

Would You Accept a Politics of “Multi-Realism?” Comparing *The Matrix* with Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* and *Solaris*

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Introduction

Solaris (1972) and *Stalker* (1979) by Andrei Tarkovsky as well as *The Matrix* (1999) by the Wachovski brothers are science fiction films with a highly metaphysical appeal. In addition, all three films deal with the possible falseness of what we generally suppose to be a “reality”. In *The Matrix*, a reality of millions is declared to be due to cognitive manipulations effectuated by machines and computers and thus not real; in *Solaris*, a strange kind of non-reality penetrates reality and creates doubts about the “cognitive correctness” of reality; and *Stalker* evokes, though in an ambiguous and ironical way, a spiritual reality more real than ordinary reality.

Philosophical literature on *The Matrix* is vast and reaches from phenomenological, existentialist, and feminist interpretations to searches for Buddhist and Gnostic themes in the trilogy, exploring a large number of ethical and epistemological questions.ⁱ Given the reality/non-reality theme contained in the films, most prominent are of course attempts to link them to classical discussions of skepticism as raised by Berkeley, Hume, and Descartes, as well as to Plato’s allegory of the cavern. Descartes designed in his *Meditations* a skeptical scenario in which the narrator supposes “that not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me.”ⁱⁱⁱ Descartes’ hypothesis that what we perceive as the world might be a comprehensive illusion leads to Hilary Putnam’s 1980 readoption of this notion with his “brain in a vat” scenario. “Brain in a vat” scenarios have been discussed by numerous contemporary philosophers, for example by Jonathan Drancy who described this situation like this: “You do not know that you are not a brain, suspended in a vat full of liquid in a laboratory and wired to a computer which is feeding you your current experiences under the control of some ingenious technician scientists.”ⁱⁱⁱ I agree that the “reality theme” is the philosophically most interesting topic of the trilogy but at the same time I find these aforementioned classical responses to skepticism insufficient, as they reduce “reality” to a one-dimensional cognitive notion. For this reason I want to compare *The Matrix* with the two films by Tarkovsky.

However, also Tarkovsky’s films will profit from the “cognitive” reading I offer. Though it is impossible to resume the entire body of existent Tarkovsky criticism, it appears that roughly the half of all works on this director has theological orientations concentrating on the search of God, belief, etc. Though I have nothing concrete to oppose to such approaches, I think that within the logic they produce a certain essentializing tendency is almost inevitable. True, the theme of the “search for an ideal realm” (childhood, the zone, home, spirituality) is very present in Tarkovsky’s films; however, “the search” cannot be reduced to such purely subjective ambitions. This is why I want to confront *Stalker* and *Solaris* with the theme that is central in the *The Matrix*: the theme of the search for *reality*.

In *The Matrix*, the computer hacker Neo suspects that reality around him is only a complex computer simulation. Soon he is contacted by underground freedom fighters who explain that he and everybody around him are living in a matrix created by intelligent machines and that the real humans are living in a city under the earth. Later he also learns that the humans' bodies are kept in tanks and harvested by the machines which need their energy. Neo joins a group of freedom fighters who attempt to overthrow the machines, free people from their simulated reality, and lead them to reality. A traitor called Cypher decides to reenter the matrix and deliver the humans to the machines but he does not succeed. Neo's role becomes that of a "savior" of humanity because it turns out that, once he has recognized the fake character of the reality that ordinary humans accept as real, he is able to challenge the physical laws of this virtual world.

In *Stalker*, a man called the Stalker guides a writer and a scientist through "the zone," which is an apocalyptic wilderness supposed to be endowed with supernatural qualities. The saying goes that a meteorite crashed into the zone twenty years before, creating a kind of cosmic abyss and that the zone is perhaps the product of a superior civilization. In any case, army troops that have been sent there as well as others have never come back. Inside the zone there is a chamber said to grant wishes and the objective of the men's journey is to find this chamber. In the past, Porcupine, Stalker's teacher, had entered the chamber and a week later he became immensely rich. It seems that the conflict between his mental inside reality and the reality outside had been so big that he committed suicide. This might be the reason why, in the end, none of the men dare enter the chamber. However, in spite of the apparent miscarriage of the journey, the experiences of the three men in the zone effectuate important existential changes in them.

In *Solaris*, a biomagnetic current that appears like a "gluey mass" or "fog" acts upon the conscience of cosmonauts when they approach the Ocean Solaris. The result is the appearance of living persons on the station who are since long dead but who resided, as sorts of cognitive residuants, in the brains of the cosmonauts. Like in *Stalker*, disputes about these experiences take place between a scientist (Sartorius) who simply calls these unreal persons "a matrix," a more literary and humanistically inclined scientist (Snout), and Kris Kelvin, who tends towards more pragmatic behavior. The mysterious Guibariane (who appears only on video tape) seems to be a representation of the utmost realist because he accepts both realities as real but is ultimately unable to reconcile them, which determines (like for Porcupine in *Stalker*) his tragic end.

The Matrix's hero Neo fights for "reality" and his search pushes him to the end of his own spiritual and physical capacities. In principle, this is very similar to what also Tarkovsky's films are supposed to show. As the Russian master said himself: "In all that I have done, in all that I intend to do (...) my theme is this: a man gripped by an ideal searches passionately for the answer to a question and goes to the limit in his attempt to understand reality."^{iv} However, the search is not the same in the Russian films and in *The Matrix*. In *The Matrix*, the people who find out about the falseness of reality decide to engage in a grim fight *for reality*. Tarkovsky, on the other hand, explores the virtual reality theme without prescribing red pills but, instead, concentrates on the *search* for reality, a search during which the protagonists' cognitive systems go through hybrid states of dreamlike and real cognition. In other

words, what Chalmers calls the "Matrix hypothesis," that is, the fact that "I have (and have always had) a cognitive system that receives inputs from and sends its outputs to an artificially designed computer simulation of the world" (142) is deluded.

In *The Matrix* there is no doubt that the virtual reality of the matrix is false and that the city Zion is real. Neo is mostly occupied with the fight against his enemies and with a search for his own role within this reality. Of course, problems and doubts do appear but they are solved, even when they are most serious. In the second sequel (*The Matrix Reloaded*) the destiny of the entire human race seems to depend, for a while, on the accuracy of the Oracle's prophecies. The fighters have to decide if her prophecies are only a part of the matrix or if her truths have an "absolute" value. In the third sequel (*Revolutions*), even Neo's role as The One who saves humanity from the matrix is said to be a part of the matrix program. At both occurrences in the script, the question of whether it is possible to escape a false reality is closely linked to the question of whether one can escape destiny. However, the Oracle herself makes clear that even in oracles choice exists, and depicts the whole reality-destiny problem as a matter of self-fulfilling prophecy: "You are in control of your life. Don't believe in this fate crap" (*Reloaded*).

The Matrix displays some of the skepticism that we also note in Tarkovsky's films. However, in *The Matrix* it concerns the question of *destiny within reality* and not reality itself. This skepticism is resolved through belief and love while the reality of Zion remains at all times firmly established. One can say that "the Matrix turns its back on the philosophical problem of skepticism it invokes" (Chris Falzon)⁹ while in *Solaris* and *Stalker* the focus is on the act of *understanding* reality, a reality, which eternally remains a matter of "non-understanding."

The basic idea of *The Matrix Trilogy* suggests a skeptical scenario of radical deception that can be philosophically supported by Cartesian "evil demon" theories as well as by positivist "brain in a vat" ideologies. The two alternative worlds, the real one and the virtual one are, a priori, irrelevant to each other. Normally, the two different cognitive systems, the red and the blue one, do not interfere with each other. The existence of the matrix *as a reality* is in no way threatening for those who are living in Zion; the only threat is the efforts of the organizers of the two worlds to destroy the reality of the others. The people who are living in the false world of the matrix *can* be happy as long as they do not find out that their reality is due to artificial and that their bodies are exploited by machines.

Tarkovsky's films settle on the grounds of a more moderate skepticism, an attitude that *The Matrix's* Neo was given to when he was still living in the matrix and hacking into its system, which initiated his doubts about the "real" world. What Neo, *Stalker*, and *Solaris's* Kris have in common is that they have "splinters in their minds" which lets them doubt about the realness of their reality. In a way, all three of them refuse to go with the herd and want to discover a more authentic way of being human; as a consequence, their "zones" are what Andy Clark calls "lazily programmed" systems, they are hybrid mixtures of a "communal dreamworld" and a "multiagent immersive virtual-reality simulation" (195). This is why in all three films people manage to hack into an apparently coherent cognitive system and the world it perceives. Their cognitive systems are no longer "prisons of their minds."

In all three films humans attempt to overcome the constraints of matter by using spiritual means though this is not done in the same way in the three films because the ontological conditions are different. In *The Matrix*, Neo and the little girl

who bends the spoons have the power to interfere in the matrix because the matrix is *only* a mental construct while in the real world they have no spiritual powers at all. Stalker's daughter, on the other hand, has the power to move glasses on the table *in reality*. For her, reality is only a matrix that she can manipulate. The "outer" world of *Solaris* is also malleable and grants unknown possibilities; however, these possibilities begin to trickle into the "inner" world of the station until, finally, even the dacha on earth gets inserted into the ocean.

1. *The Matrix* and *Solaris*

With regard to its underlying structure, *Solaris* and *The Matrix* are diametrically opposed. In *Solaris*, the feeling that something is not right with this world is produced through the contact *with* a matrix while in *The Matrix* the same feeling is produced through a contact with what is supposed to be the "real world." The "real world" in *Solaris* is a dacha in a Russian landscape and the rationalized, soulless space of the station that gets filled with unreal apparitions. In *The Matrix* things work the other way round: cozy family life exists in the Oracle's kitchen, which is situated in the virtual world of the matrix. In the real world, people are living in Spartan conditions, very much like cosmonauts though not in space but underground (strangely, they fly around in the earth in spaceship-like hovercrafts through sewers).

A further difference is that the *Solaris* cosmonauts do not fight against the Ocean but try to communicate with it. Snout even wants to shout to it. Finally he sends out X-rays containing transcriptions of Kris' thoughts hoping that it will put an end to the strange happenings. Apparently it works: no new apparitions occur. In *Solaris*, the Ocean is not an evil demon invented by machines but just *another cognitive system*. That is perhaps not so different from our own brain. It is possible to negotiate with the Ocean.

The result is that in *Solaris* the protagonists necessarily reside *between* two programmes; some of them even discover this mental state as an interesting existential experience. In *Solaris* (as much as in *Stalker*), "real" reality turns out to be the tragic interplay of the red and the blue system. This creates an ambiguity that is alien to the inhabitants of Zion as well as to those who live in the virtual world of *The Matrix*. While in *The Matrix* the virtual world represents total ignorance (everybody in the film, including Cypher and Agent Smith, agrees with this), in *Solaris* the recaptured and relived memories that walk around on the station represent experiential entities that we cannot – and perhaps should not – escape. While Cypher wants to forget everything by surrendering to the matrix, the matrix-like apparitions in *Solaris* prevent the inhabitants from forgetting: "Why are we tortured like this? On earth you can forget about your memories, on the station you get tortured with them." The matrix, as it appears in *Solaris*, represents a world of suffering and when Kris suggests living with Hari on the station forever, this is no Cypher-like hedonistic flight into a virtual dream world but the opposite: Kris decides to live *with* reality and all memories that it includes. In *The Matrix*, too, the virtual world contains suffering but it is part of the program. It is not *real* but has been incorporated into the matrix by the machines in order to make the matrix look more authentic for humans. In *Solaris*, on the other hand, it is the matrix which causes *real* suffering.

In *Solaris* the protagonists are confronted, for a certain period of time, with two programmes or with two realities. Though at the end of the film the apparitions no

longer occur and the problem seems to be "solved," Kris' and Snout's – though not that of Sartorius – relationships with reality (Earth) have undergone permanent changes. This has to do with their way of approaching the apparitions while they were present. Of all the protagonists, Kris manages most successfully to accommodate two realities in his consciousness and to live with them at least for a while. He is impressed by Hari's claim that the "visitors are part of you, they are your consciousness." His pragmatic "multi-reality" approach is that our memories are constantly present in our lives anyway. So, why reduce "reality" to a one-dimensional cognitive notion?

Guibariane commits suicide for matters of "conscience" because for him contradicting realities are unbearable (we do not know what tormenting content these realities had).^{vi} Snout, on the other hand, makes great efforts to adopt a relativistic attitude towards reality. He is convinced that the colonial claim of humans that "we don't want any more worlds but only a mirror to see our own world" equates to scientific fraud. In a way, "science" always finds what it wants to find, so why not be unscientific at least for once? However, in truth, Snout can bear the "multi-reality" situation only when being drunk.

Only Sartorius, who fights with Morpheus-like determination for enlightenment, categorically refuses any "multi-reality" approaches and sternly insists to scientifically establish "the real world." That he never succeeds in doing so is not due to Sentinel ridden counter-reactions from the Ocean but simply to the fact that he does not find the appropriate scientific proofs to establish this reality or, rather, the Ocean's unreality.

In spite of their divergences, all four men definitely decline *the Cypher-like way* of refusing a multi-reality. They refuse ignorance as a kind of madness that accepts the unreal as real, though as Snout says, "madness would be a blessing."^{vii}

The multi-reality approach is grounded in an ontological definition of "the other world" which is in *Solaris* essentially different from that of *The Matrix*. Though Sartorius claims that the apparition Hari is "a mechanical repetition of the form, a copy from the matrix," in reality the creatures that people *Solaris* are far more complex. On the one hand, they are, like the matrix, produced by a non-human cognitive system (the experts say "the Solaris Ocean is a particular kind of brain"). On the other hand, they flow out of the minds of just those people who see them. The ontological ambiguity of this constellation is never resolved in the film; rather it is reinforced. Hari remains real and unreal at the same time. Chemically, she might not be a real person, but since Kris' emotional contact with her *is real*, on a social and psychological level she must be seen as real.

The complexity of Tarkovsky's scenario can be appreciated when one imagines how complicated *The Matrix* would have been if its virtual world had been a product not only of evil machines but *at the same time* also of Neo and his companions; or if virtual constructs from the matrix (not robots) had begun filling the city of Zion. Certainly, the Wachovski brothers introduce complications of this kind for example by revealing the Oracle and Neo's identity as The One as nothing other than a part of the system in the second sequel. But this concerns only the plot of the story (destiny) and not questions about reality.

Tarkovsky takes pleasure at elaborating such ambiguities on the reality level. Even after Hari is sent off into space in a rocket, her woolen shawl significantly remains on the seat. Being initially only a "piece of memory without consciousness

extracted from the ocean," she gradually gains consciousness, partly escaping the control of the Ocean. However, her process of gaining consciousness is not a linear one, it is not equal with acquiring more and more information about the "real world" and its convincingly real character. On the contrary, the more conscious Hari becomes of the real world, the more she develops, exactly as Kris and Neo do, a *splinter in her mind*: "I think somebody is playing a game with us," says she in a lucid moment. Paradoxically, being "conscious" and being "real" signifies having doubts about reality. The "fighting for truth and reality" ideology of the Hollywood matrix is naturally unable to admit this.

Only because reality has such a "soft structure" is Hari able to escape the matrix. She escapes the control of the Ocean because she manages to produce her own consciousness and her own memories independently of any evil spirit. This is something that the Wachovskis' virtual people are unable to do because their world is unreal to the extent that every bit of their consciousness and all their memories are products of machines.

In Tarkovsky's films, a certain metaphysical dimension is produced at the moment real people enter in contact with a "false reality" which is a mystery; in *The Matrix*, the false reality is, in principle, fake. True, a "mystic" dimension appears. Trinity's love for Neo, propelled, like in *Solaris*, through oracular displacements of time and space, resuscitates Neo and helps him to impose "his" reality upon the agents. This has a parallel in the idea of the Ocean Solaris as "a location of oceanic love" which produces – with the help of Kris and his colleagues – new versions of beloved beings who are "in reality" dead. In *The Matrix*, through love, Trinity manages to interfere in reality as if it were a matrix. This is a mystery for agent Smith as much as for us. However, whatever it is, the mystery works in the service of absolute, scientific truth. Once Neo gets saved, reality is more firmly established than ever. In *Solaris*, on the other hand, "love" has the power to blur the borders between what is scientifically real and what is remembered and unreal.

2. *The Matrix* and *Stalker*

Aesthetically, *Stalker* and *The Matrix* are very similar because they play out the "reality vs. unreality" theme in a derelict, underworld post-human environment in which life seems to be possible only in margins. In *The Matrix*, the natural human environment has been destroyed, leaving only some ruins of human civilization. The underground housings of Zion are reminiscent of improvised industrial architecture. Also the *Stalker's* zone is situated in and around derelict factory buildings though the "reality" bordering the zone does not look much more inviting. The Peugeot convertible driven by the Writer's friend seems to come from another world. The world that *Stalker* calls his home is an industrial sector bordered by a power plant with polluted air and water. Strange white particles are flying through the air. Also in this science fiction film humanity, as it faces ecological disaster, seems to have left its happiest days behind. The parallels that the contemporary spectator will draw with the Chernobyl disaster (which occurred seven years after the release of *Stalker*) are, curiously, no coincidence. Tarkovsky is said to have been inspired by the 1957 nuclear disaster of the Mayak plant near Chelyabinsk in 1957. Though this accident had not been officially acknowledged until 1992, a "zone" of hundreds of square kilometers

had been polluted by radiation. In addition, Tarkovsky shows shots of the Chernobyl power plant in his film.^{viii}

Like in *Solaris*, Tarkovsky confronts us in *Stalker* with the reality theme. At least for *Stalker* the zone is a reality, because "my happiness, my freedom, my self-respect, it's all here." At the same time, the zone is constantly on the verge of appearing as unreal, because it has a supposedly supernatural character. Even more, the zone might be a product of some evil mind and the Writer even considers that "all this is someone's idiotic invention." The zone appears as a place in which we will not find anything like "facts."

Again, like in *Solaris*, Tarkovsky introduces us to a space that is purely mental. Like the matrix and the *Solaris* station, the zone is a place where subjectivity plays with time. From a subjective point of view, the zone is a *reflection in space*, a reflection about human existence through which humans can walk, in which they are confronted with their hidden wishes and daydreams, but from which they can return and reenter reality. According to *Stalker* the zone is a "complicated system," which makes us think that it is very much like a computer game in which – just because nothing is real – the conditions can change at any moment ("old traps disappear, new ones arise, safe spots become impassable") according to how the players behave. From an objective point of view, however, the zone might be not more than an abandoned factory ground in which nothing mystical has ever happened.

This ambiguity is what makes the zone interesting. "Officially," in the zone, time and space do not count, and the humans who are confronted with this mental landscape are supposed to experience its mystical dimension. At least apparently, the zone defies the laws of physics and is, like the Ocean *Solaris*, a cosmic abyss. Ironically, until the end of the film we get no real proof of the mystical character of the zone because nothing supernatural happens. While in the Strugatsky brothers' book the men salvage material that has been left behind by extraterrestrial visitors, Tarkovsky has removed such evidences.^{ix} All we have are strange noises, like the howling of wolves and there is a sound that only the Writer hears and which could be the effect of the upcoming wind. Also, the men get lost and walk in a circle, but theoretically all this can happen anywhere. The mystical character of the zone is entirely based on rumors. It is still possible that the zone is no normal place, but it in no case can it be reduced to a purely virtual matrix. For example, even if *Stalker* recognizes that the zone is a kind of program, he would not be able to interfere in it. Paradoxically, this does not make the zone "normal" in return but, on the contrary, it only *reconfirms* its ontological dimension as something exclusively mental because it is a "zone" only in the mind of the people. In other words, the zone is the uncanny space that produces doubts not only about reality but even doubts about these doubts. And this radical pyrrhonian skepticism can sustain itself only through irony. For the people who traverse it, the zone is a matrix and reality at the same time.

Like in *Solaris*, the men have to cope with this ambiguous phenomenon. The individualist writer looks for a reality that is hidden behind the hypocrisy of the world of culture that consists of "inventions" like conscience and anguish. The civilized people that are his readers together with journalists, editors and critics are captured in this reality and do not have the cognitive means to look beyond it: "They are all so 'literate.' They all got sensory deficiency," he complains. The Writer refuses to believe in this cultural matrix and hopes that the zone will open his eyes to something (more) "real."

When the Writer accuses the scientist (the Professor) of being too curious in the name of science he sounds like Cypher: "All this is someone's idiotic invention, can't you feel it? But you, of course, must find out whose invention it is. And why? What good can your knowledge do?"

The reality of the empirically minded Professor, on the other hand, is determined by political strata, and though he is ready to accept the supernatural zone as a "natural" phenomenon, he cannot but perceive this reality in relation with the overall political reality that exists outside the zone. In order to prevent mass-hysterical conversions and morally unsustainable attempts to use the power of the zone, the Professor decides to destroy it. However, even by committing this political act in the name of humanity, he is led by passions because his project is linked to a personal revenge against a colleague. Though his scientific conscience forces him to *pragmatically* accept the existence of the zone as a possible empirical fact, politically the Professor is an *idealist*: like Morpheus & Cie, like Guibariane and Sartorius, he cannot accept the simultaneous existence of two realities.

The Writer believes neither in the reality of (consumer) culture nor in the reality of science and this makes him different not only from the Professor and Sartorius, but also from Cypher. He is a pragmatist like Kris and is ready to accept, what is "good in the way of belief."^x He clutches a weapon when he deems it necessary but he is also ready to let it fall when Stalker tells him to do so. The Writer *would* be ready to believe in the zone but at the same time nothing that he experiences in the zone can convince him of its superior character. Besides that, he came to the zone for pragmatic reasons: to find inspiration.

Stalker assumes, like Neo, the role of Jesus Christ. To be a Stalker is, as he says, "a kind of calling." (In the film, it is actually the Writer who puts on the thorn crown, probably because Tarkovsky wanted to avoid an all too evident symbolism. However, on the poster that is also used for present DVD release, it is Stalker who wears the crown). Stalker is supposed to show his adept's reality and his role is therefore similar to that of Neo. But he has also Trinity's miraculous power because his desire is that "everything that has been planned comes true." There is a plan, a reality that the zone or the chamber has seen; and if we *believe* in it we will live in reality.

Like Morpheus, Stalker wants to push his companions towards self-knowledge and requires that they abandon all "thinking" and only *believe*. He wants to open their eyes so that they come to *know* reality as it is. He confirms that his teacher Porcupine had "opened his eyes" in this way. Only if people believe and do not "think" can they successfully move around in the zone and arrive at the chamber of wishes. The non-thinking dog, for example, can walk in and out of the zone without problems.

According to Stalker, the zone "lets those pass who have lost all hope" because in fact those are the ones who do not think. Accordingly, he implores the zone as if it were a reality hidden behind the "outside" reality to which one has access only when one believes:

Let everything that has been planned come true. Let them believe. And let them have a laugh at their passions. Because what they call passion is actually not some emotional energy, but just the friction between their souls and the outside world. And most important, let them believe in themselves. Let them be helpless like little children, because weakness is a great thing, and strength is nothing.

Only if we enter the chamber of wishes in such a disillusioned state of mind will we perceive what is "real" and not the unreal veil of reality determined by our vanity and our passions. However, ironically, if we really do not wish *anything* any longer we don't need to enter a chamber of wishes. It's their passions and ambitions that let people perceive a reality that is a matrix but once they have given up these passions there is no difference between the zone, the chamber, and outside reality. This is probably the reason why the chamber looks like a kind of twin of Stalker's own house and why, in Tarkovsky's film, the zone and Stalker's extra-zonal housing interpenetrate from the beginning. (The sound of dripping water, typical for the zone, is constantly present in Stalker's house as well as white feathery particles that are flying through the air.)

Stalker is a film about disillusionment, a disillusionment that is also present in *The Matrix* but which is overcome in the latter film in order to lead to a final victory. The Oracle tells Neo that he is not The One and in the end he actually gets killed. But Trinity, by using another oracle in the way of a self-producing prophecy, insists that he *must* be The One because she loves him. Here Trinity *knows*, in a Zen-Buddhist intuitive fashion, without *thinking*. She does not *hope* that this or that will happen, she is not afraid that it will not happen, but suddenly all "this and that" no longer matter for her. She simply *knows*^{xi}. The result is that in the end she and Neo can embrace reality with even more certitude. In *Stalker*, however, once the men have lost their hope, they step out of the zone more skeptical and confused than ever. At the same time they have learned something about themselves, about their false ambitions and hopes and will embrace reality in a – say – more "truthful" way.

Within the realm of the matrix, Morpheus pushes Neo from a cognitive approach of "reflection" to that of knowledge ("don't think you are, know you are"). In the realm of reality this corresponds to the shift from *hope* to *belief*. All this makes sense with regard to the destiny problems and conflicts with the Oracle's prophecies, but the Zen-like idea of "no-thought" or "emptiness" that is lurking behind the script ("free your mind, don't try to hit me") looks incorrect with regard to cognitive questions. The problem is that we will never understand how Neo can "know" that the matrix is not real. The answer will probably be: Because he is "The One." But what if he is not? In that case, is the reality of Zion also based only on belief? Nothing in the trilogy suggests this. It seems rather that the reality problem has been left to a populist idea of "immediacy" in Zen Buddhism combined with Judeo-Christian or westernized conceptions of eastern thought.

Ironically, it is Tarkovsky who turns out here to be more "eastern" though his film sports no Asian motives at all. Tarkovsky pushes his protagonists from apparent *knowledge* towards a process of meditation or reflection, a reflection which leads them to real freedom of the mind. When the Professor and the Writer arrive at home, they are certainly confused and skeptical but they are no longer obsessed with the idea of the zone. Even Stalker's attitude towards the zone has changed. He still appears to be hypnotized by the idea of the zone but even this seems acceptable given that the zone is now just a kind of religion for him. He understands that nobody needs the zone and will probably no longer lead people there. He can practice his "zone religion" within the realm of reality.

Curiously, Stalker's undergoes the perhaps most dramatic change and suddenly appears to be serene. As becomes clear through her monologue, it is *she* who

recognizes most clearly what the others are just suspecting: that reality is just what it is. Reality is what it is, and this is at the same time reality's most *mystical* characteristic. Stalker's wife points this out when explaining that, for her, the most essential choices she has made in her life have always remained entirely unexplainable for her. Like Trinity, when it came to important questions, she only *knew* and did not care about any "this or that." Everything points to the fact that "reality" itself is already mystical enough, as Tarkovsky suggests by letting Stalker's daughter move glasses on the table.

The destiny problem, on the other hand, is exploited in a sophisticated manner in *The Matrix*. One of the disturbing effects of the matrix is that here software designers and fortunetellers determine the course of our destiny while we would like to have *choice*. And if we want choice we also need *hope* (which is an illusion according to the architect of the matrix). However, in the end, hope is all that remains: the sentence that concludes the trilogy is spoken by the Oracle and it is: "I hope so." In *The Matrix* hope has become a power on condition that it is used by those people who clearly *know* what reality is.

Stalker tries to convince us that the bits of hope that we have are the vanities that create the dreamlike veil of a matrix that we would do better to abandon. In the end, the men abandon their hopes up to the point that they do not even want to enter the chamber of wishes. On the deepest level they are afraid of a further confrontation with the prophecy/choice conundrum because hope means (as *The Matrix* very well shows) hoping for a destiny that is beneficial. Neo *hopes* that the Oracle's prophecy is true. But in the end it is not hope that saves him but rather love and belief (Trinity loves him and Morpheus believes that the prophecy is true). The people in *Stalker* are confronted with a similar problem. "You want one thing but you get another thing," says the Writer. Porcupine had certainly not "officially" wished to become rich but he was unable to abandon these hopes, and when he entered the chamber they became true. In a way it is right to say that this was his destiny; it was a destiny that he had predetermined himself through the hopes that were his most intimate thoughts. The chamber only materialized these hopes and made true what was unavoidable. Porcupine should have recognized the "other plan," the other reality that was hidden underneath his hopes and he could have recognized it through belief.

Had Cypher entered the chamber, he would have ended up in a virtual dreamworld in which all wishes are fulfilled. That's what he was actually hoping for. The men in *Stalker* abandon these passions and discover a new reality – which turns out to be the same reality as before. The only thing that has changed is that they now no longer need to enter the chamber.

Conclusion: Towards Multi-Cultural Approaches to Reality

We can understand Tarkovsky's films as an appeal to humanity to acquire different patterns of perception of the *cultural* reality of their everyday life. This is a stance that we do not find in *The Matrix*. The scientist Kevin Warwick has suggested that the matrix is perhaps the dull world of everyday life with television and brains conditioned by the fake world of commercials. Or perhaps it is a world haunted by a virtual reality that humans have produced themselves. Even if the industry presents, for example, a hamburger as something nourishing and delicious, *in reality* it contains "a high percentage of water, is mainly fat, and is devoid of vitamins."^{xii} Against this,

Morpheus and his people want to establish a reality that is scientifically sound. *Solaris* and *Stalker*, on the other hand, tell us that any concept of reality as an *absolute presence* is impossible.

In other words, Tarkovsky's films concord with Baudrillard's theory of simulation, whereas *The Matrix* does not. Baudrillard believed that there is no solution to simulation but *The Matrix* makes us believe that there is one.^{xiii} Too many "self-produced" elements like memories, traditions, etc. are part of our reality and we will have to live with them. However, we should not approach them with too much hope. We should not be hypnotized by them though it is also clear that we cannot consider them as entirely unreal.

Though the virtual reality in *The Matrix* is supposed to be "normal," in most scenes of the trilogy the matrix world appears as utterly strange: it is here that supernatural things happen. In Tarkovsky's films strangeness becomes rather generalized because known and unknown territories cannot be distinguished. The earth scenes in *Solaris*, for example, represent an idyllic everyday reality. However, after returning from the station, Kris will no longer understand this world as a world which simply "is." As mentioned, those scenes are comparable with the idyllic kitchen scene in *The Matrix*, which insists so much on normality though we all know that nothing is normal here because it is not real. But are the earth scenes on *Solaris* real? The last image shows the house with the lake as an island in the cosmic ocean *Solaris*. No evil demon has put it there but it is most probably a phenomenon of consciousness. Still, we do not see it only because our brain is "in a vat." Tarkovsky wants to show us that reality is always multi-dimensional and the world, as it is conceived by human consciousness, is always leavened with simulacra like childhood memories, art, and regrets. In Stanislav Lem's novel *Solaris*, Kris manages to establish a contact with the Ocean, an idea that Tarkovsky rejected in his adaptation of the book. Instead Kris returns to earth in order to find a reality impregnated by the non-reality of the Ocean. For Kris, reality has become a matrix but, paradoxically, a matrix which grants real freedom because, after all, is not living with one's memories an essential part of a free human condition? The virtual people from *The Matrix*, once Morpheus and his team recruit them in the real world, can commute between the two worlds rather freely. They have the "contact" that the *Solaris* people have never had. However, does this provide them any freedom? Real freedom means to be able to shift between the real and the unreal, between experience and memories and to recognize the meaningful character of both. The virtual reality people of *The Matrix* cannot do this and this is why they are enslaved.

The people in *Stalker* have also acquired this freedom because they accept the mystical dimension of the zone as a "culture" that one can live with but which does not and should not determine our cognition up to a point that we consider it as an absolute and only "reality." There are other "cultures" in the world, that of the Writer's readers and critics for example, and they all are "good in a way of belief" though none represents something absolute. Even in the case of "absolute strangeness," that is, even when we have the impression of definitely dealing with another reality, we cannot decide that the one is real and the other unreal.

ⁱ David Chalmers: “The Matrix as Metaphysics” and Andy Clark: “The Twisted Matrix: Dream, Simulation, or Hybrid?” in Christopher Grau (ed.) *Philosophers Explore the Matrix* (Oxford University Press, 2005). Other valuable elaborations on the *The Matrix* are contained in William Irving’s two edited volumes *The Matrix and Philosophy* (London: Open Court, 2002 and 2005) as well as Matt Lawrence’s book *Like a Splinter in your Mind: The Philosophy behind the Matrix Trilogy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). Glenn Yeffeth (ed.): *Taking the red pill: Science, Philosophy and Religion in The Matrix* (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2003)

ⁱⁱ *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 298.

ⁱⁱⁱ Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), p. 10. David Chalmers and Andy Clark have perhaps best explained the relevance of Putnam’s model for *The Matrix* since, as Chalmers says, the principle of *The Matrix* is that people who live within its realm “have a cognitive system which receives its inputs from and sends outputs to a matrix.” David Chalmers: “The Matrix as Metaphysics” and Andy Clark: “The Twisted Matrix: Dream, Simulation, or Hybrid?” in Grau 133.

^{iv} From an interview that Tarkovsky gave just before starting the work on *Solaris*. Quoted from Timothy Hyman’s review of *Solaris* in *Film Quarterly* 29: 3, 1976, p. 57.

^v Chris Falzon: “Philosophy and the Matrix” in Diocaretz and Herbrechter (eds.), *The Matrix in Theory* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2006), p. 103.

^{vi} In Stanislav Lem’s novel, Guibariane had not been confronted with a blonde girl like in the film, but with a gigantic negress: “A giant Negress was coming silently towards me with a smooth, rolling gait. I caught a gleam from the whites of her eyes and heard the soft slapping of her bare feet. She was wearing nothing but a yellow skirt of plaited straw; her enormous breasts swung freely and her black arms were as thick as thighs” (*Solaris*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company 1978, p. 30). For Slavoj Žižek this negress is a product of Guibariane’s fantasy. He comments: “Unable to sustain confrontation with his primordial maternal fantasmatic apparition, Gibarian dies of shame.” Žižek: “The Thing from Inner Space: On Tarkovsky” in *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 4: 2, 1999.

^{vii} Soderbergh’s adaptation of *Solaris* offers this alternative. At the end of the film, Kris and Hari manage (how they come to do this is not explained) to melodramatically live in the Matrix.

^{viii} The caretakers of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant refer to themselves as “stalkers” and to the abandoned area as “the Zone.”

^{ix} Boris and Arkady Strugatsky: *Roadside Picnic* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1978)

^x As has said the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey.

^{xi} Žižek insists on this love-faith motive in Tarkovsky’s films: “Since love is ‘blind,’ contingent, grounded in no clearly observable properties, that unfathomable *je ne sais quoi* which decides when am I to fall in love can also be totally externalized in the decision of an unfathomable authority.” (“The Thing from Inner Space”).

^{xii} Kevin Warwick: “The Matrix – Our Future?” in Christopher Grau’s book, p. 205.

^{xiii} Cf. Sven Lutzka: “[*The Matrix*] offers a solution to the problem of simulation [but] Baudrillard believes that there is none.” “Simulacra, Simulation and *The Matrix*” in Herbrechter & Diocaretz, p. 126.