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## Wake up! Gnosticism and Buddhism in The Matrix

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# Wake up! Gnosticism and Buddhism in *The Matrix*

## **Abstract**

The Wachowski brothers' 1999 hit release *The Matrix* draws on multiple religious traditions to establish its complex worldview. Two of the most prominent are Gnostic Christianity and Buddhism, which, like the film, pose humanity's fundamental problem and its solution in terms of ignorance and enlightenment. Because of ignorance, people mistake the "material" world for something real, but they may "wake up" from this dream with help from a guide who teaches them their true nature. This article explores the film's pervasive allusions to Gnosticism and Buddhism, which in turn opens up the question of the film's overarching message and ultimate view of reality.

In *The Matrix*, a 1999 film by the Wachowski brothers, a black-clad computer hacker known as Neo falls asleep in front of his computer. A mysterious message appears on the screen: "Wake up, Neo."<sup>1</sup> This succinct phrase encapsulates the plot of the film, as Neo struggles with the problem of being imprisoned in a "material" world that is actually a computer simulation program created in the distant future by Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) as a means of enslaving humanity, by perpetuating ignorance in the form of an illusory perception called "the matrix." In part, the film crafts its ultimate view of reality by alluding to numerous religious traditions that advance the idea that the fundamental problem which humanity faces is ignorance and the solution is knowledge or awakening. Two religious traditions on which the film draws heavily are Gnostic Christianity and Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> Although these traditions differ in important ways, they agree in maintaining that the problem of ignorance can be solved through an individual's reorientation of perspective concerning the material realm.<sup>3</sup> Gnostic Christianity and Buddhism also both envision a guide who helps those still trapped in the limiting world of illusion, a Gnostic redeemer figure or a bodhisattva, who willingly enters that world in order to share liberating knowledge, facilitating escape for anyone able to understand. In the film, this figure is Neo, whose name is also an anagram for "the One."

Although as a "modern myth"<sup>4</sup> the film purposefully draws on numerous traditions,<sup>5</sup> we propose that an examination of Gnostic Christianity and Buddhism

well illuminates the overarching paradigm of *The Matrix*, namely, the problem of sleeping in ignorance in a dreamworld, solved by waking to knowledge or enlightenment. By drawing syncretistically on these two ancient traditions and fusing them with a technological vision of the future, the film constructs a new teaching that challenges its audience to question "reality."

### **Christian Elements in *The Matrix***

The majority of the film's audience probably easily recognizes the presence of some Christian elements, such as the name Trinity<sup>6</sup> or Neo's death and Christ-like resurrection and ascension near the end of the film. In fact, Christian and biblical allusions abound, particularly with respect to nomenclature:<sup>7</sup> Apoc (Apocalypse), Neo's given name of Mr. Ander/son (from the Greek andras for man, thus producing "Son of Man"), the ship named the Nebuchadnezzar (the Babylonian king who, in the Book of Daniel, has puzzling symbolic dreams that must be interpreted),<sup>8</sup> and the last remaining human city, Zion, synonymous in Judaism and Christianity with (the heavenly) Jerusalem.<sup>9</sup> Neo is overtly constructed as a Jesus figure: he is "the One" who was prophesied to return again to the Matrix, who has the power to change the Matrix from within (i.e., to work miracles), who battles the representatives of evil and who is killed but comes to life again.

This construction of Neo as Jesus is reinforced in numerous ways. Within minutes of the commencement of the movie, another hacker says to Neo, "You're my saviour, man, my own personal Jesus Christ."<sup>10</sup> This identification is also suggested by the Nebuchadnezzar's crew, who nervously wonder if he is "the One" who was foretold, and who repeatedly swear in Neo's presence by saying "Jesus" or "Jesus Christ."<sup>11</sup> In still another example, Neo enters the Nebuchadnezzar for the first time and the camera pans across the interior of the ship, resting on the make: "Mark III no. 11." This seems to be another messianic reference, since the Gospel of Mark 3:11 reads: "Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, ' You are the Son of God!'"

### **Gnosticism in *The Matrix***

Although the presence of individual Christian elements within the film is clear, the overall system of Christianity that is presented is not the traditional, orthodox one. Rather, the Christian elements of the film make the most sense when viewed within a context of Gnostic Christianity.<sup>12</sup> Gnosticism was a religious system that flourished for centuries at the beginning of the Common Era, and in many regions of the ancient Mediterranean world it competed strongly with "orthodox" Christianity, while in other areas it represented the only interpretation of Christianity that was known.<sup>13</sup> The Gnostics possessed their own Scriptures, accessible to us in the form of the *Nag Hammadi Library*, from which a general

sketch of Gnostic beliefs may be drawn.<sup>14</sup> Although Gnostic Christianity comprises many varieties, Gnosticism as a whole seems to have embraced an orienting cosmogonic myth that explains the true nature of the universe and humankind's proper place in it.<sup>15</sup> A brief retelling of this myth illuminates numerous parallels with *The Matrix*.

In the Gnostic myth, the supreme god is completely perfect and therefore alien and mysterious, "ineffable," "unnamable," "immeasurable light which is pure, holy and immaculate" (Apocryphon of John). In addition to this god there are other, lesser divine beings in the pleroma (akin to heaven, a division of the universe that is not earth), who possess some metaphorical gender of male or female.<sup>16</sup> Pairs of these beings are able to produce offspring that are themselves divine emanations, perfect in their own ways.<sup>17</sup> A problem arises when one "aeon" or being named Sophia (Greek for wisdom), a female, decides "to bring forth a likeness out of herself without the consent of the Spirit," that is, to produce an offspring without her consort (Apocry. of John). The ancient view was that females contribute the matter in reproduction, and males the form; thus, Sophia's action produces an offspring that is imperfect or even malformed, and she casts it away from the other divine beings in the pleroma into a separate region of the cosmos. This malformed, ignorant deity, sometimes named Yaldabaoth, mistakenly believes himself to be the only god.

Gnostics identify Yaldabaoth as the Creator God of the Old Testament, who himself decides to create archons (angels), the material world (earth) and human beings. Although traditions vary, Yaldabaoth is usually tricked into breathing the divine spark or spirit of his mother Sophia that formerly resided in him into the human being (especially Apocry. of John; echoes of Genesis 2-3). Therein lies the human dilemma. We are pearls in the mud, a divine spirit (good) trapped in a material body (bad) and a material realm (bad). Heaven is our true home, but we are in exile from the pleroma.

Luckily for the Gnostic, salvation is available in the form of gnosis or knowledge imparted by a Gnostic redeemer, who is Christ, a figure sent from the higher God to free humankind from the Creator God Yaldabaoth. The gnosis involves an understanding of our true nature and origin, the metaphysical reality hitherto unknown to us, resulting in the Gnostic's escape (at death) from the enslaving material prison of the world and the body, into the upper regions of spirit. However, in order to make this ascent, the Gnostic must pass by the archons, who are jealous of his/her luminosity, spirit or intelligence, and who thus try to hinder the Gnostic's upward journey.

To a significant degree, the basic Gnostic myth parallels the plot of *The Matrix*, with respect to both the problem that humans face as well as the solution. Like Sophia, we conceived an offspring out of our own pride, as Morpheus

explains: "early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, all of mankind was united in celebration. We marveled at our own magnificence as we gave birth to A.I."<sup>18</sup> This offspring of ours, however, like Yaldabaoth is malformed (matter without spirit?). Morpheus describes A.I. as "a singular consciousness that spawned an entire race of machines," a fitting parallel for the Gnostic Creator God of the archons (angels) and the illusory material world. A.I. creates the matrix, a computer simulation that is "a prison for your mind." Thus, Yaldabaoth/ A.I. traps humankind in a material prison that does not represent ultimate reality, as Morpheus explains to Neo: "As long as the matrix exists, the human race will never be free."

The film also echoes the metaphorical language employed by Gnostics. *The Nag Hammadi* texts describe the fundamental human problem in metaphorical terms of blindness, sleep, ignorance, dreams and darkness / night, while the solution is stated in terms of seeing, waking, knowledge (gnosis), waking from dreams and light / day.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, in the film *Morpheus*, whose name is taken from the Greek god of sleep and dreams, reveals to Neo that the matrix is "a computer generated dreamworld." When Neo is unplugged and awakens for the first time on the Nebuchadnezzar in a brightly lit white space (a cinematic code for heaven), his eyes hurt, as Morpheus explains, because he has never used them. Everything Neo has "seen" up to that point was seen with the mind's eye, as in a dream, created through



software simulation. Like an ancient Gnostic, Morpheus explains that the blows he deals Neo in the martial arts training program have nothing to do with his body or speed or strength, which are illusory. Rather, they depend only on his mind, which is real.

The parallels between Neo and Christ sketched earlier are further illuminated by a Gnostic context, since Neo is "saved" through gnosis or secret knowledge, which he passes on to others. Neo learns about the true structure of reality and about his own true identity, which allows him to break the rules of the material world he now perceives to be an illusion. That is, he learns that "the mind makes it [the matrix, the material world] real," but it is not ultimately real. In the final scene of the film, it is this gnosis that Neo passes on to others in order to free them from the prison of their minds, the matrix. He functions as a Gnostic Redeemer, a figure from another realm who enters the material world in order to impart saving knowledge about humankind's true identity and the true structure of reality, thereby setting free anyone able to understand the message.

In fact, Neo's given name is not only Mr. Anderson / the Son of Man, it is Thomas Anderson, which reverberates with the most famous Gnostic gospel, the Gospel of Thomas. Also, before he is actualized as Neo (the one who will initiate something "New," since he is indeed the "One"), he is doubting Thomas, who does not believe in his role as the redeemer figure.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the name Thomas means

"the Twin," and in ancient Christian legend he is Jesus' twin brother. In a sense, the role played by Keanu Reeves has a twin character, since he is constructed as both a doubting Thomas and as a Gnostic Christ figure.<sup>21</sup>

Not only does Neo learn and pass on secret knowledge that saves, in good Gnostic fashion, but the way in which he learns also evokes some elements of Gnosticism. Imbued with images from eastern traditions, the training programs teach Neo the concept of "stillness," of freeing the mind and overcoming fear, cinematically captured in "Bullet Time" (digitally mastered montages of freeze frames / slow motion frames using multiple cameras).<sup>22</sup> Interestingly enough, this concept of "stillness" is also present in Gnosticism, in that the higher aeons are equated with "stillness" and "rest" and can only be apprehended in such a centered and meditative manner, as is apparent in these instructions to a certain Allogenes:

And although it is impossible for you to stand, fear nothing; but if you wish to stand, withdraw to the Existence, and *you will find it standing and at rest after the likeness of the One who is truly at rest...* And when you becomes perfect in that place, still yourself... (*Allogenes*)

The Gnostic then reveals, "There was within me a stillness of silence, and I heard the Blessedness whereby I knew my proper self" (*Allogenes*).<sup>23</sup> When Neo realizes the full extent of his "saving gnosis," that the matrix is only a dreamworld, a reflective Keanu Reeves silently and calmly contemplates the bullets that he has stopped in mid-air, filmed in "Bullet Time."

Yet another parallel with Gnosticism occurs in the portrayal of the agents such as Agent Smith, and their opposition to the equivalent of the Gnostics - that is, Neo and anyone else attempting to leave the matrix. A.I. created these artificial programs to be "the gatekeepers - they are guarding all the doors, they are holding all the keys." These agents are akin to the jealous archons created by Yaldabaoth who block the ascent of the Gnostic as he/she tries to leave the material realm and guard the gates of the successive levels of heaven (e.g., Apocalypse of Paul).<sup>24</sup>

However, as Morpheus predicts, Neo is eventually able to defeat the agents because while they must adhere to the rules of the matrix, his human mind allows him to bend or break these rules.<sup>25</sup> Mind, though, is not equated in the film merely with rational intelligence, otherwise Artificial Intelligence would win every time. Rather, the concept of "mind" in the film appears to point to a uniquely human capacity for imagination, for intuition, or, as the phrase goes, for "thinking outside the box." Both the film and the Gnostics assert that the "divine spark" within humans allows a perception of gnosis greater than that achievable by even the chief archon / agent of Yaldabaoth:

And the power of the mother [Sophia, in our analogy, humankind] went out of Yaltabaoth [ A.I. ] into the natural body which they had fashioned [the humans grown on farms by A.I.]... And in that moment the rest of the powers [archons / agents ] became jealous, because he had come into being through all of them and they had given their power to the man, and his intelligence ["mind"] was greater than that of those who had made him, and greater than that of the chief archon [Agent Smith?]. And when they

recognized that he was luminous, and that he could think better than they... they took him and threw him into the lowest region of all matter [simulated by the matrix]. (Apocry. of John 19-20)

It is striking that Neo overcomes Agent Smith in the final showdown of the film precisely by realizing fully the illusion of the matrix, something the agent apparently cannot do, since Neo is subsequently able to break rules that the agent cannot. His final defeat of Smith entails entering Smith's body and splitting him in pieces by means of pure luminosity, portrayed through special effects as light shattering Smith from the inside out.

Overall, then, the system portrayed in *The Matrix* parallels Gnostic Christianity in numerous respects, especially the delineation of humanity's fundamental problem of existing in a dreamworld that simulates reality and the solution of waking up from illusion. The central mythic figures of Sophia, Yaldabaoth, the archons and the Gnostic Christ redeemer also each find parallels with key figures in the film and function in similar ways. The language of Gnosticism and the film are even similar: dreaming vs. waking; blindness vs. seeing;<sup>26</sup> light vs. dark.<sup>27</sup>

However, given that Gnosticism presumes an entire unseen realm of divine beings, where is God in the film? In other words, when Neo becomes sheer light, is this a symbol for divinity, or for human potential? The question becomes even more pertinent with the identification of humankind with Sophia - a divine being in

Gnosticism. On one level, there appears to be no God in the film. Although there are apocalyptic motifs, Conrad Ostwalt rightly argues that unlike conventional Christian apocalypses, in *The Matrix* both the catastrophe and its solution are of human making - that is, the divine is not apparent.<sup>28</sup> However, on another level, the film does open up the possibility of a God through the figure of the Oracle, who dwells inside the matrix and yet has access to information about the future that even those free from the matrix do not possess. This suggestion is even stronger in the original screenplay, in which the Oracle's apartment is the Holy of Holies nested within the "Temple of Zion."<sup>29</sup> Divinity may also play a role in Neo's past incarnation and his coming again as the One. If, however, there is some implied divinity in the film,<sup>30</sup> it remains transcendent, like the divinity of the ineffable, invisible supreme god in Gnosticism, except where it is immanent in the form of the divine spark active in humans.<sup>31</sup>

### **Buddhism in *The Matrix***

When asked by a fan if Buddhist ideas influenced them in the production of the movie, the Wachowski brothers offered an unqualified "Yes."<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Buddhist ideas pervade the film and appear in close proximity with the equally strong Christian imagery. Almost immediately after Neo is identified as "my own personal Jesus Christ," this appellation is given a distinctively Buddhist twist. The same hacker says: "This never happened. You don't exist." From the stupa-like<sup>33</sup>

pods which encase humans in the horrific mechanistic fields to Cypher's selfish desire for the sensations and pleasures of the matrix, Buddhist teachings form a foundation for much of the film's plot and imagery.<sup>34</sup>

**The Problem of *Samsara*.** Even the title of the film evokes the Buddhist worldview. The matrix is described by Morpheus as "a prison for your mind." It is a dependent "construct" made up of the interlocking digital projections of billions of human beings who are unaware of the illusory nature of the reality in which they live and are completely dependent on the hardware attached to their real bodies and the elaborate software programs created by A.I. This "construct" resembles the Buddhist idea of *samsara*, which teaches that the world in which we live our daily lives is constructed only from the sensory projections formulated from our own desires. When Morpheus takes Neo into the "construct" to teach him about the matrix, Neo learns that the way in which he had perceived himself in the matrix was nothing more than "the mental projection of your digital self." The "real" world, which we associate with what we feel, smell, taste, and see, "is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain." The world, Morpheus explains, exists "now only as part of a neural interactive simulation that we call the matrix." In Buddhist terms, we could say that "because it is empty of self or of what belongs to self, it is therefore said: 'The world is empty.' And what is empty of self and what belongs to self? The eye, material shapes, visual consciousness, impression on the

eye -- all these are empty of self and of what belongs to self."<sup>35</sup> According to Buddhism and according to *The Matrix*, the conviction of reality based upon sensory experience, ignorance, and desire keeps humans locked in illusion until they are able to recognize the false nature of reality and relinquish their mistaken sense of identity.

Drawing upon the Buddhist doctrine of Dependent Co-Origination, the film presents reality within the matrix as a conglomerate of the illusions of all humans caught within its snare. Similarly, Buddhism teaches that the suffering of human beings is dependent upon a cycle of ignorance and desire which locks humans into a repetitive cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. The principle is stated in a short formula in the *Samyutta-nikaya*:

If this is that comes to be;  
from the arising of this that arises;  
if this is not that does not come to be;  
from the stopping of this that is stopped.<sup>36</sup>

The idea of Dependent Co-Origination is illustrated in the context of the film through the illusion of the matrix. The viability of the matrix's illusion depends upon the belief by those enmeshed in it that the matrix itself is reality. A.I.'s software program is, in and of itself, no illusion at all. Only when humans interact with its programs do they become enmeshed in a corporately-created illusion, the

matrix, or samsara, which reinforces itself through the interactions of those beings involved within it. Thus the matrix's reality only exists when actual human minds subjectively experience its programs.<sup>37</sup>

The problem, then, can be seen in Buddhist terms. Humans are trapped in a cycle of illusion, and their ignorance of this cycle keeps them locked in it, fully dependent upon their own interactions with the program and the illusions of sensory experience which these provide, and the sensory projections of others. These projections are strengthened by humans' enormous desire to believe that what they perceive to be real is in fact real. This desire is so strong that it overcomes Cypher, who can no longer tolerate the "desert of the real" and asks to be reinserted into the matrix. As he sits with Agent Smith in an upscale restaurant smoking a cigar with a large glass of brandy, Cypher explains his motives:

"You know, I know this steak doesn't exist. I know that when I put it in my mouth, the matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious. After nine years, you know what I realize? Ignorance is bliss."

Cypher knows that the matrix is not real and that any pleasures he experiences there are illusory. Yet for him, the "ignorance" of samsara is preferable to enlightenment. Denying the reality that he now experiences beyond the matrix, he uses the double negative: "I don't want to remember nothing. Nothing. And I



want to be rich. Someone important. Like an actor." Not only does Cypher want to forget the "nothing" of true reality, but he also wants to be an "actor," to add another level of illusion to the illusion of the matrix that he is choosing to re-enter.<sup>38</sup> The draw of samsara is so strong that not only does Cypher give in to his cravings, but Mouse also may be said to have been overwhelmed by the lures of samsara, since his death is at least in part due to distractions brought on by his sexual fantasies about the "woman in the red dress" which occupy him when he is supposed to be standing alert.

Whereas Cypher and Mouse represent what happens when one gives in to samsara, the rest of the crew epitomize the restraint and composure praised by the Buddha. The scene shifts abruptly from the restaurant to the mess hall of the Nebuchadnezzar, where instead of being offered brandy, cigars and steak, Neo is given the "bowl of snot" which is to be his regular meal from that point forward. In contrast to the pleasures which for Cypher can only be fulfilled in the matrix, Neo and the crew must be content with the "single-celled protein combined with synthetic aminos, vitamins, and minerals" which Dozer claims is "everything the body needs." Clad in threadbare clothes, subsisting on gruel, and sleeping in bare cells, the crew is depicted enacting the Middle Way taught by the Buddha, allowing neither absolute asceticism nor indulgence to distract them from their work.<sup>39</sup>

**The Solution of Knowledge/Enlightenment.** This duality between the matrix and the reality beyond it sets up the ultimate goal of the rebels, which is to free all minds from the matrix and allow humans to live out their lives in the real world beyond. In making this point, the film-makers draw on both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist ideas.<sup>40</sup> Alluding to the Theravada ideal of the arhat, the film suggests that enlightenment is achieved through individual effort.<sup>41</sup> As his initial guide, Morpheus makes it clear that Neo cannot depend upon him for enlightenment. Morpheus explains, "no one can be told what the matrix is. You have to see it for yourself." Morpheus tells Neo he must make the final shift in perception entirely on his own. He says: "I'm trying to free your mind, Neo. But I can only show you the door. You're the one that has to walk through it." For Theravada Buddhists, "man's emancipation depends on his own realization of the Truth, and not on the benevolent grace of a god or any external power as a reward for his obedient good behavior."<sup>42</sup> The Dhammapada urges the one seeking enlightenment to "Free thyself from the past, free thyself from the future, free thyself from the present. Crossing to the farther shore of existence, with mind released everywhere, no more shalt thou come to birth and decay."<sup>43</sup> As Morpheus says to Neo, "There's a difference between knowing the path and walking the path." And as the Buddha taught his followers, "You yourselves should make the effort; the Awakened Ones are only teachers."<sup>44</sup> As one already on the path to

enlightenment, Morpheus is only a guide; ultimately Neo must recognize the truth for himself.

Yet *The Matrix* also embraces ideas found in Mahayana Buddhism, especially in its particular concern for liberation for all people through the guidance of those who remain in samsara and postpone their own final enlightenment in order to help others as bodhisattvas.<sup>45</sup> The crew members of the Nebuchadnezzar epitomize this compassion. Rather than remain outside of the matrix where they are safer, they choose to re-enter it repeatedly as ambassadors of knowledge with the ultimate goal of freeing the minds and eventually also the bodies of those who are trapped within the Matrix's digital web. The film attempts to blend the Theravada ideal of the arhat with the Mahayana ideal of the bodhisattva, presenting the crew as concerned for those still stuck in the matrix and willing to re-enter the matrix to help them, while simultaneously arguing that final realization is an individual process.

**Neo as the Buddha.** Although the entire crew embodies the ideals of the bodhisattva, the filmmakers set Neo apart as unique, suggesting that while the crew may be looked at as arhats and bodhisattvas, Neo can be seen as a Buddha. Neo's identity as the Buddha is reinforced not only through the anagram of his name but also through the myth that surrounds him. The oracle has foretold the return of one who has the ability to manipulate the matrix. As Morpheus explains, the return of

this man "would hail the destruction of the matrix, end the war, bring freedom to our people. That is why there are those of us who have spent our entire lives searching the matrix, looking for him." Neo, Morpheus believes, is a reincarnation of that man and like the Buddha, he will be endowed with extraordinary powers to aid in the enlightenment of all humanity.

The idea that Neo can be seen as a reincarnation of the Buddha is reinforced by the prevalence of birth imagery in the film directly related to him. At least four incarnations are perceptible in the film. The first birth took place in the pre-history of the film, in the life and death of the first enlightened one who was able to control the matrix from within. The second consists of Neo's life as Thomas Anderson. The third begins when Neo emerges, gasping, from the gel of the eerily stupa-like pod in which he has been encased, and is unplugged and dropped through a large black tube which can easily be seen as a birth canal.<sup>46</sup> He emerges at the bottom bald, naked, and confused, with eyes that Morpheus tells him have "never been used" before. Having "died" to the world of the matrix, Neo has been "reborn" into the world beyond it. Neo's fourth life begins after he dies and is "reborn" again in the closing scenes of the film, as Trinity resuscitates him with a kiss.<sup>47</sup> At this point, Neo perceives not only the limitations of the matrix, but also the limitations of the world of the Nebuchadnezzar, since he overcomes death in both realms. Like the Buddha, his enlightenment grants him omniscience and he is no longer under the

power of the matrix, nor is he subject to birth, death, and rebirth within A.I.'s mechanical construct.<sup>48</sup>

Neo, like the Buddha, seeks to be free from the matrix and to teach others how to free themselves from it as well, and any use of superhuman powers are engaged to that end. As the only human being since the first enlightened one who is able to freely manipulate the software of the matrix from within its confines, Neo represents the actualization of the Buddha-nature, one who can not only recognize the "origin of pain in the world of living beings," but who can also envision "the stopping of the pain," enacting "that course which leads to its stopping."<sup>49</sup> In this sense, he is more than his bodhisattva companions, and offers the hope of awakening and freedom for all humans from the ignorance that binds them.

**The Problem of Nirvana.** But what happens when the matrix's version of reality is dissolved? Buddhism teaches that when samsara is transcended, nirvana is attained. The notion of self is completely lost, so that conditional reality fades away, and what remains, if anything, defies the ability of language to describe. In his re-entry into the matrix, however, Neo retains the "residual self-image" and the "mental projection of [a] digital self." Upon "enlightenment," he finds himself not in nirvana, or no-where, but in a different place with an intact, if somewhat confused, sense of self which strongly resembles his "self" within the matrix. Trinity may be right that the matrix "cannot tell you who you are," but who you are

seems to be at least in some sense related to who you think you are in the matrix. In other words, there is enough continuity in self-identity between the world of the matrix and "the desert of the real" that it seems probable that the authors are implying that full "enlightenment" has not yet been reached and must lie beyond the reality of the Nebuchadnezzar and the world it inhabits. If the Buddhist paradigm is followed to its logical conclusions, then we have to expect at least one more layer of "reality" beyond the world of the crew, since even freed from the matrix they are still subject to suffering and death and still exhibit individual egos.

This idea is reinforced by what may be the most problematic alteration which *The Matrix* makes to traditional Buddhist teachings. The Buddhist doctrine of ahimsa, or non-injury to all living beings, is overtly contradicted in the film.<sup>50</sup> It appears as if the filmmakers deliberately chose to link violence with salvific knowledge, since there seems to be no way that the crew could succeed without the help of weaponry. When Tank asks Neo and Trinity what they need for their rescue of Morpheus "besides a miracle," their reply is instantaneous: "Guns -- lots of guns." The writers could easily have presented the "deaths" of the agents as nothing more than the ending of that particular part of the software program. Instead, the Wachowski brothers have purposefully chosen to portray humans as innocent victims of the violent deaths of the agents.<sup>51</sup> This outright violation of ahimsa stands at direct odds with the Buddhist ideal of compassion.

But why link knowledge so directly with violence? The filmmakers portray violence as redemptive,<sup>52</sup> and as absolutely essential to the success of the rebels. *The Matrix* steers sharply away at this point from the shared paradigms of Buddhism and Gnostic Christianity. The "reality" of the matrix which requires that some humans must die as victims of salvific violence is not the ultimate reality to which Buddhism or Gnostic Christianity points. Neither the "stillness" of the pleroma nor the unchanging "nothingness" of nirvana are characterized by the dependence on technology and the use of force which so characterizes both of the worlds of the rebels in *The Matrix*.

The film's explicit association of knowledge with violence strongly implies that Neo and his comrades have not yet realized the ultimate reality. According to the worldviews of both Gnostic Christianity and Buddhism that the film evokes, the realization of ultimate reality involves a complete freedom from the material realm and offers peace of mind. The Wachowskis themselves acknowledge that it is "ironic that Morpheus and his crew are completely dependent upon technology and computers, the very evils against which they are fighting."<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the film's very existence depends upon both technology's capabilities and Hollywood's hunger for violence. Negating itself, *The Matrix* teaches that nirvana is still beyond our reach.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Whether we view the film from a Gnostic Christian or Buddhist perspective, the overwhelming message seems to be, "Wake up!" The point is made explicit in the final song of the film, *Wake Up!*, by, appropriately, *Rage Against the Machine*. Gnosticism, Buddhism and the film all agree that ignorance enslaves us in an illusory material world and that liberation comes through enlightenment with the aid of a teacher or guide figure. However, when we ask the question, "To what do we awaken?", the film appears to diverge sharply from Gnosticism and Buddhism. Both of these traditions maintain that when humans awaken, they leave behind the material world. The Gnostic ascends at death to the *pleroma*, the divine plane of spiritual, non-material existence, and the enlightened one in Buddhism achieves *nirvana*, a state which cannot be described in language, but which is utterly non-material. By contrast, the "desert of the real," is a wholly material, technological world, in which robots grow humans for energy, Neo can learn martial arts in seconds through a socket inserted into the back of his brain, and technology battles technology (Nebuchadnezzar vs. A.I., electromagnetic pulse vs. sentinels). Moreover, the battle against the matrix is itself made possible through technology - cell phones, computers, software training programs. "Waking up" in the film is leaving behind the matrix and awakening to a dismal cyber-world, which is the real material world.



Or perhaps not. There are several cinematic clues in the scene of the construct loading program (represented by white space) that suggest that the "desert of the real" Morpheus shows Neo may not be the ultimate reality. After all, Morpheus, whose name is taken from the god of dreams, shows the "real" world to Neo, who never directly views the surface world himself. Rather, he sees it on a television bearing the logo "Deep Image." Throughout the film, reflections in mirrors and Morpheus' glasses, as well as images on television monitors point the viewer toward consideration of multiple levels of illusion.<sup>54</sup> As the camera zooms in to the picture on this particular television and the viewer "enters" the image, it "morphs" the way the surveillance screens do early in the film, indicating its unreality. In addition, the entire episode takes place while they stand in a construct loading program in which Neo is warned not to be tricked by appearances. Although sense perception is clearly not a reliable source for establishing reality, Morpheus himself admits that "For a long time I wouldn't believe it, and then I saw the fields [of humans grown for energy] with my own eyes... And standing there, I came to realize the obviousness of the truth." We will have to await the sequel to find out whether "the desert of the real" is itself real.<sup>55</sup>

Even if the film series does not ultimately establish a complete rejection of the material realm, *The Matrix* as it stands still asserts the superiority of the human capacity for imagination and realization over the limited "intelligence" of

technology. Whether stated in terms of matter/ spirit, body/ mind, hardware/ software or illusion/ truth, the ultimate message of *The Matrix* seems to be that there may be levels of metaphysical reality beyond what we can ordinarily perceive, and the film urges us to open ourselves to the possibility of awakening to them.

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<sup>1</sup> All unidentified quotes are from *The Matrix* (Warner Bros. release, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> In an online chat with viewers of the DVD, the Wachowskis acknowledged that the Buddhist references in the film are purposeful. However, when asked "Have you ever been told that the Matrix has Gnostic overtones?", they gave a tantalizingly ambiguous reply: "Do you consider that to be a good thing?" From the Nov. 6, 1999 "Matrix Virtual Theatre," at "Wachowski chat". (<http://www.warnervideo.com/matrixevents/wachowski.html>)

<sup>3</sup> Elaine Pagels notes that the similarities between Gnosticism and Buddhism have prompted some scholars to question their interdependence and to wonder whether "...if the names were changed, the 'living Buddha' appropriately could say what the *Gospel of Thomas* attributes to the living Jesus." Although intriguing, she rightly maintains that the evidence is inconclusive, since parallel traditions may emerge in different cultures without direct influence. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, (New York: Random House, 1979, repr. 1989), xx-xxi.

<sup>4</sup> James Ford recently explored other Buddhist elements in *The Matrix*, which he rightly calls a "modern myth," in his article "Buddhism, Christianity and *The Matrix*: The Dialectic of Myth-Making in Contemporary Cinema," for the *Journal of Religion & Film*, vol.4 no. 2. See also Conrad Ostwalt's focus on apocalyptic elements of the film in "Armageddon at the Millennial Dawn," *JR & F* vol. 4, no. 1.

<sup>5</sup> A viewer asked the Wachowski brothers, "Your movie has many and varied connections to myths and philosophies, Judeo-Christian, Egyptian, Arthurian, and Platonic, just to name those I've noticed. How much of that was intentional?" They replied, "All of it" (Wachowski chat).

<sup>6</sup> Feminists critics can rejoice when Trinity first reveals her name to Neo, as he pointedly responds, "The Trinity?... Jesus, I thought you were a man." Her quick reply: "Most men do."

<sup>7</sup> The Wachowski brothers indicate that the names were "all chosen carefully, and all of them have multiple meanings," and also note this applies to the numbers as well (Wachowski chat).

<sup>8</sup> In a recent interview in *Time*, the Wachowskis refer to Nebuchadnezzar in this Danielic context, ([www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,22971,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,22971,00.html)), "Popular Metaphysics," by Richard Corliss, *Time*, April 19, 1999 Vol. 153, no. 15). Nebuchadnezzar is also the Babylonian king who destroyed the Jerusalem Temple in 586 B.C.E., and who exiled the elite of Judean society to

Babylon. Did the Wachowski brothers also intend the reference to point to the crew's "exile" from Zion or from the surface world?

<sup>9</sup> The film also suggests Zion is heaven, such as when Tank says, "If the war was over tomorrow, Zion is where the party would be," evoking the traditional Christian schema of an apocalypse followed by life in heaven or paradise. Ironically, the film locates Zion "underground, near the earth's core, where it is still warm," which would seem to be a cinematic code for hell. Is this a clue that Zion is not the "heaven" we are led to believe it is?

<sup>10</sup> Neo's apartment number is 101, symbolizing both computer code (written in 1's and 0's) and his role as "the One." Near the end of the film, 303 is the number of the apartment that he enters and exits in his death / resurrection scene, evoking the Trinity. This in turn raises questions about the character of Trinity's relationship to Neo in terms of her cinematic construction as divinity.

<sup>11</sup> The traitor Cypher, who represents Judas Iscariot, among other figures, ironically says to Neo, "Man, you scared the B'Jesus outta me."

<sup>12</sup> We would like to thank Donna Bowman, with whom we initially explored the Gnostic elements of *The Matrix* during a public lecture on film at Hendrix College in 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Gnosticism may have had its origins in Judaism, despite its denigration of the Israelite God, but the issue is complex and still debated within scholarly circles. It is clear, however, that Gnostic Christianity flourished from at least the 2<sup>nd</sup> -5<sup>th</sup> c. C.E., with its own scriptures, and most likely also its own distinctive rituals, entrance requirements and a creation story. See Gershom Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1960), Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979, repr. 1989), Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> This corpus lay dormant for nearly 2000 years until its discovery in 1945 in Nag Hammadi, Egypt. The complete collection of texts may be found in James M. Robinson, ed. *The Nag Hammadi Library*, revised edition, (New York: HarperCollins, 1990; reprint of original Brill edition, 1978). These documents are also available on-line at *The Nag Hammadi Library* Section of The Gnostic Society Library (<http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/nhl.html>).

<sup>15</sup> Gnostic texts are cryptic, and no single text clearly explains this myth from beginning to end. The literature presupposes familiarity with the myth, which must be reconstructed by modern readers. The version of the myth presented here relies on such texts as *Gospel of Truth*, *Apocryphon of John*, *On the Origin of the World* and *Gospel of Thomas*. See *The Nag Hammadi Library*, pp. 38-51, 104-123, 124-138, 170-189.

<sup>16</sup> Since the divine beings are composed only of spiritual substances and not matter, there are no physical gender differences among the beings.

<sup>17</sup> Depending on the text, a plethora of divine beings populate the pleroma, many with Jewish, Christian or philosophical names, e.g. the Spirit, forethought, thought, foreknowledge,

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indestructibility, truth, Christ, Autogenes, understanding, grace, perception, Pigera-Adamas (Apocryphon of John).

<sup>18</sup> Humanity's characterization also resonates with the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11:1-9; in both we admire the work of our own hands.

<sup>19</sup> The bulk of the following excerpt from the Gnostic "Gospel of Truth" might just as well be taken from the scenes in *The Matrix* in which Morpheus explains the nature of reality to Neo:

Thus they [ humans] were *ignorant* of the Father, he being the one whom they did not see... there were many *illusions* at work... and (there were) empty fictions, *as if they were sunk in sleep and found themselves in disturbing dreams*. Either (there is) a place to which they are fleeing, or without strength they come (from) having chased after others, or they are involved in striking blows, or they are receiving blows themselves, or they have fallen from high places, *or they take off into the air though they do not even have wings*. Again, sometimes (it is as) if people were murdering them, though there is no one even pursuing them, or they themselves are killing their neighbors...(but) *When those who are going through all these things wake up*, they see nothing, they who were in the midst of all these disturbances, for they are nothing. Such is the way of those who have cast ignorance aside from them like sleep, not esteeming it as anything, nor do they esteem its works as solid things either, but *they leave them behind like a dream in the night...* This is the way each one has acted, as though asleep at the time when he was ignorant. And this is the way he has [come to knowledge], as if he had awakened.

(*Gospel of Truth*, 29-30)

<sup>20</sup> This is perhaps most evident in the subway fight between Neo and Agent Smith. At a point in the film when Morpheus says of Neo, "He is just beginning to believe," Agent Smith calls him "Mr. Anderson," and while fighting he replies, "My name is Neo." The Wachowskis confirm this interpretation when they state "Neo is Thomas Anderson's potential self" (Wachowski chat).

<sup>21</sup> This twin tradition was especially popular in Syrian Christianity. See also Pagels, p. xxi, where she wonders if the tradition that Thomas, Jesus' twin, went to India points to any historical connection between Buddhism and Hinduism on the one hand and with Gnosticism on the other.

<sup>22</sup> See the online chat with the special effects creators in the "Matrix Virtual Theater" from March 23, 2000 (<http://www.warnervideo.com/matrixevents>).

<sup>23</sup> *Nag Hammadi Library*, pp. 490-500. Compare the Gnostic idea of stillness with these Buddhist sayings from the *Dhammapada*: "The bhikku [monk], who abides in loving-kindness, who is delighted in the Teaching of the Buddha, attains the State of Calm, the happiness of stilling the conditioned things" and "Calm is the thought, calm the word and deed of him who, rightly knowing, is wholly freed, perfectly peaceful and equipoised." Quoted in Walpola Sri Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1974) p.128, 136.

<sup>24</sup> See *Nag Hammadi Library*, pp. 256-59. We are grateful to Brock Bakke for the initial equation of agents with archons.

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<sup>25</sup> In Gnosticism "Mind" or the Greek "nous" is a deity, such as in the text "Thunder, Perfect Mind," *Nag Hammadi Library*, 295-303.

<sup>26</sup> Note that as Morpheus and Neo enter the elevator of the apartment building of the Oracle, images of "seeing" symbolize prophecy and knowledge: a blind man (evoking blind prophets such as Tiresias) sits in the lobby beneath some graffiti depicting a pair of eyes. Interestingly, the Oracle - a sibyl / seer - wears glasses to look at Neo's palm.

<sup>27</sup> Note too the metonymic use of color to convey this dualism: black and white clothing, floors, furniture, etc.

<sup>28</sup> Ostwalt, "Armageddon" in *JR & F* Vol. 4, no. 1. The parallel with apocalypticism does not work quite as well as one with Gnosticism because like Gnosticism, the film understands salvation to be individual (rather than collective and occurring all at once), to be attained through knowledge, and most importantly to entail leaving behind the material earth (that is, not resulting in a kingdom of God made manifest on the earth). <http://www.viewfromthewall.com/matrixscreenplay.htm>

<sup>29</sup> The original screenplay is available online at [www.geocities.com/Area51/Capsule/8448/](http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Capsule/8448/). In its description, the Temple of Zion evokes both the Oracle of Delphi (three legged stool, priestesses) and the Jerusalem Temple (polished marble, empty throne which is the mercy seat or throne of the invisible God).

<sup>30</sup> A viewer asked the Wachowski brothers, "What is the role or {sic} faith in the movie? Faith in oneself first and foremost - or in something else?" They answered, "Hmmm ... that is a tough question! Faith in one's self, how's that for an answer?" This reply hardly settles the issue (Wachowski chat).

<sup>31</sup> Specifically, these humans are Neo (the Gnostic Redeemer / Messiah) and Morpheus and Trinity, both of whom are named for gods. As a godhead, this trio does not quite make sense in terms of traditional Christianity. However, the trio is quite interesting in the context of Gnosticism, which portrays God as Father, Mother and Son, a trinity in which the Holy Spirit is identified as female, e.g. Apocryphon of John 2:9-14. For further reading on female divinities in Gnosticism, see Pagels, pp. 48-69.

<sup>32</sup> The brothers explain, "There's something uniquely interesting about Buddhism and mathematics, particularly about quantum physics, and where they meet. That has fascinated us for a long time" (Wachowski chat). In the *Time* interview with Richard Corliss (see note 8), Larry Wachowski adds that they became fascinated "by the idea that math and theology are almost the same. They begin with a supposition you can derive a whole host of laws or rules from. And when you take all of them to the infinity point, you wind up at the same place: these unanswerable mysteries really become about personal perception. Neo's journey is affected by all these rules, all these people trying to tell him what the truth is. He doesn't accept anything until he gets to his own end point, his own rebirth." The film's presentation of the matrix as a corporate network of human conceptions (or samsara) which are translated into software codes that reinforce one another illustrates this close relationship.

<sup>33</sup> Stupa: a hemispherical or cylindrical mound or tower serving as a Buddhist shrine.

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<sup>34</sup> Of course, the most transparent reference to Buddhist ideas occurs in the waiting room at the oracle's apartment, where Neo is introduced to the "Potentials." The screenplay describes the waiting room as "at once like a Buddhist temple and a kindergarten class." One of the children, clad in the garb of a Buddhist monk, explains to Neo the nature of ultimate reality: "There is no spoon." One cannot help wondering if this dictum only holds within the matrix or if there is in fact "no spoon" even in the real world beyond it.

<sup>35</sup> *Samyutta-nikaya* IV, 54. In Edward Conze, ed. *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), p. 91.

<sup>36</sup> *Samyutta-nikaya* II, 64-65. Ibid.

<sup>37</sup><sup>37</sup> The entire process depends upon human ignorance, so that almost all who are born into the matrix are doomed to be born, to die, and to re-enter the cycle again. When asked about the film's depiction of the liquefaction of humans, the Wachowskis reply that this black ooze is "what they feed the people in the pods, the dead people are liquefied and fed to the living people in the pods." Tongue in Buddhist cheek, the brothers explain this re-embodiment: "Always recycle! It's a statement on recycling." (Wachowski chat ) Even in the "real world" beyond the matrix, the human plight is depicted as a relative and inter-dependent cycle of birth, death, and "recycling."

<sup>38</sup> This dialogue also points to the "reality" (or the "matrix") which we ourselves inhabit. In our world, and in the world of Joe Pantoliano, he is an actor. Therefore, the world of which both the actor Joe Pantoliano and we are now a part may be seen as the "matrix" into which he has been successfully re-inserted, and thus the film itself may be seen as a part of the software program of our own "matrix." The argument, of course, is seductively circular.

<sup>39</sup> Take, for example, this quote from the *Sabbasava-sutta*: "A bhikku [monk], considering wisely, lives with his eyes restrained ... Considering wisely, he lives with his ears restrained ... with his nose restrained . . . with his tongue ... with his body ... with his mind restrained ... a bhikku, considering wisely, makes use of his robes - only to keep off cold, to keep off heat ... and to cover himself decently. Considering wisely, he makes use of food – neither for pleasure nor for excess ... but only to support and sustain this body ..." (Quoted in Rahula 103).

<sup>40</sup> James Ford has argued that the film embodies in particular the Yogacara school of Buddhism. Instead of pointing to that which is absolutely different than the world as *nirvana*, Yogacarins point to the world itself, and through the processes enacted in meditation, come to the realization that "all things and thought are but Mind-only. The basis of all our illusions consists in that we regard the objectifications of our own mind as a world independent of that mind, which is really its source and substance" (Edward Conze, *Buddhism*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), p. 167. The matrix exists only in the minds of the human beings which inhabit it, so that in *The Matrix*, as in Yogacara, "The external world is really Mind itself" (p. 168). Yet a problem arises when one realizes that for the Yogacara school, the Mind is the ultimate reality, and therefore samsara and nirvana become identified. By contrast, the film insists on a distinction between samsara (the matrix) and nirvana (that which lies beyond it). Because *The Matrix* maintains a duality between the matrix and the realm beyond it, Yogacara is of limited help in making sense of the Buddhist elements in the film, nor is it helpful in supporting the idea that beyond the matrix and beyond the Nebuchadnezzar there is an ultimate reality not yet realized by humans (see note 4).

<sup>41</sup> According to Theravada teachings, *arhat* ("Worthy One") is a title applied to those who achieve enlightenment. Because according to Theravada beliefs enlightenment can only be achieved through individual effort, an *arhat* is of limited aid in helping those not yet enlightened and so would not necessarily choose to re-enter samsara to aid others still enmeshed within it.

<sup>42</sup> Rahula, p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Rahula, 135.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Rahula, 133.

<sup>45</sup> A *bodhisattva* is one who postpones final entry into nirvana and willingly re-enters or remains in *samsara* in order to guide others along the path to enlightenment. The Buddha's compassion serves as their primary model for Mahayana Buddhists, since they point out that he too remained in *samsara* in order to help others achieve enlightenment through his teachings and example.

<sup>46</sup> The screenplay describes Neo as "floating in a womb-red amnion" in the power plant.

<sup>47</sup> In the screenplay, Trinity does not kiss him but instead "pounds on his chest," precipitating his resuscitation. The screenplay states directly: "It is a miracle." This fourth "life" can be viewed as the one to which the oracle refers in her predictions that Neo was "waiting for something" and that he might be ready in his "next life, maybe." This certainly appears to be the case, since Neo rises from the dead and defeats the agents.

<sup>48</sup> These four "lives" suggest that Neo is nothing other than the "One" foretold by the oracle, the reincarnation of the first "enlightened one," or Buddha, who "had the ability to change whatever he wanted, to remake the matrix as he saw fit." Buddhist teaching allows that those who have been enlightened are endowed with magical powers, since they recognize the world as illusory and so can manipulate it at will. Yet supernatural powers are incidental to the primary goal, which is explained in the very first sermon spoken by the Buddha: "The Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering is this: It is the complete cessation of that very thirst, giving it up, renouncing it, emancipating oneself from it, detaching oneself from it" (*Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*. Quoted in Rahula, 93.)

<sup>49</sup> Buddhacarita 1:65. E. B. Cowell, trans., *Buddhist Mahayana Texts, Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 49 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1894).

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, in the *Dhammapada*: "Of death are all afraid. Having made oneself the example, one should neither slay nor cause to slay" (Verse 129) (*Dhammapada*, trans. John Ross Carter and Mahinda Palihawadana. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 35.

<sup>51</sup> The idea that violence as salvific is made explicit by the writers. Whereas they could have chosen to present the "deaths" of the agents as of the same illusory quality as other elements within the software program, instead, they choose to depict actual humans *really* dying through the inhabitation of their "bodies" by the agents. This addition is completely unnecessary to the overall plot line; 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.

<sup>52</sup> See the article by Bryan P. Stone, "Religion and Violence in Popular Film," *JR & F* Vol. 3, no. 1.

<sup>53</sup> When asked whether this irony were present, the Wachowskis reply abruptly but enthusiastically "Yes!" (Wachowski chat).

<sup>54</sup> This is especially true in the "red pill/blue pill" scene where Neo first meets Morpheus, and Neo is reflected differently in each lens of Morpheus' glasses. The Wachowskis note that one reflection represents Thomas Anderson, and one represents Neo (Wachowski chat).

<sup>55</sup> A viewer asked the pertinent question of the Wachowskis: "Do you believe that our world is in some way similar to *The Matrix*," that there is a larger world outside of this existence?" They replied: "That is a larger question than you actually might think. We think the most important sort of fiction attempts to answer some of the big questions. One of the things that we had talked about when we first had the idea of *The Matrix* was an idea that I believe philosophy and religion and mathematics all try to answer. Which is, a reconciling between a natural world and another world that is perceived by our intellect" (Wachowski chat).