The Matrix: A Dialogical Perspective

Md. Mahbubul Hasan Nayeem

Lecturer, Department of English Language and Literature, North Western University, Khulna
naimnnil@gmail.com | ORCID: 0000-0001-9053-6527

Abstract

Film as a visual art form can be understandably perused as a form of "visual literature" where, under proper scrutiny, literary theories and critical concepts may be found intervening significantly. Stretching the range of "cine-literacy," an approach to interpret films from a literary/theoretical perspective, suggests simultaneously the pervasive reach and the inter-disciplinary scope of literature. This article aims at addressing the aspects of the 1999 movie *The Matrix* that enable it as a congenial site for Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism to operate. There is hardly any linguistic phenomenon, verbal or non-verbal, that can negate its affiliations with the Bakhtinian theory of dialogism which affords a disentanglement of the dialogic properties operative in the phenomenon and thus attempts to excavate its philosophical roots as well as the diversity of implications. *The Matrix*, as a form of communicative event captured in celluloid that attempts to convey some messages to the audience, corroborates the idea further and the film indeed illustrates the ways dialogism and other Bakhtinian precepts are imbricated in the cinematized fiction. What an enumeration of Bakhtinian concepts in the movie allows is an articulation of the movie's rich diversity of meaning and implications. The film has been approached from Bakhtin's theoretical perspective with a view to addressing the adaptability of the filmed fiction with the central tenets of his theory of dialogism. Furthermore, a dialogical perspective of the film unearths its underlying mosaic of philosophical imbrications that ultimately endorses its intrinsic quality of multiplicity of meaning.

Keywords: *The Matrix*, dialogics, polyphony, heteroglossia, carnivalesque

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, a trailblazer in the reformation of the formalist legacy, influenced, particularly with his ground-breaking philosophical concepts, the late 20th century world of creative art and literature so overwhelmingly that the shades of his notions remain traceable in diverse creative endeavors like literature, philosophy, and even films. One good example of his theory's pervasive influence is the Wachowski brothers' much celebrated 1999 film *The Matrix*, where Bakhtin's notions of polyphony, dialogics, heteroglossia, carnivalesque, and chronotope appear to be at work abstrusely but surely. This article comprises a critical identification of the ways these Bakhtinian doctrines are embedded as well as operative in the thought-provoking movie and how effectively they are immersed within the thrilling cyberpunk fiction on the surface. Basically, it is the Wachowski brothers' allusive amalgamation of myth, religion, philosophy, and literature in the movie that lends

Md. Mahbubul Hasan Nayeem. "*The Matrix*: A Dialogical Perspective."
CROSSINGS: VOL. 12 | 2021 | pp. 123-129 | ISSN 2071–1107

123

it with a polyphonic dimension replete with a variety of suggestions, indeterminacy, and multiplicity of meaning which indeed demarcate the sphere for dialogism and allocate a playground for the Bakhtinian precepts to flourish.

To dive straight into the core, polyphony, as propounded by Bakhtin in his path-breaking work, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, refers to the unique feature of linguistic phenomena to articulate and facilitate a liberation of multiple, independent, and original voices, triggered by fully valid, internalized socio-ideological inputs, interactively contesting in any linguistic operation that ranges from oral speech and written text to conscious evolution of inner thoughts and transition of consciousness. Indeed, polyphony provides a realistic novel, as the likes of Dostoevsky's, with a multiplicity of originally valid voices and stances so as to confirm indeterminacy of meaning, diversity of implication, and unfinalizability of the future. And the polyphonic sphere turns into an open site for a rich array of voices and personae (Pearce 225). It moreover sanctions an open world where "characters are liberated to speak 'a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, [they orchestrate] a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices'" (Abrams 63). In the polyphonic periphery, characters are set in an open sphere, with utmost freedom to choose their own ways and propound their own philosophies, and thus pursue their own contingent future. Characters are no more stereotypically confined in an outworn structure, nor bound to submissively adhere to the author's point of view; rather, they turn into free men possessing autonomy, idiosyncrasy, and uncurbed free will that determine their ensuing futurity.

Concordantly, the protagonist Neo, who refuses to remain Mr. Thomas A. Anderson, his computer-generated identity in the virtual world of the Matrix, is a vicar of such autonomous selfhood that makes him rather follow his free will by choosing the red pill, instead of the blue one, which allows him access to the Matrix and to challenge the virtual system of governance emblematic of omnipotent Fate. The villain or, rather, the anti-hero, Agent Smith, being a programmed entity, is also seen pursuing his mechanized free will when he takes off the sunglasses and ear-pieces, symbolizing his denial of the system, while talking to Morpheus about freeing himself from the systemic constraints of the Matrix by destroying the Zion which would allow him thus to solely capture the entire system of the Matrix. His free will fuels his audacity to aspire to control the system that once he was controlled by. Even the computer operator Cypher, being Neo's companion and so knowledgeable of his will of annihilating the Matrix, unreservedly pursues his lust of leading a sumptuous life in the virtual reality of the Matrix, and accordingly betrays his comrades on *Nebuchadnezzar*, the ship carrying the rebels from Zion. Each of the characters mentioned above nonchalantly follows their free will composed out of their peculiar perspectives and ideologies that drive them to the particular

directions they follow. Neo's ideology of freedom through self-knowledge is what makes him venture into the Matrix, while Agent Smith's mechanical resolution to destroy Zion and its dwellers is activated by his programmed but autonomous creed of a sovereign rule. If Neo is a diehard devotee of reality and freedom, Agent Smith becomes the hardcore aficionado of illusion and restriction. This classic encounter between reality and illusion gradually flourishes throughout the movie; and the directors, who can in many ways be called the authors of the film, do not seem to gravitate towards any of the viewpoints, rather cinematize the conflict between them and dramatize their dialogical faceoff, leaving a doubtless implication of openness and indeterminacy. The duel between illusion and reality, more like the 2010 movie *Inception*, where dreams and reality come into a dialogic clash and reciprocally overlap with an internecine effect and allows the characters their disparate philosophical viewpoints and peculiar goals that they pursue as free men. This invests the movie with the multiplicity of original and independent voices that confirms its polyphonic dimension.

Bakhtin's masterpiece, *The Dialogic Imagination*, offers an in-depth perusal of his notion of dialogics or dialogism which unprecedentedly attributes private thoughts and interior monologues with flavor and functionality of dialogues. Bakhtin's formulations corroborate that every utterance is shaped as much by the targeted listener as by the speaker, and the topic of the utterance comes always-already populated with the words previously spoken about it (Morson 220). Bakhtin explains it in plain but powerful words:

> his [speaker's] orientation toward the listener is an orientation toward a specific conceptual horizon, toward the specific world of the listener; it introduces totally new elements into his discourse; it is in this way, after all, that various different points of view, conceptual horizons, systems for providing expressive accents, various social "languages" come to interact with one another. (282)

The concept of dialogics dilates the regular mechanism of dialogues to the point of thought transition and philosophical propounding. Every speech or word uttered by a speaker, either orally or psychologically, is engaged in a constant dialogue either with himself or with the other. This "other" may embody his cultural values, societal norms, religious ideals, or any such entity whom he is continuously involved in a dialogue with and whom his utterances are oriented to, while communicating his thoughts and propagating his ideas. *The Matrix* films such an incessant dialogic faceoff between the Matrix and Zion, between AI (Artificial Intelligence) and human beings. The dialogical confrontations between Morpheus and Agent Smith, between Neo and Agent Smith and, above all, between the rebels from the Zion

and the Agents from the Matrix are but sub-dialogues of a greater dialogue between humans and machines, between fact (reality) and fantasy (illusion).

Furthermore, the movie's imbrications with diverse philosophical issues as well as its incorporation of various mythico-religious allusions allocate the film a wide-enough span for articulating its embedded dialogism, since neither of those stances is the exclusive pivot of the plot, nor is it ostensibly rejected in the movie. Although the film is meant to stand on its own and enunciate its own philosophy, the engaging dialogue between reality and illusion is notably fueled by references to some relevant philosophical influences. Four such philosophical inspirations of *The Matrix* are Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, Plato's allegory of the cave in *The Republic*, Socrates' visit to the Oracle of Delphi, and Rene Descartes' 1641 book *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

In addition, Buddhism and Gnosticism are the two religious influences that intensify the movie's philosophical indeterminacy. From a Gnostic perspective, Neo's role as a liberator, rather than a savior as Jesus Christ, parodies the general Christian conviction that the innocent savior is to suffer for the sins of others. Rather, there pervades a Gnostic spirit that the savior is to suffer for the original sin and humanity must suffer for its ignorance; and so does Neo for his lack of self-knowledge, for it is hinted at with the Oracle's showing him the inscription meaning "Know Thyself." For Neo, knowing himself is to start believing that he is "The One," much like the protagonist Po, in the film *Kung Fu Panda*, who gains self-knowledge through believing that he is the "Dragon Warrior." Besides, several other references are made to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* particularly through the reference to the "white rabbit." Thus all these borrowings from religious-philosophic discourses are deliberately amalgamated and often reversed or modified, to some extent, to evoke some intended effect of uncertainty and indeterminacy. And all these unresolved complexities and unfinalized entanglements lead towards a hidden polemic of openness of meaning that remains dialogically operative throughout the movie. Basically, the ambivalence of reality and illusion as voiced by Neo seems to echo Bakhtin's assertion, that the reality as we have it is only one of many possible realities: "it [reality] is not inevitable, not arbitrary, it bears within itself other possibilities" (*The Dialogics* 37). And Neo, at the very end of the movie, declares, over a pay-phone, that he leaves the world free from all constricting control and dicta, leaves a planet full of unfathomed possibilities, initiating a journey towards indeterminacy and infinity.

The movie's dialogical diversity ranges from dialogues between groups and individuals to dialogues between cryptic utterances of the individual. The dialogical conflict between Neo and A. Smith or A. Smith and Morpheus denotes one of the

several ways the movie emerges as a dialogic process. The operational doctrines of the Matrix, as most often voiced by Agent Smith, constitute a particular entity, though mechanical, that inevitably engages itself in a dialogue with the marginalized humanity and its values represented by Neo and his crew, in order to consolidate a sole authority. Such a dialogic contest resembles another such thematically coherent film titled *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* where sentient apes try an upheaval against conscientious humans. The Matrix, with its rigorous and predetermined rules and tenets, assumes the role of fate that is always set to prevent humanity from pursuing free will. The renegades in the reality are the devotees of free will and they often intrude into the Matrix to precipitate its downfall. Thus a non-stop dialogical polemic between fate and free will is discernible throughout the film. Furthermore, in a dialogical ambience, even the individual words of an utterance can engage in a dialogue with other words of the same utterance. It can be instantiated through Neo's hazy utterances about his being "The One," where his belief is in a constant dialogue with his disbelief, the freewill with fate. Moreover, whether the interlocutor is present or absent, the utterances of the characters in the movie are always oriented towards an entity, either external or internal, real or imagined, concrete or abstract.

The "mixture of tongues" in *The Matrix* crucially suggests the sociolinguistic diversity of varied social sects which echoes Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia that refers to "a perception of language as ideologically saturated and stratified … 'specific points of view on the world, forms of conceptualizing the world in words'" (Morris 15-16). The ruling voice of Matrix authority, as represented by A. Smith is somber, calculative, reticent, and polished in expression, while the expression of the rebels like Mr. Anderson is rough and rude, crass and crude, an unashamed shower of the "middle finger." The agents' polished and disciplined expression is the resultant insignia of their being the ruling disciplinarians, whereas Anderson's rough outburst is the upshot of suppression and an emblem of mutiny. The typical variety of accent of the Agents and of the mutineers and the very disparateness of their expressions and attitude endorse the heteroglossic dimension of the film. Even the cryptic utterances of the prophetic figures like the Oracle and Morpheus are suggestive of the enigmatic nature of the prophesies. Thus, the variety of language and accent digs up the diversity of cultural contexts, social circumstances, philosophical stand-points, specific patterns of moral-ethical perspectives, etc. in a way that multiplicity of viewpoints earns a direct license to multiplicity of meaning and indeterminacy of the finale.

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin demonstrated his concept of carnival or carnivalesque as a decisive moment or circumstance when the world is "temporarily turned upside down" and "carnival time" is special precisely because it allows the prevailing social hierarchies to be reversed (Pearce 230). It denotes a transient,

utopian state where kings become slaves and vice versa, so as to abolish momentarily the social hierarchy and establish an ephemeral equilibrium in the world. Neo's mutiny against the Matrix and Cypher's rebellion against Morpheus bring them all on an equal plane. The rulers and the ruled, the authority and the subjects, the superiors and the subordinates interchange their roles and swap their significance in a way that opens a threshold towards the possible diversity of meaning, disrupting the prevalent social structure. Cypher's assumption of the role of the controller of the previously superior comrades is a vital instance of such norm-shattering carnivalesque state. More importantly, A. Smith's show of human emotions like anger, hatred, disgust, and the human's unwavering, robotic adherence, especially Morpheus' unflinching faith in Neo's being "The One" and Trinity's blind obedience to Morpheus, imply a switch between their roles and blur the line between humans and machines, cognitive intelligence and artificial intelligence, and coalesce them on an equal platform to confirm the inevitability of indeterminacy and unfinalizability of meaning.

The spatio-temporal molding of the characters and its corollary impact on their actions, ideological diversity, and development are what define Chronotope (chronos=time and tope=place) from the Bakhtinian point of reference. The variety in the time-space combination causes a variety in social situations as well as world views. Where and when a character is set determines how he responds to or views the surrounding world. Gary Saul Morson elaborates that adventure stories and romances incorporate naive chronotopes that confine characters to hackneyed stereotypes, whereas realistic novels exploit novelistic chronotopes that allow a subtle probing into the "dark depths" of the characters, into their convictions inculcated by historical transitions and social milieus (221). Correspondingly, all the major characters in *The Matrix* can be said to revolve in a complex novelistic chronotope where they are never stuck to a certain pivot, nor caged in clichéd predictability. Rather, they show their malleability to the continuous change of place and time, with their vicissitude. Neo's shift in realization and attitude as he is said to be existing in 2199, in lieu of 1999 and the remarkable change in the characters and their expression while venturing into the Matrix from reality, along with the gradual but glaring change in expression of A. Smith, speak for the time-space impact in a dialogic domain.

How marvelously *The Matrix* films a sci-fi fantasy can be observed effortlessly through a cursory glance at the surface story of this magical embroidery, but what philosophical imbrications it implies and how it dissolves them into a fantastic fiction offering a multiplicity of meaning are due to a minute dialogical dissection underneath the surface. Average viewers would relish the movie for its brilliant display of a well-knit, compact, and compelling plot, but the critical ones would be simultaneously amazed

with the profundity and far-fetchedness of its philosophical intersections. In short, it will not sound hyperbolic to say that the movie's philosophical affiliations and its variety of implications culminate through its scrutiny under dialogism. *The Matrix* is just one of the innumerable protégés of Bakhtin's cataclysmic theory of dialogism that actually permeates any communicative phenomenon, be it spoken, written, staged or filmed, and brings out its buried treasures of discursive imbrications and avails a wide variety of implications.

Works Cited

Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 8th ed. New York: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005.

Bakhtin, M. M. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Edited and translated by Caryl Emerson. U of Minnesota P, 1984.

---. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. U of Texas P, 1981.

Macey, David. *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*. Penguin, 2000.

Morris, Pam, editor. *The Bakhtin Reader*. Arnold, 2003.

Morson, Gary Saul. "The Russian Debate on Narrative." *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*, edited by Patricia Waugh, OUP, 2006, pp. 212-222.

Pearce, Lynne. "Bakhtin and the Dialogic Principle." *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*, edited by Patricia Waugh, OUP, 2006, pp. 223-232.

The Matrix. Dir. Andy Wachowski and Larry Wachowski. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1999.