



## Faith and Popular Culture

# Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Film and the Culture of Death

By Leonie Caldecott

Film is one of the most compelling art forms ever produced. It engages both eye and ear, engrosses the mind and beguiles the spirit. When we sit in a darkened space and watch a film, like the hapless denizens of Plato's cave, we are entering another universe, the world as perceived by someone else. The advent of sophisticated special effects increases this immersion, and fantasy films such as *Lord of the Rings* or the comic book adaptations of *Superman*, *Spiderman*, or *XMen* pack a tremendous imaginative punch. At the very least, it is important to understand how this medium impacts on the culture. The negative results of too much exposure to explicit sex and violence are well-documented, and rightly concern us. But there is another, more positive and interesting dimension of this popular medium. In many cases, particularly in the hands of intelligent directors and screenwriters, film expresses at a very deep level the unconscious concerns of the civilisation we live in.

One of the most startling examples of this is the hugely successful trilogy *The Matrix*. The Wachowski brothers' cult classic can seem baffling to anyone who is not already immersed in the world of virtual reality, martial arts fantasy, and the rest. Sometimes a little too pretentious for their own good, the films tell the story of a young man named Thomas Anderson (the name is carefully chosen) who by day holds down a respectable job as a software writer, whilst at night he goes by his hacker identity "Neo". The films explore and express the anxiety of a culture increasingly dependent on technology for survival, yet always in danger of being dominated or even exterminated by that very technology. The first



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*Matrix* film was released in 1999, an uncanny foreshadowing of 9/11/01, as the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has pointed out. The mood is apocalyptic, at once a celebration of high technology and an indictment of its ability to crush us beneath heaps of unforeseen rubble.

Traumatic excursions aside, the children of the late twentieth century are for the most part addicted to the benefits, the material comforts that technology brings us. Instant heat and light. Rapid means of transportation. Even human interaction is dominated by technology: the internet, as well as satisfying our endless curiosity, is increasingly seen as an essential tool for communication. YouTube, MySpace, and Facebook vie for our attention alongside the more traditional methods of social networking. Meanwhile studies have warned that children are spending increasing amounts of time sitting at computer terminals, rather than playing and interacting in the real, physical world. Large numbers of people inhabit a "Second Life", and the commercial success of the Halo role-playing video game transcends that of the Beatles and J. K. Rowling.

This, quite rightly, makes us uneasy; what if we are actually being enslaved by the very technology which was supposed to liberate us to live fuller, more "connected" lives? It is this unspoken fear that is addressed by the *Matrix* films. What if our very devotion to and dependence on high technology actually ended in a diabolical reversal, whereby the machines that we have created in order to serve our endless proliferation of material desires eventually turned on their creators, enslaving us as we once enslaved one another? What if mankind

pricked its finger once and for all on the enchanted spindle of its own ingenuity, and fell into a sleep from which it would never wake, living a virtual dream-life whilst the robotic sorcerers who are the expression of our technocratic supremacy now themselves lived off the basic energy generated from our minds and bodies? What if machines, rather than human beings, now controlled what is left of the real world? What if we were simply captives of an illusion, an imaginary Matrix, which intrinsically prevents us finding a deeper meaning to life, because we have been rendered incapable of knowing the objective truth?

The fear that we are living an illusion is not a new one. Long before the high-tech age of the third millennium, philosophers had speculated upon whether we can trust what we see, hear, feel and generally experience. After waking from sleep, Chuang Tzu famously wondered whether he had been a man dreaming he was a butterfly, or was a butterfly dreaming he was a man. Descartes famously speculated about what could constitute certainty in the face of doubt about the veracity of human experience. And while Kant believed in an objective reality, he thought it lay “behind” the world of subjective experience, and cannot be perceived directly. Then of course there is Plato’s *Republic* with its famous cave. The philosopher frees himself and goes to the back of the cave where he finds the objective entities whose shadows had been projected against the cave wall, and the sun which provides the light on which the shadowplay had depended.

In the Matrix, that intrepid explorer is represented first and foremost by the character of Morpheus, who guides Neo out of his illusory existence and into the “desert of the real”. *I think therefore I am* is definitely not a given in a world where your thoughts are controlled by artificial intelligence run riot. Reality, in the *Matrix*, consists in the fact that somehow, against all the odds, a group of human beings have managed to struggle out of their state of enslavement, out of the computer-generated landscape of lying sensation and false information, and

into the frightening landscape of reality in which the only remaining human enclave lies far beneath the crust of a desecrated planet cocooned in electric storm-clouds. The citizens of this new Zion are also reclaiming others from the test-tube wombs of machines who are only interested in—or rather, programmed to—breed human beings in order to harvest their energy, ever since humanity cut them off from their original source of power, namely the sun.

It isn’t easy to reclaim personhood from the machine world. Neo’s reaction when first confronted with the full truth of his condition is nearly fatal. Morpheus tells him that the rebels don’t often reclaim a human being so late in their development. The adult mind, unsurprisingly, is incapable of taking in the enormity of the truth,

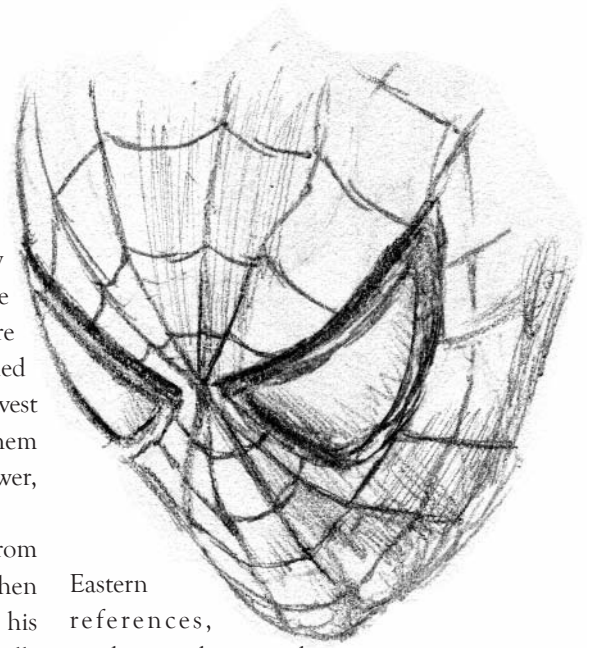
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and would break down, perhaps even betray others to get back to the comfort-zone of the Matrix. Ignorance is bliss, says the Judas figure Cypher, who falls prey to this temptation.

The interesting thing about the *Matrix* films is not just the philosophical speculation, but also the multifarious religious references. To begin with there is the initial choice: take the red pill, or take the blue pill. The latter will return you to your state of blissful enslavement. The former will initiate you once and for all into a new life, a conversion experience from which there is no stepping back. There are also multiple



Eastern references, not least in the martial arts training which prepares Neo for the interior combat to come. A child resembling a Buddhist adept enlightens Neo on the power of the human mind to alter reality. Much play is made of mirror imagery—Neo morphs with a mirror after he has swallowed the red pill which will wake him to reality (and enable the rebels to trace the location of his real body). Thus the meditator steps back from his experience and realizes his identity with the substance of Mind itself, which in some forms of Buddhism is compared to a mirror. When the boy holds up a spoon and says, “There is no spoon”, we see Neo reflected in the spoon’s surface. The dark glasses worn in the virtual world of the Matrix have the virtue of reflecting the gaze of the other back at himself.

It is well known that the Wachowski brothers have immersed themselves in many currents of thought and speculation, from New Age self-help techniques, such as self-remembering, to ancient mystical traditions. In the second film Neo enters the Matrix to keep an appointment with the mysterious figure of the Oracle, an ancient programme which most closely approximates the random nature of humanity that the machines have difficulty in encompassing. As he goes to the meeting, he passes through an oriental market-place in which images of Hindu deities jostle for space on the stalls with images of the Sacred Heart. While the oriental influence gives the films their edge, it is this other, Judeo-Christian

strand which interestingly ends up providing the “eucatastrophic” resolution at the end of the third film. Neo ends up vanquishing the rogue programme of the legion Agent Smith—but not by kicking and chopping his way to victory in the virtual world. Rather he allows himself to be “crucified”: his mind, with its uniquely human character, absorbs the excessive functionality of the programme. Only in this way can Neo accomplish the counter-invasion of darkness with light, countering technocratic utilitarianism with something uniquely human.

Much of the *Matrix* trilogy turns around the question of causality. The sinister “older” programme in the second film, *Matrix Reloaded*, portentously named “The Merovingian” (someone has been reading *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*) claims that all human life is driven by sensory input or neural activity. “Cause and effect,” he insists, reminding us of another grotesque French character, the headmaster in *Les Choristes*, with his mantra: “Action-Reaction!” Everything in the Matrix tends towards this deterministic view of humanity, even the Architect, the original self-programming mentality at the heart of the machine world. The severest test of faith will come when this master programme seems to undermine the last hope shared by Neo and his fellow rebels, by encompassing even their rebellion in his “plan”.

Only love can overcome this determinism. At the end of the first film, Neo is saved from literal death by the kiss of a woman called Trinity—recalled into the mysterious “next life” referred to by the Oracle. Neo’s love also saves Trinity in her turn, enabling her to be the essential motivating factor in his choice in the face of the Architect’s nihilistic ultimatum. Finally, Trinity provides the vehicle through which Neo reaches the mainframe of the Matrix and is able to save Zion, the last human city, from destruction by the machines. It is Trinity who flies through the clouds enveloping our crippled planet and becomes the first person to see the actual, objective sun for the first time in two hun-

dred years.

Interestingly, the Judeo-Christian references prove to be the dominant ones, at least in terms of plot movement. Zion is the default refuge of a beleaguered humanity, the home of the true believers. Morpheus’s ship is called the Nebuchadnessar, after the Babylonian king who (Larry Wachowski says) “has a dream he can’t remember but keeps searching for an answer.” On the hull are the words “Mark III No. 11”—Mk 3:11 reads, “And whenever unclean spirits beheld him, they fell down and cried out, ‘You are the Son of God.’” Finally, the ship that takes Neo and Trinity to the accomplishment of their mission is called the Logos.

Not that Neo is exactly a Christ-figure: he remains human and fallible, whatever incredible gifts he develops. Innocent people die at his hands—since human beings perish in reality if they die in their minds in

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the world of the Matrix, and there are many deadly combats initiated in that world by the rebels. But the central mystery of the Incarnation haunts the films to a fascinating degree: the Son of Man/Anderson, even in the context of doubting Thomas who needed physical proof of the Resurrection in order to believe, challenges first and foremost those who cannot endure the idea that the body matters. Agent Smith, who represents the most controlling aspect of the Matrix, spews forth his contempt for the revolting stench of human life, comparing a proliferating humanity with a lethal virus (shades of the population control lobby). At the end of the series he is still attacking everything that pertains to faith, whether in God or simply in the goodness of human existence: “Why, why

Mr. Anderson, why go on fighting? Is it hope, is it peace, is it love—that most pathetic of human constructs—why do you do it?” Neo’s answer is perhaps the classic post-modern one: “Because I choose to.” Nonetheless, the notion of choice is an important one, especially when it is put in a self-sacrificial, rather than a self-indulgent context.

At the heart of *The Matrix*, at the heart of all information technology, there is the mysterious principle of the binary system, that quirk of human genius based on just two numbers: one, and zero. We could take the first to stand for the good, for that which exists (God) and the second to stand for evil, that which negates, destroys (not-God). In which case the development of computers and information technology could be the embodiment of that mysterious fruit, the consumption of which first made mankind fall from grace. “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” (Genesis 2: 16–17) The spiritual torpor, the living death of the enslaved body, is the stunning consequence of the moment humanity exulted in its promethean achievement, or as Morpheus explains in the first *Matrix*: “Sometime in the twenty-first century, we marvelled at our own magnificence, as we gave birth to AI (artificial intelligence).”

*We marvelled at our own magnificence.* We may delude ourselves that we are as gods, abrogating power to ourselves over life and death. But the fruit of that tree is leading us into a desert, not a paradise. Another film which also uses a science-fictional device to explore the abuse of our fallen freedom is *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. This modern morality tale from Charlie Kaufman (screenplay) and Michael Gondry (director) depicts, from the interior experience of one particular person, a world where relationships have become consumer commodities to be taken up and ditched at will. The problem is that such relations leave parts of themselves behind, like bee-stings that tear out the guts of the bee. The

answer, for the technocratic age, is simple. Erase the memory of the relationship, and you erase the once hankered after (and now hated) person from your life.

Except, of course, it isn't that simple. Jim Carrey's diffident and dorky Joel Barish, having been cut to the quick by the discovery that his estranged girlfriend Clementine (Kate Winslet) has had him deleted from her mind with the help of a clinic named Lacuna, Inc., thinks that all will be set to rights if he does the same thing. Halfway through the procedure, as the better memories from early on in the relationship are "re-run" prior to erasure, he suddenly realises that by eliminating pain, he is also eliminating something infinitely precious. In his early appreciation of Clementine, he was seeing something true, something *sub speciae aeternitatis*: that essence of a person which makes them what they are. It is as though these glimpses of a person's soul (so often driven into the mud by their impatient exploitation) are a kind of Eden. It is later that the falling-off occurs. The knowledge of good and evil in a person, which gives rise to a life-denying cynicism. At the core of the break-up between Joel and Clementine is his utterance of this knowledge, at once true, and hopelessly inadequate as a description of the whole person.

Thus, as the science-fictional apparatus is engaged in its search-and-destroy mission, Joel starts to try and halt the procedure he has signed up for. Except that he can't communicate with the technician in charge of the "operation", as he has, of course, been put to sleep for the duration. In a series of surreal scenes designed to depict the workings of the mind and the role of memory and association therein, Gondry and Kaufman trace Joel's increasingly desperate attempts to "hide" Clementine in parts of his memory that the boffins have no access to. He takes refuge in his child-

hood, with all its attendant emotions. Meanwhile, bizarrely, the technician in charge of the procedure gratifies his own desires with the clinic's secretary, shamelessly using the patient's apartment to while away the tedium of the night-long procedure. His nerdy sidekick at Lacuna, Inc. (Elijah Wood, which is a little surreal for LOTR fans) has himself fallen for the newly brainwashed Clementine and is virtually impersonating Joel in his desperation to get her attention. The themes of voyeuristic invasion and betrayal of human dignity run through the heart of the film.

While *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* poses more questions than it answers, those questions are the right questions. To what extent are memories coloured by personal prejudice, subsequent experience, or what psychologists call "projection"? Can the memory be healed, rather than suppressed or manipulated? Is it possible to have an objective take on another person's soul? What is the role of memory, of anamnesis, in giving meaning to a person's life, and what kind of fidelity does this entail? And, most poignantly, to what extent do the "existential impositions" we make on

one another prevent and distort the possibility of redemption?

Interestingly, the title of *Eternal Sunshine* is taken from a speech in Alexander Pope's "Eloisa to Abelard":

How happy is the blameless  
Vestal's lot!

The world forgetting, by the world  
forgot.

Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind!  
Each pray'r accepted, and each  
wish resigned.

Make of this what you will, but the question remains: is there a way out for those who, in fact, are far from being "blameless Vestals"? How do you construct a meaningful life in the face of the almost obligatory loss of innocence that our permissive culture encourages? I have shown *Eternal Sunshine* as part of a Theology of the Body course, and it certainly gave rise to an interesting discussion. Both this film and the *Matrix* are asking hard questions about the place we as a civilisation have come to, as we abuse the body in the belief that consciousness is nothing more than a bundle of random neurological activity. And yet we cannot help yearning to find genuine spiritual significance beneath the banal atmosphere of the culture of death. The problem for a hedonistic generation is that waking up from the grip of this powerful illusion invariably proves to be a painful experience. While the films I have discussed acknowledge this, there is still a pressing need for intelligent Christian film-makers to create a cinema which begins to respond to the crisis at a still deeper level.

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