

# ***The Matrix* and the Subversion of *Wu xia*: Reasserting the Hollywood Ideological Hegemony**

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## **Introduction**

*The Matrix* trilogy (1999; 2003) provides a tantalising glimpse into the process through which digital augmentation of the visual dimension of film becomes capable of producing a globalised cinematic vocabulary of *wu xia pian* (Chinese "sword-fighting films", literally, or "martial arts films" -- in the context of this paper, *wu xia pian* will refer to both sword-fighting and kung fu films). The trilogy does this through its explicit referencing of martial arts films in general, together with Asian philosophies of the nature of reality, packaging these in the ultra-fashionable garb of cutting-edge technical innovation, thus allowing some of the visual qualities of these martial arts films to appeal to a wide audience, a "globalised" audience not necessarily familiar with the conventions of that genre *per se*. Undercutting this creation of a globalised, digital-image *wu xia* vocabulary, however, and so jettisoning from the trilogy its sensitivity to its Asian philosophical influences, is a retrogressive insistence on the cliché of the renegade, individualistic, male hero whose ultimate desire for self-sacrifice serves to elevate him to the status of a divine martyr, thus privileging Judeo-Christian attitudes towards the self and its fundamental importance to the (Western) world view.

This paper will explore the ways in which *The Matrix* trilogy borrows from *wu xia* films, to create a visual style seemingly informed by influences from around the globe, only finally to subvert its globalising tendencies in order to reassert an ideology quite common in films produced in Hollywood, an ideology which highlights the Western individual as a universal redeemer. This paper will approach its project utilising a comparative analysis of the moments of intersection between *The Matrix* Trilogy and the world of *wu xia pian*, incorporating a consideration of the similarities in characterisation, plot, and narrative style that run between these two "categories" of cinematic art. Throughout this paper, I will make use of the visual substance of the films under consideration; it is in their visual textures that *The Matrix* Trilogy and the *wu xia* films I discuss harbour their most compelling points of both distinction and similarity. These visual elements, also, however, construct and sustain the differing thematic and philosophical dimensions of the trilogy.

I will start by situating critical views of *The Matrix* trilogy to examine ways in which its flirtations with philosophy and adaptations of the conventions of science fiction locate it within a particular branch of the dystopic science fiction tradition. This act of situation will also engage some of the political assumptions which the trilogy makes -- about race, gender, and the posthuman aspects of the function of technology in the trilogy's settings, for example -- but only as a preface to a more fundamental issue with which the trilogy deals, the relationship between the hero and the ensemble -- the individual and the group. This issue is of central importance throughout both the trilogy and this paper, for it is through the

treatment and presentation of the hero that the trilogy not only signals its relationship to martial arts films, but also demonstrates its radical difference from those films. From this discussion of the hero, I will move into a discussion of the nature of *wu xia*, or "swordfighting", and kung fu films from China and Hong Kong, to situate those types of film within a tradition both literary/cultural, and philosophical. From here, and building on the idea of the hero/ensemble binary, the discussion will move to the area of embodiment, another key issue in which the trilogy makes a break from the martial arts films from which in many ways it has borrowed. The notion of embodiment stands as a very clear distinction between the trilogy and martial arts films, and serves as an indicator of a differing philosophical attitude toward the nature of the self, an attitude which is ideological and hegemonic. It is with a discussion of this attitudinal difference that my paper will end.

### **What is *The Matrix*?**

The first of the three films making up *The Matrix* trilogy was released in 1999, and quickly attracted critical praise and large audiences for its computer-enhanced, cinematographic innovations, highly choreographed action sequences, and blending of cultural theories with philosophy and science fiction. The two other films were both released in 2003, six months apart -- filmed simultaneously, this too marked an innovation on the part of the producers, but, for diverse reasons, the highly-anticipated sequels received less critical praise than the first instalment. A complete summation of the plots of the three films is not necessary here; it is enough to describe the essential story line, which centres on a group of rebels who have discovered that the human race exists in a state of unconscious enslavement, living as perpetually comatose sources of power for a population of machines which maintain a computer-generated artificial reality projected into the thoughts of the sleeping humans, the so-called "Matrix" of created "reality". Through the self-sacrifice of a saviour, "The One", whose coming has been foretold and who will lead the awakened few out of Zion, the rebel stronghold attempt to reclaim the "real" world for all of humanity. They wage terrible battle with their machine foe, a battle in which they are doomed to fail, until "The One", through his self-sacrifice, convinces the machines to release certain humans from bondage, leaving each individual the responsibility of choosing his or her reality.

This highly-schematic plot description alone is enough to situate *The Matrix* trilogy within a long line of "rebellion" films, stretching from such early classics as the *Zorro* films (for example, Fred Niblo's *Mark of Zorro* from 1920, remade in 1940 by Rouben Mamoulian), to the epic *Spartacus* (1960), up to relatively light science-fiction fare such as the *Aeon Flux* television series on MTV (1995), passing through *Star Wars* (1977) along the way. *The Matrix* trilogy also locates itself within a tradition of class- and race-discourse that privileges capitalist/humanist, predominantly "white" values -- as Laura Bartlett and Thomas Byers have it, *The Matrix* trilogy "bears a significant relation to any number of Hollywood films about bourgeois-liberal heroes who must save their communities" (Bartlett and Byers 2003: 36), such heroes typically being male and Caucasian. Lisa Nakamura amplifies this when she asserts that the trilogy is "especially invested in addressing whiteness as a racial formation with its own visual culture and machine aesthetics; its own mode of appearing and embodiment in the visual field of new media and cinema" (Nakamura 2005: 126). Nakamura argues that, through its inclusion of many African-American characters in positions of authority within the rebel organisation -- most obviously in the character of Morpheus, who "awakens" Neo, the protagonist and saviour-figure, to his identity as "The One" -- the trilogy utilises "African-American authenticity as racialised subjects [?] made to represent a kind of antidote or solution to the problem of machine culture which specialises in reproducing white

masculine privilege" (Nakamura 2005: 126-7). But this reading of the film is in contrast to that put forth by Jason Haslam, who argues that an appropriate understanding of the films comes "through a specific analysis of the [trilogy]'s allusions to and images of African Americans and African-American discursive traditions, all of which seem to point to an explicit critique of American racism and white power, only to be undercut by the main plot concerning Neo" (Haslam 2005: 95). In fact, I argue that both of these assertions are correct. Nakamura's, however, doesn't go far enough into the substance of the film's characters, and while she is right to focus on the protagonist's confrontation with the designer of *The Matrix*, the Architect, as a moment of potential rejection of "the alliance between race, gender, and power" (Nakamura 2005: 127), she overlooks the reverence with which the other characters, of whichever race, look upon Neo as a (white) saviour.

While these assessments of *The Matrix* trilogy's ideological rejection of a potentially non-racialised response to technological dystopia are essentially correct, I propose that what the trilogy truly rejects is the non-Western attitude toward the relationship between "self" and "reality" it initially introduces as valid; what it truly resurrects is a Judeo-Christian insistence on the nature and function of a messiah. Indeed, as Paul Fontana argues, "anyone with a religious background can notice some of the more obvious Biblical parallels in *The Matrix* [?] The theology of *The Matrix* is informed by the concerns of apocalyptic expectation characteristic of [the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries], specifically hope for messianic deliverance and establishment of the Kingdom of God" (Fontana 2003: 160-1) This expectation of a messiah-figure, the quintessential "hero" who embodies masculine, individuated subjectivity, is related to an issue with which Bartlett and Byers continue their critique, that of the significance of class relations within the trilogy. They see the trilogy (at least ostensibly) as presenting a view of a vanguard, a "revolutionary cell, living collectively and trying to bring down an oppressive system that enslaves and exploits the common citizen for its own ends" (Bartlett and Byers 2003: 32). As they point out, however, ultimately the film rejects the primacy of collective struggle in favour of a reliance on "The One", the "chosen" individual -- "the triumph of [the rebel] band depends on a fantasy whose affinities are more fascist than socialist: the fantasy of the coming of a single, superior, 'chosen' strong leader" (Bartlett and Byers 2003: 34). This leader not only reinscribes *class* values into the "new world", but also religious values, as well, and a hope for restoration, for Revelation, for things not "as they were, but [?] as they are meant to be [?] The eschatological hope for restoration is for *radical newness*" (Fontana 2003: 181) and for a restoration of meaning. This meaning, Paul Fontana argues, comes through a reminder "that there is another possibility, that by "freeing our minds" we can become spiritually enlightened" (Fontana 2003: 182) to the Judeo-Christian reality which *The Matrix* "subtly but unmistakably" (Fontana 2003: 161) makes attractive through its technological innovation, cinematic style, and "character allegory" (Fontana 2003: 161).

This character allegory works well to reinscribe race values, as well, as Haslam points out when he asks, "does *The Matrix* truly offer a radical critique of enlightenment subjectivity, or does it simply reproduce dominant ontological biases, specifically surrounding gender and race?" (Haslam 2005: 93). In that *The Matrix* presents specifically-racialised characters and settings, such as the Oracle and her apartment, as well as Zion with its "tribal" motifs, which ultimately serve only to support and centralise a white male hero, it is not difficult to find an answer to this question. The question itself, however, is coded as involving only black and white America, and therefore overlooks one of the motivating influences of the trilogy's ideological movement, away from its martial-arts progenitors and back to Hollywood's more familiar territory.

## Ideology and the Body of the Hero

The ideology of *The Matrix* enacts itself upon the body of the hero, Neo, "The One" who is predestined to effect the overthrow of the machine world, but this hero's body, male, individual, and white, functions as more than a reassertion of Hollywood racial discourse -- it also signals the boundaries of the human and the posthuman in the trilogy, and functions as a reminder of the role of human embodiment in ideology itself. The issue of the posthuman serves as a worthwhile starting point for discussions of the philosophical reversal present in the trilogy, for it directly addresses the issue of embodiment which is so central to both *The Matrix* and to its roots in Chinese martial arts films. While the posthuman permits *The Matrix* trilogy to flirt with notions of an expanded definition of "the human", and thus opens the possibility of a view of reality capable of transcending an immanent entrapment within corporeality, as I'll show, ultimately the trilogy rejects this possibility in order to revert to a familiar grounding in embodied "reality". This rejection will become a significant difference between *The Matrix* and the world of *wu xia* films which -- while not concerned with a technologically "posthuman" world -- are predicated upon a transcendence of the corporeal.

The term "posthuman" is one which N. Katherine Hayles uses most eloquently among her writings in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (1999). This term indicates an attitude towards science and humanity, which sees human beings as evolutionarily dependent upon technology. In the posthuman view, human beings have always used tools to enhance their bodies and improve upon the functions of their minds as devices which gather and manipulate information; thus, humans have always, to a greater or lesser extent, existed in some relationship to machines which, ultimately, come to be seen as not separate from humanity itself (Hayles 1999: 2-3). The human and the machine have always been fused and interdependent -- the human body is nothing more than a receptacle for the information-gathering function of the mind, which itself is not the source of human consciousness but one aspect of the human-environmental system which, as an entirety, produces consciousness. In this way the human body is seen as nothing more than an organic "prosthesis" which the mind uses as part of a distributed-cognition system (Hayles 1999: 2). Bartlett and Byers build on this conception of the human as an amalgam of organic and machine components; they apply this term to *The Matrix* trilogy to suggest that "*The Matrix* places posthuman subjects at the centre of its action and flirts with a theoretical postmodernism only to reject the posthumanist configuration of subjectivity in favour of resurrecting a neo-Romantic version of the liberal-humanist subject" (Bartlett and Byers 2003: 30) in which the traditional view of an organic, individuated subjectivity receives primacy. The primacy of this individuated, organic subjectivity argues the primacy of human embodiment as the site of reality's origins, but through this, as I will show, *The Matrix* trilogy both approaches and deviates from some of the philosophical roots from which, initially, it appears to spring. *The Matrix* specifically presents the body as illusory, as inhabiting a world created by the mind, a world from which the subject can "wake up" and so perceive the "true reality" of his situation. This notion of awakening points to transcendence, and transcendence points to spirituality. It is here that the foundational issues of *The Matrix* trilogy lie, within the specific codings of the body as, on the one hand, virtuosically corporeal, and on the other, illusory. Within this split and the ways in which *The Matrix* views it we have the subtle though central movement of the trilogy's influences and goals, from a Buddhist appreciation of the interconnectedness of all things and the illusory nature of individuation, toward a Catholic Christianity, with its insistence on the importance of the self-sacrificing martyr as saviour, grounded in an objective "reality" infused with "truth." This movement comes from the trilogy's handling of the body as both illusory and also existing *in fact*, as simultaneously

a fantasy and substratum grounded in an objective reality. But this conception of the body as illusory and as inhabiting a reality the laws of which can be bent by an enlightened hero is one also found in *wu xia* films -- and in *wu xia* we also find an attitude toward embodiment and the hero that are productive for a critique of *The Matrix*.

### **What is *Wu xia*? Situating *The Matrix* in Relation to Martial Arts Films**

While *The Matrix* revels in a computer-graphics-augmented display of corporeal virtuosity (creating an "almost surreal state of extremity" [North 2005: 52]), on the one hand, and dense visuality on the other -- layering references to a myriad of styles, genres, and precedents within a complex package that calls attention to its own artificial qualities through its very complexity -- this revelry serves to seduce the viewer into an intimacy with the films' underlying agenda which is anything but simple or innocent. The multi-layered allusions to and quotations from other films and genres signal *The Matrix* trilogy's cinephilia in no uncertain terms, and this apparent respectful citation of earlier films goes far in facilitating the viewer's entry into the world of the trilogy, in effect duplicating in the viewer the process of living in a simulated environment that is the lot of the trilogy's characters. It is not my intention here to enter into a critique or explication of the films' flirtation with philosophy, except to show how such philosophical flirtation serves to subvert an initially Asian-inspired conception of the nature of reality as illusory, and a corresponding conception of the "hero" as an enlightened being who through his understanding of the essential unity of existence and the physical laws of nature is able to manipulate and utilise those laws for his transcendent purposes. This is a type of hero character whom we find frequently in Chinese martial arts films, and it is the influences and conventions of this genre, *wu xia pian* or martial arts films from Hong Kong in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, that inform much of the visual and philosophical appeal of *The Matrix* trilogy. However, the term "hero" is problematic in martial arts films, where he is typically only part of an ensemble. This positioning of the protagonist within a group of allies does much to separate *wu xia* films from *The Matrix*, but also provides a ground on which to criticise *The Matrix* trilogy's insistence on a hegemonic valorisation of the figure of the individual.

Before I speak about the ways in which it is possible in *The Matrix* to see a conscious borrowing from plot elements of "typical" *wu xia* or martial arts films, I'll speak about what goes in to making a martial arts film in general. There are a number of features, of course, but the most obvious of these is the presence of the martial arts themselves, specifically kung fu or other Chinese physical combat forms. These films grow out of a long tradition of "sword-fighting" (*wu xia*) fiction in pre-modern and early-modern Chinese literature, a tradition which has produced conventions and tropes which carry over into cinema. These include the settings (typically in the palaces and markets of pre-modern Chinese dynastic cities), heroes (typically presented as types rather than as psychologically well-defined characters, but always virtuous and respectful of the common people and their values), and an awareness of Chinese philosophical principles from (usually) Daoism and Buddhism. I'll return to these elements later on, but for now, it's worth noting that a typical *wu xia* hero has had life-long training in a wide range of combat styles, learned from a father or uncle, and in Chinese herbal medicines through which he may make a living as an herbalist. Poetry is also important and the *wu xia* hero is capable of reciting poetry at the height of battle. Further, the role of relativist philosophy is key, which teaches him about his place in the cosmic scheme (and typically gives him occult understanding of the principles of Heaven, which allows him to "walk" on air, fly, dodge arrows with incredible deftness, etc.).

Many of the most explicit similarities between *The Matrix* trilogy and the *wu xia* films come in the figure of the initially reluctant hero battling an unjust and oppressive regime on behalf of a subjugated people, but of course this plot line is by no means unique to the martial arts genre, nor unique to Asian films in general. While films like *Once Upon a Time in China* (Wong Fei Hung, 1991), *Magnificent Warriors* (Zhong hua zhan shi, 1987), *The Shaolin Temple* (Shao lin tzu, 1982), or *Iron Monkey* (Siu nin Wong Fei Hung ji Tit Ma Lau, 1993) offer plots of this nature, they owe much to earlier Western films such as *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) or *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1934). What we have in both the martial arts film paradigm and *The Matrix* trilogy is a typical clash between Good and Evil, structurally a quest romance in which a Hero encounters along the way helpers and deceivers, arriving at the site of his own redemption through an ultimate struggle between a nemesis representative of oppression and darkness. That the typical quest romance is an allegory of Christian triumph is pertinent in the context of *The Matrix*, for this trilogy ultimately resolves its moral crisis in a re-emphasis of the sanctity of a Judeo-Christian saviour, embodied in the figure of Neo explicitly crucified on the altar of a mechanised antagonist. It is within this reassertion of a Judeo-Christian valorisation of the lone, self-sacrificial saviour, that *The Matrix* most resoundingly "betrays" its Asian philosophical roots and influences, subverting the process whereby the *wu xia pian* ensemble achieves righteous vengeance. In *The Matrix* this in the end fails to solve the very conceit upon which the plot had built itself -- the subjugation and entrapment of the human race within a computer-generated, artificial reality as chattel forced to endure a false consciousness. *The Matrix* presents itself as subversive of an understanding of reality as "a rock-solid, axiomatic basis to support our knowledge and values" (Weberman 2002: 226) only, finally, to reassert that understanding through its insistence on the role of Neo as a saviour for human kind from its false consciousness.

In this sense, its subversion is very different from that found in *wu xia pian*, where the hero and his ensemble help to overthrow forces of oppression. Bhaskar Sarkar argues that "the mythic figure of the *xia* or wandering swordsman is inherently subversive [evincing] a contingent, provisional sense of justice and often [coming] into conflict with the law and the regime" (Sarkar 2001: 164). It is precisely this clash between the hero and the regime which highlights the illegitimacy of the figures of authority who, typically, are corrupt, concerned with their own power, and ignorant of the plight of their subjugated wards. In this regard the "wandering swordsman" is a subversive figure -- but what he subverts is not a model of government or figure of authority which has a legitimate mandate to govern. This is precisely the situation that elicits the greatest sympathy amongst the audience of *wu xia* and serves the greatest purpose for this genre: to reassure and reestablish within the audience a sense of justice, righteousness, and Heaven-mandated propriety that the weak should have a protector. This "wandering swordsman" however is not alone -- he operates with a group, and in fact his success is typically predicated upon his willingness to accept assistance from within the victimised population. In this way *wu xia pian* resists the aggrandisement of the lone hero -- the projection of the "saviour complex" which typifies Western conceptions of the hero figure as one whose self-sacrifice or insistently individual toil is necessary to achieve the goal for which he strives.

### **Character Ensembles in Martial Arts Films**

A representative example of the *wu xia* ensemble structure is *Iron Monkey* (Siu nin Wong Fei Hung ji Tit Ma Lau, 1993) in which a Robin Hood-like outlaw steals from corrupt officials, distributing stolen money to the wretched and the poor who truly deserve it. Iron Monkey, as the thief is known throughout the city, is in reality an herbalist and skilled physician who

treats poor patients for free but who charges his wealthy clients much. Despite being hunted relentlessly by the local officials who seek to exploit their subjects, Iron Monkey pays no heed to his own safety or security, tirelessly protecting the weak and so earning the love and admiration of his fellow citizens. The plot involves another herbalist and martial arts master, Wong Kei-ying, who has been blackmailed by the city officials into hunting down Iron Monkey, but who comes to realise the righteousness of his "adversary's" mission -- the two end up fighting together (Wong Kei-ying even impersonates Iron Monkey) with Iron Monkey's sister, Miss Orchid, and Wong's son, Wong Fei-hung, himself a character of legend in the world of *wu xia pian* and kung fu for his founding of a school of martial arts. This ensemble successfully defeats the corrupt officials -- headed by a renegade Shaolin monk -- before parting as life-long friends.

*Iron Monkey* is certainly not a multi-million dollar blockbuster but it does feature numerous points of similarity with *The Matrix*, not the least of which are some of its visual conventions. Its opening contains obvious influences on the Wachowski brothers' conceptions of "Bullet Time," but also on the "look" of *The Matrix* trilogy's art direction -- its pallet leans towards the grey and sombre, its action scenes (in typical *wu xia* fashion) are presented in medium-long shot with an occasional close shot for emphasis -- and even on some specific fight sequences throughout the trilogy. For example, the opening fight between Iron Monkey and the local police is visually very close to the "Burly Brawl" sequence of *The Matrix Reloaded*, in which Neo battles an ever-increasing number of Agent Smiths. In *Iron Monkey*, the hero finds himself at the centre of a crowd of constabulary, from whom he escapes by twirling them away from himself. Soon after, he leaps over several Shaolin monks, standing in mid-air atop the head of one in a pose which is anticipatory of the pose which Trinity adopts at the beginning of *The Matrix*. This similarity between *Iron Monkey's* mise en scène and that of the "Burly Brawl" sequence in *The Matrix Reloaded* extends to several of the cinematic conventions of the martial arts film, as well, specifically some of the "authenticating strategies employed in kung fu films in order to re-synthesise the presence of the body, which is otherwise threatened by the technological mediation between a human body and the fighter on-screen" (North 2005: 59). These strategies are necessary to reassure the audience that they are watching in fact a "real" martial artist and not merely an actor; a film like *The Matrix* has need, too, of such authenticating strategies but for different reasons, for indeed thematically within "the Matrix", there can be no distinction between a "real" artist and a mere actor. However, as part of its acknowledgement of its indebtedness to martial arts films, the trilogy utilises many of the same cinematic techniques to provide a degree of reassurance -- "the authenticating technique Burly Brawl employs is [?] the 'one-by-one tracking shot', a technique of cinematic authentication through which a fighter is shown moving through a group of combatants in a continuous take" (North 2005: 59). Unlike in a "traditional" martial arts film such as *Iron Monkey*, however, which uses cinematic technique to heighten the appreciation of the physical techniques of the martial artists on screen, *The Matrix* provides "a profusion of textual exit points which offer the chance to observe the spectacle from a position that reveals its artificiality at the same time as it celebrates the seductive force of artifice" (North 2005: 60).

Beyond the similarities of framing, action sequences, and cinematic techniques apparent between *Iron Monkey* and *The Matrix* trilogy, many of the plot points are similar, too -- the presentation of an exploited citizenry who live to support a corrupt officialdom, held in line by violent overseers (this is the same situation we find in many martial arts films, such as *The Shaolin Temple*, for example, in which aged and decrepit slaves are forced to perform hard labour), the confrontation between the "hero" and a religious figure who has turned away

from the path of his religion (reminiscent of Neo's meeting with the Architect). While visually there are similarities between *Iron Monkey* and specific scenes from *The Matrix*, there are significant differences arising from the trilogy's persistent use of computer-graphics to enhance its cinematography. In fact, Dan North argues that the "profane use of digital imagery in the *Matrix* trilogy is precisely for the purposes of differentiation from the films to which it refers" (North 2005: 58). However outside of the visuality of these films, what is most important here is their different conception of the *function* of the hero; *Iron Monkey* does not seek to *sacrifice* himself, and does not operate alone. Throughout the film it is always clear that while he works selflessly for the downtrodden, his success is possible only through the cooperation of his sister. The final defeat of the corrupt officials comes through the combined efforts of *all* of the martial artists whose techniques in concert are necessary to overcome the forces of "evil". *Iron Monkey* himself resists any self-aggrandisement, keeping, as best he is able, his true identity a secret from his admiring beneficiaries.

### **Theorising the Hero in *The Matrix***

It is this resistance to self-aggrandisement which *The Matrix* trilogy most assuredly rejects: "the hero's natural and supernatural superiority go along with a certain disturbing sense of elitism and *droit de sieigneur*" (Bartlett and Byers 2003: 36). While Neo is initially reluctant, indeed highly so, to take on the mantle of "The One" which Morpheus faithfully assigns to him, the plot dynamic of the trilogy depends upon Neo's growing acceptance of and comfort with that mantle. Indeed, visually, the trilogy presents an inescapable identification of Neo with "The One", the Hero, throughout its six-hour length, but most obviously at the moment of Neo's self-sacrifice. Even in the first instalment the truth of Neo's identity as "The One" is never in question. The style of the film, utilising high-fashion costumes, slow-motion photography, and the technically innovative (though not conceptually original (Leary 2005)) "Bullet Time" sequences culminating in Neo's transcendent enlightenment, highlight Neo as a sanctified character, a "saviour" awaiting his moment of self-realisation but this moment leads to an acceptance of the uniquely individual *responsibility* inherent within a self-identity as divine, a responsibility for the salvation of the human race that is exclusively Neo's, exclusively the "property" of a chosen individual. *Wu xia pian* while presenting characters aware of their own social responsibilities, resists this notion of exclusivity as antithetical to the ensemble quality of the hero's struggle, to the equal awareness within the hero that his success is dependent upon the assistance of others, and the humility which arises from that knowledge.

But this self-aggrandisement of the hero in *The Matrix* trilogy is not surprising -- the problem is one of a messianic self-imagining that valorises the vanguard position of the self-sacrificing martyr/saviour, as exemplified by *The Matrix*'s Neo, "The One" and sole champion for whom all have been waiting, whose sacrifice leads to the eternal glorification of the memory of this One. This is Hollywood's own vision of its entitlement to the role of vanguard of progress. While content to present a vision of struggle, *The Matrix* trilogy's "subnarratives may highlight the problematic nature of Neo's and the AI's [Artificial Intelligence's] power, but neither Hollywood nor its revivification [?] of cyberpunk want to allow those politicised narratives to break through their own encoding" (Haslam 2005: 107) as specifically in need of a white, Western, male guardian. Neo abrogates the validity of an Asian-philosophical attitude toward reality, responsibility, and the nature of sacrifice in an ensemble, in favour of a Judeo-Christian attitude toward martyrdom which brings glory to the martyr. This abrogation centres itself in the body -- the body of the hero that denies here the role of the ensemble, the assistants whose own faith, sacrifice, and determination were

precisely what constituted the body of the hero as heroic. This embodiment of cultural attitude is central to both *The Matrix* trilogy and to *wu xia pian*, but, of course, in very different ways.

### **Embodiment, *The Matrix* and Martial Arts**

Embodiment and the fascination with the limits and potential of the human form are two of the key issues which unite *The Matrix* trilogy with its *wu xia pian* progenitors. This fascination with the limitations and potentialities of the human body finds its fullest expression in *The Matrix's* situation of that body within a completely artificial world; the body *as it is* is completely limited in reality, but within the artificial space, the simulacrum of the computer-regulated matrix, the body *as it is not* is completely capable of transcending every physical "law". This is a tidy adaptation of the underlying assumptions of Buddhistic/Daoistic-inspired martial arts films, which propose the body's limitations as arising from an illusory understanding of the world as "real", a reality which enlightenment reveals to be only a product of the mind's misperceptions. The "liberated", enlightened master -- "the ultimate swordsman who achieves enlightenment in the form of a transcendental aloofness from the baser human instincts" (Chan 2004: 11) -- who has acquired the skills of *qing gong*, or "lightness training," is able to transcend the limitations of his misperceiving mind and so is able to fly, pass through walls, become invisible, and perceive his unitary "oneness" with all of creation. It is not the place here to provide a detailed history or description of Buddhist practices to aid the disciple in transcending the limitations of his perceptions of reality, but -- and this is a highly simplified understanding of the processes involved -- a concentration on the repetition of physical actions, a process of meditation though praxis, is one of the methods adopted by martial artists to "empty" their actions of conscious interference, thus awakening their conscious minds to their own illusoriness. It is this practice in which Neo and Morpheus engage during the "training" episodes in the first *Matrix* film -- with the explicit goal of alerting Neo to the unreality of his corporeal form. As James Ford argues, the relationship between mental concentration -- meditation -- and physical training becomes metaphorical in the scenes of Neo's training with Morpheus. Neo's "mind is literally reprogrammed so that [?] he is able to enter the Matrix [?] with increasing powers of perception and control. In other words, the very process of Neo's training is a techno-cyber version of meditation" (Ford 2003: 138). Meditation here, in the guise of Neo's "physical" training by means of uploaded, computer-generated skills, demonstrates to him the need to "control the mind that so fundamentally distorts reality and imputes permanence and selfhood to things that are ultimately empty" (Ford 2003: 137). This training becomes the process whereby Neo realises the non-existence of his physical body and his ability to manipulate the physical world around him, itself only an illusion created by his mind, as an adept at Consciousness-only Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, or Daoism comes, in martial arts films, to be able to walk on air or bend metal. Through this process of Neo's training, the filmmakers present a conscious and indeed self-conscious adoption of a specifically Asian attitude toward embodiment, utilised to demonstrate diegetically the nature of the created "space" of the narrative. This adoption sets in motion a series of assumptions, however, of the nature of the *characters* who inhabit this space as capable of embodying the ideologies of the martial artist. These ideologies are deeply steeped in attitudes toward the self and its perceptual relationship with the surrounding world, an attitude manifested when Neo meets the children who, like him, have come to see the Oracle. One child, presented as an obvious reference to a Buddhist monk/child prodigy, demonstrates to Neo his ability to transform inanimate objects, prefacing his demonstration with the famous line, "You must not try to bend the spoon, that's impossible; but you must realise that there is no spoon, that it's your

mind which bends." This, together with Morpheus's query to Neo during their training episode, "Do you think that's air that you're breathing?" are the clearest signals of *The Matrix's* self-aware adoption of an Asian attitude toward the situation of the body within a "reality" postulated as illusory.

### **Philosophically-Informed Differences: Towards a Conclusion**

But this postulation and the self-conscious adoption of Asian-influenced attitudes toward embodiment do not pursue the corresponding attitudes inherent within *wu xia pian* and that genre's relationship with cultural history. *Wu xia pian* as a genre, while centrally concerned with highlighting the martial arts, is also concerned with issues of justice, filial piety, and a nationalistic propriety which often "imagines" a China that, as Lee Ang says, "probably never existed" (Lee 2000: 7). "[T]he *wu xia pian* genre, together with certain period movies, is assumed to offer a kind of cinematic cultural gravitas that efficiently embodies history and tradition. In other words [?] *wu xia pian* should] retain at its core a traditionalist, nationalist ideology of 'Chineseness'" (Chan 2004: 4). This nationalistic attitude is informed by both a respect for the concept of the "Mandate of Heaven" whereby a ruler maintains his legitimacy only so long as he remains just; and an awareness of China's philosophical traditions -- a very clear example of this comes in Yen Chang Hsin's *Shao Lin tzu (The Shaolin Temple, 1982)* starring Jet Li in his first film role. This film makes repeated and explicit reference to the Buddhist underpinnings of the Shaolin Temple's martial arts styles, as well as to the sense of camaraderie that pervades "typical" *wu xia* films. In essence, the plot of a *wu xia* film revolves around a few central devices or conceits, which permit a display of the philosophically/spiritually/culturally informed physical virtuosity of the heroes/heroines who, as an ensemble, achieve a just restoration of righteousness. The *wu xia pian* must be aware of the body; as David Bordwell notes, "from the 1960s swordplay films and 1970s *kungfu* movies to the cop movies and revived *wuxia pian* of the 1980s and 1990s, this filmmaking tradition has put the graceful body at the centre of its *mise-en-scène*" (Bordwell 2001: 78). For one of its central conventions, after all, is the presentation of the techniques which permit that body its entryway into transcendence.

*The Matrix* trilogy, on the other hand, through its cinematographic innovations such as "Bullet Time," highlights the body as inhabiting an artificial space which better demonstrates that very artificiality, and insists upon the existence of a "true" reality outside of the artificial Matrix -- even outside the film's diegetic space. The extreme visuality of "Bullet Time" accentuates the "transcendence" of the "masters" who are able to manipulate the physical "laws" of their "reality" but do so in a technophilic fashion, divorced from the traditionalistic/nationalistic imagination of the living philosophical premises of Daoism/Buddhism which the *wu xia* master personifies. We come once again to the scenes of training in the first *Matrix* film, in which, after being "plugged in" to the on-board computer of the rebels' ship, Neo tells Morpheus that he knows kung fu. Here, the knowledge which Neo has acquired is the product of binary code downloaded to the programs resident in his brain; that is, this knowledge is *not* something which Neo has learned through long years of physical practice but rather is a gift, a function of the interactions between his "program" and the programs of the Matrix. The body here is truly an empty conduit, an *embodiment* of artifice which, while permitting the mind of the individual an insight into the simulated nature of the "world" around him, does not link that mind in a unity of physical connections with "reality" for this body is in fact incapable of the transcendent physical action which the mind perceives within the Matrix. Neo's *true* body does not know kung fu, any more than it had ever known anything "real" before its removal from the machine-maintained cocoons in

which it had grown. This is one of the reasons why Morpheus was so easily able to beat Neo initially while they practiced together. Despite Neo's having been uploaded with the appropriate computer codes to allow his computer-generated body to perform the martial arts techniques with a certain mastery, as Michael Branigan argues, his mind interferes because of the gap he maintains between "actual" mind and "projected" body (Branigan 2002: 105-6). Neo's mind still believes in its projected embodiment until very late in the trilogy's first film, when he comes to realise the illusoriness of even that "projected" mind within the Matrix. Neo's experience of embodiment may appear eventually to arrive at that of the truly enlightened, but ultimately this experience serves to demonstrate to him that his "real" body is something to be discovered once the illusory quality of the Matrix has been stripped away. Embodiment thus functions differently in *The Matrix* and *wu xia* films. Embodiment in *wu xia pian* provides for a transcendence of illusory isolation/individuation from the substance of reality; in *The Matrix* trilogy it highlights the artificiality of a projected "reality" behind or beneath which exists another "true" one, to be discovered through faith in the self-sacrifice of a saviour. This is a key difference, and a substantial substitution of one attitude toward the body for another.

It is in this difference that *The Matrix* enacts its reassertion of a typically "Hollywood", ideologically hegemonic response to the problem of the hero. This response resists seeing the hero as truly dependent upon the ensemble which has sustained him, in favour of representing him as an individual, motivated by a personal rebelliousness, and ultimately assured of his own place within a verifiable, objective reality which will further validate the hero's self-aggrandisement. This validation goes beyond simply affirming the hero's individuality; it confirms his racialised and gendered value, as well. *The Matrix* trilogy utilises visual, philosophical, character, and plot elements from *wu xia pian*/martial arts films in order to subvert those films' attitudes towards embodiment and reality, thereby reasserting the propriety of a view which accentuates objectivity, individuality, and an insistence on a saviour which, in this case, is revealed at the trilogy's close through an allusion to the specifically Christian Crucifixion. In this way, the act of subversion here is more than a postmodern pastiche of film elements recombined into a parodic or playful homage to *wu xia* films in particular, or Hong Kong action films in general, but is an ideological reassertion of Hollywood's favoured view of its character types as universally valid, universally necessary. *The Matrix*, for all of its borrowings from *wu xia*/martial arts films, hasn't taken much from them at all.

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