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1

The Matrix and Plato's Cave: Why the Sequels Failed

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***The Matrix* and Philosophy**

The Matrix and its sequels—*The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*—embody many deep connections to philosophy. Movie-goers immediately began to make some of these connections for themselves. When professional philosophers chimed in, thanks to *The Matrix and Philosophy*, public awareness of these connections deepened, and public interest grew. Movies have potentially great power to entertain us, or to provide a temporary escape from daily routine. But beyond this, some movies also have the power to stimulate thought about important issues in life, or to help us rethink such issues in a new light. This is exactly why *The Matrix* was so successful. Let me give you an example of what I mean.

I teach philosophy at a large American public university (The City University of New York). There is a required core course in Philosophy, which every student must take in order to graduate. All the philosophy professors teach some version of this course, in multiple sections, to hundreds of students every year. Many students take this course without ever realizing the relevance of philosophy to their everyday lives. They sometimes struggle to make sense of the required readings, without really appreciating why the ideas of philosophers like Plato, Descartes, or Nietzsche form an integral part of their undergraduate education, and preparation for adult life. *The Matrix* changed all that, and in a powerful way. In order to

make the first two points of this chapter, I will explain both how and why *The Matrix* makes a difference to students of philosophy. Since we are all “students of philosophy” in one way or another, these points have broad applications to you, the general reader, and by extension to society as a whole.

A bit later in this essay, we are going to touch on one of Plato’s key concepts: “mimesis,” or imitation. According to Plato, a work of art imitates or represents something, for better or worse. Sequels to a movie imitate the original movie, also for better or worse. In the case of *The Matrix*, we’ll see why its sequels are poor imitations of the original, and we’ll also discover why that’s a grand philosophical irony.

How *The Matrix* Makes a Difference

How does *The Matrix* make a difference to students’ appreciation of Plato or Descartes? That’s easy to illustrate. The Allegory of the Cave is one of Plato’s most famous, and important, teachings. One of its purposes is to make us think about the distinction between appearance and reality. After all, the world is not exactly WYSIWYG (“What you see is what you get”). On the contrary, the world is often a place in which you don’t necessarily see what you are getting, and don’t necessarily get what you are seeing. Appearances can be very important, but are also notoriously deceiving at times.

Philosophy students know this perfectly well, or at least as well as anyone. And yet most of them don’t immediately “get” the relevance of Plato, and certainly don’t rush off to read Plato enthusiastically on their own, before he is assigned. But most of them have already rushed off to the theater or Blockbuster to see or rent *The Matrix*, enthusiastically on their own, without having it “assigned.” So to introduce Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, all I have to do is ask “Have any of you seen a movie recently that addresses the difference between appearance and reality?” The response is instantaneous. Dozens of hands shoot up, and voices call out “*The Matrix!*” This sets up Plato beautifully. Students who have seen *The Matrix* are predisposed and curious to read the Allegory of the Cave. Why? For two reasons. First, *The Matrix* speaks to their personal experiences in having been deceived by appearance, and stimulates their desires to penetrate veils of deception and glimpse reality. Second, stu-

dents thus impacted by *The Matrix* acquire immediate interest in Plato, as soon as they find out that he had contemplated this very theme millennia before the advent of visual technologies.

This applies just as forcefully, if not more so, when we come to Descartes’s *Meditations*. When Descartes speculates that some “evil genius” may be deceiving us entirely about the nature of reality, so that for all we know we are merely “brains in vats” hard-wired to stimuli-generating devices that make us think we have bodies and lives, Descartes has literally anticipated the holding tanks and program architecture of *The Matrix*. (Or else *The Matrix* has adapted Descartes’s speculations to the silver screen.) Either way, the students immediately make this connection, and they demonstrate a vested interest in learning more about Descartes’s proposed resolutions of the fundamental problem he and Morpheus raise: “What is real? How do you define real? If you’re talking about what you can feel, what you can smell, what you can taste and see, then real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain” (said Morpheus to Neo).

The Matrix has made Plato’s and Descartes’s questions directly relevant to contemporary youth, and so has awakened in them the perennial spirit of philosophical inquiry. In this sense *The Matrix* is not only an artifact of the entertainment industry, but also a bridge to philosophical culture. In so far as it motivates students to read Plato and Descartes (among many other philosophers), it serves a worthwhile educational purpose. Very few movies accomplish that much these days.

Why *The Matrix* Makes a Difference

That’s an overview of how *The Matrix* makes a difference. Now let’s look at *why*. For better or worse, our civilization has shifted from a written tradition to a visual one. Let me explain how significant this is. Our earliest cultural traditions were oral, not written. All tribal lore—including history, mythology, music, and so forth—was originally preserved by memorization and disseminated by recitation. A few people had to remember everything, which drastically limited the amount of information that could be stored and transmitted, but which also developed imagination on the part of the myth-makers, memory and verbal skills on the part of the story-tellers, and attentiveness, visualization, and understanding on the part of the audience.

With the advent of writing, human civilization as we know it began to emerge. Writing and reading allow us both to store information externally and also to retrieve it at will, thus freeing up human memory, stimulating our capacity for imagination and invention, and boosting attention span to optimum levels. Given a cumulative written tradition, each generation can build on what previous generations have accomplished.

Thanks to the written tradition, we can still read Plato and Descartes. But the written tradition has also enabled the invention of movies, television, computers, video games, and the Internet. And these products of the written tradition have collectively ushered in the visual tradition. The visual tradition differs from the written one in many key respects. Visual media reduce attention span instead of increasing it, reinforce the processing of images instead of language, evoke primitive emotions instead of refined ideas, diminish memory and enculturation instead of enhancing them. The net effect of this—as a few bright young philosophy students are beginning to realize—is that *The Matrix* has become more of a reality than a fantasy. The deceptions of the visual tradition are becoming more and more difficult to penetrate. By making viewers more aware of the real power of technological deception, *The Matrix* impels many of them to read the philosophers who warned us long ago about such deceptions—before the advent of the visual tradition itself.

Just look at the history of movies, and you will realize that most great movies, along with many not-so-great ones, were once typically adapted from books. The written tradition preceded the visual one, so it was natural for books to be the source of screenplays. (Similarly, the oral tradition preceded the visual one, so it was equally natural for the earliest television programs to be visual renditions of radio broadcasts.) Movie fans of Hollywood's "Golden Age" were also serious readers, and the consensus in those days (and probably today too) was that movies were rarely as good as the books they were adapted from. Whenever someone succeeds in making a movie better than its corresponding book, that movie usually wins Academy Awards. For example, David Lean's movie of *Dr. Zhivago* in many ways improved upon the Boris Pasternak novel from which it is adapted; and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather (Parts I and II)* similarly improved upon the Mario Puzo novel from which they are adapted.

But nowadays this order has become completely reversible: It is increasingly common for popular movies to inspire popular books. *The Matrix* itself gave rise to the book *The Matrix and Philosophy*, and sequels to *The Matrix* have inspired the very book you are now reading. In general, this shows that culture is malleable and multi-directional. A work of art in one medium can always stimulate a corresponding work in another medium, or a continuing work in the same medium. With specific reference to *The Matrix*, we currently see numerous works of art: three movies and several books. Quantitatively, that is pretty impressive output in a fairly short time.

But now I want to raise a qualitative question, both in general and specifically applied to *The Matrix*. The question is: Are sequels to movies generally better, or worse, than the original from which they are derived? We can think of many sequels, because Hollywood loves to produce them: *Jaws*, *Rocky*, *Airplane*, *Scream*, *Austin Powers*, and *The Matrix* are just a few of the many movies that have been "sequelled." In general, most viewers find that the original of any series tends to be the best, with sequels representing worse and worse copies of the original. The same opinion has been widely expressed about *The Matrix*: audiences and critics loved the original, disliked the sequel, and thought the third one was not even worth watching.

Why? Here is a synopsis of the opinions I have heard consistently expressed, by students and other mainstream moviegoers. *The Matrix* was a brilliant and innovative movie. For reasons elaborated in this book and the previous one, *The Matrix* raised vital philosophical questions in a dramatic and engaging context.

The sequel, however, was disappointing. *The Matrix Reloaded* degenerated into comic-book-style sequences of gratuitous violence. Its characters were imbued with physical superpowers to make up for the movie's lack of plot and intellectual content. The storyline itself was blurred by a haze of special effects. The one significant piece of mytho-philosophical content was Neo's encounter with the Architect. Neo learned that history repeats itself, that character types reincarnate to play archetypal roles assigned by forces greater than themselves. The deeper message was almost a confession about the movie itself: Governed by market forces greater than creative ones, this sequel is bound to be worse than the original.

The third part, and last act of this downward spiral, was *Matrix Revolutions*. It was reminiscent of the Alamo, as the “good guys” wage a desperate but doomed battle against the forces that threaten to overwhelm them. That Neo returns to fight for love is a great idea, but the tragedy of Trinity’s death is dwarfed by the larger tragedy: that the story-tellers cannot find a way to end this movie. It seems as if they need the Oracle mostly for this reason: to tell the audience the point of the whole trilogy before the virus that clones infinite copies of Smith wipes her and everyone else out.

How did this happen? Why did a movie that started so promisingly fall so flat and end so badly? In the case of the *Matrix* trilogy, there is a philosophical explanation that the movie itself hints at but fails to reveal. I will reveal it to you here.

The Matrix and Plato’s Cave

Let us return to Plato’s Cave, and to its fundamental question posed by Plato and restated by *The Matrix*: How can we reliably distinguish between Appearance and Reality? Plato’s answer is that we must exit the world of Appearances, leaving behind its fleeting illusions and fuzzy shadows, and step into the real world of Ideas, in which we begin to understand what Plato called the “Pure Forms” of things.

According to Plato, all artifacts of culture—from chairs to concertos, from makeovers to movies—are copies of their respective Pure Forms. The creators of these artifacts are not bringing something out of nothing. In the best cases, they have each glimpsed the Pure Form (or Ideal) of the object of their respective craft, and have copied it to the best of their abilities. In the worst cases, they are merely copying fuzzy shadows from the Cave wall, and so have no Idea (literally) of what they are doing. Every chair that a craftsman designs is a better or worse copy of the Ideal Chair. Every concerto that a composer writes is a better or worse copy of the Ideal Concerto. Every makeover that a stylist implements is a better or worse copy of the Ideal Makeover. And every movie that an individual or team writes, produces, and directs is a better or worse copy of the Ideal Movie.

Plato was especially concerned about two art-forms of his day: poetry and painting. He thought that poets and painters

tended to imitate fuzzy shadows of things, rather than represent their Pure Forms. While such imitations distracted people with emotionally compelling imagery and images alike, these works of art did not help guide people out of the Cave. In fact, they had the opposite effect, serving to reinforce prejudices, inflame passions, and to encourage other kinds of irrational and counter-productive mind-states.

Plato thought that artisans were often better imitators than were artists. For instance, a skilled bed-maker can learn to make increasingly comfortable beds, which improve the quality of sleep. Similarly, a skilled flute-maker can learn to make increasingly sonorous flutes, which improve the quality of music. Plato believed that bed-makers and flute-makers could glimpse the Pure Forms of beds and flutes respectively, and by doing so could make better and better copies of these Forms. In the process, they would come to understand reality outside the Cave. Their souls would be flooded with light, as would the souls of those who slept in their beds, or who played or heard their flutes.

At the same time, Plato worried that poets could pen poetry about flutes or beds, and painters could paint pictures of flutes or beds, without understanding anything about their Forms or essences; that is, about reality outside the Cave. These art-forms, if badly done through poor imitation, could make people desirous to sleep in uncomfortable beds, or to listen to unharmonious music. Their souls would remain in darkness, chained to the Cave wall, mistaking fuzzy appearance for illuminating reality.

So mimesis, imitation, can lead to improvement, or to degeneration. If you start outside the Cave but retreat inside, then you will replace your clear vision of the Pure Forms with the blurred images of shadows dancing on the cave wall. Before long you will be copying those shadows instead of the Forms, and your art will degenerate accordingly. That is why Plato was so opposed to what we would today call “pop” culture: The artist is “an imitator of images and is very far removed from the truth” he said. (*Republic* X, 27). If we apply this concept to movie sequels in general, and to *The Matrix* and its sequels in particular, we can understand how American culture itself has become self-imitating in a degenerative sense, and also far removed from truth.

The Platonic artist is concerned with making better and better copies of the Form in question; the anti-Platonic artist, with making worse and worse ones. American mass culture has become increasingly anti-Platonic, with predictable and observable results. Artists who are successful with an initial creation, be it a book or a movie, are not encouraged to improve upon it in a Platonic way; on the contrary, they are asked to make an inferior copy of it. The inferior copy will be less popular than the original, but will still attract an audience because of the original. Nonetheless, it is a well-known maxim of the entertainment business that sequels rarely do as well as originals. Similarly, sequels to sequels fare even less well, and so forth, until it becomes pointless to continue the process because of diminishing returns on increasingly inferior products.

Why Sequels Fail

Both the movie and the book industry abound with cases of anti-Platonic (that is, increasingly degenerate) copying. In book publishing, an extreme example of this phenomenon is surely the "Chicken Soup" series. The initial volume in this series, namely *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, was a best-selling self-help book. Why? Because, Plato might say, it captured a great Idea: Just as chicken soup can have a healing effect on the ailing body, so wise thoughts can have a healing effect on the ailing soul.

But the success of this book made American anti-Platonism kick in, and saw the industry generate a huge number of increasingly bad copies of this original work: chicken soup for every possible kind of soul—old, young, married, divorced, and so forth. At one point, you could hardly go into a bookstore without tripping over an array of "chicken soup" books. At least one cynic remarked that they should have published a final title in this degenerate series; namely, "Chicken Soup for the Souls of the Sick-and-Tired-of-Chicken-Soup-for-the-Soul Books."

Similarly (but not too similarly, I hope!), I'm sitting here writing a chapter for a sequel to a successful book, a chapter which deals with unsuccessful sequels to a successful movie. I don't know whether these books are improving or worsening; that's for you (the reader) to decide. Meanwhile, you see how the process works: It's all about representation and imitation, or what Plato called "mimesis."

The commercial scenario is this: Every copy of the original gets worse and worse, just like photocopies of photocopies, and so every copy is also less and less popular, and therefore also less and less profitable. Eventually, some copy becomes so degenerate and unpopular that the revenues it generates are smaller than the costs of making and marketing it. At this point, the series of sequels is terminated.

While everyone in the book and movie industries knows that a sequel rarely performs as well as the original from which it is copied, and that the sequel to a sequel performs even less well, and so forth, both *ad infinitum* and *ad nauseam*, I'll bet that very few producers or publishers ever consulted a philosopher to find out why.

With *The Matrix* and its sequels, we confront a special irony. On the one hand, this trilogy performed exactly as the allegory of Plato's Cave predicts: The original was both brilliant and popular; the sequel was a degenerate copy and less popular; while the final "episode" was even more degenerate and unpopular. Mercifully, that spelled the end of this mimesis. Ironically, however, the original movie in the sequence was based on the allegory of Plato's Cave itself, the whole point of which is to help us distinguish between appearance and reality, to assist us in emerging from the dim cave of fuzzy images (and their degenerate copies) into the sunlit world of pure forms. While *The Matrix* seemed to lead in that direction, namely out of the Cave, *The Matrix Reloaded* made a rapid U-turn and led its viewers back into the Cave, while *Matrix Revolutions* (rather, "devolutions") re-chained viewers to the Cave wall itself.