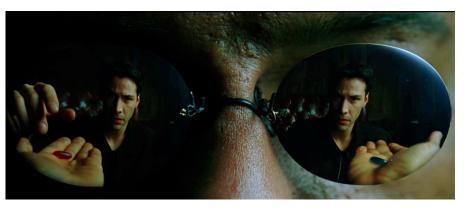# Belief: A Critical Analysis of *The Matrix* Trilogy

Shannan Lojeski

Some people use the word "belief" to defend why they hope; others resist believing to maintain their free will and control their future. Regardless, beliefs are evident in every circumstance and govern every individual's choices. What do you believe? What do you believe *in*? These are questions that inevitably dictate the order of life and the ideologies that maintain it. In his essay, "The Mirror Stage," Jacques Lacan explains the human psychological experience through three orders: the symbolic, the real, and the imaginary. Through application of these three orders, the Wachowskis' film trilogy—comprised of *The Matrix* (1999), *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), and *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003)—uses Lacan's psychoanalytic theory to explore the concept of belief.

The "symbolic order," as explained by Lacan, is a dimension in which elements have no absolute existence but are constituted by their mutual differences. In the first *Matrix* film, Neo's "normal" life is turned upside down when he learns that the life he and those around him have come to accept as real is only a representation of the symbolic order created by the Matrix—a lie that enslaves humans in its system and deprives them of the knowledge of its existence. In her article "*The Matrix* and Critical Theory's Desertion of the Real," Dana L. Cloud mentions Lacan's theory and recognizes its effects in the first film. "The film also invokes a Lacanian Real, in which the psychic residue of the lack of wholeness in the Symbolic and the experience of trauma leave persons/subjects uneasy. In the first film, for example, Neo experiences vague unease with his daily life in the Matrix and begins to 'hack' into the computer-driven system," Cloud writes. "While he remains in the symbolic world of the Matrix, he is incapable of fighting it in a systemic way, because his suspicions are quite literally groundless until he is unplugged from ideology" (330–31). Neo is given the choice in the first film to be told the truth about the Matrix and reveal the enslavement he's been under when Morpheus offers him the red and blue pills. With one pill in each hand, Morpheus symbolically presents Neo freedom in his right hand (with the red pill) and enslavement in his left hand (with the blue pill). As Morpheus says, "You take the blue pill, the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes."

Even in this statement, Morpheus linguistically uses the symbol of the rabbit hole in *Alice in Wonderland* to explain the journey into truth that he would take Neo through if he chooses to take the red pill. Neither freedom through truth nor enslavement in the Matrix can be given an absolute existence in this sense, but can be constituted based on the clear difference between them. The symbolic order of lived experienced is presented here as a choice. Through representation of the Lacanian theory of the order of the symbolic, Neo is prompted to choose what he believes, which sets up the theme of belief that the rest of the trilogy's narrative will develop.

As an exterior to the Lacanian concept of the symbolic, the real can be considered an ontological absolution. While the symbolic can be described in oppositions, there are no oppositions when it comes to the real. While it may appear so, Lacan does not equate the real with reality but instead considers it a resistance to symbolization. In the second installment of the Wachowskis' trilogy, *The Matrix Reloaded*, Neo learns and unlearns what is real and what is a symbolic representation of lived experience. This is complicated when Neo meets the Architect, whom he hadn't known to be real even though he suspected the Matrix must have a creator. Thrown into what seems to be space but resolves into a circular room with banks of television screens for walls, Neo meets the Architect, who explains the formation of the Matrix as the balancing of a mathematical equation. The Architect explains Neo's existence to him this way: "Your life is the sum of a remainder of an unbalanced equation inherent to the programming of the Matrix. You are the eventuality of an anomaly which despite my sincerest efforts I have been unable to eliminate from what is otherwise a harmony of mathematical precision." In complete contrast to what the Oracle represents, an individual's own free will and choice, the Architect believes only in one choice which will produce one solution to what he considers the real to be. According to the Architect, there is nothing left unaccounted for among the possible sums, probabilities, and factors that play into the order of the Matrix.

Lacan's third order in his psychoanalytic theory, the imaginary, appears most prominently in *The Matrix* trilogy through other characters' belief in "The One." Many times throughout the films, characters display their belief in Neo and the prophecy of the Oracle. The concept of belief is, at its core, imaginary. When an individual believes something or

believes in something, their belief in that thing does not depend on whether it is physically real or not. Considering the materiality of an object of belief engages the expectation that the object be visible in nature and strips away the very essence of the imaginary that makes it an object of belief. In the second film, the Oracle explains to Neo our inherent belief in an overarching power that governs the order of life without us having to see it. She states, "At some point, a program was written to watch over the trees and the wind, the sunrise and the sunset. There are programs running all over the place. The ones doing their job, doing what they were meant to do, are invisible." The Oracle is pointing out the imaginary, what we don't question because we believe in its function and purpose. As

The One, Neo fulfills his purpose in *The Matrix Revolutions* by sacrificing himself to the machine mainframe, stopping Agent Smith, and saving Zion. Up to this point, Neo has constant supporters—including Trinity, the Oracle, and Morpheus—willing to defend Neo and stand up for their belief in him. An example of this is in *The Matrix Reloaded* when Morpheus is speaking to the Commander about the defense systems and the next move against the approaching machines. This is part of the conversation from the second film:

MORPHEUS. Commander, we need a presence inside the Matrix to await contact from the Oracle.
COMMANDER. I don't want to hear that shit! I don't care about oracles or prophecies or messiahs! I care about one thing: stopping that army from destroying this city. And to do that I need soldiers to obey my orders.
MORPHEUS. With all due respect Commander, there is only one way to save our city.
COMMANDER. How?
MORPHEUS. Neo.
COMMANDER. Goddmamn it, Morpheus. Not everyone believes what you believe.
MORPHEUS. My beliefs do not require them to.

The belief that Morpheus has in Neo is imaginary. His belief relies on the prophecy of "The One" and the ideology of a system where a broken society needs a savior. It is this belief, the imaginary, that drives Neo to sacrifice himself to save the people of Zion and the future of humanity from total destruction.

Through the concept of belief and instances of believing, the directors of *The Matrix* films exhibit each of what Lacan argues to be the three orders of the human psychological experience: the symbolic, the real, and the imaginary. Through the very literal symbol of a pill, Neo is given a choice between freedom and enslavement in the first installment of the films. When meeting the Architect, Neo learns what the Architect believes to be the real,

which provides him the strength to make his own choice. Lastly, the constant belief and support from others in the film push Neo toward a belief in himself as the One that will make his ultimate sacrifice possible in the third film, *The Matrix Revolutions*. Holistically, the concept of belief provides a foundation for each of these three orders. To see ideologies, situations, or things as representative of the symbolic, you have to believe that symbols are representations of real things. In order to understand the real, you have to believe that there are no oppositions to the real. In order to even have a belief, you have to believe in the imaginary, in things you can't necessarily see. While not always easy to analyze or point out, each of Lacan's three orders of the human psychological experience—the symbolic, the real, and the imaginary—are displayed in the Wachowskis' *The Matrix* trilogy. ❧

Shannan Lojeski graduated from UW-Whitewater with majors in both English Literature and Professional Writing and Publishing. This essay was written for a course in Critical Writing in Multimedia Contexts *in the fall of 2019.*

———

Cloud, Dana L. "*The Matrix* and Critical Theory's Desertion of the Real." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 3.4 (2006): 329–54.

Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." *Écrits.* Translated by Bruce Fink. New York: W. W. Norton (1996): 75–81.

Wachowski, Lana, and Lilly Wachowski, directors. *The Matrix.* 1999; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.

Wachowski, Lana, and Lilly Wachowski, directors. *The Matrix Reloaded.* 2003; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.

Wachowski, Lana, and Lilly Wachowski, directors. *The Matrix Revolutions.* 2003; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.