

THE MATRIX

By Julie Arliss and Peter Vardy

A part from the refreshing lack of aliens this film is a regular sci-fi movie. It is a high street best-seller because it is not the sort of film that can be watched only once. Why is this? Keanu Reeves and Lawrence Fishbourne both put in remarkable performances, but this does not fully explain its appeal. It deals with our shared questions about reality and the nature of truth. *How do I know that I am not a butterfly dreaming that I am a man/woman?* These ideas are clearly engaging, but the actual power and the hidden depth of meaning for this film may come from another source; the most profound and spiritual of our Biblical books, the Gospel according to St John. At first sight no doubt this seems like a radical claim. Many people will sit quietly perplexed wondering what it is about this film, and why they have to watch it again. Most will understand and identify with the film but not see the most profound and distinctly theological of ideas that underpin it. In the film 'The MATRIX is a world that is drawn over your eyes to blind you to the truth,' and this is probably true for many people who watch it.

Two Ways of Seeing the World – The MATRIX

Neo, (Neo stands for 'The New' as in neo-orthodoxy or neo-platonism and is an acronym for 'one') at the start of the film lives a double life; as a respectable computer programmer, and privately as a supplier of illegal software. One night he is woken as his computer types something to him without prompting or effort on his part, he is told to follow the white rabbit. He can make no sense of this at all. Then people come to the door and on the arm of a girl is tattooed a white rabbit. He has the choice to follow her or not. It is an unreasonable thing to do. The visitors are going to a party and they tell him that he needs to 'unplug' which means to seek release from reality through drugs (mescaline) and parties. He does not want to go, until he sees the white rabbit. At this point he can trust the message on his computer and go, or return to his bed. He goes to the party and here is met by TRINITY, who he has heard of but says he has always regarded as a 'God'. Trinity is a member of the resistance. She knows that humanity is now only part of a computer generated reality and has entered the world of the MATRIX to warn Neo that he is in danger. Morpheus, the leader of the resistance, believes that Neo will be the one to save humanity from the world of artificial intelligence and has been hacking into the computer world to watch him. Now that Neo is in danger the resistance must warn him, and if possible bring him into their 'real' world. Before Neo can enter the real world outside of the MATRIX he has to make a decision. He can

not know what the truth about his world is until the decision has been made. He has to trust Trinity and Morpheus, and has very little reason for doing so. He chooses to trust because of the question which troubles him. 'What is the truth?' It is a question that has been driving him mad. But he has to be willing to be open to the new possibility without comprehending what it is. Morpheus offers Neo two pills, which represents his choice. All Morpheus promises Neo is the truth which brings freedom from bondage to the Matrix. He can stay in the MATRIX, which is a living death, or choose a life of freedom and truth, however uncomfortable that may be.

These opening scenes of the film establish that there are two ways of seeing the world. One is to be like the party goers who live from high to high. They live within the world of the MATRIX, which is unfulfilling, and numb themselves to it with drugs. If they are troubled with deeper questions about truth and reality they are not really prepared to look for answers. Neo's employer is another of these people; the only question which he seems willing to take seriously is whether Neo is at his desk at 9.00am. He finds purpose in life running an office. These people do not question the nature of their existence and do not know that their lives are not in fact real, but part of a computer generated illusion. They are 'dead' people, living in bondage to the MATRIX. The other way of looking at the world is to see it as it really is. This is a much narrower harder path to tread. Neo's search for the truth is uncomfortable and makes him unwilling to go with the crowd. He is called in this search to place the importance of asking the question above reason; he does not know where this will lead him. He is called to trust those, Trinity and Morpheus, who claim to know him already even though he has never met them. This goes against all rational thought, but he is promised the truth if he can trust. He is faced with a decision to go forward to re-birth into the real world or to go back to bed; he takes the red pill and in so doing turns his back on his past and any future he may have had in the working day world of the MATRIX. It is a huge risk, leaving everything behind, but he cannot be told the truth about the MATRIX, he has to be shown it. Only by experiencing the truth will he be able to grasp the true nature of the illusion.

The film thus establishes the difference between the known world and the real world. That there is a greater reality beyond 'the world' is the single most important theological truth revealed in St John's gospel.

Two Ways of Seeing the World – St John's Gospel

"For this I come into the world; that you may know

the truth and the truth may set you free.” (8:32)

Some people in St John’s gospel are not genuinely seeking answers to their questions. They are happy in their world, which they feel they understand, and they enjoy the privileges of status and the comforts of life. Such as John presents them to us, are the leaders of the Jews. They are stuck in a world (of rationality) governed by rational interpretation of the law (Torah). Whilst they are unwilling to challenge this they are not able to grasp spiritual truths. John uses the symbol of darkness to describe this way of seeing the world. To live in darkness is to turn away from that which offers the truth. To live in darkness is to develop a false understanding of life and the world; it is to live in a self-created illusion. It is in fact to be dead. In the MATRIX Morpheus tells Neo that the Matrix is a world that is pulled over people’s eyes to blind them to the truth and this is precisely the point in John’s gospel; that the Jews are blind and live in darkness, they think that this world is all there is. That means living with a false sense of reality, but they prefer life in darkness

“the light has come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light” (3:19)

While in darkness people cannot see the truth and without a willingness to engage with the question will never find a meaningful path in their lives.

“If any man walk in the night he stumbles because there is no light in him” (11:10)

Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, comes to Jesus “by night” because he lives in darkness. Nicodemus has a secure life as a Pharisee and his study of the law gave him purpose in life, but he knows that there is more to life than this and this is why he seeks Jesus. But Nicodemus is only at the stage of asking the question and is not willing to turn his back on his past and be shown the truth. He cannot understand the words of Jesus and departs unenlightened because he ‘loved the darkness rather than light’.

In John, as in the MATRIX, there are two ways of seeing the world; to accept as it appears or to seek the truth. Seeking the truth involves more than being willing to ask questions. Even Pontius Pilate at the trial of Jesus asks, ‘What is the truth?’

In John’s gospel there is a more real way of seeing the world. Those who see clearly walk in the LIGHT and see through the illusion to the truth about the world. There is only one way to the truth and that involves the response to a call to give up everything and to do something unreasonable. The first disciples in John’s gospel see Jesus and, without speaking, stop what they are doing and follow him. These fisherman with jobs and responsibilities give up their working day worlds, and all security to follow him, with no real grounds. It is a huge risk, but where Jesus is, is a world which is without illusion. They cannot enter it without being prepared for a radical change to their view of the world, and, unlike Nicodemus, they are prepared for this. After the feeding of the 5000 many people no longer stayed with Jesus. Jesus turned to his disciples and asked them, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’ Simon Peter replied on behalf of the disciples, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed.’ (6:68) They are prepared to trust and follow

Jesus when all around them have fallen by the wayside and taken offence at Jesus. The Jews took offence because they think that Jesus is like them and of ‘this world.’ They think that they know where he has come from,

‘Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?’ (6:42)

They are stuck in a two dimensional view of reality which sees only the physical. The spiritual truth which the disciples recognise is that Jesus is not ‘of this world’ but ‘of God.’ Because God is the source of all truth the disciples have nowhere else to go, unless they go back into the dark world of illusion which does not recognise spiritual truth. The choice to stay with Jesus means a choice to ‘abide’ in Jesus, not in the world. This however makes the disciples a threat to the world,

‘If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world...therefore the world hates you....if they persecuted me they will persecute you.’(15:19-20)

This is exactly what happens to Neo in the Matrix. He chooses the truth rather than the illusory world of the Matrix and this automatically makes him a threat to the powers of the Matrix. For the disciples, as for Neo, they can now view the world for the first time as it really is; a place of darkness, deceit and death. This corresponds exactly with the reality of the planet which Morpheus shows Neo. Jesus in John’s gospel offers release from bondage to this world as the bringer of the light life and truth; at the end of the film Neo has conquered the powers of the MATRIX and is ready to reveal the truth to all mankind.

The MATRIX offers the same double world-view as St John’s gospel; a world which is based on an illusion and a real world of truth, knowledge of which can give meaning to life. Upon this highly philosophical and deeply theological stage some key events of the gospel are now played out.

John the Baptist

Morpheus functions in the MATRIX as a John the Baptist character. He is himself an extraordinary, visionary, far-sighted man – but he knows that he is not ‘the one’. He is not the key figure who can transform the world. In the gospels John the Baptist, recognised by his contemporaries as a prophet, knows that he is not ‘the one’. He sends a message to Jesus

‘Are you he’ (the one) ‘who is to come, or should we look for another?’ Matt 11¹

In John’s gospel when John the Baptist first sees Jesus he says

“I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God” John 1³⁴

Morpheus in the film also recognises Neo as the one. The task of Morpheus, as of John the Baptist, is to identify ‘the one’ and he stakes his whole life on this. John and Morpheus are both in the service of truth, but do not themselves contain the way of truth.

Baptism and Re-birth

In the film Morpheus has to put Neo through a painful process of re-birthing. Neo is seen being physically awoken from his computer-generated reality and then being violently unplugged from it. He is then reborn through water and symbolically into the light. He is born naked and bald and when he vomits it is like a baby positing.

In the gospels Jesus is put through the water of John's baptism in the river Jordan; this marks the beginning of his ministry. It is also the path which all who seek the truth must tread, and it must be chosen willingly. It is the path to truth, liberty and knowledge. John's gospel makes this clear in the discourse between Jesus and Nicodemus where Nicodemus is particularly obtuse and fails to understand that which the reader must understand. It is a life and death choice.

Exile and the new Jerusalem

The name of the ship used in the Matrix is the Nebuchadnezzar - this is the name of the emperor under whom the people of Israel were in Exile in Babylon. Similarly the machines have bound into slavery most of the human population from the real world by the creation of the Matrix (Morpheus specifically says to Neo '.....you are a slave - you were born into bondage..... a prison for your mind'). The Nebuchadnezzar represents the point of exile for the few who have seen through the illusion of the Matrix. The machines control the whole world, except for one small city which is the last refuge of free humans - this is the city of Zion. The parallel with the city of hope, the new Jerusalem are obvious; meanwhile those on board the Nebuchadnezzar have to fight the illusion and lies of the Matrix on their own - yet they know of the existence of Zion and can draw strength from this.

Miracles; In the World but not of the World

Those who are no longer in the MATRIX are not wholly constrained by its physical limits or its rules. The rules are part of the construct of the MATRIX which they, to a degree, live outside. The degree to which they can bend or break the rules of the MATRIX depends upon the degree to which they believe they can. In one scene Neo visits the MATRIX and meets some children who perform apparently supernatural feats. One boy bends a spoon and tells Neo how he does it; you must not think of the spoon, but only of the truth. The truth is that there is no spoon. The reason there is no spoon is because the spoon is part of the computer generated illusion. The problem for those who live outside of the MATRIX is that when they enter it it all appears so real. In the MATRIX they can hear, touch, feel, smell and feel pain. They can also be killed. To know that it is not real is a huge challenge, which nobody before Neo has managed. If they do not believe this they are vulnerable to its powers.

In St John's gospel Jesus is in the world, but not of the world; he knows that the world has no power over him because, 'all things were made through him' (John 1:2). He can bend and break the laws of nature by walking on water, multiplying food, healing the sick. The disciples cannot do the things he does because they lack faith. In

Mark 9 the disciples try, and fail to perform an exorcism, because of their lack of faith. What they lack is only the belief that they can do it; they lack the confidence that Jesus has that evil has no real power when faced with the truth. The problem for the disciples is that evil appears very real and to be the dominate power of the world. They have to learn that this is part of the illusion which imprisons them - with faith they can move mountains.

In the MATRIX Neo learns from Morpheus about the nature of his true powers in the computer generated reality. He can enter the Matrix wherever and whenever he chooses and whilst there is not subject to the normal limits of the human body or to the laws of nature. In John's gospel Jesus exhibits this same freedom to come and go, appear and disappear. In John 10³⁹ his opponents try to stone him, but he just disappears. Neo, like Jesus must come into conflict with the powers of the 'world' in order to destroy its dominion. Like Neo Jesus is a threat to the powers of the world because he knows the truth.

Betrayal

Cypher, in the MATRIX, decides to betray the resistance: he does not believe that Neo is the one and thinks that Morpheus has mis-led him. Cypher also yearns for the comfort zone of the MATRIX where the food tastes good and he can have success, enjoyment, comfort and security even though he knows that these things are not real. He decides to betray Morpheus to the powers of the MATRIX in return for re-insertion into the MATRIX and a fictional life of fame and success.

In the gospel Jesus' disciples follow him, but also have difficulty believing how he will achieve his mission. Judas decided to betray Jesus and in so doing decided to destroy what Jesus was doing. Judas' motives are unknown, but it is recorded that he received money for the betrayal: he may have been motivated by this or he may no longer have believed in what Jesus was doing. The nature of Cypher and Judas' betrayal is the same; they each reveal the whereabouts of the one they betray.

Gethsemene

In the MATRIX Neo had been told that he would have to choose between saving Morpheus' life, and dying himself, or preserving his own life. When Morpheus is captured Neo is under no illusion that in making the decision to try to rescue Morpheus he will die, but this is his free choice.

Both Neo and Jesus are prepared to lay down their lives for their friends revealing the capacity of the human heart for selfless self-giving love. The only teaching of Jesus in St John's gospel is

'Love one another as I have loved you' (15:12)
Which demands being prepared to give up ones life to save others.

'Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends' (15:13)

Fear of death is a part of the world which imprisons people. Once fear is overcome each can take on the world fearlessly.

Resurrection

In the MATRIX Neo dies, but because of the love of Trinity comes back to life. In his own self he now fully realises the illusory power of the MATRIX. The MATRIX cannot harm him because he is not **of** the MATRIX. When bullets are fired at him he puts out his hand and says 'No'. He is not prepared to let the MATRIX have any power over him. The bullets stop in mid-air and his triumph is complete.

In the gospel Jesus dies and is buried. The powers of evil and death have seemed insurmountable. Pontius Pilate appears to have had the power to kill Jesus and to have triumphed. But death has no power over those who are not **'of the world'** and Jesus rises again in triumph. Jesus knew that he had to go through death but death has no dominion over him or over those that follow him.

In Religious and Values education, students will tend to focus increasingly on the study of Ethics and the Philosophy of Religion as they are made aware of these through the Five Strands approach to Religious and Values education in Australia. This is good in itself as these subjects are directly relevant to contemporary life and are exciting and relevant. By contrast, many feel that the gospels are boring and irrelevant – yet these same people are excited by and identify with the Matrix. There is a lesson here; the profundity and depth of the scriptures, the ability of these 'stories' to convey ultimate truth is as inescapably powerful today as ever. Current films cannot replace scriptures but they may offer a door through which the Hebrew and Christian scripture can become accessible for a new generation.

TRUTH OR ILLUSION?

How could one know if the world as we experience it is just an illusion?

Are there any truths that cannot be explained to us but which we have to 'see' for ourselves?

What could prompt us to radically change our view of what is real or really significant in the world?

Sticks appear bent in water, the sun appears to go round the earth, a mirage appears to be an oasis, time appears to be absolute. Light appears to travel in straight lines – why should we trust our senses?

Can the comfort zone of conventional thinking blind us to a search for any further truth?

PLATO'S STORY OF THE CAVE

Imagine an underground chamber, like a cave with an entrance open to the daylight and running a long way underground. In the cave are men who have been prisoners there since they were children, their legs and backs being fastened so that they could only look ahead of them and cannot turn their heads. Behind them and above them a fire is burning, and between the fire and the prisoners runs a road, in front of which a curtain has been built like a screen at puppet shows between their operators and their audience.... Imagine further that there are men carrying all sorts of gear along behind the curtain wall – all the prisoners would see were the shadows on the wall in front of them.... Suppose one of the prisoners were let loose, and suddenly compelled to stand up and turn his head and look and walk towards the fire. All these actions would be painful and he would be too dazzled to see properly the objects of which he used to see as shadows. So if he was told that what he used to see was mere illusion and that he was now nearer reality and seeing more correctly, because he was turned towards objects which were more real... don't you think he would be at a loss and think that what he used to see was more real than the objects now pointed out to him? Plato says that the task of the philosopher is to free himself from the shackles and shadows of illusion, to seek release from the prison of the cave and to come out into the truth represented by the sun. Those who try to do this will face mockery and ridicule from those who remain prisoners but, for Plato, the philosophic life in which truth is sought no matter what the cost is the only life worth living.