

TAKING

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SCIENCE,  
PHILOSOPHY  
AND RELIGION  
IN *THE MATRIX*

EDITED BY  
Glenn Yeffeth

INTRODUCTION BY  
David Gerrold

summersdale

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## Praise for *Taking the Red Pill*

“Dr. Barr enthusiastically prescribes *Taking The Red Pill* for all readers who wish to enhance their understanding of science, philosophy, and religion in *The Matrix*. *Taking The Red Pill* acts as a wonder drug, a miracle cure for all the cognitive complications *The Matrix* generates. The volume, after all, is replete with doctors who are not physicians: economists; philosophers; scholars of religion, literature, and media; science fiction writers; inventors; and technologists. This plethora of Ph.D.’s concocts brilliantly articulated interpretive medicine which goes down in a most delightful way.”

—Dr. Marleen S. Barr, pioneering feminist science fiction scholar and author of *Genre Fission: A New Discourse Practice for Cultural Studies*

“*Taking the Red Pill* is an interesting and intelligent collection that explores, from a variety of viewpoints, the film that (for better or worse) may well be the most widely and seriously discussed work of science-fiction cinema since Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*.”

—Carl Freedman, author of *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*

With the release of *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*, 2003 is going to be the year of *The Matrix* (again). Published four years after the release of the first film, *Taking the Red Pill: Science, Philosophy and Religion in The Matrix* is a significant contribution to the field of film and literary studies, as well as the most approachable collection of essays for non-specialists who simply adored *The Matrix* and its complex and thought-provoking storyline. *Taking the Red Pill* contains many answers to the questions raised by the film, and offers exciting and daring new readings of this blockbuster. Combining detailed readings of the many philosophical, literary and economical issues present in *The Matrix* with a clear and readable style . . . *Taking the Red Pill* is a must-read for anyone interested in a broad ranging literary and cultural analysis of one of the most important twentieth-century films.

—Dr. Michael Eberle-Sinatra, founding editor of the e-journal *Romanticism on the Net* and editor of *Mary Shelley’s Fictions: From Frankenstein to Faulkner*

DAVID GERROLD



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# INTRODUCTION

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*The Matrix* hit the film-going public by surprise, much like *Star Wars* a generation earlier, and for many of the same reasons. It had a breathless pace, astonishing eye-candy, a sense of mythic adventure, and an acid-tinged sensibility. Like *Star Wars*, it opened up a new continent of imagination; in this case, a domain of cyber-existence that no movie had explored before.

Also, like *Star Wars*, *The Matrix* drew heavily on the major tropes of science fiction. Long-time readers of the genre recognized the permeating flavors of George Orwell, Harlan Ellison, Philip K. Dick, and William Gibson: a dystopic machine-dominated future, peopled by implacable forces and disposable identities; a juggernaut of industrial behemoths flattening humanity under the steamroller of time.

But all of this came in on top of an earlier, even more powerful mythic structure: the lone hero who saves the town; almost always he has some superior ability or insight. We've seen this story in a variety of forms, we never get tired of it.

It's the underlying theme in James Bond movies and Tom Clancy novels, in almost every Clint Eastwood western, in classics like *Shane* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, in comic books like *Superman* and *Batman*, in popular television

shows like *Route 66* and *The Fugitive*, and even in many *Bugs Bunny* cartoons—but although this particular myth has sometimes been identified as “the American mono-myth,” we also see it expressed in earlier fables, such as *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, *Beowulf*, and *St. George and the Dragon*.

We can even find variations of this story in other cultures, as in Akira Kurosawa’s film of *Yojimbo*, or in the earlier tales of medieval Samurai warriors, such as *Musashi*. If we go far enough back, we can add Perseus to the list, Prometheus too, and probably even Orpheus as well; all lone heroes who took on impossible challenges and succeeded, often at enormous cost.

Neo stands among some very proud company indeed.

The cultural archetype, of course, is Christ. He came into the world with superior powers and insight. He was misunderstood. He saved the souls of those who trusted him and believed in him, he was betrayed by someone he trusted, and he was punished by the authority he challenged. But he left the world changed for the better for having passed through it. So, of course, any tale that echoes that one is going to have enormous resonance among its audience.

And you thought *The Matrix* was just a movie, right?

Like any good movie, like any good work of art, a single exposure is not enough; there’s much more to be discovered by revisiting the work, by giving ourselves over to some careful contemplation of its intention as well as its impact. We have the opportunity to consider at some length the nature of reality as portrayed in the film, not as a simple story, but as a commentary—a mirror in which we can see ourselves and our own “reality” reflected—and thereby granting us the opportunity for insight.

Insight, also known as wisdom in drag, allows us to recognize the traps of existence. Some traps, like life itself,

cannot be broken, cannot be escaped; the best we can do is recontextualize. With the addition of insight, we gain mastery over ourselves in relation to the trap. This is the essential function of philosophy, as well as of art, and what this excellent collection of essays demonstrates, if nothing else, is a confluence of intention where art and philosophy collide in a single film.

Here, *The Matrix* is held up to the light and examined from a dozen different directions. I suppose I could make the immediate comparison of the six blind men and the elephant (I won't mention where the seventh blind man stuck his hand), except in the world of *The Matrix*, we're all blind and everything is elephants—but that analogy would be wrong.

It might also be appropriate to mention an odd little book, long out of print, that made a minor splash three decades ago. It was called *The Pooh Perplex* and served up a collection of essays analyzing Winnie the Pooh, each from a different perspective—political, social, religious, philosophical. That book was a parody, and while it told you very little about Winnie the Pooh, it told you a great deal about how individual authors impressed their own agendas and mind-sets upon even the most innocently intentioned works. But that comparison would be wrong as well.

The authors of these explorations have given us, instead, a lens, an object through which light is focused and projected so as to provide illumination—so that we can distinguish our environment. Sometimes we project light through filters, sometimes we polarize it, sometimes we use infra-red or ultra-violet, or even micro-waves or X-rays, all so that we can look at the world in ways that go beyond the limitations of the physical eye. In that regard, we are using not the body's vision, but the mind's. The authors of these explorations have given us the opportunity

to see how a single work resonates on multiple levels, reflecting off many facets, striking deep chords of memory, meaning, and interpretation.

That's the success of a movie (or any work, for that matter)—that it creates new opportunities for exploration, discovery, and insight, that it gives us new ways to think about ourselves and the world in which we live.

Indeed, that's the point of the Matrix—that humanity has a choice, not just as a species, but as individuals as well. We can accept our roles as slaves of the machine, or we can reinvent ourselves as masters.

I'll get out of your way now. You can step into the mirror.

READ MERCER SCHUCHARDT

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WHAT  

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IS  

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THE  

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MATRIX?

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*Media and cultural critic  
Read Mercer Schuchardt  
presents the definitive  
answer to the question  
“What is the Matrix?” If  
you only have time for one  
essay on The Matrix, this  
is the one to read.*

**PARABLE**

While the stated reason for the early release and accelerated postproduction process of *The Matrix* was to beat the marketing hype that surrounded *The Phantom Menace*, it is not without coincidence that *The Matrix* was released on the last Easter weekend of the dying twentieth century. It is a parable of the original Judeo-Christian worldview of entrapment in a world gone wrong, with no hope of survival or salvation short of something miraculous. *The Matrix* is a new testament for a new millennium, a religious parable of the second coming of mankind’s messiah in an age that needs salvation as desperately as any ever has.

Keanu Reeves plays Thomas Anderson, a computer programmer by day who spends his nights in the alternative reality of the Internet, where he goes by the name Neo,

spending his time among hackers and phreaks who have come to rely on his expertise. Symbolically, Reeves's character plays that of both new convert and Christ in the film and is on the receiving end of some of the world's most ancient wisdom wrapped in some of the best modern technological analogies. "You are a slave" and "We are born into bondage" are the two sentences Morpheus speaks to Neo that reveal the analogy to the Judeo-Christian understanding of slavery as sin. Like the biblical understanding, our technoslavery is a bondage of mankind's own making, a product of our own free will, as evidenced by Agent Smith's revelation that this is the second Matrix. The first Matrix, Smith says, was perfect, but we humans decided we wanted to define ourselves through our misery, and so we couldn't accept it. This is the technological version of the Garden of Eden story from Genesis. There we see that the very first use of technology was clothing, so it is significant that Neo is reborn completely naked.

Within that framework, *The Matrix* is also the story of the chosen one's doubts, slow realizations, and final discovery that it is he, and not anyone else, who is the savior. Anderson must first be convinced that the realm he inhabits as Neo has provided him a glimpse of the true reality, while his everyday existence as Thomas Anderson is actually the false consciousness, the world of the Matrix in which he senses, but cannot prove, that something is terribly wrong. This thought tortures him like a "splinter in the mind."

Neo is contacted first by Trinity, a slightly androgynous female counterpart to his slightly androgynous masculinity. It is she who leads Neo to Morpheus. Trinity is an obvious allusion to the biblical concept of a triune God consisting of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Because of the long-standing patriarchal metaphor for God, it is quite humorous when Neo says to Trinity, "I always thought you



were a guy.” Also of note is the fact that the word “trinity” never actually appears in the Bible. It is during Neo’s second conversation with Morpheus, just after he wakes up from being interrogated, that Morpheus reveals his role as John the Baptist by saying, “You may have been looking for me for a few years, but I’ve been looking for you for my whole life.” However, Morpheus also plays the role of God the Father to Neo and the rest of the small band of rebels. He spends a significant part of the film teaching Neo the nature of “reality” as opposed to the world of the Matrix. When Morpheus is captured by the agents, as his body lies there helpless, Trinity says, “No, he’s much more important than that. He’s like a father to us.”

To join Morpheus and Trinity in experiencing the depth of this true reality, Neo must be born again. As he is jacked in to the initiation sequence, Cypher tells him, “Buckle your seatbelt, Dorothy, ’cause Kansas is going bye-bye.” Reeves’s character is literally born again into the new world in a visually explicit birth from a biotechnical womb that spits him out like a newborn infant: hairless, innocent, covered in muck, and eyes wide open in awe. He sees that he alone, of all the millions of entombed and enwombed humans plugged in as batteries to the Matrix’s mainframe, has been allowed to break free of his shell. The wombs are slightly opaque, allowing the inhabitants to at least glimpse a portion of the reality to which they are enslaved. The implication is that everyone can be freed, following the example set by the savior. (There is also a nice *2001* star child visual reference during this sequence.)

Just prior to his rebirth, Neo turns aside and sees a fragmented mirror, which becomes whole as he looks into it. He is about to make the journey into the self, or psyche, and the metaphor of a shattered universal mirror is one that Huxley and others have also used. He reaches out and

touches the mirror, which then becomes whole, nicely referencing I Corinthians 13:12, “For now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face.” The mirror then liquefies and swallows Neo, confirming for us that this is essentially an inward journey he is making. Upon being reborn, Neo asks Morpheus why his eyes hurt: “Because you’ve never used them,” comes the reply. Or, as William Blake puts it, “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.” In one of the first scenes, we see Neo sell a software program to a character named Choi for two grand, while Choi comments, “You’re my savior, man, my own personal Jesus Christ.” Choi’s reference to mescaline in this conversation is a reference to Huxley’s mescaline experiment book, *The Doors of Perception*. Huxley’s title is drawn from the William Blake quote and was also subsequently the source for the name of Jim Morrison’s rock group, *The Doors*.

In Greek mythology, Morpheus was the god of dreams, and his name is the linguistic root for words like “morphine” (a drug that induces sleep and freedom from pain) and “morphing” (using computer technology to seamlessly transform from one reality to another). This resonates with the ability of Fishburne’s character to morph back and forth between the dream world (the “real” world) and the waking world (the Matrix). Morpheus asks, “Have you ever had a dream, Neo, that you were so sure was real? What if you were unable to wake from that dream, Neo? How would you know the difference between the dream world and the real world?” The stage is now set for the film to equate the dream world with the digital world, the world of pure consciousness that exists in infinity. It is an equation that works, because life on the screen is a disembodied life, a virtual existence where the rules of society and the laws of physics don’t necessarily apply, which is why online

relationships are so intoxicating and addictive. It's also one reason why they fail so completely when the people actually meet. Like a movie version of a book, the real version of an online person's self cannot help but disappoint, simply because the codes and conventions of space and time are so constrictive of the power of imagination.

As Morpheus tells it, The One has been prophesied, like Jesus of Nazareth, from time immemorial. The revealer of ultimate truth is the Oracle, played as a soul-food mama (cf. *Meet Joe Black*) with more of a sense of humor than seriousness, who nevertheless gives Neo the key insight into the nature of fate versus free will that is critical to the film's final twist. That the Oracle is a woman is also a key ingredient in the film's theology. The brothers Tank and Dozer have their biblical precedents in the apostles James and John, who were also brothers and called the "sons of thunder," which makes sense since both a tank and a bulldozer are modern technological "thunder" makers. But *The Matrix* is not simply a Christian allegory; it is a complex parable that pulls strongly from Judaism and other traditions. In their initial discussion about The One, both Morpheus and Neo are in cramped quarters wearing what is clearly the garb of concentration camp victims; rough-textured wool and blue-striped bed linens. But because Jewish history has not yet given us a political Messiah, and perhaps because Jesus was himself Jewish, the Wachowski brothers seem to be comfortable relying on Jesus' story as a precedent for their own. When asked if *E.T.* wasn't a retelling of the Christ story, Steven Spielberg said he "resented" the comparison because he was Jewish. So too might the Wachowski Brothers have inadvertently relied on the only well-known resurrection messiah story lying around.

And yet critics are saying the film is equally influenced by Zen Buddhism or Eastern mysticism. Many of the lines, and certainly the martial arts sequences, certainly reflect an Eastern influence. But people often make the mistake of assuming that Judaism and Christianity are somehow exclusively “Western” religions. Both are situated geographically and historically in Israel, which is on the Asian continent. The holy city of these two religions is Jerusalem, which sits in the navel of the world, as the meeting point of East and West. In other words, Judaism and Christianity are religions that share and have been influenced by both East and West, and have influenced both Eastern and Western philosophies since time immemorial. Thus, if you think you’re seeing a lot of Alan Watts’s *Supreme Identity* in the film, you probably are. But Watts isn’t seeing something new by saying that East and West can be reconciled, he’s simply pointing out what was there all along.

The Judas character, named Cypher, is sympathetically played by New Jersey tough guy Joe Pantoliano. Like Judas before him at the Last Supper, Cypher accepts his fate as traitor over a meal. Like Judas, who shares a drink with Christ at the Last Supper, Cypher and Neo share a cup while Cypher expresses his doubts about the whole crusade with the line, “Why oh why didn’t I take the blue pill?” We see Neo part ways with Cypher by not finishing the drink, but instead handing the remainder over to Cypher. We know Cypher is up to no good when he breaks the convention of social hygiene by finishing Neo’s drink for him after Neo leaves. Cypher also wears a reptile-skin coat, which alludes to the biblical figure of Satan as serpent. It is Cypher’s doubts about Morpheus’s certainty that Neo is The One (note the clever anagram of Neo = One) that causes Cypher to betray the cause, because he’s not certain he’s fighting on the right side, or at least not on the winning side. There

is a nice mealtime scene, reminiscent both of *2001* and *Alien*, in which Mouse waxes philosophic about the nature, essence, and ultimate reality of food, which serves to confirm the drudgery of everyday life for this ragtag team of revolutionaries. The food scene, and the discussion of the woman in the red dress, confirm the loneliness and difficulty of life on the Nebuchadnezzar. Like the faithful of any religion, our apostles are tempted by the Matrix's illusions and are often led into daydreaming or fantasizing that ignorance really can be bliss. This confirms the Christian idea that the believer really is an alien in this world and is only a visitor, a transient resident, an alien on a temporary visa. As the anti-Christian filmmaker Luis Bunuel accurately puts it, "Properly speaking, there really is no place for the Christian in this world." Neo's new life is living proof of this maxim.

It is immensely significant that Cypher's deal-making meal with the agents centres around steak. First, meat is the metaphor that cyberspace inhabitants use to describe the real world: *meatspace* is the term they use to describe the nonvirtual world, a metaphor that clearly shows their preference for the virtual realm. Cypher says that even though he knows the steak isn't real, it sure tastes like it. The stupidity and superficiality of choosing blissful ignorance is revealed when Cypher says that when he is reintegrated into the Matrix he wants to be rich and "somebody important, like an actor." It's a line you could almost pass over if it wasn't so clearly earmarked as the speech of the fool justifying his foolishness. But meat is also the metaphor that media theorist Marshall McLuhan used to describe the tricky distinction between a medium's content and its form. As he put it, "the 'content' of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat that the burglar throws to distract the watchdog of the mind." This line illuminates

the fact that many people watching *The Matrix* are seeing only the “content” of the kung-fu scenes and the electronica soundtrack while missing the serious sermon going on all around them. But it also heightens the point that the story is making about the Matrix itself, which is designed, like Huxley’s “brave new world,” to oppress you not through totalitarian force, but through totalitarian pleasure. As Agent Smith says, “Isn’t it perfect? Billions of people, just living out their lives, oblivious.” “Steak” is also the password revealed for the website at the film’s closing credits, though there are nine passwords in total that reveal hidden messages on the website.

Because it’s a Hollywood picture, Jesus has to have a girlfriend (as he did in *The Last Temptation of Christ*), who is fantastically played by the little-known Carrie-Anne Moss. Her character, Trinity, is a mix of Mary Magdalene and the Holy Spirit, as evidenced by her earthly-yet-celestial relationship with The One. She follows him everywhere, and the Oracle has told her she would fall in love with him, and so it is she who represents eternal, infinite, unbounded love by giving Neo the kiss of Princess Charming at the end with the line, “You can’t be dead, because I love you.” This line may have had you fighting the gag reflex, but the point is that love is stronger than death, that God is manifested by a triune love relationship, and this was simply the best way to show the miraculous Christ-likeness of Neo. The power of her love to bring him back from the dead is also foreshadowed by her statement that she is the “commanding officer” on the ship, indicating her authority over him. Love *is* stronger than death, but the film could have shown this in a better way, even if only by developing their emotional relationship by an extra five lines each. Then again, if the Wachowskis are planning two sequels, it would make sense to have them kiss with about as much passion



as Leia kisses Luke in *The Empire Strikes Back*. This way we won't be shocked to discover that they were actually brother and sister, or part of the same heavenly family, all along. But the important thing to remember is that Neo really is dead before this, having been riddled with bullets by the three agents. After receiving the kiss, he is resurrected in the Hollywood equivalent of three days, which is about three seconds.

Upon rising from the dead, Neo experiences the cosmic revelation of his identity, similar and yet dissimilar to Superman. Superman has an Achilles' heel in the form of kryptonite and is also powerless to save his father from dying—despite all his other strengths. Neo's realization, however, is that he has no weaknesses, no fatal flaws, that he is in fact an infinite being. Having had the doors of perception fully cleansed, Neo can now “see” things as they truly are—which is in binary code. He looks down the hallway and sees the three agents as a series of flowing digits, meaning that he alone is now able to bridge the gap between analog and digital realm, able to control the digital rather than be controlled by it. Like the previous messiah that Morpheus alluded to, he is now able to remake the Matrix as he sees fit. He is a bulletproof Christ, not dying for our sins and coming back, but dying for his unwillingness to believe in his own power, who comes back to life through the power of someone else's belief, and who then asks us to join him in the fight against the Matrix. Like Jesus, he is the intermediary between our “bound” selves and our free selves. His is the example we are called on to follow in order to remake the Matrix with him.

A sympathetic understanding of Agent Smith is to assume that his hatred of humanity was programmed by the AI of the Matrix. This would indicate that the Matrix has learned what humankind failed to learn, which is how to manage

AI technology successfully. But Agent Smith's "revelation" speech is flawed: man is obviously a mammal. The fact is that no animal moves instinctively toward an equilibrium with its environment. Every animal is forced there by the competition of other life forms. Mankind is unique insofar as it has, alone among species, been able to vanquish its competition. Agent Smith may have been more accurate when he referred to man as a cancer. Just as cancer cells are human, so also human beings are mammals. And Agent Smith, the film makes clear, also wants to escape the Matrix. He has been infected by the "virus" of humanity and is desperate to know the Zion access codes, not so much to destroy the revolutionaries as to free himself.

At the film's conclusion, the invitation is clear. The film stops where it starts, with us staring at a blinking cursor on the computer screen in Room 303. Neo is making a call to us, sitting out there in the audience, to join him in fighting the Matrix's bondage. Like the final scene in *Superman*, Neo flies up and out of the screen as if to help us break free of our bondage, to suggest that he really is real, to suggest that we really can be free. One interpretation is that Neo is flying into us the way he flew into Agent Smith, to liberate us by destroying our preconceptions. In order to understand our preconceptions, our bondage, our slavery, all we need to know is one thing.

## EXPERIENCE

"I can visualize a time in the future when we will be to robots as dogs are to humans."

— Claude Shannon, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, 1949

What is *The Matrix*? Your senses of sight and sound will be placed on continuous red alert as they experience information overload on a scale almost unimaginable. *The Matrix* is Marshall McLuhan on accelerated FeedForward. Scene cuts are visual hyperlinks. Fight scenes are PlayStation incarnated. What is *The Matrix*? It's the Technological Society come to its full fruition. It's Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* for the twenty-first century, in which we don't simply work for the machine (rather than the machine working for us), but we are created, given life, and used by the machine exclusively for the machine's purposes. It's a modern pastiche of Hollywood's latest special effects combined with John Woo kung-fu and more bullets, explosions, and gothic horror than Batman-meets-Bruce-Lee under the aural assault of a cranked-up electronica. But don't let the packaging fool you. Because far more than the eye-popping special effects and ear-shredding soundtrack, it is the ideas and the dialogue that dazzle in *The Matrix*.

In other words, the Wachowskis seem to have asked themselves this question: How do you speak seriously to a culture reduced to the format of comic books and video games? Answer: You tell them a story from the only oracle they'll listen to, a movie, and you tell the story in the comic-book and video-game format that the culture has become so addicted to. In other words, *The Matrix* is a graduate thesis on consciousness in the sheep's clothing of an action-adventure flick. Whether you're illiterate or have a Ph.D., there's something in the movie for you.

What the word "matrix" actually means, according to the dictionary, is 1. *The womb.* 2. *Hence, that which gives form, origin, or foundation to something enclosed or embedded in it.* 3. *The intercellular substance of a tissue.* 4. *The earthy or stony substance in which an ore or other mineral is bedded.* 5. *The hollow in a slab*