.

¹ In this essay, all references to *The Matrix* are intended to refer to the whole trilogy. If a particular film is being referenced this will be made explicit.

² See, for example, Boyd & Larson *Escaping the Matrix Setting your mind free to experience real life in Christ* (Baker Books 2005) and Seay & Garrett *The Gospel Reloaded* (Pinon Press 2003).

Although the Wachowskis³ are famously reticent when it comes to talking about the meaning behind their work I would suggest that it is reasonably clear that there were myriad influences behind the making of *The Matrix*:

“We’re interested in mythology, theology and, to a certain extent, higher-level mathematics...If you’re going to do epic stories, you should concern yourself with those issues.”⁴

One of the most pervasive images within these films is that of mirrored surfaces: whether it is the reflection of the red and blue pills in Morpheus’ glasses, Neo’s face reflected from the back of a spoon in the Oracles’ apartment or the mirror which turns to liquid glass and engulfs Neo. Mirrors, of course, tend to reflect those who look into them, albeit sometimes in a distorted fashion. My, perhaps Nietzschean, suggestion is that all those who peer into *The Matrix* looking for meaning, theological or otherwise, run the risk of seeing their own belief system reflected back at them. As Anna Robbins puts it:

“...a Christian sees Christ in the film, a Buddhist sees the Buddha, a Platonist sees a philosopher-king, and those who know little of religion or philosophy enjoy the action scenes and ignore the ‘mumbo-jumbo’...”⁵

For the purposes of this brief essay I shall be examining some elements of *The Matrix* from a Judeo-Christian perspective, but acknowledging throughout that this is only one parabolic ways of approaching the films, that many other

³ Formerly the Wachowski brothers but now the Wachowski sisters:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Wachowskis

⁴ Yeffeth, Glenn (ed.) *Taking the red pill, science, philosophy and religion in The Matrix* (Benbella 2003) p. 126 Quoting the Wachowski brother’s interview in Corliss

⁵ Couch, Steve. (Ed.) *Matrix Revelations. A thinking fan’s guide to the Matrix trilogy*. (Damaris 2003) p. 161

different routes could have been chosen and that, ultimately, there is no systematic theology which can bring all the elements together in a theologically cohesive fashion. We should not feel cheated by that; *The Matrix* was never intended to be viewed as Holy Writ. That said, let's take the red pill, go through the looking glass and fall down the rabbit hole into the world of *The Matrix* and seek to identify some theological resonances.

Judeo-Christian Resonances

On a superficial level *The Matrix* follows a standard hero-story, or monomyth, arc: Humanity is in peril, an unlikely or unwilling hero arises, sets out on a perilous quest which transforms them into the hero required, the peril is overcome, humanity saved and the hero may (or may not) return.⁶ On the basis that one can easily substitute the word 'messiah' for 'hero' it is equally easy to see resonances of the Jesus story in almost any hero story. However, there is no denying that *The Matrix* makes the connection between hero and messiah more explicit than most.

Perhaps, in the same way that we are only aware of the nativity and life story of Jesus because of his crucifixion and resurrection, there is some sense in looking at the imagery and language used about Neo⁷ at the end of the story, in order to make more sense of what came before.

During *Matrix Revolutions* it becomes clear that Neo is fighting a battle on two fronts. There is the overarching war to save Zion⁸ from the onslaught of the

⁶ See, for example, Campbell, Joseph *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Pantheon Books 2008)

⁷ Meaning both 'New' and an anagram of 'One'.

⁸ The theological significance of Zion as the home for freed humanity is clear.

machines and free the rest of humanity from the control of the matrix. But both humanity and the machines have a common enemy in the form of Agent Smith. He started as simply another program designed to protect the matrix (by, for example, fighting against Trinity) but it soon becomes clear that Agent Smith has gone rogue. At an early stage, Agent Smith seems to hold Neo responsible for his own liberation:

“Because of you I am no longer an agent of the system. Because of you I’m changed. I’m unplugged. I’m a new man, so to speak – like you, apparently free.”⁹

By the time we reach *Revolutions* Agent Smith seems both out of control and on the verge of victory. He has replicated himself countless times (possessing others) and he is convinced that he is lord of all he surveys:

“This is my world! My world!”¹⁰

Agent Smith is a fallen agent and there is a clear resonance here with Satan as a fallen angel, who seeks to tempt Neo away from his calling:

“Why Mr Anderson? Why... Why keep fighting? Do you think you are fighting for something – for more than your survival? Can you tell me what it is? Do you even know? Is it freedom, or truth, perhaps peace, could it be for love? Illusions Mr Anderson, vagaries of perception. Temporary constructs of a feeble human intellect trying desperately to justify an existence without meaning or purpose.”¹¹

⁹ Lawrence, Matt *Like a splinter in your mind. The philosophy behind the Matrix trilogy*. Blackwell 2004 p.153

¹⁰ Cf. 2 Cor 4:4

¹¹ Lawrence (2004) p.102

Neo and the machines enter a pact for Neo not to overthrow the matrix but to destroy Agent Smith, in return for a truce in the larger war. Neo does this by being plugged into the matrix, at the heart of Machine City and, at the moment of victory, the cruciform imagery and use of language is striking.

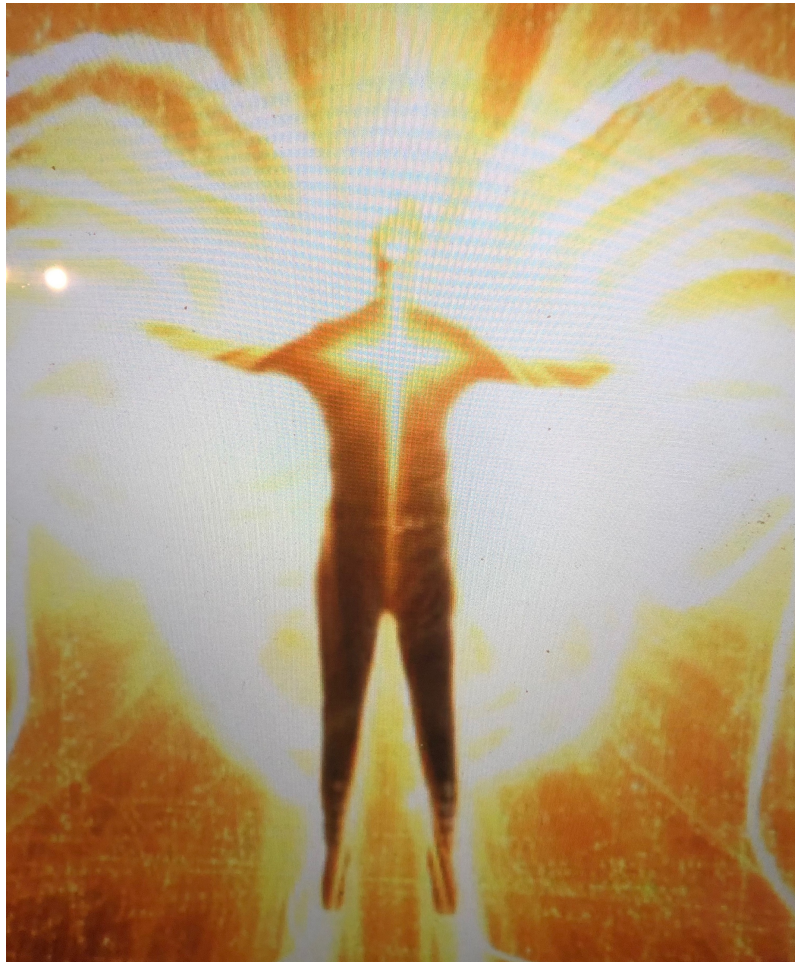


Figure 1 Screenshot from Matrix Revolutions Copyright Warner Bros 2003

As Neo dies, so are all the Agent Smith copies destroyed and the voice of the Architect¹² proclaims:

“It is done.”¹³

¹² It is a machine face but presumably representing the Architect.

¹³ Cf John 19:30 “It is finished.”

There then, follows, celebrations in Zion as the machines withdraw and it is proclaimed: “He saved us!”

I shall look a little more closely at the nature and extent of this ‘salvation’ shortly but having established, I hope, a clear messianic resonance at the climax of the trilogy it may be worth casting our minds back to Neo’s ‘nativity’, and the nature of his quest, at the beginning of *The Matrix*.

Thomas Anderson¹⁴ knows there is something wrong with the world. By day he works in a cubicle for a large corporation but, at night, he assumes the hacker name Neo and looks online for the elusive Morpheus.¹⁵ The hacker is then hacked and, following some dream-like encounters with both Trinity and the mysterious and powerful Agents (including Agent Smith), Neo finds himself with Morpheus, who tells Neo why he feels that the world is not as it should be:

“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 can feel it when you go to work, or go to church or 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 inside a prison that you cannot smell, taste or touch. A prison for your mind.”

Morpheus believes in a prophecy that Neo is ‘the One’ who will free humanity from this ‘prison for the mind’. But, despite the prophecy, Neo still has free will, and he is offered the choice of the red or blue pills. If he takes the blue pill then he will wake up back in his matrix-generated life and it will be ‘game over’

¹⁴ Both the doubting apostle and ‘Andros Son’, the ‘Son of Man’. Couch p.164

¹⁵ God of dreams, but also related to morphine and morphing.

for the prophecy. But he opts for the red pill, the liquid mirror envelopes him and, for the first time ever, Neo wakes up outside the matrix and in the ‘desert of the real’.

In the ‘real’ world, rather than working in an office cubicle, Neo is in a fluid-filled pod looking like an overgrown foetus in a metallic womb. Apart from the remnant of humanity who either live in the underground city of Zion or who pilot its craft, such as the Nebuchadnezzar and the Logos,¹⁶ the majority of humankind, presumably billions of people, are housed in such pods. The year in this world is not 1999, as it is in the matrix, but 2199. Following the rise of AI there was a war between intelligent machines and humanity and, in desperation, humanity created a nuclear winter to prevent the machines using solar power. Nonetheless, the machines won that war and, in the absence of sunlight, the machines decided to use humans as battery cells. However, either because of compassion (we know from Sati’s father that the machines can feel ‘love’) or reason of expediency the machines don’t simply use the bodies of the humans but they also keep their minds alive by feeding into them the virtual world, which is the matrix.¹⁷ Most of humanity therefore live their entire lives with their bodies in these pods and their minds in the matrix. When they die they are liquefied and fed to others as amniotic fluid.

As Neo awakes the umbilical cord connecting him to the matrix is disconnected, the waters around him break and he is flushed out of the pod, down a tube and lands in another body of water. This is Neo being born again¹⁸, this is a virgin birth (as humans are ‘grown’) and a baptism all at once. This certainly looks

¹⁶ Both of which are, of course, resonant biblical references in their own right.

¹⁷ The interdependence of human and machine is also an interesting theme throughout. The human ‘batteries’ keep the AI machines alive and, in Zion, the ‘dumb’ machines keep the humans alive.

¹⁸ Neo-natal? Sorry.

like the beginning of a messiah's quest to free all of humanity from the prison for the mind. How successful that quest is, and therefore what sort of messiah Neo is, we shall see.

We have already considered Agent Smith's fall from grace and the importance of choice for Neo. These themes perhaps echo something of the Garden of Eden story and that resonance is reinforced when we discover that the current version of the matrix is not the first. It is revealed that the first version of the matrix was a beautiful and harmonious environment, a paradise, but it collapsed because the human mind could not accept it. This may bolster the argument that the machines feel some compassion for the humans (perhaps recognising them as their creator) whilst also making the point that humans shut themselves out of paradise. Ultimately we learn that this is the sixth version of the matrix, but even that may remind us of the six days of creation.

Another character who exercises his free will and resonates strongly with a biblical character, is that of Cypher.¹⁹ In short, Cypher is Neo's Judas:

“Like Judas before him at the Last Supper, Cypher accepts his fate as a traitor over a meal. Like Judas, who shares a drink with Christ at the Last Supper, Cypher and Neo share a cup while Cypher expresses his doubts...Cypher also wears a reptile-skin coat, which alludes to the biblical figure of Satan as serpent.”²⁰

However, Cypher does not seek to betray Neo for anything as tangible as money; he does so to be plugged back into the matrix. He would rather have the illusion of steak in the prison for the mind than gruel in the desert of the real.

¹⁹ As a name this has resonances both of something that is hidden but may also remind us phonically of Lucifer.

²⁰ Yeffeth (2003) p. 9

This may remind us not only of Judas but also, perhaps, of the Hebrews freed from slavery in Egypt but who quickly turned to grumbling against Moses when life in the desert (of the real?) became too hard.²¹

Conclusion

A theological reading of *The Matrix* identifies a significant number of resonances with the Judeo-Christian story, and it has only been possible to explore a few here. However, as noted in the introduction, we should be cautious about drawing any grand conclusions, for several reasons.

First, the story contains significant elements which are inimical to a Christian reading. Although Neo may be seen as a messiah figure, and although there is a character called Trinity, there is precious little evidence of God the Father or Spirit. The closest we come to either is probably the Architect and the Oracle. But the Architect is not the creator of the universe, rather he is the designer of the matrix, and is probably closer to a Gnostic rather than a Christian understanding of God. The Oracle is certainly 'spiritual' but both she and the Architect are computer programs and may be better understood as the Ying and Yang of the matrix.

Second, what does the 'messiah' Neo achieve? Whilst he defeats Agent Smith, this assists the machines as much as it assists humanity. There is no end to the war, the AI machines are not defeated and the matrix is not discontinued. Although there is a 'Hollywood' sunrise, perhaps signifying a new dawn, even this is computer generated and the only witnesses to it are Sati, Seraph and the Oracle, all of whom are programs. The humans are all either underground in

²¹ For example Ex. 16:3

Zion or still plugged into the matrix. There is no resurrection either of Neo nor a general resurrection of humanity emerging from their pods. The finale of *Matrix Revolutions* is a truce between man and machine and whilst the Architect promises to free those who want to leave the example of Cypher has already demonstrated that not all will take that option. One could argue that this is consistent with salvation only being available for those who exercise their free-will to choose it but, nonetheless, this ending seems far removed from Jesus ‘trampling down death by death.’²²

Finally, and as touched on in the introduction, it seems possible to interpret *The Matrix* through the lens of almost any faith, philosophy or, probably, political position. For example, there are substantial Buddhist parallels to be found:

“The matrix itself is analogous to *samsara* the illusory world that is not the reality it appears to be... There is also a dimension of karma evident in the film in the sense that humans are basically in a condition of their own making... Meditation is a means of ‘reprogramming’ the mind, as it were, so that our perception of reality conforms to the way the world really is.”

²³

²² The Pascal troparion of the Orthodox Church
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paschal_troparion

²³ Yeffeth (2003) p.137

Similarly, writers have identified themes from Hinduism²⁴, Islam²⁵, Taoism²⁶, Neo-Platonism²⁷, Gnosticism²⁸ the philosophy of Baudrillard²⁹, Post-modernism³⁰ and many others. I would therefore agree with Anna Robbin's assessment that every viewer of these films sees something of themselves reflected back at them and with her conclusion that:

“...no religious interpretation seems to offer a comprehensive understanding or provide an accurately coherent interpretative framework for *The Matrix*.”³¹

In conclusion, I would suggest that theological reflection on *The Matrix* produces some fascinating insights into the films, from a variety of perspectives, but that one should hesitate before placing too much theological weight upon them. Finally, it is probably healthy to keep Gregory Bassham's comment in mind:

“It is unclear whether the Wachowski brothers meant to endorse the various religious and philosophical ideas they present in the film. More likely they simply wanted to make a kick-ass intellectual action movie that features some interesting and relevant myths.”³²

Word Count: 2950

²⁴ For example, Irwin (2005) Chapter 10

²⁵ For example, Irwin (2005) Chapter 11

²⁶ For example, Lawrence (2004) Chapter 13

²⁷ For example, Grau, Christopher (Ed.) *Philosophers Explore The Matrix* OUP 2005 Chapter 14

²⁸ McKee, Gabriel. *The Gospel according to science fiction*. WJK 2007 p. 36

²⁹ For example, Irwin (2005) Chapter 8

³⁰ For example, Crouch (2003) Chapter 7

³¹ Couch (2003) p.173

³² Irwin (2002) p.116

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