

Perspectives



What Story Do We Live In?

I am bothered by the *Matrix* phenomenon. To be sure, I saw *The Matrix* on a 747 somewhere high over Africa in the middle of the night, so maybe I didn't give it a fair chance. Besides, it wasn't the movie itself that troubles me as much as the "inflamed pseudo-philosophy"* that it has generated. A surprising number of people (mostly young), even those who sometimes converse with a hopelessly unhip person like me, seem to find the movie terribly profound and to regard its premise (that the world doesn't actually exist, being only a form of virtual reality contrived to keep us subservient to the Machines) at least as plausible as, say, the notions of reality found in Genesis 1 or Stephen Hawking. So, what story do we live in? What story do we *want* to live in? Does it matter?

Even though I am probably now succumbing to that which provides Ebert so much amusement, namely, "becoming an expert in the deep meaning of shallow pop mythology," I think the story we choose to live in *does* matter. I wish people who are enchanted by *The Matrix*—that is, as something more than just a piece of science-fiction, special-effects entertainment—could find their way into a better story.

Or is there a choice? To the degree that for many, especially the young, popular culture *is* culture (see Bruce Forbes's article in this issue), do they actually choose its conspiratorial/dualistic/paranoid/violent worldview, or is that simply as real to them (and as unquestioned and unseen) as the air they breathe?

None of us can simply choose to withdraw altogether from the culture and the worldview in which we live ("Let's see, I don't think I'll be affected by my cultural environment this afternoon")—nor should we rigorously seek to do so. At a minimum, we need to understand it in order properly to read the audience for the Christian story we would like to tell. But, more than that, we need to hear its sometimes legitimate reflection of or prophetic challenge to the "real" world of the evening news. Those of us with a robust doctrine of creation will even have to wonder what God might be doing out there in the cacophonous culture of the media and the megamall.

Still, as bearers of the Christian story, we do have another world to present. Personally, I have little interest in offering an "alternative world" (an increasingly popular term in the language of worship and preaching), unless that world is real and not mere metaphor. What is the value in exchanging one form of virtual reality for another? True, one envisioned world might be arguably aesthetically or ethically superior to another, but is that enough? Is that a faith to proclaim? If, finally,

*The term is Roger Ebert's, commenting on *The Matrix* in his review of *The Matrix Reloaded*, online at http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/2003/05/051401.html [cited 15 May 2003].

there *is* no other reality than virtual, then it will be hard to convince people not to go with the folks who offer the best special effects.

Worst-case scenario: that we present a “Christian” story that is simply a competing form of the dualistic, fear-motivated story of the popular media. Yes, the Bible takes sin and evil with utmost seriousness, and so must we, and there comes with that an inevitable element of dualism—but always a dualism profoundly limited by the confession of a God besides whom “there is no other” (Isa 45:6) and who, in the beginning, saw all creation as “very good” (Gen 1:31). Dualism is even more radically undermined by the story of a God who enters that creation not, at last, in the form of a warrior but of a servant. Now, *that’s* a different story, one about which we might be willing to say, with Tertullian, sufficiently other—even sufficiently absurd—to be true.

But so is *The Matrix* absurd, so an appeal to absurdity will not finally do. We need to tell not just a different story, but a better one—better because it produces fuller, more peaceful, and more compassionate lives; better not only for me but, to the degree that I reflect it, for my neighbor; better because it is able to converse more fully with all we know from whatever source; better because it is more fully in the spirit of Jesus; better because it prepares us more fully to live in the ambiguities of a complex world; better, in short, because it is true. We will not prove its truth, but we’d better be able to demonstrate its truth. And we’d better be able to tell it in a way that can outdo *The Matrix*—not by exploiting the virtual special effects of cinema, but by incorporating the real and astonishing special effects of creation, redemption, and human transformation.

The story we live in matters—to us and to the world. But, of course, no one can live in a story that they do not know. Most of us have little difficulty in telling our neighbors about a “great movie” that they simply “must see.” Many of us are considerably more reticent about telling those same neighbors about a great story that they simply must hear. The “must” in that sentence is not a threat—if so, we’re back in the wrong story—it’s invitation all the way, to a story always new and ever waiting to be told.

F. J. G.

Word & World mourns the untimely death of two friends, colleagues, and contributors. We will miss their wise counsel and faithful support.

Donald H. Juel †February 22, 2003
Timothy F. Lull †May 20, 2003

“Blessed are those who from now on die in the Lord.” (Rev 14:13)