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THE MATRIX RECONSIDERED

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David J. Gunkel

THE MATRIX RECONSIDERED

Thinking through binary logic in science fiction and social reality

This article employs the conceptual opposition of the red and blue pill that is presented in The Matrix trilogy as a mechanism for investigating the philosophical antagonisms and structural conflicts commonly associated with the 'information society'. The text is divided into two main parts: The first reconsiders the logical structure of this pharmacological dialectic, arguing that the choice between these two alternatives originates in the history of western thought and demonstrating how this binary arrangement organizes not just science fiction narratives but our understanding of social reality. The second part reconsiders the choice of the red pill. It critiques the assumed value of 'true reality' that is expressed in the cinematic narrative and suggests alternative ways to think outside the box of this rather limited binary structure. The objective of such an undertaking is not simply to question the philosophical assumptions of what has been defined as the 'right choice' but to learn, through such questioning, to intervene in and undermine its very system. The article, therefore, suggests an alternative method by which to challenge and critique the established network of conceptual oppositions that goes beyond mere revolution and the other familiar strategies of social change.

Keywords computer ethics; Matrix; Plato; science fiction; virtual reality

I begin with a quotation from Deleuze. 'A book of philosophy', Deleuze writes at the beginning of *Difference and Repetition* (1994), 'should be in part a very particular species of detective novel, in part a kind of science fiction' (p. xx). And if you think about it, he is right. Take the *Meditations* of Descartes, for instance. Descartes provides descriptions that sound remarkably close to the basic plot elements of a science fiction/detective story, like the Wachowski brothers' *Matrix* trilogy. He explains how he is unable to discern whether he is awake or asleep; he admits that he cannot be certain whether everything he knows is in fact real or some kind of grand deception fed directly into his brain by some Evil deceiver; and

he harbors doubts as to whether the other people who surround him are real human beings or pre-programmed automatons (Descartes 1988, pp. 78–85). If one can read philosophy as a kind of science fiction, it may also be possible to reverse Deleuze's statement and read science fiction as a kind of philosophy. That is, one could just as easily assert, as Haraway has suggested, that science fiction comprises a particular species of theorizing (Haraway 1991, p. 173). And this is again perhaps most evident in the *Matrix* films. In fact, reading the *Matrix* trilogy as philosophy has become something of a trend in both the academic and popular press. Since the release of the first film in 1999, there have been no less than 10 books published on this particular subject. According to the description provided on the back cover of William Irwin's *The Matrix and Philosophy* (2002), '*The Matrix* is the most philosophical film ever made, every step of its fast-paced plot pivots on a philosophical conundrum'.

In approaching the *Matrix* films in this fashion, however, we must be cautious not to confuse one thing with another. We must, in particular, be mindful of the warning provided by Žižek (2005):

There is something inherently stupid and naïve in taking the *philosophical* underpinnings of the *Matrix* trilogy seriously and discussing its implications. The Wachowski brothers are obviously *not* philosophers. They are just two guys who superficially flirt with and exploit in a confused way some postmodern and New Age notions.

(p. 198)

Heeding such advice, I will not endeavor to expose, explain, or evaluate the 'philosophical themes' that are supposedly contained in and exemplified by *The Matrix* and its numerous spin-offs. The current crop of books already does an adequate job of tracing and connecting the conceptual dots in this curious mash-up of philosophical profundity, Eastern mysticism, and martial arts cinema. Instead, I will chart a different course. 'What is interesting', Žižek continues, 'is to read the *Matrix* movies not as containing a consistent philosophical discourse, but as rendering, in their very inconsistencies, the antagonisms of our ideological and social predicament' (Žižek 2005, p. 199). This is precisely how I want to reconsider *The Matrix*. Understood in this way, *The Matrix* can be read as a contemporary parable or myth that articulates the *antagonisms* that comprise our current social situation with respect to new information and communication technologies (ICTs). But what does Žižek mean by 'antagonisms?' We often think of the digital computer as a machine that operates according to binary logic. That is, everything digital can be reduced to the difference between two variables – 0 or 1. Interestingly, this also describes our own thought processes. We also function on the basis of binary logic. We organize and understand our world by dividing things into simple oppositions or antagonisms: good or bad, true or false, mind or body, real or illusion. And of all the antagonisms or binary

oppositions that appear in the *Matrix* films, perhaps none is more influential and significant than that which occurs at the beginning of the narrative – the choice between a blue or red pill. What Morpheus offers Neo in the form of these two pills are two very different and opposed possibilities. To select the blue pill is to decide not only to live in an immaterial, computer-generated fantasy but to remain ignorant of the mechanism of this deception. This fantastic virtual world is, if not perfect, at least a significant improvement over the derelict real world that exists outside the Matrix. To select the red pill is to choose the truth no matter how disturbing, disappointing, and difficult the ‘desert of the real’ might turn out to be. It is a choice that affirms the undeniable importance of the real world that exists outside computer-generated simulations. Consequently, what Morpheus offers Neo is a choice between competing and radically different alternatives – a virtually seamless immaterial fantasy or the unvarnished reality of the true world. It is an important and dramatic decision, and Neo’s choice matters for the film, for advocates and critics of computer technology, and for contemporary social theory.

In addressing this particular antagonism, I want to investigate three separate but related concerns. First, the distinction between the red and blue pill may be read as an allegory of the logical oppositions that, for better or worse, organize our understanding of the social significance of ICT. But the relationship turns out to be much more than allegorical. This pharmacological structure, we will discover, is not original to the Wachowski brothers’ script but is prescribed by a metaphysical matrix that is at least 2400 years old. Second, the choice of the red pill already appears to be rational, defensible, and correct. In fact, as Irwin suggests, ‘the red pill is a new symbol of bold choice, and most people insist they would take it if they were in Neo’s shoes’ (Irwin 2002, p. 15). But why? What makes this not only the ‘right choice’ but the option that most people would recognize and validate as appropriate? Should not this almost unqualified and virtually unquestioned agreement make us just a little suspicious? Should we not worry about this ‘blind faith’ that is expressed in and exercised by such an immediate and seemingly universal agreement? Third, none of this skepticism should be taken to mean that I simply advocate swallowing the blue pill. Although I harbor doubts about the presumed value of the red pill, I want to go beyond the mere antagonism of this rather limited opposition, questioning its logical structure and social repercussions. In other words, I want to question the intellectual assumptions and consequences of opposing blue to red and of restricting decision to selecting one or the other.

The red pill

Morpheus presents Neo with a simple choice. Should Neo decide to swallow the blue pill, he will remain within the virtual reality of the Matrix and know nothing

of his decision to do so. Should he decide to swallow the red pill, he will initiate a process that is euphemistically called the 'awakening' and eventually come to experience the 'real world'. In the face of these two, apparently exclusive options, Neo makes what can only appear to be the right choice. He decides to swallow the red pill. That this decision is marked, within the space and time of the film, as the *right choice* is perhaps best illustrated by the way Neo's actions are differentiated from those of another character – Cypher. Cypher is a member of Morpheus' crew, who, after having lived in the real world, opts to return to the computer-generated fantasies of the Matrix and does so in such a way that willfully betrays his colleagues. In a scene that functions as the antithesis of Neo's pivotal decision, Cypher makes a deal with Agent Smith while enjoying the pleasures of an artificial, computer-generated steak. In return for information on the activities and location of Morpheus and his colleagues, Agent Smith agrees to reintegrate Cypher into the Matrix, to erase all memory of his experiences on the outside, and to give him whatever he wants (Wachowski & Wachowski 1999). Unlike Neo, who decides for the truth, Cypher chooses deception, and he does so at all levels. He not only decides to deceive his friends but also chooses to deceive himself. Cypher, therefore, freely and knowingly decides in favor of a fictional existence that is cut off from the real life of his community, and, perhaps what is worse, he does so at their expense. He sacrifices everything for the sake of artificially produced self-gratification. In being portrayed in this fashion, the character of Cypher functions as Neo's dramatic foil. He is, as Frenzt and Rushing (2002) describe, invoking binary terminology, 'the 0 to Neo's 1' (p. 68). And this difference is most vividly marked in scenes involving the consumption of food. While Cypher enjoys the pleasures of a virtual steak and drinks a computer-generated glass of fine wine, Neo chokes down real sustenance in the form of a thin cream-of-wheat concoction that the crew of the *Nebuchadnezzar* call 'a bowl of snot' (Wachowski & Wachowski 1999).

By counterposing the characters of Neo and Cypher, *The Matrix* conforms to a value system that, on the one hand, equates the good with the real, truth, authenticity, self-knowledge, and self-determination and, on the other hand, identifies the bad with artifice, fantasy, inauthenticity, self-deception, and mechanistic determinism. If *The Matrix*, as Vasiliou suggests, is 'a film with a moral plot' (Vasiliou 2005, p. 98), then the moral of the story appears to be that it is better to face the truth than to live in an illusory world that makes us feel good. Neo's decision is therefore immediately recognized as 'the correct one,' and almost everyone it seems identifies with what Gibson, in the forward to *The Matrix: The Shooting Script*, calls 'the hero of the real' (Gibson 2001, p. viii). This agreement, however, renders Neo's decision less than surprising. In fact, there is something about his choice that is predictable and almost programmed. When Morpheus holds out his hands, Neo does what we all know he will do. He takes hold of and swallows the red pill; he makes the right choice. This decision

can be considered 'correct' for at least two reasons. First, it is necessary for the cinematic narrative in which it occurs and is portrayed. If Neo had, for some reason, not selected the red pill, there would be no 'matrix' – either the one encountered by Neo within the film or the film itself that stages this encounter. Morpheus does not know to what extent he is right. You take the blue pill and the story – quite literally in this case – ends. Had Neo decided – or better, had the Wachowski brothers, who wrote the script, decided to have Neo decide – to swallow the blue pill, the protagonist would have been returned to the relatively uneventful computer-simulated 1990s and know nothing of his decision to live in this computer-generated deception. The interesting and dramatic set of events that lead Neo to Morpheus in the first place would come to an abrupt conclusion and be completely eradicated. In doing so, the dramatic conflict that initiates the narrative and motivates its development would simply dissipate. The film, as we know it, would come to an end. Consequently, the *Matrix*, not just the matrix that is presented within the frame of the film but *The Matrix* that is the film, requires and stipulates that Neo take the red pill. It is a cinematic necessity.

Second, Neo's choice of real truth over illusory deception is 'correct', because this decision is underwritten and supported by a philosophical matrix that is some 2400 years old. In swallowing the red pill, Neo does not make some exceptional decision rooted in the strength of his unique character. The 'hero of the real' simply reenacts and validates one of the fundamental decisions that occurs at the beginning of Western thought. Take for example, Plato's *Phaedrus* (1982), a dialogue that includes what is arguably the first recorded debate about ICT. Like *The Matrix*, *Phaedrus* employs explicit drug imagery and does so in order to facilitate a decision concerning what was during Plato's time new technology. All this occurs toward the end of the dialogue, where Socrates and Phaedrus discuss the technology of writing. The discussion begins with Socrates recalling an ancient myth concerning two Egyptian gods – Theuth the inventor and Thamus the king. According to the Socratic account, Theuth comes to exhibit his invention before the king, whose main task is to pass judgment on its usefulness or harm. Theuth presents his invention by using explicit drug imagery. That is, he calls writing a drug or an elixer of memory that will, according to his estimations, improve the information and communication capabilities of those who use it. Thamus, like any politician, is immediately suspicious of the new invention, and argues that this new technology will not improve memory but will function like a narcotic, causing forgetfulness and lethargy in its users. According to the Socratic narrative, then, the technology of writing is presented as either a medicine that will enhance truth and wisdom or a poison that will intoxicate its users with artificial deceptions. And in the face of these two competing alternatives, Phaedrus makes a crucial decision. Like Neo, he decides in favor of truth as opposed to falsity, knowledge instead of ignorance, and the real in opposition to mere appearances. Although

the two options that are described in *Phaedrus* are not color coded, *Phaedrus* decides to take what would have been the red pill. Consequently, the choice presented to Neo in *The Matrix* is not a clever cinematic device synthesized by the Wachowski brothers. It is, on the contrary, a technical and philosophical necessity that is determined, regulated, and justified by this ancient Platonic prescription.

The Matrix, then, is a parable that connects up with and dramatizes values that appear to be ancient, fundamental, and essentially beyond question. In taking the red pill, Neo does not initiate some unique choice but enacts a decision that is commensurate with, conforms to, and is supported by the Western philosophical tradition. And *The Matrix* is not the only contemporary fable to entertain or to capitalize on this lineage. In fact, a good number of popular films produced in the last decade of the twentieth century seem to be about similar matters. Leonard's *Lawnmower Man* (1992), one of the earliest films to address the technology of virtual reality, ends by making a similar decision and affirming the same philosophical values. At the climax of the narrative, the protagonist, Jobe (Jeff Fahey), terminates his ascendancy into virtual immortality and returns to the real world to save the life of his childhood friend Peter. As Heim has interpreted, the film ends by affirming the unmistakable importance of the primary world and the real human relationships that are a part of it (Heim 1993, p. 146). A similar argument is presented in Weir's *Truman Show* (1998), which constitutes something like reality television turned up to eleven. The film concerns the life of Truman Burbank (Jim Carey), who, like the human batteries wired into the Matrix, unknowingly lives his life in an artificial world. In this case, it is not a computer simulation fed directly into the mind but an elaborate television set. The narrative, which is organized around minor intrusions of the real into the fabric of this televisual fantasy, concludes with the protagonist bravely exiting through the horizon of his illusory environment in order to confront the real and true world that exists outside the deceptions that had constituted what he thought was reality. *The Matrix*, then, is not alone. In the popular mythology of our time, we see and entertain argument after argument for taking the red pill.

The blue pill

No one, or almost no one, it seems, advocates swallowing the blue pill. And even the small number who do do not question the basic structure and values that organize the film and direct its interpretations. In fact, the few dissenting voices actually reinforce the fundamental decision that is at the center of the narrative, even though they appear to question Neo's choice and even, at times, side with Cypher. In 'You Won't Know the Difference So You Can't Make the Choice', Beck (2000) evaluates the two options presented to Neo and concludes that the difference between the blue and the red pill is effectively negligible and

immaterial. 'There are', he argues, 'no rational grounds for making the decision' because '[e]pistemologically, the worlds are the same' given that either world would seem 'equally real' once one pill or the other had been swallowed (p. 35). For Beck, it simply does not matter which pill is taken. Both lead to a 'reality' that will be equally true and valid for the individual who happens to encounter it. Whether he decides to take the blue or the red pill, Neo will live in a 'reality' that will be, as far as he is concerned, absolutely real and unquestionably true. This insight is commensurate with an understanding of the 'virtual' not as the mere dialectical opposite of the real but as another register of what can properly be called reality. Although different versions of this argument can be found in the writings of Sismondo (1997), Heim (1998), Horsfeld (2003), and Stanovsky (2004), it was Deleuze (1994) who first introduced and presented this alternative configuration: 'the virtual is not opposed to the real; it possesses a full reality by itself' (Deleuze 1994, p. 211).

A similar argument is proffered by Blackford (2004), who suggests that the value attributed to taking the red pill is simply a matter of aesthetics. That is, it is a prejudice resulting from the way the trilogy has unfortunately presented the material conditions of life in the virtual world. According to the presentation supplied in the first film, life in the matrix appears to be less than attractive. However, with a little imaginative tweaking or creative reengineering, things might not really be as bad as they appear. 'What happens', Blackford writes,

if we reshuffle the deck. What if the machines had fed their human batteries a nice organically grown algae broth or what if, instead of rejecting the virtual paradise that the machines originally provided them, the humans had accepted it and flourished? What if they had consciously agreed to live their lives in the simulated reality of the matrix? Morpheus's moral crusade to wake everyone up would be at least slightly compromised, no?
(Blackford 2004, p. 171)

Consequently, Blackford, like Beck, argues that life in the computer-generated simulation could be just as real, just as fulfilling, and just as authentic as life is assumed to be in the so-called 'real reality'. For this reason, the choice between one or the other is far from clear cut. 'It all depends', as Blackford concludes, 'on the detail' – 'What life? What simulation? What reality? (Blackford 2004, p. 181).' And once we are provided with the details – in the form of two sequels, an animated prequel, a couple of computer games, and a seemingly endless supply of attendant texts and commentaries – it becomes increasingly difficult to make a definitive choice. In *Reloaded*, for example, the so-called 'desert of the real' does not appear to be so deserted or desolate. Zion is not some post-apocalyptic nightmare but a sophisticated, vertically arranged metropolis complete with impressive cathedral-ceiling interiors, comfortable domestic spaces, a multicultural populace, orgiastic rave parties, and rockin' sounds.

Conversely, the computer-generated virtual world of the matrix does not appear to be limited to the monotonous *Microserf* existence that is first encountered in Thomas Anderson's (a.k.a. Neo's) corporate cubicle. It also contains incredible diversity and even beauty. In fact, the Architect shows Neo multiple images of the simulated world, which make it appear just as diverse and interesting as our own. Consequently, the more detail that is provided about both worlds, the more difficult it is to justify selecting one pill or the other.

Weberman (2002), who agrees with the basic terms of this assessment, goes one step further. He concurs with Beck that the decision between blue and red is ostensibly insignificant and equivocal. But he draws an entirely different conclusion. 'Of course', Weberman (2002) writes,

the whole plot of the film is driven by the noble battle for liberation from the tyranny of the machines and their evil Matrix. But the film, despite itself, presents us with two worlds in a way that shows us that Cypher is the one who is right. I believe that the only sensible path is to choose the simulated world over the real one.

(Weberman 2002, p. 234)

According to Weberman, if there is no appreciable difference between taking the blue or red pill, then a rational and defensible decision can be made. One should choose the option that offers the best outcome. For Weberman, the quality of life inside the Matrix is simply better than that on the outside. And by 'quality of life' he is not simply referring to the base hedonistic pleasures that have been associated with the character of Cypher. The computer-generated world can certainly provide for these 'shallow gratifications', but it can presumably also run simulations that stimulate what Weberman calls 'the higher faculties' (Weberman 2002, p. 235), providing everything we believe makes a human life worth living. Consequently, swallowing the blue pill and living inside the Matrix, despite the way this option has been maligned both within the film and through its various interpretations, is without question the best decision. And anyone who chooses otherwise is either out of their minds or 'out to lunch' (Weberman 2002, p. 235). This decision, furthermore, does not remain at the level of mere theoretical speculation located in science fiction. It is already operative in social reality. In his empirical investigation of virtual worlds, economist Castronova (2001) found that *EverQuest* (a massive multiplayer online role-playing game or MMORPG) possesses a gross national product (GNP) per capita that 'easily exceeds that of dozens of countries, including India and China', supports an hourly wage of approximately \$3.42 (US), and has been identified as 'the principle place of residence' for some 12,000 individuals (Castronova 2004, p. 4). According to Castranova's findings people are actually deciding to live their life in the Matrix, because it offers better social and economic opportunities.

These alternative readings challenge the usual interpretations by apparently inverting the fundamental decision between the red and blue pill that is made by Neo. Such an operation might be called 'revolutionary,' because it literally 'overturns' the value system that structures and animates the cinematic narrative. This overturning, however, does not actually occur. The substitution of the blue pill for the red pill does not achieve the status of a revolutionary gesture. Although Beck, Blackford, and Weberman provide alternative readings of *The Matrix*, their interpretations remain structured by an ideology that respects the opposition of truth to illusion and the real to the false. What makes the blue pill attractive, on their accounts, is not that it will lead one to deception, illusion, and falsity but that it too provides access to a world that is just as real and true. What they dispute, therefore, is not the choice of truth over illusion but the fact that Morpheus simply presents the decision in a way that is not entirely accurate. Despite what Morpheus says, they argue, the blue pill does not lead to something that is the opposite of true reality, but constitutes the doorway to an alternative and improved reality. Consequently, the issue is not deciding between reality and deceptive illusion but of choosing between two very different kinds of reality – a neoluddite existence in the cold harsh world of the *Nebuchadnezzar* or the rich and complex virtual environment of the Matrix.

Hence, even those who advocate swallowing the blue pill end up affirming the same values as those who select the red pill. No matter how the film is interpreted, no matter who is situated as the hero of the narrative, illusion and deception are universally regarded with suspicion. But why? What's the matter with illusory deceptions? Why are they so thoroughly devalued that they are, almost without exception, maligned? Should not this almost absolute exclusion make us just a little apprehensive? Nietzsche is one thinker in the Western tradition to question this seemingly unanimous conviction and moral prejudice: 'This unconditional will to truth – what is it? Is it the will *not to allow oneself to be deceived*? Or is it the will *not to deceive*? For the will to truth could be interpreted in the second way, too – if only the special case "I do not want to deceive myself" is subsumed under the generalization "I do not want to deceive." But why not deceive?' (Nietzsche 1974, p. 281). In asking these questions, Nietzsche not only exposes one of the fundamental prejudices of Western thought, which always decides in favor of the true, but inquires about the almost universal exclusion of deception. 'Why do you not want to deceive especially if it should seem – and it does seem! – as if all of life aimed at semblance, meaning error, deception, simulation, delusion, self-delusion, and when the great sweep of life has actually always shown itself to be on the side of the most unscrupulous *polytropoi*' (Nietzsche 1974, p. 282). Here, in his use of the Greek word *polytropoi* Nietzsche alludes to one of the characterizations of Odysseus, who Homer (1995) presents as the hero of 'many turns', master of deception, disguise, and tricks. According to Nietzsche, then, it is virtuosity in deception that is necessary for survival, while the 'will to truth', the will to avoid deception at any cost, is a disposition that is antithetical

and even hostile to life. The 'will to truth', Nietzsche concludes, 'might be a concealed will to death' (Nietzsche 1974, p. 282).

A similar form of critical reflection is situated in the context of *The Matrix* and is voiced by the only character who can occupy such a thoroughly skeptical position – Cypher. Cypher, like Nietzsche, reflects on the burden and danger of having taken the red pill. In his estimations, the 'will to truth' is both a painful disappointment and a death sentence. And he not only asks the critical question, he acts on it. For this reason, his character is situated as a defector and traitor – what McGinn and others call, not without some justification, 'the Judas Iscariot of the story' (McGinn 2005, p. 63). He not only betrays Neo and his disciples, but he also betrays the unquestioned faith in and the unconditional will to truth. Consequently, Cypher is, like Nietzsche, the blasphemer who, through a gesture that can only appear to be ethically suspect and philosophically foolish, puts in question the seemingly irrefutable value of truth. Cypher's actions seek and end with a reversal of Neo's affirmation of truth. He questions the value of the true world, asks to be returned to the computer simulations of the Matrix, and desires to live the life of an actor. Nietzsche it seems charts the same course. He also questions the 'will to truth', is intrigued by the actor's 'delight in simulation' and 'craving for appearances' (Nietzsche 1974, p. 316), and seeks to reverse the traditional value system that has defined Western philosophy. Nietzsche, however, is not satisfied with mere reversal. He knows that all revolutionary gestures confirm and maintain the traditional system, albeit in an inverted form. For this reason, he finds it necessary to go one step further. Instead of simply inverting the accepted decision and selecting deceptive appearances, he disturbs the entire system itself. This is perhaps most evident in the text, 'How the "True World" Finally Became a Fable'. This short parable, which proceeds in several discrete steps, ends with the following, remarkable statement: 'The true world – we have abolished. What world has remained? The apparent one perhaps? But no! With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one' (Nietzsche 1983, p. 486). Here, Nietzsche exceeds the mere reversal of antagonisms, undermining and collapsing the very distinction between the true world and its apparitional other. Nietzsche, therefore, goes one step beyond the revolutionary gesture that had been instituted by Cypher. Whereas Cypher seeks to overturn the decision made by Neo and to return to the artificial world of the Matrix, Nietzsche does something different. He questions and undermines the entire system that opposes true being and deceptive appearances in the first place. This fundamental intervention leaves neither truth nor illusion, reality nor appearance but something other – something that is beyond and outside of the binary oppositions that organize traditional forms of philosophical thinking and expression.

Technically speaking, this is also what transpires in *The Matrix*. *The Matrix* can be read as film that not only employs but exploits the conceptual oppositions that define traditional forms of thinking. In this way, the narrative proceeds by drawing distinctions between the red and the blue pill and deciding in favor of

the one over the other. All of this, of course, is programmed and delimited by binary logic – a way of thinking that not only arranges antagonisms but determines a value system by siding with one term instead of the other. In *The Matrix*, the blue pill, which leads to a life of self-deception in a computer-generated simulation, is both opposed and subordinated to the red pill, which leads to real knowledge of the truth. This arrangement, however, shows itself to be a fiction. If one pays attention to the structure of the narrative, the decision that Morpheus offers Neo cannot be a real alternative or choice. In other words, there is neither a blue nor a red pill. What appears as a choice between two alternatives is itself something that is simulated within the artifice of the Matrix. Neo's encounter with Morpheus takes place in a computer-generated hotel room inside the Matrix, which is, at this point in the film, the only reality Neo is capable of understanding. This situation is marked explicitly by Morpheus at the beginning of their conversation: 'The Matrix is everywhere, it's all around us, here even in this room'. Consequently, the choice that Morpheus presents to Neo between a computer artifice and true reality is itself an artifact in a computer-generated simulation. The two pills, as Lloyd (2003, p. 106) describes it, are entirely virtual. This insight is eventually confirmed in the sequel, *Reloaded*, where it becomes clear to Neo that the choice between the red and blue pill was always and already part of the Matrix's own program and operations. The problem, as Neo comes to realize, is not red or blue; the problem is the choice itself.

The task, therefore, is not a matter of simply choosing one or the other but of questioning the structure, necessity, and stakes of this particular and limited set of alternatives. It is, to paraphrase Kroker and Weinstein, less a matter of being pro- or anti-Matrix, but of developing a critical perspective on the ethics of this very choice (Kroker & Weinstein 1994, p. 5). What is at issue in such an undertaking is not deciding either for blue or red, but of inquiring about the terms and conditions by which this binary opposition has been generated in the first place. The issue, then, is not as simple as deciding between two different and opposed alternatives. Instead, the task is to learn to think outside of and beyond these limited options and the customary philosophical categories that already dictate the kinds of questions we ask, the alternatives we think we have to choose between, and the outcomes that we foresee as being possible. For instance, instead of selecting between the two pills presented by Morpheus, Neo could have stood up and walked away from the entire scene. In doing so, he would have not selected either pill. He would have effectively said 'no to drugs' and not consented to having his options restricted to a binary structure where one term is already opposed to and privileged over the other. He would, therefore, neither have awakened in the 'desert of the real' nor have been returned to the anesthetized deceptions of the Matrix where 'ignorance is bliss'. He would have done something entirely other, something that is neither predictable nor revolutionary, something outside of and beyond the logical antagonisms of truth/falsity, reality/illusion, and good/bad.

Conclusions

So where does this leave us. Let me conclude by making three general statements – all of them negative. First, thinking in terms of binary oppositions is not optional. Just as the digital computer is designed to operate in terms of binary logic (0 or 1), we are, it appears, wired in such a way that we inevitably make sense of ourselves and our world by employing conceptual oppositions. We organize things according to antagonisms: real/illusion, true/false, good/bad, etc. Operating in this manner is not voluntary. One does not, for example, decide to think in binary terms or not, which is obviously just one more binary opposition. It appears, as Elbow (1993) suggests,

there's no way of getting away from binary oppositions given the nature of the human mind and situation. Binary thinking seems to be the path of least resistance for the perceptual system, for thinking, and for linguistic structures It may be that the very structure of our bodies and our placement in phenomenal reality invite us to see things in terms of binary oppositions.

(Elbow 1993, p. 51)

Consequently, what makes *The Matrix* the most philosophical film ever made is that it puts into play and opens the space for questioning the antagonisms, dualisms, and binary logics that already organize our understanding of the world and structure modes of thinking.

Second, although binary opposition is not optional, we should not allow it to go unquestioned. There are good reasons to remain skeptical and critical of its controlling influence. The binary, in whatever form it appears, has the effect of dividing between and sorting things into one of two possibilities – like a blue or red pill. These two terms, however, are never situated on par with each other. They are not involved in what one would call an equitable and unbiased relationship. Instead one of the two is always given precedence and, as a result, determines the other as its negative and deficient counterpart. For this reason, the red pill is, even before Neo makes his decision, the right choice. The blue pill, which is situated as its opposite, is defined negatively and, hence, is already determined to be 'wrong'. This is, on the one hand, an entirely rational and justified procedure. We often define something by differentiating it from what it is not. Falsity is the negation of truth. What is artificial is not natural. And evil is the privation or lack of good. On the other hand, these hierarchical arrangements have considerable and potentially troubling consequences. In positioning one term over and against the other, preprogrammed decisions are made concerning what is valued and what is not. Consequently, binary oppositions are neither impartial nor indifferent. They institute difference and this difference always makes a difference. As Derrida described it, 'in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful co-existence of a *vis-à-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two

terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand' (Derrida 1982, p. 41). For this reason, what is at stake in binary opposition is not simply a manner of conveniently dividing up the world. Binary pairings, no matter where they occur or how they come to be arranged, always and already arrange unequal hierarchies that make exclusive and prejudicial decisions. To put it in colloquial terms, the deck is already stacked.

Third, revolution as such is not adequate. Because of these problems and complications, binary opposition should be questioned, challenged, and perhaps even surpassed. Unfortunately, this is easier said than done. All the traditional strategies of resistance – contradiction, inversion, and revolution – are always and necessarily ineffectual. Consider how the *Matrix* trilogy ends. The third film, titled (not coincidentally) *Revolutions*, concludes not with some radical intervention that changes everything but with a tenuous cease fire that preserves and sustains the original antagonism between the machines and the human population of Zion. *Revolutions*, therefore, are not sufficient. This is the thoroughly insidious nature of the problem: criticizing binary opposition by deploying the usual strategies of contradiction, reversal, and revolution is actually involved in and sustains the oppositional structure one had wanted to criticize in the first place. This does not, however, mean that binary oppositions are simply beyond critical inquiry. It does not, it is important to note, simply disarm or render impotent any and all forms of intervention, whether political, social, philosophical, or otherwise. What it does mean is that critical engagement will need to operate in excess of mere opposition and be structured in a way that is significantly and disturbingly otherwise. What is needed therefore is something entirely different. Something unanticipated and surprising. Something that does not play by the established rules of the binary game. The task for critical thinking, then, is not to conform to the two options that have been and are presented to us, but to learn to challenge the terms and conditions of any and all such choices. To put it in *Matrix* terminology, the task is not to select either the red or the blue pill, but to learn how to question and intervene in the philosophical structures that are already imposed upon us by means of this particular conceptual opposition. It is only by following this kind of alternative and thoroughly disturbing path that we can begin to think through binary opposition and to articulate opportunities that are and remain otherwise.

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