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“Matrix”, Stupidity and Metaphysics A Commentary on Zizek’s Commentary

Summary:

The author points out how the projection of philosophical meanings in popular movies like “The Matrix” is inevitable: criticism is always projective.

Along these lines, the author interprets “The Matrix” series as both a reflection of and a reaction to today’s (partly) dominant philosophy, which views the human being as a machine. The confrontation with this mechanistic vision-Machine as Ultimate Truth-does, however, come with an ethics that exalts pure possibility-our Need for Multiple Lives. This modern ethics, “you’ll never be what you’ll become”, also expresses itself aesthetically: everything is represented as different from what it appears to be.

1.

Zizek is absolutely correct when he says that The Matrix series is like a Rorschach test. He is so correct that he himself offers us a nice example of projection. In fact, he sees in these films an allegory of the contradictions and dead ends of the West’s political Left. He tells us,

[They] signal the antagonism of our late-capitalist social experience, antagonisms concerning basic ontological pairs like reality and pain [...], freedom and system.

“The failure of ‘cognitive mapping’” of Matrix Reloaded (the second episode of the series) “mirrors the sad predicament of today’s Left and its struggle against the System.” Zizek reads the dualism that informs the Wachowski brothers’ film-a virtual world dominated by machines, versus a real world of authentic human beings-along the lines of the classical dualism of Marxist thought: between the economic structure (the place of the real) and the political and cultural superstructure (the theater of shadows).

Zizek is clearly much more interested in the crisis of the West’s political Left than in other, say, more metaphysical questions, so that he sees this very Crisis in the Matrix-Rorschach. I don’t criticize him for this, of course. Although it’s true that he exposes the “lure, [the] trap to be avoided,” namely, that of seeing deep meanings in these films, it’s also true that he falls into this trap himself; but perhaps no one who comments upon or interprets a work can avoid doing so. Offering a critique always ultimately implies posing a self-critical question that has no answer: “Does what I see come from the work, or do I project it?” This problem obsesses not only critics, but also other professionals- psychoanalysts, for example. Yet this obsession cannot be cured once and for all. We can say that each generation of critics denounces “the projections” that earlier periods carried out with respect to the works of Plato, Dante, Shakespeare, Hölderlin, Hitchcock, The Beatles, etc., asserting that their own reading “reveals” something that, in these works, was really there. But, thank God, this game will never come to an end.

Thus I, too, like Zizek, will tenderly take the bait. I, too, will project my clever interpretations upon The

Matrix series, in the unending hope that my projections reveal, in part, what these films have projected.

2.

Zizek tells us that *The Matrix* was made for a public of idiots-that seeing it as an intelligent film is a mistake by the intellectuals. In other words, Zizek suggests that the metaphysical questions this film seems to raise are, in fact, stupid questions. Yet, I wonder if the questions that make up the plot of the Matrix series are stupid questions precisely because they are metaphysical. Isn't wondering, like Descartes or the Matrix, whether everything we experience is an illusion, whether we really are free or only determined by mechanisms of cause and effect, just wondering about stupid things? Of course, but I'd also say that, sooner or later, we're seduced by such questions.

In discussing photography, Roland Barthes wrote, "Flaubert was making fun of (but was he really making fun of?) Bouvard and Pécuchet, who wondered about the sky, the stars, the weather, life, the infinite etc." (Barthes 1980). Yet, says Barthes, photography-and for that matter cinema, I would add-raises these very questions: "questions that belong to the sphere of a 'stupid' or simple metaphysics (only the answers are complicated); probably the true metaphysics." We could remove Barthes' quotation marks from 'stupid' and say that true metaphysical questions-whether raised by popular films or philosophers-are by nature stupid. They are so also because the standard responses given to these questions are not simply complicated, as Barthes thought, but impossible.

If in the end it is metaphysical inquiry that brings together Zizek's idiot in Ljubljana with the philosopher Hilary Putnam when he speaks of "brains in a vat," is it then fair to take a squeamish distance from this stupidity? Or rather, is it better to admit that human beings, as metaphysical animals, are constitutionally destined to a certain stupidity? Perhaps the only difference between the sophisticated intellectual and the simple idiot who goes to see *The Matrix* is that the former is able to admit this unavoidable stupidity.

It ought to be noted that, like certain metaphysical questions, even many of the most famous works of art-those making up the Western Canon-are of interest to both idiots and geniuses. Although the Matrix films are not Dostojevskij, they put into play perplexities and worries that no one living at the beginning of the 21st century can escape, regardless of their level of education, since these are the questions of our time, and our time is neither stupid nor intelligent. It is our time, and nothing more.

There are two apparently contradictory ideas with which our period seems to be obsessed. The first might be called the machine as ultimate truth; and the second, the need for multiple lives. To the idea occupying an epistemological level, there corresponds another one on an ethical level. Let's first examine the former.

All of us today both love and abhor the Machine as truth of Being. Even those of us who indulge in spiritualism or phenomenology are presented with the challenge-at once philosophical and technological-of modern materialism. This is by no means the reassuring, sugar-coated Marxist or Freudian dialectical materialism; it's the official view of science today, which conceives of the real as essentially a machine. Basic science, i.e. physics, thus developed so-called classical mechanics, later followed by quantum mechanics-yet dealing always with mechanics. The aim of all serious science today is to show that everything in the world-including the deepest thoughts and the ineffable pangs of love-occurs by way of deterministic mechanisms. All of nature, including man, is a Bachelor Machine, to borrow the title of an exhibit on Duchamp (Clair 1975). The world is a giant cog that, unlike the mechanisms we have built, has no use. The world is a useless machine much like the devices made by the artist Jean Tinguely: enormous, complex, chaotic machinery that ceaselessly repeat the same movements but have absolutely no use-and in some cases are self-destructing. (Even for science the real is a Self-Destructing Machine-as the second principle of thermodynamics states).(1)

The thoughts and feelings of human beings are thus mechanisms that can be described by neurological processes. One need only leaf through the science and culture sections of the most popular newspapers to see that this is the message being communicated: in the end, we human subjects are machines. Julien de Lamettrie's 17th century *homme-machine* is now quite literally taking shape, thanks to new engineering techniques being applied to man and mind. The neurosciences-so highly praised today-relate even the most sophisticated mental processes to neural processes, which can be described as extended substance (to use Descartes' terms). Alan Turing's wager, since the 1930s, ultimately assimilates our thinking to a computer program. The only choice that mechanistic philosophy leaves us is whether we ought to consider ourselves

as neural machines of an exclusively biological nature, or as computational machines for which our brain is the hardware.

Today the idea of considering ourselves as machines no longer greatly disturbs-it tends instead to inspire our esthetic sense. Recently in Italy there was an ad campaign in which handsome men and women-with whom viewers were intended to identify-"fill up" their brains with gas. On the side of their heads was a whole, just as on a car, with a gas nozzle filling them up. To paraphrase the title of a book by Mario Perniola (1994), the ad exploited the sex appeal of the inorganic machine.

Even Spielberg made a melancholic hero out of a robot-the child-machine, David-in A.I. (2001), a rather unsuccessful film in which anthropomorphic machines take the place of persecuted and oppressed minorities, the underclass: an ever-present role in any politically well-thought film. Yet it is clear that in asking us to sympathize with the sad lot of the small robot David-the Pinocchio of the electronic age-Spielberg tries to reconcile us to the idea that we ourselves, in the end, are machines: what's important is not even that we are thinking machines, but that we are machines that suffer and take pleasure. It's the final reconciliation between materialism and sentimentalism.

I think that *The Matrix*-whose special effects are often more crude than those in *Star Wars*-has broken box office records because it takes seriously the metaphysics that fascinates and repulses us, and that in any event is currently dominant: that the real and people are machines. This science fiction thriller, as Zizek saw, is modeled on the most venerable myth in western philosophy: Plato's cave. As in Plato's allegory, human beings in the world of *The Matrix* (apart from the few enlightened rebels) take the shadows on the back of the cave for reality-and the true reality is the machine.

However, it would be mistaken to read *The Matrix* as an anti-technology apology of the kind, "We built the machines to serve us, but now it is we who serve the machines!" The Machine that feeds off human life, constraining it to a blessed but stupid virtual existence, is not the Hegelian servant who has now become master; rather, it's the image of what is, for mechanistic philosophy, the ultimate truth, even as concerns human beings. It recalls certain ultra-Darwinist theories, today quite popular, according to which living beings do not seek to advance their own individual or phenotypic interests, but rather obey-like a puppet on invisible strings-their own genotype.(2) The true egoist-the real subject-is not the individual human being, but the gene, that is to say, a small protein machine that counts only to the extent it reproduces-just like Smith, the agent of the Matrix, who replicates himself out of all proportion. If some human beings are altruistic, good, benevolent, heroic, it's because a selfish gene controls them.

This joining of the mechanical with the biological-the esthetic conjunction between the electronic universe and biotechnologies-takes on a specific iconographic form in *Matrix Revolutions*: the machines that attack Zion look like horrifying GMOs. The seemingly infinite number of machines draws to mind the floods of invading trolls in *The Lord of the Rings*-in short, they conjoin medieval horrors with the anxiety of the electronic age. These soldier-machines are like swarms of spermatozoa, great metallic frogs, or "bad squid-like machines" as Zizek says. These aggressive machines have none of the bright and shiny wrappings of the hi-tech; they instead recall the old scrap-iron constructions of Jean Tinguely, or Niki de Saint Phalle's puppets: reproduction of the machines creates new techno-zoological species, whose ugliness equates to their dominance. Often, in popular films, when the machine becomes aggressive it loses its neutral design only to reveal the old underlying machinery, resembling the paleo-industrial objects of 1960's Italian *Arte Povera*. In other words, once the smooth, post-industrial skin has been peeled off the electronic machine, it is unmasked as a machine, thus uncover its paleo-industrial skeleton, the ugliness of the toothed gears gone to rust.

The Matrix has been making money hands over fist because it depicts a rebellion, at once ethical and epistemological, against the Machine as the ultimate truth of Being. But from a Cartesian perspective, this rebellion is uncertain (as Zizek rightly notes): there always arises the doubt that the rebellion of human free will against the Machine is part of the Machine itself, an outcome it has already foreseen-the doubt that the war of Freedom against Determinism is actually a conflict internal to Determinism itself.

When, in the final duel of *Matrix Revolutions*, the bad guy, Smith, says to Neo, the chosen one, "Why do you keep on fighting? Don't you understand that the program can't be beaten?" Neo answers, "I fight because I've chosen to." On the surface it seems to be a classic Cartesian confrontation between the determined world-machine and the freedom of the rational mind that chooses and decides. Yet, might not

this freedom be a corollary, a foreseeable implication, a sub-directory of the Machine? Indeed, Neo is only able to defeat Smith by making him acknowledge that the Program has already programmed his end (but then also, by implication, Neo's choice of fighting): to the extent that Smith acknowledges the complete determination of his destiny, he finally fulfills that very destiny. Does anyone here recall Oedipus Rex?

4.

In a parallel though opposite way, people today have, in addition to this dubious epistemological certainty, an uncontrollable ethical passion: everyone wants more lives. Not only do we want more life, i.e. to live longer-this was so even in the past-but we also want to realize our possible lives. One happy life isn't enough for us: we want many lives, even if some of them are unhappy.

Zizek reveals a contradiction in *The Matrix* when it becomes clear that the "desert of the Real" of the human beings of Zion has itself many of the features of a virtual world. Yet I wonder if this contradiction is not in fact a characteristic of today's art in general, to the extent that it puts our ethical ideal on stage. That is, I wonder whether the artworks today that best depict our time are not those seeking to represent our life, every life, as one possible, yet always revocable, life. Convinced of the alleged epistemological truth according to which we are all machines, we retain the privilege of being versatile, flexible, masterful machines, to the extent they are virtual. Just as in classical ethics, it is no longer a question of contrasting an apparent life to a real one. The imaginary has become virtual, i.e. potentially real. The Aristotelian dynamis-the being-in-power-has come back into favor. Today, the real human virtue is in being virtual, that is, in keeping open the possibility of being something else, despite one's own actuality and reality. Zizek writes:

Neo offers to humanity the experience of the universe as the playground in which we can play a multitude of games, freely passing from one to another.

But not only Neo offers this: it is the ideal of existence tout court at the start of the 2000 Century.

The desire of keeping the possible actual-relativizing the realization of the individual possibility-probably explains the great success of Herman Hesse's *Siddharta* among young people: *Siddharta* is in fact a character who goes through different identities, each one completely different from and in sharp contrast to the others, settling on one particular form of life only at the end. The post-modern condition rejects stable identity in favor of *virtus*, the power to change identity at will.

On an aesthetic level, we are now in fact leaving the period of the avant-garde arts that dominated the twentieth century. But what kind of art are we moving toward? The avant-gardism of the past century was based on a clear separation between elite (valuable) art and kitsch products for the masses (rarely valuable)-I wonder whether this division, which is more sociological than aesthetic, and so typical of the modernist aristocracies of the twentieth century, is not now waning. That is, I wonder whether the art of the masses (like *The Matrix*) and its more refined forms-in film, one example would be the works of Cronenberg that deal with similar nightmares-are not today essentially converging(3) in place of the classical opposition between the imaginary (false) and the real (true), both of them substitute a kind of colonization of the real by possibility.

In my view, this idea that we must consider our life as a plurality in actu found its cinematographic Manifesto in P. Howitt's *Sliding Doors* (1998) with Gwyneth Paltrow. In the film there are two parallel stories that are alternately presented and developed, yet which never intersect: film A shows the scenario of the beautiful protagonist who just misses her train one day in the London underground; film B shows the story of the same protagonist who instead catches her train. Paltrow's destinies turn out to be radically different in each scenario: they actualize two possible lives. It's to some extent the same dichotomy used in *The Matrix*, with the difference that while *The Matrix* contrasts-in the most classical Platonic tradition-a virtual (illusory) life with a real (authentic) life, *Sliding Doors* in this respect is much closer to the ancient Sophists, avoiding as it does any hierarchical distinction between the two lives: both are presented to us as completely real-or rather, as completely imaginary, if one prefers. The film, in short, reinterprets the famous slogan of modern theories of chaos and complexity: "The beating of a butterfly's wing in Japan can cause a tornado in Texas." Paltrow's two divergent lives are the result of the smallest differences: the closing of a train door, two seconds earlier or later.

However, what seems to me more important in this film-paradigm is that no criteria are proposed for judging

one life as being better than the other: it doesn't pronounce any final meaning. The film does not advance any moral view; it does not suggest any rules. Life A at first seems sad, while life B appears decidedly happier, but, in fact, in B Paltrow dies, while in A she survives and falls in love...No trace of an indication, either immanent or transcendent, favoring one life over the other—a disenchanted equidistance between possibilities that not even *The Matrix* dares assume.

Actually, Žižek criticized the idea that films and novels today recounting unusual alternative stories are something new. *Sliding Doors* is no different than classic films like Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*, for example. "The usual lesson of alternative history films—writes Žižek—is either that choices don't matter or, more typically, that any intervention in, or alteration to, history inevitably produces a catastrophic result. It is precisely through the representation of history as a realm of infinite possibility and permutation that the ideological fantasy of a naturalistic course to the latter is reproduced" (Žižek & Daly 2003, p. 103). Now, what Žižek says is true of less modern films like *It's a Wonderful Life*, wherein an angel intervenes in the protagonist's attempted suicide, allowing him to see what his small town would have been like had he not lived there: everyone would have been worse off than they actually are. What we have here is a counterfactual demonstration (if...then...) which aims at reconciling the protagonist with his reality which appears, in the end, the best possible—or the least bad. But it is precisely with films like *Sliding Doors* or *Mulholland Drive*(4), that the distinction between imaginary life and the real fails, and a radical uncertainty between virtual and real is created. Obviously, we are dealing with an ideal, and not with a reality: our everyday lives continue to be one-directional and irreversible. But it would be wrong to think that this "ideal" leaves no mark in the history and actual lives of today's men and women. The fundamental difference with respect to similar films from the past is that today, both art and the work market (the well-know work mobility) continually remind us of the following: "don't identify too much with your actual life! Remember that there is always a distance, a gap, between what you are and your life, which could be other than this one".

5.

Yet it would be useless to anathematize in the "Frankfurt manner" this art of equipossibility, since it would leave us with doubts over the real and illusory: in fact, it reveals an important change in subjectivity that today tends to be increasingly conceived as an horizon of pure possibility. The magic of the virtual is, in the end, an allegory: every subject today tends to think of him or herself as perpetually open to all possibilities. It's not by chance that the "American way of life"—where changing jobs frequently, and hence one's identity, is seen as a sign of success and freedom, and not as a sign of failure as it's seen in Europe—is today proposed as the existential ideal of the 21st century. The modern subject could borrow a title from Pirandello's work, defining himself as "One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand".

I've presented examples from cinema, but there are analoga in the other arts. For example, in architecture: I'm struck by the tendency in recent years of turning architecture into a figurative art, of conceiving the building as the image of a natural being. It's as if architecture were also seeking to become a sculptural reproduction of the natural world. That is, the building is a building, but also something else: a hyperbolic representation of realities that differ from the building itself. Everything tends to be different from what it actually is: it functions in parallel contexts as another thing. It's as if the arts today were placing themselves at the service of the great Decision of modern man and woman: not to consider anything as irreversible. To jump from one life to another, just as an electron jumps—without a continuous solution—from one atomic orbit to another. *Matrix* (imaginarily) makes this dream, which is at once ethical and esthetic, true.

And death?

It's as if modern subjectivity were leaving behind the modernist essential rule, Nietzsche's "Become who you are," in order to adopt a "2000ish" one: "you'll never be what you'll become."

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Notes:

1 Obviously, the theory of entropy-that is, the total disorder that makes up the final death of the cosmos-does not contradict this mechanism: it says that the universe is a machine that degenerates.

2 I'm referring here in particular to the theses of sociobiologists and of Richard Dawkins, cf. S. Benvenuto (1999).

3 A sophisticated version of this occurrence is Ozon's recent film *Swimming Pool*. In the film, the doubt is never resolved over whether the story, in which the main character is a writer of thriller novels, is true or yet another novel that she wrote and later published. It apparently deals with an old modernist theme: the difference between the real and the imaginary vanishes in the preeminence of language. Twentieth century modernism, in the end, celebrated the fictional character of art, with language bringing it to light. But what turns out here to be post-modern-or perhaps post-postmodern-is that the real events presented in the film are related back to their pure possibility: it's possible that they were real events, and it is in the end this possibility that matters.

4 By David Lynch, 2001.