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The Matrix: Reloaded

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The Matrix: Reloaded

Abstract

This is a review of *The Matrix: Reloaded* (2003).

If there were a postmodern messiah, Neo, the protagonist of *The Matrix: Reloaded*, would surely be it. *The Matrix* and its sequel *The Matrix: Reloaded*, written and directed by the Wachowski brothers, are an eclectic mix of Gnostic Christian and Buddhist elements mixed with postmodern reflection, most notably that of French philosopher Jean Baudrillard. Religious symbolism is what accounts, in part, for *The Matrix's* massive appeal. Neo (Keanu Reeves) is "the One," potentially a savior for the human race. In the first movie he endures a series of transformations in which he awakens, dies and is resurrected as the deliverer of the human race who is at war against an insidious conglomerate of smart computers, or artificial intelligence. The "matrix" is a program created by these computers, and is somewhat like a mass movie that the whole human race is plugged into and by which it is deceived. Neo is charged with the destiny of waking people up to this deception and to the fact that there is a real world outside of the matrix. Many critics have identified parallels between the movie, Buddhism and Christianity, concluding that the movie seems like an old story revived in contemporary, cyber punk clothes.

Reloaded, however, defies this simple assessment. If the first movie posits a dual-world reality, one in which there is a real world over against one of false representations, the second movie questions this assumption. As Neo penetrates the many levels of the matrix, he finds that the very idea of a messiah may actually be

programmed. Determinism vs. free will is examined in light of Neo's awakening, which in the first movie was portrayed as an act of freedom. *Reloaded* questions the very notion of freedom, as well as the dual construction of a real world vs. a world of illusion.

This issue is dramatized in a scene in which Neo is confronted with the realization that the teleology on which the movie is based, the salvation of humankind from evil computers and false representations, is perhaps itself another false representation. If this is the case, there would be no free will, something Neo realizes in a horrifying instant. This is a shocking moment in the movie, as the audience has so far been following a salvation narrative typical of many Hollywood movies. The Wachowski brothers, however, do not simply deliver what the audience wants, or expects. An implicit criticism of traditional religious teleology--the notion of progress and ultimate salvation--runs throughout this film. On another level this film serves to complicate the formulaic adaptations of religious and mythic elements that have permeated Hollywood films since the 1970's. There is no easy summation of this film into clear religious categories, unless one termed the film a koan, or a performative paradox, meant to tease the audience into active thought.

Reloaded tackles head-on the premise of the first movie, which is the notion of salvation. What is the meaning of salvation if it is pre-programmed, and of a

savior, if he is part of a computer template? These questions and others are pondered in sporadic dialogues interspersed with spectacular action scenes, the combination of which makes this movie unique. Just before Neo embarks on his journey to overthrow the offending computers and save a small portion of humankind who are freed from the matrix and living in a city in the middle of the earth (aptly named Zion), he reflects on the nature of technology with "the counselor," (Anthony Zerbe). The counselor questions the irony of humankind's dependence on machines and computers, which generate the basic conveniences of modern life, while in the midst of a war with wayward computers. Neo claims that the difference is that the computers they use can be turned off, which is not true of the offending computers. The counselor, however, has the last word. Can we turn our computers off?

Beyond notions of freedom and determinism, the film reflects on the moral issues involving mass production and technology. There are blatant references to Baudrillard's work, which is a criticism of contemporary representation. Whereas in modern times images were thought to represent something real or tangible, in the present (postmodern) era images, or simulacrum, bear no resemblance to reality at all. The appeal of *The Matrix: Reloaded* is that it posits these abstract concepts through the medium of dynamic action science fiction, which makes it a movie for everyone. The critique of representation is illustrated in a real way through the

costumes of the characters. In Zion, the human's freed from the matrix don multiculturally diverse garb, from retro 60s to saris to Buddhist-style robes, whereas those still in the matrix look like contemporary Westerners. The contrast is telling, perhaps, of the overall message of the *Matrix* trilogy. The good guys are critical of technology and yearn for a more traditional connection to the earth and reality.

While utilizing religious themes of resurrection and salvation, *Reloaded* nonetheless subjects these concepts to interrogation, and thoroughly entertains its audience at the same time. Neo is not a modern savior, confident in his status and destiny, but rather a postmodern messiah, unsure, confused, eminently sympathetic.