

American Family Foundation

Cultic Studies Review

An Internet Journal of Research, News & Opinion

Volume 2, Number 3
2003

Book and Film Reviews

Film Review: The Matrix Cult

Much of the semiotic discussion around the deeper structures of *The Matrix* has tended to center around positive ethical and philosophical systems. Thus, numerous critics have pointed out the Christian subtext in the film with Neo as Christ and Morpheus as John the Baptist (James L. Ford: 8). The Garden of Eden story has been superimposed on *The Matrix* as well with the implication that just as Adam's and Eve's awakening to knowledge makes Christianity possible, so too, Neo's awakening will lead to the salvation of humanity by a Christ-like figure (cf. James S. Spiegel: 13). Others have picked out connections with Joseph Campbell's monomyth concept where the hero must depart from the familiar world, go into a netherworld and return morally transformed (A. Samuel Kimball: 176, 198). There is also the Platonic interpretation where the passage toward the light from the famous cave allegory is read into the awakening process of *The Matrix*: "The theme of appearance versus reality is as old as Plato's *Republic*. And while perhaps no writer or artist has improved upon his cave allegory in presenting this theme, the Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix* might be as effective an attempt as any since Plato, in cinematic history anyway" (James S. Spiegel: 9). Buddhism and its notion that reality is illusion appears as an equally convincing model for reading *The Matrix* (James L. Ford: 10). Even Gnosticism has been used as an interesting semiotic framework for the film (Frances Flannery-Dailey and Rachel Wagner: 10-12).

However, most of the authors mentioned above sooner or later end up dealing with the issue of violence in the Wachowski brothers' film. This violence seems to be at odds with the ethical principles inherent in the Christian, Buddhist or Gnostic interpretative models. In fact, the martial arts and bloodshed in *The Matrix* and in *The Matrix Reloaded* might move some viewers to discount whatever philosophical message(s) the films might seek to convey. If one is still bent on applying a positive semiotic model to the film, one may be tempted to make the argument that in the cyberworld of the Matrix the violence is as unreal as the residual images of the characters. This desire for moral consistency is undoubtedly what motivated the film's special effects supervisor John Gaeta and editor Zach Staenberg to make the following remark in the scene-by-scene commentary accompanying the DVD version of *The Matrix*: "Nobody actually dies. All these people are virtual. [...] [It's] a cathartic experience" (*The Matrix* DVD: Feature Length Audio Commentary). They are referring to the scene where numerous government security men are killed by Neo and Trinity as the two rebels try to rescue Morpheus. However, this attempt to pretend the violence is not real within the logic of the story does not stand up to scrutiny.

As Morpheus trains Neo in a virtual reality program that resembles the Matrix, he explains the relationship that the rebels have with the inhabitants of the evil cyberworld: "The Matrix is a system, Neo. That system is our enemy. [...] [The people we're trying to save] are a part of that system, and that makes them our enemy. [...] Anyone we haven't unplugged is potentially an agent" (*The Matrix* DVD: The Gatekeepers). Therefore, apart from the agents, the people with whom the rebels interact in the Matrix are computerized projections of those imprisoned in the pods, i.e., each individual within the Matrix is linked to a specific existing physical body that lives in the power plant. Neo is a case-in-point since his virtual self is not merely a bunch of numbers in a computer (as would be the case in a video game for example), but rather a bunch of numbers that represent a real person in a pod. Thus, the dwellers of the Matrix are virtual and real at the same time.

What makes the reality of these people indisputable is that the death of a computerized self in the Matrix means the death of the body to which it corresponds. This is evidenced by the death of Mouse at the hands of government security men who are pursuing the rebels. Mouse's virtual self is shot by virtual bullets within the Matrix, and then we immediately see

his *real* body inside the hovercraft (i.e., in the real world) writhe in agony and bleed profusely out of the mouth. The same applies to Neo whose physical body in the Nebuchadnezzar dies (before his Christ-like resurrection) after his residual image is shot within the Matrix. Therefore, Zach Staenberg and John Gaeta are wrong in their assumption that "all these people are virtual" and so "nobody actually dies" (see above). If the real Mouse dies after being shot, then so do the real bodies of all the security men shot by Neo and Trinity in the government building.

In this connection Frances Flannery-Dailey and Rachel Wagner wonder why the Wachowski brothers make the violence so real in the film:

Indeed, the "violence" which takes place in the Niko Hotel could still be portrayed, with the reassuring belief that any "deaths" which occur there are simply computer blips. The fact that the writers so purposefully insist that actual human beings die (i.e. die also within the power plant) while serving as involuntary "vessels" for the agents strongly argues for *The Matrix's* direct association of violence with the knowledge required for salvation (53; also see Peter X Feng: 151).

I would suggest that a shift in semiotic perspective occurs when we read *The Matrix* in this light. Instead of seeing the cyberworld as analogous to the Buddhist *samsara* — a world of illusion that every human must strive to overcome in order to access a higher reality (Frances Flannery-Dailey and Rachel Wagner: 26), instead of interpreting Morpheus's rebels as the enlightened ones of Mahayana Buddhism who give of themselves in order to guide the "blind" out of *samsara* and toward enlightenment (Frances Flannery-Dailey and Rachel Wagner: 30), I would propose the model of a modern aggressive, violent cult.

The story of destructive fringe religious movements begins with the Book of Revelation in the New Testament. The author, John of Patmos, offers a reading of the Roman Empire not as a sociopolitical network that offered peace and relative prosperity to most of the world for the first time in human history. Instead, feeling disenfranchised as a member of a new religious movement that did not fit into any religious system of the times, John presents the entire world as an instrument of cosmic evil slated for destruction (cf., Adela Yarbro Collins: 141-142). The only exception is a small group of "saints" that follow John's understanding of Christianity. The method for legitimizing this stance is the projection of the social conflict in question to the transcendental plane where the in-group (John's Christians) are agents in the hands of God while the out-group (the rest of humanity) are representatives in the hands of Satan (cf. Adela Yarbro Collins: 148-150). This model went on to inspire various millenarian sects throughout the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance, e.g., the Anabaptists. As Norman Cohn points out, one can recognize the paradigm of what was to become and to remain the central phantasy of revolutionary eschatology. The world is dominated by an evil, tyrannous power [...] until suddenly the hour will strike when the Saints of God are able to rise up and overthrow it. Then the Saints themselves, the chosen, holy people who hitherto have groaned under the oppressor's heel, shall in their turn inherit dominion over the whole earth (4).

The pattern of social turmoil which emerged as a result of this thinking worked as follows:

A marginalized group (often consisting of peasants that flocked to medieval cities but could find no work or a social niche) dealt with its frustration by isolating itself from mainstream society exactly as John demands in Revelation.

The group argued that society was part of a cosmically evil enemy deserving of utter destruction.

Often violent acts (including the massacre of local Jews [Norman Cohn: 49-50, 61-2]) would be committed against society on the assumption that a divine agent would intervene and usher in the end of the unjust world (cf. Norman Cohn: 29-32, 253, 314).

When we consider modern cults, the same logic appears to be operating time and time again, with Jim Jones's People's Temple in Guyana or David Koresh's Branch Davidians in Waco being two striking examples (cf. David G. Bromley and Edward D. Silver: 58). John W. Morehead points out that the cosmic struggle element is standard in today's aggressive religious sects (article), and so is the need to refer to a sacred text:

Their role in battle is symbolized by various scriptural or authoritative imagery that confirms for them the nature of the divine struggle. The ideology then provides the appropriate moral justification for violent acts against civilians who would not ordinarily be seen as combatants and appropriate targets for destruction.

Let us recall in this connection the above-cited passage from *The Matrix* where Morpheus tells Neo that *everyone* in the out-group is the enemy. The scriptural equivalent in this war is the prophecy that drives Morpheus. Since there was a godlike individual who woke up from the Matrix and predicted his own return in the guise of The One (Neo), the struggle of the rebels in the Wachowski film shifts from the political sphere to the transcendental/cosmic one. Thus, anyone standing in the way of the rebels is preventing something sacred from being accomplished, which justifies all violent acts against innocent people in the out-group.

Two attitudes toward the out-group seem to be combined in *The Matrix*. On the one hand, the unawakened population of the Matrix is the unquestionable enemy, a threat that must be dealt with decisively. This would be epitomized by Neo's well-known request that Tank provide him and Trinity with "guns, lots of guns." Such a position corresponds to that of the Japanese Aum cult, for example, regarding which John W. Morehead writes:

From within the mindset of terrorist "cultures of violence" the world is already a hostile place, and the groups themselves, and those they represent, are the ones under attack. What those on the outside view as terrorism and unprovoked aggression, those perpetrating the acts consider self-defense.

This difference of perspective is well illustrated by agent Smith who asks Neo to help in bringing "a well-known terrorist to justice." To Smith, Morpheus is a terrorist while to the rebel group Morpheus is a heroic liberator.

The other attitude toward mainstream society is a paradox inherent not only in aggressive religious cults but also in many 19th and 20th century revolutionary movements. This is well illustrated by the lyrics of the Russian version of the Communist International: "The whole world of violence shall be destroyed by us down to its foundations, and then we shall build our own world..." (my translation: http://www.funet.fi/pub/culture/russian/html_pages/internatsional.html). As Herbert L. Rosedale indicates with respect to the Aum cult,

In a recent work dealing with Aum Shinrikyo, Robert Lifton has commented on how the view of that cult was manifested in the apocalyptic goal of "destroying the world in order to save it," and the group's action in killing innocent non-believers was viewed as altruistic murder that benefited both the victims and their perpetrators.

Morpheus's position is similar in that he too seeks to save the deluded population of the Matrix but considers every sleeping individual as a foe at the same time (see above).

The disdain with which the out-group is viewed by the rebels in *The Matrix* is suggested by the term "coppertop." This is how Switch calls Neo in the car when she points a gun at him and tells him to lift up his shirt for debugging. Unawakened humans are treated like batteries by the machines, and the evil of that attitude is indisputable. But Switch seems to share in this dehumanization, demonstrating not compassion for the enslaved but a sense of haughty superiority. This social exclusivism can be traced back from the modern

cult to the Book of Revelation. To quote Adela Yarbro Collins, "The dualist division of humanity in the Apocalypse is a failure in love. [...] One's enemies, including large numbers of unknown people with whom one supposes oneself to be in disagreement, are given a simple label, associated with demonic beings, and thus denied their full humanity" (170). After the events of 9/11 this assessment rings more true than ever:

In-group morality [in Al Qaeda] was emphasized; there is no moral obligation to those outside the Ummah, or indeed to other Muslims outside the group. [...] Secularists and disbelievers are not even considered living. Mahmud Abouhalima, involved in the first World Trade Center bombing, described non-religious individuals as moving "dead bodies" (Christopher M. Centner).

Neo and Trinity have a stone-faced attitude toward murdering innocent security men in *The Matrix*. They kill as if they were part of an action cartoon with no emotion, no regret, no sense that (and this might have been somewhat mitigating) this murder is a horrible necessity. Trinity especially tends to move like a machine as she shoots people at pointblank range, puts knives in their foreheads and mutilates men who are convinced they are fighting dangerous terrorists the way real-life police officers would risk their lives to protect innocent civilians from... Al Qaeda! In *The Matrix Reloaded* the same approach to murdering unknowing security people is observed. After captain Niobe attacks and neutralizes a couple of policemen, her head shoots up in a jerky motion as if to stress the idea of a superhero's job well-done. Equally disturbing is the way in which a power plant is blown up right in the middle of a city in *The Matrix Reloaded*; the implicit countless civilian victims within the explosion radius are discounted by the film as not even worth thinking about.

Christopher M. Centner's above-cited reference to "in-group morality," which amounts to the willingness to "trash" anyone in the out-group, is a position typical of aggressive cults and terrorist organizations with cult-like elements. This can be linked to Lawrence Kohlberg's discussion of moral development stages across cultures. Kohlberg outlines six stages through which a human being can progress in his or her conception of what is right and wrong. The first two stages are pre-social in that they make the creation of stable social units impossible and characterize mainly young children or psychopaths. Thus, stage one is about the simple avoidance of punishment while stage two is the conception of other people only in terms of what they can give in exchange for something (Lawrence Kohlberg: 17). It is only with stage three that a rudimentary social structure can emerge — on the basis of in-group and out-group morality. The in-group tends to be a smaller interest group, like a tribe, where justice is defined in terms of approval from the in-group. Such a position makes the creation of larger social structures problematic because the members of the in-group identify with a narrow range of goals rather than a broad social system that incorporates many interest groups or "tribes." (cf. Lawrence Kohlberg, p. 18-21)

The members of Morpheus's rebel group appear to function at the level of Lawrence Kohlberg's third stage, and in this connection the parallels with cultic thinking appear very prominent. Since this morality violates that of mainstream society and age-old traditions, cults tend to focus on the figure of a charismatic leader in order to bolster their shaky ethical systems. In fact this goes back to medieval millenarian sects that normally centered around a prophet-like person or *propheta* (Cohn 43). Such a leader declared all conventional norms invalid and sanctioned violence meant to usher in the Millennium. Modern cultic leaders function the same way, e.g., Jim Jones and David Koresh claimed divine status and absolute trust as well as the absolute right to rule the in-group as they saw fit (cf. David G. Bromley and Edward D. Silver 44: 58).

In *The Matrix* Morpheus is undoubtedly a prophet-like leader modeled on John the Baptist (see above). His superhuman nature is suggested in a scene from *The Matrix Reloaded*

where the ship's operator Link appears fearful of what is to come. The situation seems to be such that Morpheus's actions imperil the rebel group and all of awakened humanity. Instead of justifying his position by logical reasoning, Morpheus simply tells Link: "Trust me." In other words, Morpheus's authority is inspired/divine rather than human and open to questioning. To follow Morpheus is to believe in him. In fact reliance on belief, rather than logic, is what characterizes Morpheus and his relationship with the other rebels. Morpheus repeatedly talks not about what he knows or has experienced, but what he *believes* to be true. And the suspension of critical thinking is a sine qua non in the relationship between a modern cult's membership and its leader.

Morpheus's special status is illustrated by the lobby shooting spree and the rooftop rescue in *The Matrix*. How does Neo justify the murder of many innocent people in the office tower during his attempt to save Morpheus? Morpheus knows the codes for accessing Zion, and, as Tank tells Neo, in the interests of awakened humanity, Morpheus's body should be disconnected and therefore killed before the agents pry the information out of his residual image. Therefore, the willingness to use "guns, lots of guns" against the security men cannot be justified even in terms of the rebel's practical goals. The justification for the ruthless rescue rests on Morpheus's special, semi-divine nature so typical of modern and medieval cult leaders. The welfare of the divine individual is by definition greater than that of ordinary humans (awakened or not). After all, the policemen killed by Neo and Trinity are just a bunch of coppers whose value pales in comparison to that of a prophet.

None of this is to suggest that the cultic model appears as an intentional semiotic structure of *The Matrix* and *The Matrix Reloaded*. Many critics have pointed out that the Wachowski brothers were very deliberate in imbuing the film with Buddhist and other traditionally positive religious overtones. For example, this is how the directors sum up the film's implications in an interview:

We're interested in mythology, theology and, to a certain extent, higher-level mathematics. All are ways human beings try to answer bigger questions, as well as The Big Question. If you're going to do epic stories, you should concern yourself with those issues. People might not understand all the allusions in the movie, but they understand the important ideas. We wanted to make people think, engage their minds a bit (Quoted in James L. Ford, 22).

And indeed, it would be absolutely wrong to suggest that the Wachowskis fail in their attempt to convey such philosophic ideas. The obvious presence of the intended message explains the interest that this "action" film has aroused in the academic and philosophic community. The problem appears to be that the unintended cultic subtext is there at the same time as the intended subtext. And the result is a mix of discourses which amounts to a cacophony of values. Jim Jones, Bruce Lee and Buddha appear together on the same stage and inevitably sing out of tune. There is no denying that the bad guys are absolutely bad in *The Matrix* and in *The Matrix Reloaded*. The problem is that that the good guys are not good enough.

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**Vladimir Tumanov, vtumanov@rogers.com
University of Western Ontario, London, Canada**