

Plato's Cave: the History of Waking up to the World First-Year Seminar (1137)



*“Movements come and movements go
Leaders speak, movements cease”*

Wake Up! Rage Against the Machine

Instructor and Office Location:

Julia Nelson Hawkins, 428 University Hall

Course Topic:

One of Julius Nyerere's last endeavors before he died was to translate it into Kiswahili. Che Guevara looked to it for inspiration while fomenting revolution in the Congo. Huey P. Newton, one of the founders of the Black Panthers movement, taught himself to read and analyze the world around him by studying it. The Wachowskis loosely based the “Matrix trilogy” on it. Hegel used it to formulate his concept of metaphilosophy, which was influential to thinkers like Marx and Engels. Plato's *Republic*. In this text, Plato's vision of education through a series of “awakenings” to the world around us has been foundational for the history of Western political philosophy. But it was his allegorical story of the “Cave” in Book 7 of the *Republic* that catalyzed many literary, artistic, comic, musical, and political movements in the modern era. This course will track the reception of Plato's Cave and the many movements it has sparked. The course's goal is to inspire students to think of “critical reasoning”—one of the core principles of humanistic education—as a type of “waking up.” We will do this by tracing the reception of one of the most foundational allegories of Western Culture.

Our class assignments will range from traditional, primary-source readings / class discussions and film screenings / analysis, to the study of modern art installations, song lyrics, and political movements such as “Black Lives Matter” –all of which are inspired by or repeat the themes of Plato’s captivating Cave. This course is designed to *awaken a desire* for learning about classics, ethics, aesthetics, film and literature... not only in college, but as a life-long goal.

Required Texts:

1. *Plato, Republic* (Hackett Classics) 2nd Edition 1992.
2. *Philosophers Explore “The Matrix,”* ed. By Christopher Grau, Oxford 2005.

Suggested Text: *Shadow Philosophy: Plato’s Cave and Cinema*, Nathan Andersen, Routledge 2014.

Course Requirements:

1. Regular attendance and participation (2 unexcused absences permitted)
2. A midterm thought paper
3. A formal end-of-term paper, plus a project proposal (see assignments for last two days of class)
4. Pop quizzes on readings (3-4, spread throughout the semester)

Grade Rubric:

Participation	50 %
Midterm in-class essay	20%
Final formal paper	20%
Quizzes	10%

Readings and Assignments: ******(All assignments are from required texts or OSU’s “Secured Media Library (drm.osu.edu); otherwise they will be marked “CARMEN upload.”). Each week we will have a reading or film viewing as assigned homework. Readings will be limited to 20-30 pages a week.

Week 1. Introduction. View Orson Welles’ animated short film entitled, “Plato’s Cave,” followed by a discussion of “what is the cave an allegory for?” This will be followed by a short history of major thinkers who were influenced by Plato’s allegory of the cave.

Week 2. Mapping Plato’s Cave:

Read: Selections of *Republic 2-7* and *Republic 7. 514a–520a* (The Allegory of the Cave)

Discussion question: What is Plato trying to say about reality and the meaning of existence in his allegory of the Cave?

Week 3: The Cave and ancient literature:

Read: Homer, *Odyssey 9* and Cicero, *De Republica 6.14* (both CARMEN uploads)

Discussion question: Was Plato was inspired by Homer's telling of Odysseus' escape from Polyphemus' cave? What is gained and / or lost in Cicero's attempt to move the Cave allegory from Greece to Rome?

Week 4: The Cave and Modern Philosophy: Descarte's Reception

Read: "Descarte, Plato, and the Cave," S. Buckle. *Philosophy* (2007) 2: 301-37 and Descarte, *Objections and Replies (On Meditation Two*, with special emphasis on "*Cogito ergo sum*," CARMEN upload)

Discussion question: What is "modern" about Descarte's version of the Cave?

Week 5: The Cave and Modern Film: *The Matrix*

Watch: *The Matrix, Part 1* (OSU's Digital Resource Media, DRM.OSU.EDU)

Discussion question: Does narrative storytelling make it easier to understand the fundamental ideas of the allegory of the Cave?

Week 6: Philosophers Respond to *The Matrix*

Read: "Reality, What Matters, and *The Matrix*," Iakovos Vasiliou in *Philosophers Explore "The Matrix"*; **Internet Research:** google "Baudrillard" and "*Matrix*" and be prepared to discuss what Baudrillard's basic philosophy is and how his ideas are deployed in the *Matrix*.

Discussion question: Do you think the *Matrix* is engaging seriously with philosophy? How does the film's meditation on various strands of philosophy (the Cave analogy and the theme of "waking up,"; the references to Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, etc.) advance the overall plot? Do they get in the way?

Week 7: Baudrillard and the Cave. How do we know we are "awake"?

Read: "Virtually real and really virtual: Baudrillard's procession of simulacrum and *The Matrix*," M Chan, *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies*, 5.2 (2008). CARMEN upload.

Discussion question: Baudrillard is concerned with reality vis-à-vis media saturation. Do you ever feel like the media dictates what you feel is real? Consider, for example, the relationship between your biological self and your media profile. How much does your or your friends' media profiles match what you see as reality? Do you feel that certain media, like the film *The Matrix*, actually help us become more sensitive to differing realities than less so?

Week 8: What About Those Who Choose to Stay in the Dark?

Read: "Happiness and Cypher's Choice: Is Ignorance Bliss?," in *The Matrix* and Philosophy, in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, ed. W. Irwin (CARMEN upload) and Plato, *Republic* 2.359a–2.360d (The Invisibility Ring of Gyges).

Discussion question: Plato poses an important thought experiment in *Republic* 2: what if you had a ring that made you invisible.... Why should you choose "the good" when you can get away with "the wrong?" In many ways,

Plato is addressing the appeal of staying in the dark and resisting the gravitational pull of the higher path. Based on this background reading, do you think Cypher (a character in the *Matrix*) makes the right choice when he chooses to remain plugged into the Matrix (and, hence, remain “invisible” to reality)?

Week 9: Other *Matrices*

Watch: *Ghost in the Shell* (OSU Secure Media Library, DRM.OSU.EDU)

Discussion question: Gilbert Ryle, in his book *The Concept of Mind* (Hutchinson, London, 1949) came up with the phrase “Ghost in the Machine,” to describe Descartes’s mind-body dualism. After a ten minute introduction to Ryle’s concept of the “ghost in the machine,” the rest of the conversation will entail analyzing how the film *Ghost in the Shell*, which was inspired by Ryle’s “Ghost in the Machine,” applies the idea of Plato’s cave to cyborgs.

Week 10: Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?

Watch: *Blade Runner* (OSU Secure Media Library, DRM.OSU.EDU)

Discussion question: Is Deckard a replicant? Does it matter? Who is “awakened,” according to Plato’s qualifications in the Cave allegory, in this film?

Week 11: Yet another film that inspired *The Matrix: Dark City*

Watch: *Dark City* (OSU Secure Media Library, DRM.OSU.EDU)

Discussion question: ‘The theologian Gerard Loughlin interprets *Dark City* as a retelling of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. For Loughlin, the city dwellers are prisoners who do not realize they are in a prison. John Murdoch’s escape from the prison parallels the escape from the cave in the allegory. He is assisted by Dr. Schreber, who explains the city’s mechanism as Socrates explains to Glaucon how the shadows in the cave are cast. Murdoch however becomes more than Glaucon; Loughlin writes, “He is a Glaucon who comes to realize that Socrates’ tale of an upper, more real world, is itself a shadow, a forgery.”¹ Do you agree?’

Week 12: Cornel West on Race and Getting “Woke”

Read: Selections of C. West, *Race Matters*. Beacon, 2000, CARMEN upload.

Discussion question. Cornel West, in his book *Race Matters*, talks about a way of seeing for black folk. He claims that African Americans are born into a system (or “matrix”) in which they are forced to “see” their lives and the world around them through the lens of the white majority. Coming to see their own reality through their own eyes, he claims, is a process of “waking up.” West was also a philosophical advisor for the *Matrix* trilogy (*Matrix Revolutions*) and appeared in it. David Jones, Senior Lecturer in AAAS, and Richard Fletcher, Associate Professor of Classics, who recently curated a modern art installation on Plato’s Cave

(<https://uas.osu.edu/exhibitions/donald-lokuta>), will both be invited to join us for this discussion.

Week 13: Plato's Cave in the 21st Century

Assignment: Students present their final project ideas about how they would apply the narrative of Plato's Cave. Each student will, in addition to her / his final paper project, include a 1 page project-proposal for a film, novel, short story, art installation, song, vel. sim., that charts how the cave allegory might shape our collective futures.

Week 14: Plato's Cave in the 21st Century

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Biographical Statement:

Julia Nelson Hawkins is an Associate Professor of Classics. Her research and teaching focus on the intersection of classical, especially Roman, literature and the history of medicine. She is the author of a monograph on this topic, titled *Therapoetics After Actium* (Johns Hopkins UP). Her next major research project will deal with the history of eugenics in terms of its ancient theoretical antecedents and its various manifestations in the American South, with particular emphasis on slave medicine. With a group of other OSU faculty, she has co-developed the new Medical Humanities minor and (soon to be) MA program.

Academic Misconduct:

It is the responsibility of the Committee on Academic Misconduct to investigate or establish procedures for the investigation of all reported cases of student academic misconduct. The term "academic misconduct" includes all forms of student academic misconduct wherever committed; illustrated by, but not limited to, cases of plagiarism and dishonest practices in connection with examinations. Instructors shall report all instances of alleged academic misconduct to the committee (Faculty Rule 3335-5-487). For additional information, see the Code of Student Conduct (http://studentlife.osu.edu/pdfs/csc_12-31-07.pdf).

Students with Disabilities:

Students with disabilities that have been certified by the Office for Disability Services will be appropriately accommodated and should inform the instructor as soon as possible of their needs. The Office for Disability Services is located in 150 Pomerene Hall, 1760 Neil Avenue; telephone 292-3307, TDD 292-0901; <http://www.ods.ohio-state.edu/>.

ⁱ Wikipedia and Loughlin, Gerard (February 2004), "Seeing in the Dark", *Alien Sex: The Body and Desire in Cinema and Theology*, Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 46-48.