

## **The Matrix as a late twentieth century masculine narrative.**

Masculine narrative involves men gaining recognition and approval from other men, and is often based around the relationship between an older and younger man.

The story of the Matrix has a strong masculine narrative centered around the main characters of Neo and Morpheus. In this essay I will explore the relationships between Neo and the other characters in the film, and how the films modern ideals affect these relationships and carry the narrative through the film.

In the opening sequence we hear a telephone conversation between Cypher and Trinity. Trinity is obviously interested in “the one” and Cypher is dissatisfied by the attention she is giving him. So before any of the characters are introduced there is already a sense of rivalry in the air.

Cypher: “You like him don’t you. You like watching him.”

Trinity: “Don’t be ridiculous.”

Cypher: “We’re gonna kill him, you understand that?”

Trinity: “Morpheus believes he is the one.”

Cypher: “Do you?”

Trinity: “It doesn’t matter what I believe.”

Cypher: “You don’t do you.”

Due to the fact that relationships between men are the basis of the story, elements are introduced early on to indicate that Neo is heterosexual. This comes in the form of Trinity. However she is not the average love interest. In the first scene we see Trinity has characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity; she is tough, serious, fit, aggressive, and commanding. Her overall appearance is quite androgynous; short dark slicked back hair, muscular body and pale angular face make her look very masculine. But her beauty, grace and the tight black pvc cat suit she wears underlines her femininity. This makes her attractive to both sexes, a characteristic embraced by modern society.

Right from the beginning the modern ideals of the film are made apparent. The police have been sent to arrest Trinity but she fights them off with some polished super-

human moves. The lieutenant believes that no female could be of any harm to his officers, he represents old ideas of males and females.

Lieutenant: “Hah Hah. I think we can handle one little girl. I sent two units, they’re bringing her down now.”

Agent: “No Lieutenant, your men are already dead.”

Trinity represents modern femininity in the film and undermines cultural stereotypes about women, which isn’t such a bad thing. In the scene where she first meets Neo she proves that she is intelligent and knowledgeable.

Trinity: “My name is Trinity.”

Neo: “Trinity? The Trinity that cracked the IRS database? Jesus. I just thought um...you were a guy.”

Trinity: “Most guys do.”

This scene shows that stereotypically men are the people assumed to be doing the intelligent work, and that a woman could not be capable of breaking an IRS database. Trinity breaks these boundaries with her male characteristics. She is portrayed masculine and feminine at the same time, which makes her a strong role model and an admirable character.

The first few scenes we see Neo in, he looks nervous and uncomfortable with himself and his body language shows that he is tense, frightened and anxious.

His character seems typical of what we may call a “geek” and appears boyish, scared, whimpy, clumsy, confused, ordinary and very uncool.

The first time we get a comparison of male characters is where Neo is confronted by his boss. Neo is made to stand while his boss sits at his desk in a relaxed way. Neo is easily distracted by the window cleaners and doesn’t seem to care about the trouble he is in as he looks down at his feet and fidgets nervously. Neo’s boss boasts more power, more expensive clothes and a sharper image of a man but Neo has a problem with authority and has no ideals to be him. His boss is perceived as unattractive and less charismatic than Neo but he seems more masculine and far more mature.

The sequence that follows when Neo is first contacted by Morpheus is an early test of Neo's masculinity. On the telephone Morpheus sounds mysterious, controlled, knowledgeable and powerful. In their conversation, Morpheus talks, Neo listens and when Neo asks a question he doesn't get an answer. Morpheus gives him instructions to escape the building but Neo is afraid he will not make it and is caught by the agents. His failure to avoid capture characterizes Neo at this point in the film as an ordinary guy, definitely not super hero material.

In the scene where Morpheus and Neo meet, Morpheus is almost godlike. His first shot of the film is very dramatic. He is stood facing the window with his back to us and when he turns around lightning outside strikes and adds power to his entrance. Morpheus wears dark glasses and a long black leather overcoat which enhances his mystery. Neo sits anxiously on the edge of his chair whilst Morpheus stands in control. When Morpheus does sit down, he leans far back into the chair in a relaxed way. His cool, calm and controlled manner highlights his power and mysterious presence. Morpheus's power is derived from knowledge and wisdom, he knows everything about Neo and holds the answers that Neo is looking for. Just before they met Trinity gives Neo one piece of advice: "Be honest. He knows more than you can imagine." The importance of knowledge and truth in the film is central. Power is gained by having these attributes and by taking the red pill, Neo starts to gain respect from his guide.

After taking the pill Neo wakes up in the real world and could be compared to the birth of a child. He finds himself naked in a small pod, he is hairless and totally unprotected. He is covered in some kind of goeey substance and connected to a mechanical womb by pipes and tubes like umbilical cords. Once he has been unplugged he is flushed down a kind of water shoot which could be likened to the baby's journey down the birth canal.

The process is painful and Neo's suffering is vital as it shows the hero of the film at his lowest point. This endears the audience to him and makes him more likeable. From this fragile reborn Neo, a stronger and more powerful one comes through. In the Nebuchadnezzar the characters look much more human and normal. Their hair and make-up is more natural and they are far less styled. Their clothes are colourless, old and tattered. The main reason for the more humane feeling of the real world is

that it is shot under a blue tone whereas the matrix is shot with strong green tones and everything is slightly decayed, monolithic and gridlike, like a machine would make it, giving a feeling of artificial control.

Once Neo had been prepared for his training he begins to learn skills in combat. These skills are programmed into his mind in seconds and his ability to take them in for so long increases his credibility with his crew members: “10 hours straight, he’s some machine.”

In “The Dojo Fight” Neo tests his new skills on Morpheus. The use of Kung Fu throughout the film is significant as it is a mental and spiritual martial art, not just a physical one. During the fight the crew of the Nebuchadnezzar watch and when Neo gets knocked to the ground, Cypher looks very pleased with himself and turns to see Trinity’s reaction. Cypher’s rivalry only contributes to Neo’s increasing masculinity. After Morpheus gets the better of Neo he asks how he beat him and emphasises how a man is not defined by masculinity but by knowledge.

Morpheus: “Do you believe that, my being stronger, or faster, has anything to do with my muscles, in this place?”

They continue to fight and the crew start to recognise how skilled Neo actually is. This is the first time they have seen him in action and their approval is clear:

Mouse: “Jesus Christ, he’s fast.

Take a look at his neuroconnetics, they’re way above normal.”

In the fight Morpheus is like an instructor teaching his pupil. When Neo finally manages to punch Morpheus the crew are amazed, and Trinity watches lovingly. This brief shot of Trinity admiring Neo does wonders for his appeal, having a woman support or lust after the character makes him far more likeable.

The next test Neo undertakes is “The Jump,” the ship’s crew watch eagerly and Trinity wills him on but he still fails the jump. This is a minor setback to Neo’s improved manliness and Trinity is disappointed with him.

When Morpheus allowed himself to be captured so that Neo could escape, his camaraderie was unmistakable. Morpheus's confidence in Neo was so strong that he was willing to give his life for him. Morpheus believed his relationship with Neo to be so strong that he would gladly give up his own life in order to save Neo's. After the capture it was thought the best thing would be to pull the plug so that the agents didn't get the access codes to Zion. However Neo would not let that happen and decides to launch a rescue mission to save Morpheus. The friendship or love they have for each other is so powerful they both risk their own life to save the other. This selflessness features at the end of most films with a masculine narrative, the lesser male proves himself to be worthy to the elder male and gains everybody's respect. In Neo's case he and Trinity take on a whole government building. The government lobby is an explosive, highly styled scene which raises Neo's status dramatically. His ability is at it's best and the ease of which he fights off all his attackers makes his strength seem even more commanding. Here Neo begins to act more like a conventional hero, although even at Neo's greatest he is still a world away from the typical action hero with over developed muscles like Bruce Willis or Sylvester Stallone.

The camera work in this scene also adds to his dominance, he is shot more often from angles which make him appear larger and slow motion is used in places where he is at his most powerful, emphasising it further. The Matrix has extremely modern cinematography including special effects, modern graphics, and brand new filming techniques. For example the three hundred and sixty degree panning shot of Neo, which appears to be freeze frame. This was done using still cameras positioned all around the studio disguised in the background, all set to trigger at very small intervals. These advanced techniques add to the authenticity of the story and make the overall film more exciting.

Andy Wachowski: "Freeze a moment and the image sustains in your mind."

Slow motion and Freeze frames are used throughout, giving the film a strong comic book feel. Influences such as John Woo movies, Japanese animation and manga give the film a certain look and science fiction books such as Simulacra and Simulation by Jean Baudrillard provide vital ideas that are evident in the film.

Neo is not defined as a super hero until he and Trinity rescue Morpheus and then

goes on to save Trinity. At this point Neo's newfound masculinity is tested to its limit when he saves her from the helicopter crash.

Trinity is equal to Neo throughout, both in her appearance, clothes and hair, and because they save each other's lives on numerous occasions. However, in spite of all of her characteristics, Trinity's narrative role function in moving the plot forward seems to contradict these other signals. Trinity starts out independent and commanding, but ends up little more than a traditional love interest by the end of the film, bringing Neo back to life with her love and inspiring the hero to conquer. This is a little disappointing as it isn't very often you get a film with a feminine heroine. However, the romantic interest of the hero is usually not essential to the narrative in the film genre, they are just used to add authority and stature. This is where *The Matrix* is different, and why Trinity is such an important character. Her love for the hero is not just to add power, their relationship is central to the narrative and without it the film would not reach its conclusion. The importance of romance to the narrative is like that of a feminine romance so it seems that the Wachowski brothers have somehow fused together two genres of romance and action and adventure. Maybe this is why the film is so popular, it has something to offer everyone whatever their taste.

Once Trinity has saved Neo with her love and ordered him to get up and fight we see our hero become one with his environment. He seems tranquil and at peace with his surroundings, finally understanding the matrix. Once he has realised he is "the one" his power is unmistakable and could be compared to Superman as he flies up into the atmosphere at the end of the film.

In conclusion, the film exploits many of the fears in our modern society; man's role in the future, environmental issues, artificial intelligence, even the after effects of experiments such as genetic engineering and nuclear testing. But more important to the film than these issues is the idea of gaining power and respect through knowledge. *The Matrix* explores new ideas about the nature of reality and deals with important issues and relationships in an action packed adventure.

Neo's relationships with the other characters in the film are an important part of his journey to enlightenment. Morpheus offers guidance and camaraderie, Cypher and Agent Smith bring rivalry and contest and Trinity and the crew of the

Nebuchadnezzar offer approval to Neo. As the hero encounters each of the characters, through slight adjustments of comparison and approval, Neo's definition as a man becomes sharper making him more appealing and importantly more cool.

Although Trinity's role becomes more of a love interest at the end of the film she is still central to the narrative as Neo would die without her love. Hopefully the idea of the female being just as significant as the male in film will be recognised and others will follow.

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