

## The *Matrix* Revisited

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**Note :** *This essay refers to important plot points in the films. If you haven't seen the films and wish to be able to do so without knowing in advance what will happen, watch them before reading this article.*

Love it, hate it, or ignore it, there's no getting around it : The *Matrix* phenomenon has become one of the most **pervasive cultural touchstones** of our day. It has been and continues to be referenced and expounded upon in university courses, philosophy books and essays, websites and everyday conversations. *The Matrix* is simultaneously a postmodern **philosophical model and a popular myth** analogue to Plato's *Cave*, Homer's *Odyssey*, Descartes' *Daemon* and *Pilgrim's Progress*, and even *Star Wars*. Here is a detailed review for any of you interested in plumbing the depths of the *Matrix* experience.

The *Matrix* phenomenon began in 1999 with *The Matrix*, a cinematic fusion of **philosophical and spiritual allusiveness with cyber-punk fiction**, Japanese *anime* and Martial Arts influences. Like *Star Wars* in the 1970s, *The Matrix* was powered by a **visually innovative approach** to action cinematography that redefined action storytelling for years to come.

With *Star Wars*, the breakthrough was a new cinematic vocabulary predicated on **computer-controlled camera movements** that carried the viewer swooping and diving through George Lucas's miniature sets. With *The Matrix*, the Wachowski Brothers made creative use of a photographic process that had been around for awhile but never fully exploited : **bullet-time photography**, in which an array of cameras positioned in an arc around their subject fire simultaneously or almost simultaneously, creating the effect of a virtual camera swooping around a subject slowed to motionlessness or near-motionlessness.

Though the principle wasn't entirely new — for example, a similar effect had been used in a series of *Gap* TV commercials —, the Wachowski Brothers not only developed it far more extensively, they utilized it to evoke a new kind of experience, suggesting a **heightened level of awareness** on the part of characters whose **abilities and physical speed** were so great that beside them ordinary people seemed to be standing still.

As a **vivid metaphor of expanded consciousness and enlightenment**, this visual innovation charged the films with philosophical and spiritual resonances, capturing the public imagination in a way that would have been unlikely with a merely clever sci-fi film. Fans studying the film eagerly documented references to Lewis Carroll, Jean Baudrillard, *The Bible* and Christian theology, Eastern Mysticism, Buddhism, Greek Mythology, Neo-Gnosticism, Harlan Ellison, William Gibson, *Sleeping Beauty*, and Superman.

With the recent sequels, *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*, the Wachowski Brothers didn't quite gain the same success as with their first film. Cinematically, despite some **technically impressive effects sequences** — a large-scale digitized fight scene ; a ballyhooed freeway set piece shot on a quarter-mile loop of highway built for the film ; an immense, video-game style sci-fi siege sequence — no new artistic breakthroughs akin to the first film's bullet-time were presented with.

## **SYNOPSIS**

The first *Matrix* film, like the first entries in the *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* franchises, follows an archetypal story pattern : the hero's journey. A **young, uninitiated nobody** — in this case Neo (**Keanu Reeves**) is **introduced into a larger conflict** in which he is destined to play a critical role.

For Neo, this conflict is nothing less than the **enslavement of mankind by machines**, which grow human beings in liquid-filled pods, transmitting illusory sensory *data* directly into their brains so that they believe they are leading normal lives in a real world. Because the virtual world — the *Matrix* — is not real, Neo learns that its artificial rules can be bent, even broken, like a computer program being hacked. What's more, Neo himself appears uniquely gifted with the potential to transcend utterly the Matrix's rules and controls, turning the tide in the **war against the machines** and ultimately bringing about the liberation of mankind.

**The sequels however have failed to deliver on this promise.** After seemingly transcending the Matrix's rules and controls at the end of the first film, in the sequels Neo became quite limited again. The story seemed to get bogged down in a parade of **red-herring plotlines** and **irrelevant supporting characters** ; and, despite emphatic and repeated foreshadowing about the impending end of the war, no decisive or satisfying resolution came forth.

## Further Analysis : Is *The Matrix* Gnostic ? Christian ?

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Our level of interest here is not due to *The Matrix*'s visual innovations. Nor is it Keanu Reeves's acting that cries out for more critical discussion. Rather, it's the **philosophical, spiritual, and moral implications** that are responsible for all the attention. Some films do not require such a level of analysis, but so does *The Matrix* Trilogy, mainly due to their evocative power and to the varying levels of obsessive compulsiveness that affected many viewers finding the film's imagery troubling them afterwards and ending up having a lot of worries about existence and whether or not we are controlled. A film like *The Matrix* can get under your skin and become a problem.

In a way, the film's implications are more of aesthetic significance, than religious. Yet certain motifs and phrases may remind us alternately of Christianity or of Eastern Mysticism. *Attempts to force the movie into any of those moulds are unconvincing, and depend upon a selective approach that ignores inconvenient or contrary facts.* However, the following demonstration attempts to analyse the seriousness of the films' philosophical implications.

### 1 – Is *The Matrix* Gnostic ?

Because the film depicts what is ostensibly the **real world as an illusion and a prison**, many have interpreted it as an allegory of world-denying Gnosticism and Eastern Mysticism. *To what extent is this statement true or inaccurate ?*

#### a) **Reminder : What is Gnosticism ?**

**Gnosticism considers physical reality as illusory, intrinsically defective, or outright evil, and bodily existence is regarded as a trap or a prison, perhaps a punishment or a process of purification.** In any case, physical existence at best seen as a necessary evil from which the goal is to escape. Those who succeed go on to a disembodied higher state (which may or may not involve the dissolution of their individual identities) while those who don't may be forced to perpetuate their corporeal entanglement through reincarnation.

This vision of the afterlife contrasts sharply with the Christian hope, which is *not* a purely spiritual existence in Heaven, but the resurrection of the body and the renewal of the physical world. Where Gnostics long to *put off* the body, the Christian longing is ‘*not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed*’ (2 Cor 5:4), that ‘*this mortality must put on immortality*’ (1 Cor 15:53).

## b) Gnostic Elements in *The Matrix*

To what extent does *The Matrix* resonate with or reflect this contemptuous attitude toward the world, physical reality, and bodily existence ?

- Neo (**Keanu Reeves**) learns from Morpheus (**Lawrence Fishburne**) that the world he knows — a world ostensibly identical to our own — is in reality a computer-generated virtual environment, **contrived by an insidious artificial intelligence** to pacify the minds of human beings while using their bodies as a natural resource. So, *The Matrix* does propose that the **known world is both an illusion and a prison**.
- Moreover, in *The Matrix*, **Truth is a secret, esoteric reality known only to a small, elite group of initiates**, just as the Gnostics believed in secret hidden truth known only to themselves.
- These gnostic resonances are heightened by various **pseudo-mystical gibberish** such as ‘*Do not try and bend the spoon. That’s impossible. Instead, only try to realize the truth. There is no spoon. Then you’ll see that it is not the spoon that bends, it is only yourself.*’

Yet for many reasons, the film is very far from expressing anything like world-denying contempt for physicality or the body.

## c) How *The Matrix* is NOT Gnostic

### 1. Welcome to the ‘real’ world

Although *The Matrix* depicts a world very much like our world as an illusion and a prison, it **does not depict liberation or freedom from that illusion as escape from physicality into a state of disembodied happiness**. On the contrary, the ‘*reality*’ behind the illusions of the *Matrix* is even more physical and disturbing than the world of the *Matrix* itself.

In fact, it's precisely *in* the Matrix — *not* outside of it — that Neo and the others leave behind their real physical bodies and escape, at least partially, the constraints of gravity and other physical laws. Yet the film is quite clear that it's the **quasi-disembodied state of the Matrix that is the prison**, and the real, physical, bodily world, frightening as it is, that represents true freedom.

The heroes of *The Matrix* are precisely those who have chosen to *reject* a **comforting, disembodied illusion for the freedom of corporeal existence in the physical world**, with all its rough edges and sharp corners. '*Welcome to the real world*', Morpheus tells Neo when he emerges from the *Matrix* for the first time. Significantly, the one character who does finally choose the Matrix's disembodied illusion over the reality of the physical world is precisely the traitor.

The film also establishes that, even while in the Matrix, the **heroes remain inseparably dependent upon their physical bodies** in the physical world. The importance of the body is graphically illustrated in a scene in which a character in the Matrix is prevented from returning to the real world when her body is forcibly un-plugged from the Matrix... and dies, when we could have expected some form of liberation. This is hardly a gnostic repudiation of the body.

## 2. Embracing procreation and sense experience

*The Matrix* further **contradicts gnostic attitudes** by depicting the common gnostic dream of escape from sex and procreation as part of the *nightmare* of mankind's enslavement, and **idealizing normal human procreation**. The premise is that, while the Matrix's human slaves are grown in laboratories by the enemy, among the free humans of mankind's last remaining community are some who are naturally conceived and born. '*Me and my brother Dozer, we're both 100% pure old-fashioned home-grown human, born free, right here in the real world*', one of them tells Neo with a smile. This **cheerfully positive attitude** towards sex and procreation is the very antithesis of gnostic contempt for physicality.

A similarly positive approach to bodily existence can be seen in an **animated discussion about eating and taste**, in which a character contemplates the implications of having lived much of their lives in the illusion of the Matrix. '*How do the machines know what Tasty*

*Wheat tasted like ?* he asks rhetorically. *‘Maybe they got it wrong. Maybe what I think Tasty Wheat tasted like actually tasted like oatmeal, or tuna fish. That makes you wonder about a lot of things’*. It’s a small thing, but interest in how food tastes is, as far as it goes, a good and wholesome thing.

Significantly, there is *one* character in *The Matrix* who shows **no enthusiasm for physical or sensory experience**. Agent Smith (**Hugo Weaving**), a malevolent enemy computer program, expresses disgust at even the simulation of physicality around him : *‘I hate this place’*, he tells Morpheus. *‘This zoo, this prison, this... reality, whatever you want to call it, I can’t stand it any longer. It’s the smell, if there is such a thing. I feel saturated by it. I can taste your stink and every time I do, I fear that I’ve somehow been infected by it.’* Even the film’s traitor, who would rather eat steak in the *Matrix* than real-world rations, doesn’t exhibit this utter world-rejecting attitude of Agent Smith, the movie’s **one true gnostic**.

#### **d) First answer : *The Matrix* echoes Pop Mysticism**

Having said all of the above, it is true that *The Matrix* plays with echoes of **Eastern Philosophy and Martial Arts** :

- In particular, Morpheus, with his **riddles and esoteric pronouncements**, is like a **Zen Master or Martial Arts Guru** who schools Neo in the ways of **mind over matter**. Within the confines of the Matrix, Morpheus suggests that Neo’s only boundaries are those in his mind : *‘What are you waiting for? You’re faster than this. Don’t **think** you are, **know** you are... Stop **trying** to hit me and **hit** me!’* One is reminded of Yoda’s challenge to Luke in *The Empire Strikes Back* : *‘Try not! Do, or do not. There is no try.’* In the real world, this is nonsense.
- Perhaps the most obvious **Pop Mysticism** reference is that of the ‘spoon boy’ in the Oracle’s apartment, who can **bend spoons by looking at them** (as Uri Geller and others have claimed to be able to do). Lines like *‘It is not the spoon that bends, it is only yourself’* doesn’t intrinsically make *The Matrix* gnostic, but they do deliberately echo or resonate with popular pictures of world-denying mysticism. The right answer would be to say that the film is playing on popular mystical and martial arts stereotypes in order to **create an aura of profundity**.

### e) **Second answer : *The Matrix* roots in Descartes**

If the premise of *The Matrix* seems (to some Christian viewers especially) genuinely gnostic or world-denying, this may be in part due to a **lack of familiarity with the more direct philosophical roots** of the premise — specifically, the thought-experiments of Descartes.

Descartes' philosophical method was to begin by asking whether we can know anything at all — even that our own bodies or any of the things we see are real — since we can imagine that **all our perceptions are being generated by a powerful enemy spirit**. In subsequent philosophical discussion, Descartes' hypothetical powerful spirit has often been replaced by a **mad scientist**, and the hypothesis has come to be known as the **brains in a vat** hypothesis. This — not eastern mysticism or world-denying philosophy — is the real imaginative source of *The Matrix*'s premise. And it's much subtler and trickier.

Incidentally, Descartes' conclusion was that we can at least know that our minds have existence (*cogito ergo sum*). From there, Descartes wrongly proceeded to argue for the existence of God and thence to the *knowability* of the world around us. In other words, he himself *rejected* the Matrix hypothesis, on the grounds that it would be **inconsistent with God's perfection to permit so absolute a deception** to occur.

## 2 – **Is *The Matrix* Christian ?**

### a) **Christian references in *The Matrix***

- **Bondage and Liberation.** In the world of *The Matrix*, we are told, men are '*born into bondage, born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch*'. We also see a promised deliverer, 'The One', who dies, comes back to life transformed with greater power and authority, and, in the film's final shot, somehow ascends into heaven, where he prepares for the coming liberation of humanity.
- **The One, Trinity and Judas.** Neo is the One, but he's also connected with Trinity. It can also be argued that Morpheus, besides being a John the Baptist figure, is additionally a kind of father figure to Neo and the other resistance fighters, forming a 'trinity' of heroes. And there's also a Judas figure — in one scene he and Neo drink from the same cup, as Jesus and Judas dipped in the same dish.

- **Creation and Fall.** The ‘*fallen*’ world of the Matrix, we learn, was preceded by a ‘*perfect*’, paradisiacal simulation-world ‘*where none suffered, where everyone would be happy*’. But its first inhabitants rejected this blissful environment, leading to the creation of the more familiar Matrix. This back-story both echoes the doctrine of the fall and also suggests the impossibility of putting fallen man back into a paradisiacal setting. ‘*I believe that, as a species, human beings define their reality through suffering and misery*’, opines Agent Smith.
- **Incarnation.** There’s also a sort of metaphorical birth/incarnation scene, when Neo first leaves the disembodied world of the Matrix and enters the physical world. Neo awakens in the ‘womb’ of the fluid-filled pod in which his body has grown, is severed from *umbilical cord-like* connective lines, and is flushed down a *birth canal-like* chute.
- **Names.** Other biblical references include the name of humanity’s last refuge : Zion, and the name of Morpheus’s ship, *Nebuchadnezzar* — perhaps signifying Morpheus’s crew as ‘exiles’ awaiting a deliverer. Other references include Seraph, a ship called *Logos* and a place named Club Hel.

#### b) A doubtful Christ figure

Despite these Christian and biblical references, *The Matrix* is **far from being a Christian allegory, any more than it is a gnostic fable**. To put it another way, however interesting the film’s Christian references may be from a critical perspective, *The Matrix* offers little in the way of **genuinely edifying or uplifting moral or spiritual significance**.

Certainly Neo is a dynamic hero, perhaps even a charismatic one, but as a Christ-figure he **doesn’t inspire the viewer with anything like faith or love**. His willingness to face death to save another may be dramatically pleasing, but it **lacks any sense of true moral depth, self-sacrifice, humility, service, or love**. By contrast, Gandalf and Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*, Fr. Gabriel in *The Mission* and even the eponymous hero of *The Iron Giant* are all much more evocative and inspiring Christic figures whose various self-sacrifices resonate far more persuasively with Jesus’ passion and death.

More troublingly, Neo's **mission of salvation involves killing dozens of innocent human beings**. In the movie's biggest set piece, Neo and Trinity walk into a government building lobby, armed to the teeth, and begin blowing away dozens of unsuspecting security guards :s From the perspective of real-world moral theology, this is akin to **resistance fighters killing innocent, unwitting civilians** of an oppressive regime. The film tries to justify the massacre in part with some philosophizing about people in the Matrix being '*part of the system*', but it doesn't wash. Nor does the mere possibility of an Agent taking over the virtual body of one of the guards offer credible justification.

### c) **Positive moral implications**

That's not to say that there are absolutely no positive moral dimensions to the film. There are. Here are three examples :

- **Truth above Illusion.** *The Matrix* emphasizes **truth as preferable to illusion**, even when the truth is unpleasant and the illusion comforting. Furthermore, those who claim to know the truth and who want to convey it to others are depicted, not as arrogant, but as **honest and compassionate**. Given the level of resistance to objective truth claims common today (e.g. '*How can you tell me what's true for me?*') — this is a significant point.
- **Pro-life implications.** Beyond this, *The Matrix* obviously depicts it as evil for human beings to be **deceived and enslaved**, and above all to be **treated as commodities**, as things to be used and then disposed of. The startling image of an animatronic infant plugged into the Matrix and awash in black goo may even be felt as a denunciation.
- **Finally, loyalty and sacrifice** among friends is depicted in a positive light, and treachery and self-interest in a negative light.

### d) **Problematic implications**

- **Conspiracy Theory.** From a Christian perspective, the whole premise of the **unknowing enslavement of all of humanity by machines** is a staggeringly apocalyptic event that raises serious eschatological questions : *Would God allow all of humanity to be subjected to so immense a deception ?* This problem is mitigated, though, by the fact that the film does establish that not all of mankind is in the Matrix — there is one surviving human

community, Zion. On the other hand, what we see of Zion in *The Matrix Reloaded* offers no indication whatsoever of any Christian presence or even symbolism. In fact, God and religion seem to be basically irrelevant to the characters in the film.

Morality, too, tends generally to be a non-issue :

- **Glaring disregard for life** as seen especially in the lobby massacre.
- **A shady and unchanging hero.** Neo himself has a shady background, and although he is in many ways transformed during the course of the film, this doesn't include any kind of moral transformation. Likewise, Morpheus sets people free from the Matrix, but there's no indication that they're any freer from sin or evil.
- **Virtual sex.** Consider a scene in which a character named Mouse invites Neo to have virtual sex with a digital woman of his own creation. The other crew members may needle Mouse as a '*digital pimp*', but there's no real moral backbone to their criticism. '*Pay no attention to these hypocrites*', Mouse tells Neo. '*To deny our impulses is to deny the very thing that makes us human*'.

Of course there's no rule forcing screenplay writers to depict their characters — although fighting against a great evil — as **paragons of virtue**. On the other hand, the film's overall lack of moral perspective does make it hard to see it as meaningfully Christian.

## CONCLUSION

In a word, the original film seems not to be meaningfully gnostic, Christian, or anything else. Rather, it is essentially a sci-fi action tale told in a mythic mode, referencing and alluding to biblical sources and pop spirituality nonsense, but in a **post-modern narrative way**, not a spiritually significant way.

## Further Light : *Matrix* Sequels

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Four years after its release, the world of *The Matrix* has been greatly elaborated by a pair of sequels, *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*. Given the intense philosophical and religious scrutiny to which the original film has been subjected, doubtless fans will be

scrutinizing the new films to see what light they shed on the first film, and how they themselves should be viewed in light of the spiritual questions raised by the first film.

It makes more than sense to consider the first film *sui generis*, and then to add considerations from the second two films as a **separate layer of consideration**. The sequels, made back to back almost half a decade later, represent a single creative act reasonably **separate and distinct** from the first film, and probably reflect more how the Wachowski Brothers, looking back at the completed first film, decided to extend and develop the story. There is no grand united vision informing the Trilogy.

The first film's East/West philosophical mix continues into the sequels. 'Karma' as well as 'Love' go along side by side, and *The Matrix Revolutions* presents with something reminiscent of a **redemptive crucifixion scene**.

**But the resonances of deeper meaning are gone.** Both sequels ironically lack *transcendence*, connection to ultimate reality or absolute truth above and beyond the finitude of the created order — illusion and prison or not.

The original *Matrix* film included **hints of transcendent reality** interacting in human affairs. Fate, prophecy, chosenness, perhaps even miracles all had a place in the world of the first film — not merely the synthetic world of the Matrix, which would be a mere contrivance of the machines, but the 'real' world. Specifically, the Oracle's prophecies that the One would free the world from slavery to the machines, that Morpheus would find the One, and that Trinity would fall in love with the One — as well as the consequence that Neo could not die because Trinity loved him and so he had to be the One — all inexorably had real-world implications. Beyond that, love, freedom, and truth appeared bound up with these transcendent realities in a way that was not spiritual but at least **humanistic**.

However, the sequels **clearly undercut the first film's hints of transcendence** and higher truth or meaning. In these sequels, Neo may still have special gifts, gifts that inexplicably extend even into the real world, but **there's no sense of his being in any way destined or chosen to accomplish his mission.**

Beyond this, in the end Neo no longer fights for truth, love, or freedom, but in the name of one final ideal : **choice**. In fact, truth and love and freedom are explicitly and contemptuously debunked as artificial constructs by Agent Smith, and neither Neo nor anyone else can gainsay him. Instead, the only rationale Neo can offer for battling Smith is that **he chooses to do so**.

**Neo's messianic promise is ultimately undercut not only by his diminished abilities, but by what he is actually able to accomplish.** After the death of Trinity, his evil double, Smith, **described by the Oracle as the key** to the ending of the battle, gains in power by **assimilating all inhabitants** in the Matrix and wins combat against Neo hands down. Neo's body is ultimately taken away by machines.

### OVERALL CONCLUSION

*The Matrix* Trilogy finds purpose not in objective values or higher reality but in **individual autonomous choices**. It even ends on an *existential* note. Having given up on freedom and love — an early scene in the 3<sup>rd</sup> film suggests that it is no more than programming — and other basic human values, it just leaves the door open for human beings to **create values for themselves through their own choices**, defying the indifferent universe that ultimately beats them down and **destroys them — only to be itself destroyed**.

*The Matrix* Trilogy is somehow an incoherent **cinematic cyberpunk Nausea**. And yet it's not even a well thought-out tract. It's a philosophically **purely allusive** series that **played with everything it could find** and gradually discarded most of it, in the end **winding up with little worth keeping...**

The original *Matrix* thus remains the most useful of the three, for it represents a stage in the story's development **when anything was possible and everything was interesting**. The sequels largely squander the first film's potential and erode what ever made it a possibly evocative and interesting film.

In the end, for Christians, the real significance of *The Matrix* is not what it says in itself, but in **how it can be used**. It should ideally be utilized as a shared frame of reference, a starting point from which to **raise, clarify, explore and answer** questions concerning the world, human nature and values, God, Providence, and the nature of Truth...