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Another Apocalypse to Enjoy:
The Matrix through Plato's and Descartes' Looking Glass

…a sensible man would remember that the eyes may be confused in two ways, and for two reasons – by a change from light to darkness, or from darkness to light.

(Plato, *The Republic*)

Looking today at the still groundbreaking *Matrix* through the eyes of the 17th century René Descartes, then going so far back as the 5th century Plato and his analogy of the cave to unearth other possible affinities might leave us with the eerie feeling that the adage "The future is now" is somehow outdated. For the future was, too; it just looked a little different. Actually, every now and then artists and thinkers get to stimulate an enhanced (or "apocalyptic", in its etymological sense of "revelation") awareness of our relation to time and space. Andy and Larry Wachowski did just that, and they did it in quite a spectacular way.

The success of the Wachowski brothers' trilogy – *The Matrix* (1999), *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) and *The Matrix Revolution* (2004) – was such that the phrase "the Matrix generation" soon became a sort of brand name for the 21st century. The

Abstract: This comparative approach is inspired by the collective volume *The Matrix and Philosophy. Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002), where elements of Buddhism, Platonism and traditional Christianism are generally identified as the most recurrent themes of the "jazz mythology" on which the narrative structure of the Wachowskis' movie is based. Our aim is to examine two specific philosophical views in their relationship to the apocalyptic theme developed in *The Matrix*: these are Plato's simile of the cave (*The Republic*) and René Descartes' *First Meditation* (*Metaphysical Meditations*, 1694). Jean Baudrillard's theory of *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) will also inform our considerations, given that Andy and Larry Wachowski make a clear reference to it in the first part of the movie as to a possible "*mise en abyme*" of its philosophical grounds. Topics as reality *vs.* illusion, freedom *vs.* manipulation, past *vs.* present will be identified along the above mentioned texts as they are mirrored by *The Matrix,* in the attempt to shape a possible meaning of the apocalypse in our present civilization.

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transit from one millennium to the other could but bring along all the exhilaration of new beginnings. However, there must have also been an unsettling sense of some imminent end – the end of something. Nobody knew of what exactly, although some still say there is going to be an end of the world.

In 2012, we're still safe and sound and, even if we fancy doing it through different "glasses", we still enjoy watching *The Matrix*. Maybe it's precisely because it exorcises our fear of the end, or simply because this movie is still able to challenge us visually – and intellectually. At the same time, and this is the beauty of its paradox, *The Matrix* might seem so revolutionary, and its impact on us ever so fresh, namely because some of the questions it raises are incredibly ancient. In our postmodern – and post-human – age of cybernetics and virtual realities, Descartes' metaphysical doubts on the nature of reality and even Plato's myth of the cave suddenly – and oddly – become very contemporary. The only difference is – and it makes all the difference – that Plato's philosophy, for instance, stemmed from a set of beliefs (strong enough to die for, as Socrates actually did), while our present civilization is being eroded, as Jean Baudrillard puts it, by a simulated "hyperreality" or "neo-reality", with no link whatsoever to its – absent – referent[1].

The Matrix is not, indeed, just another Hollywood production with a remarkable box office success. It touches some very deep level of our perception, of our imagination, of our mind. No sooner had it been put out in the United States than the movie managed to completely seduce not only the mass public, but also – maybe especially – the scholars. As Deborah and George McKnight remember, "When *The Matrix* opened in 1999, philosophers could be found talking to one another, either in university corridors or at academic conferences, and they were telling each other the same story[2]. In any introductory philosophy course you cared to name, after lecturing on, say, Plato's Cave or Descartes' *First Meditation*, students would either put up their hands in class or come up to you after the lecture and say: "It's just like in *The Matrix*.""[3].

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1 "Aujourdhui l'abstraction n'est plus celle de la carte, du double, du miroir ou du concept. La simulation n'est plus celle d'un territoire, d'un être référentiel, d'une substance. Elle est la génération par les modèles d'un réel sans origine ni réalité: hyperréel.

Le territoire ne précède plus la carte, ni ne lui survit. C'est désormais la carte qui précède le territoire (...). C'est le réel, et non la carte, dont des vestiges subsistent ça et là, dans les déserts (...). *Le désert du réel lui-même* « (Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation*, Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1981, p. 14).

2 One of the outcomes of such talks is the collective volume edited by William Irwing, *The Matrix and Philosophy. Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002). After the last part of the Wachowskis' trilogy was launched, Josh Oreck also gathered a series of filmed interviews in his *Return to Source: Philosophy & The Matrix* (2004).

3 Deborah Knight and George McKnight, "Real Genre and Virtual Philosophy" in *The Matrix and Philosophy. Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, PerfectBound e-books, Harper Collins & Carus Publishing, 2002, p. 206.

Everything was more or less "just like in *The Matrix*" those days, and somehow it might still be, even if we're no longer so much aware of it.

The only similarity I intend to further explore here, though, is the one between *The Matrix* and the above mentioned reflections of Plato and Descartes. For those who saw the movie a while ago, and also for those – if any – who haven't seen it yet, it might be useful to go over some of its significant scenes. This should help us get more acquainted with the philosophical vision it shares with the first of Descartes' *Metaphysical Meditations* – and, more specifically, with Plato's analogy of the cave, since the latter consists of a mythical scenario that could have inspired Andy and Lana Wachowski more than Descartes' less dramatic philosophical speculations.

Matrix, as some of us know, is the name of a dream world, simulated by a gigantic computer program to which the brains of the entire human species are connected. Only few – "the happy few" – manage to escape this fake reality: they choose either to openly fight it, like Morpheus and his team, or to get shelter and, if necessary, defend themselves in an underground city bearing the biblical name of Zion. The others are reduced to a larval, forever fetal state, while at the same time leading a virtual life as prisoners of a virtual reality controlled by an Artificial Intelligence – or the Architect, as we find out in the last part of the trilogy. His master plan is to turn individuals into mere sources of energy ("copper-

tops") meant to fuel the machines which have thus come to rule the world.

Once he himself has been liberated, Thomas Anderson's – *alias* Neo – mission is to free humanity from this illusion by sabotaging the very program that was generating it. Although plainly Messianic, his attempt to save the world implies a hypnotic choreography of *ju jitsu*, Western and mortal combat style fights against the Agents of the Artificial Intelligence. The visual effects can be indeed seducing, but there is much more to it: we're facing a subtle problematisation of manipulation, alienation, extinction and of our own way of relating to the world around us, be it real, virtual, or in-between. The words concluding the first part of the trilogy – "I'm not here to tell you how it is going to end, I'm here to tell you how it is going to begin" – sound like a sibylline warning message that Neo addresses to the "Matrix generation".

Morpheus, a key character in the movie, is the one that "wakes up" Thomas Anderson from the digital dream he used to live in, although he did it with the feeling that "there was something wrong with the world". "Wake up, Neo", reads the message Morpheus sends him on the computer screen. Soon follows the well-known scene of "the red and blue pill", that is, the moment when Thomas Anderson/Neo is asked to choose between ignorance and knowledge. Of course, he chooses to know – *and* do something about it, otherwise the movie would have ended right there. Once Neo has accepted Morpheus' "truth", the

latter introduces him further into the secrets of a multidimensional world, or in the art of transgressing the laws governing this multiple and deceiving reality which was actually meant to camouflage a devastated planet. "Welcome to the desert of the real" is how Morpheus greets Neo into this post-apocalyptic humanity.

Charles L. Griswold Jr. gives us an interesting perspective on Morpheus' part in this initiation: he notices that Morpheus, which is, paradoxically, the name of the ancient Greek god of dreams, plays here the role of "an expert in awakening"[4]. Griswold's considerations become even more intriguing once we realize that Morpheus could very well be the modern patron of the art of film-making, which is indeed a form of dreaming awake and also, with the Wachowskis, an art of dreaming that we are awake... "Why is the liberator in *The Matrix* named after that divinity? ", wonders Charles L. Griswold Jr. referring to Morpheus. "It seems odd, after all, that the awakener should be the expert in sleep. The god's name comes from the Greek word "*morphe*," meaning shape or form; for the god could summon up, in the sleeper, all sorts of shapes and forms. Who better than divine Morpheus to understand the difference between wakefulness and dreams? […] It is a crucial but subtle theme of the movie that in order to awake one must first dream that one is awake, that is, has the

prophetic intimation that there is a difference between dreaming and awaking"[5]. In fact, one of the capital questions that Neo is asked to answer as part of his initiation is: "How would you know the difference between the dream world and the real world?".

Morpheus is not the first to have asked this question, just as Neo is not the first one who was challenged to provide an answer. From this point of view, René Descartes' *First meditation* is indeed "just like in *The Matrix*" – or rather, if we were to look at it chronologically, it's *The Matrix* which is "just like in the *First Meditation*"… The similarities with the ideas that Lana and Andy Wachowski transpose visually in their movie are quite striking, and this proves that the creators of *The Matrix* are not mere entertainers, but genuine and cultivated thinkers.

In his *First Meditation* Descartes plays simultaneously the role of Morpheus and that of Neo. What he does (and this should be regarded as a sort of spiritual exercise meant to lead to knowledge) is to systematically doubt everything he had been told – but often proved not – to be true, in order to avoid being deluded by prejudices or ready-made convictions. To put it differently – or to put it visually, like in *The Matrix* – Descartes leads himself into a metaphysical "desert": from this observation point, things appear into a wholly new perspective. Thus, he comes to doubt the very essence of reality in its generally accepted oppo-

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4 Charles L. Griswold, Jr., "Happiness and Cypher's Choice: Is Ignorance Bliss?" in *The Matrix and Philosophy. Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, ed. cit., p. 129.

5 *Idem*, pp. 129-130.

sition to dreams or illusions: "there is no ultimate indication that is certain enough to make us distinguish clearly between the state of being awake and that of being asleep"[6], he states. Moreover, while trying to make out the truth and thereby becoming aware of his own state of deep ignorance, Descartes also comes to doubt the essence of the god that could have created such imperfect beings. The ones who are familiar with *The Matrix* (or with Gnosticism for that matter) might experience a *déjà vu* here: according to the French philosopher, this almighty creator meant to represent "the sovereign source of truth" is, in fact, nothing but "a malicious spirit" ("*un mauvais esprit*"), "a great deceiver" ("*un grand trompeur*"). And consequently, all his mastery lies in imposing an illusion which hides the true nature of reality – whatever that true nature is[7]. What we have here is a portrait or an avatar of the Architect pictured in *The Matrix*.

Descartes also acknowledges that, once awaken, the real trial is to stay awake: despite his efforts to remain perpetually alert against what he suspects to be a deception, he often abandons himself to the chimera that this god treads around the truth, making it so hard to seize. At this point, Descartes' considerations seem to define precisely the brutified state of the beings that populate or are trapped in the Matrix: "Just like a slave who enjoys an imaginary freedom in his sleep and who, when beginning to suspect that his freedom is nothing but a dream, refuses to wake up while deliberately holding on to these pleasant illusions so that he can keep on being abused, I myself go back to my old beliefs, and I refuse to doze them off for fear that the painful state of awareness that could replace this peace of mind, instead of bringing some light in my understanding of the truth, would not in fact elucidate the gloomy questions that have already been stirred"[8].

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6 "Il n'y a point d'indices certains par où l'on puisse distinguer nettement la veille d'avec le sommeil" (René Descartes, *Méditations métaphysiques* (1964), Paris: Librairie Larousse,1973, p. 31).

7 "Je supposerais donc, non pas que Dieu, qui est très bon et qui est la souveraine source de vérité, mais qu'un certain mauvais génie, non moins rusé et trompeur que puissant, a employé toute son industrie à me tromper. [...] C'est pourquoi je prendrai garde soigneusement de ne recevoir en ma croyance aucune fausseté, et préparerai si bien mon esprit à toutes les ruses de ce grand trompeur, que, pour puissant et rusé qu'il soit, il ne pourra jamais rien imposer." (*Idem*, p. 34).

8 "Mais ce dessein est pénible et laborieux, et une certaine paresse m'entraîne insensiblement dans le train de ma vie ordinaire ; et tout de même qu'un esclave qui jouissait dans le sommeil d'une liberté imaginaire, lorsqu'il commence à soupçonner que sa liberté n'est qu'un songe, craint de se réveiller, et conspire avec ces illusions agréables pour en être plus longuement abusé, ainsi je retombe insensiblement de moi-même dans mes anciennes opinions, et j'appréhende de me réveiller de cet assoupissement, de peur que les veilles laborieuses qui auraient à succéder à la tranquillité de ce repos, au lieu de m'apporter quelque jour et quelque lumière dans la

This takes us even further back, to Plato's *Republic*, and more specifically to his cave parable, which is indeed about apocalypse, but in its Greek, etymological meaning of "revelation". It's the same revelation of the truth Descartes so longed for in the 17th century, the one we still long for in the 21st. Some things never change…

If Descartes' *First Meditation* is probably less known, we are all more or less familiar with the myth of the cave. Plato presents it in a short fragment (*The Republic*, 514-521) of an extended dialogue between Socrates and some of his fellow Athenians. This section of their conversation about the perfect State, placed at the beginning of Book VII, is about education as "an art of conversion" from darkness to light, or about finding out and – here comes the hard part – living with a truth which might differ consistently from what we have been previously told or taught. Socrates urges his interlocutor, Glaucon, to imagine a cave where people have been chained ever since their birth and thus forced to perpetually watch a shadow parade on a wall. Terms like "picture", "screen", "show" make Socrates' description particularly visual and peculiarly "telecinematic": "Picture men in an underground cave-dwelling, with a long entrance reaching up towards the light along the whole width of the cave; in this they lie from their childhood, their legs and necks in chains, so that they stay where they are and look only in front of them, as the chain prevents their turning heads round. Some way off and higher up, a fire is burning behind them, and between the fire and the prisoners is a road on higher ground. Imagine a wall built along this road, like the screen which show-men have in front of the audience, over which they show the puppets." (*The Republic*, 514-515)[9].

The jailers convince their prisoners that this world of make-believe is "reality"; it is indeed the only reality they have ever known, the only reality they've grown accustomed to, since they've never had any other term of comparison. They don't even trouble to look for one, being unaware of the illusion they live in and also of the fact that they are prisoners of that cave. As Charles L. Griswold puts it, "They are ignorant of their ignorance. They are so trapped in the realm of artificiality and manipulation that they insist at all costs on the "truth" of their world. Presumably the controllers or image makers who run the image-show would be highly motivated to assist them in that defense"[10]. Of the light, they only know

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connaissance de la vérité, ne fussent pas suffisantes pour éclaircir les ténèbres des difficultés qui viennent d'être agitées" (*Idem*, pp. 34-35).

9   The English version is an extract from *The Republic of Plato*, translated by A.D. Lindsay with an Introduction by Alexander Nehamas and Notes by Renford Bambrough, London: David Campbell Publishers, 1992, p. 197.

10 Charles L. Griswold Jr., "Happiness and Cypher's Choice: Is Ignorance Bliss?" in *The Matrix and Philosophy. Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, ed. cit., p. 128.

the dim reflection on the walls of their cave; and it isn't even the original solar light, but that of a man-made fire.

However, one day one of these prisoners might begin to ask himself if that reality is the only – or the real – one. Just like Neo, he might come to suspect that "there is something wrong with the world". Questions are the beginning of all answers: as the feminine character in the movie, Trinity, says, "It is the question that drives us, Neo. It is the question that brought you here. You know the question, just as I did. The answer is out there…". Socrates, a master of maieutics, seems nevertheless to conceive of the prisoner's awakening more like a swift revelation than a gradual enlightening process: "Let us suppose one of them released, and forced suddenly to stand up and turn his head and walk and look towards the light. Let us suppose also that these actions gave him pain, and that he was too dazed to see the objects whose shadows he had been watching before. What do you think he would say if he were told by someone that before he had been seeing mere foolish phantoms, while now he was nearer to being, and was turned to what in a higher degree is, and was looking more directly at it?" (*The Republic*, 515-516)[11].

Just like the prisoners from the Platonic myth, the ones who are wired to the Matrix believe in the reality of their "foolish phantoms" without even suspecting that there might be another reality out there. And, just like in the Platonic myth, one of these ignorant creatures escapes from this world of simulacra and then goes back to his "cave" fellows to share his discovery, while offering to show them the way out. Surprisingly, though, they violently refuse to believe the "enlightened" one, they even perceive him as a menace to the apparent comfort of their existence. As we can see, both *The Matrix* and the Platonic myth present us with an allegory of extinction through sheer self-sufficiency, or of the salvation that active knowledge can bring about. It is, however, a salvation strongly opposed to by the very ones who are doomed to decay, to the point that the savior himself can become the victim of the victims of ignorance.

For the inhabitants of the Matrix, "the truth" is even harder to accept: Slavoj Žizek[12] notices that, unlike the Platonic cave dwellers, who were promised an "upper world" bathed in the light of the sun, what the Matrix prisoners are given in exchange for their knowledge is a mere "desert of the real" in an underground shelter, and not the guarantee that they would ever see the light – as they finally do. And even if they didn't, I would still agree with William Irwing: "The only thing worse than a prison for your mind would be a prison for your mind you didn't know you were in, a prison from

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11 *The Republic of Plato*, ed. cit., p. 198.

12 Slavoj Žizek, "The Matrix: Or, the Two Sides of Perversion", in *The Matrix and Philosophy. Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, ed. cit., p. 124.

which, therefore, you would have no urge to escape"[13]. The distance between "knowing the path" and "walking the path" is, according to Morpheus' prescription, long and tough. Socrates said the same about the philosophy he practiced: "for all great things are perilous, and it is true, as the proverb says, that beautiful things are hard"[14]. That's most probably why common people like us would rather watch movies and the news, or read books and newspapers.

But we might actually wake up one day and dare to live the dream if we dream that we are awake long enough. Not too long, though – and Baudrillard makes a good point here. His pun "the telefission of reality" ("*la téléfission du reel*")[15] refers to what he considers to be a contemporary catastrophe caused by the media reversed "nuclear process": the overflow of information and images which "cools" or "neutralizes the meaning and energy of events"[16]. The viewers are thus constantly exposed to, and somehow contaminated by "simulacra and simulation that actually shatter all the energy of the real, not by a spectacular nuclear explosion, but by a secret and steady implosion"[17]. We're

again in the paradox here – or, it is rather confusing: technology, which has always been defined as a "functional sophistication of the human organism"[18], seems to perform exactly the opposite, as it renders human senses opaque and blunt. The technology of visual media, for instance – photography, cinema projections, TV sets, computers, I-phones and all the handy gadgets that have invaded the market along with our lives, are supposed to operate towards the enhancement of the human faculty of *seeing* and *knowing*. But do they actually serve these aims? Baudrillard doesn't quite think so, on the contrary. They blind, for they atrophy our sense of the real or make us insensitive to what they so obviously, exceedingly, incessantly show. We're fully "updated", and yet losing touch, and direction. We're such an easy prey.

It could be that our civilization has reached a point of technical development and material achievements that relates it to the legendary, once thriving island of Atlantis, whose floody misfortunes are reported by the same Plato in his dialogue *Critias*. I seriously doubt that we are to face a similar apocalyptic end. I only wonder: could it be that Atlantis actually sank in the Platonic cave?

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13 William Irving, "Computers, Caves, and Oracles: Neo and Socrates", in *The Matrix and Philosophy. Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, ed. cit., p. 8.

14 *The Republic of Plato*, ed. cit., p. 180.

15 Jean Baudrillard, op. cit., p. 81.

16 "La TV elle aussi est un processus nucléaire (...): elle refroidit et neutralise le sens et l'énergie des événements.» (*Idem*, p. 82).

17 "…simulacres et simulation où s'engouffre effectivement toute l'énergie du réel, non

plus dans une explosion nucléaire spectaculaire, mais dans une implosion secrète et continue." (*Idem*, p. 84).

18 «Dans la perspective classique (même cybernétique), la technologie est un prolongement du corps. Elle est la sophistication fonctionnelle d'un organisme humain.» (*Idem*, p. 163).

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