

## Fluid Realities/Fluid Identities: Gender in the Matrix

by Hannah Kuhlmann

Blockbuster action movies are rarely the subject of in-depth, philosophical analysis. *The Matrix*, however, is an exception to that rule. Numerous film critics and at least half a dozen web pages have outlined its use of Christ metaphors and biblical parallels, claiming the film as a site of religious allegory. As thorough and detailed as these readings of religious symbolism are, they unfortunately leave very little room for alternative angles of analysis.

In both concept and execution, *The Matrix* is a text rich with potential for deconstruction and refiguring. The film's dominant, popular interpretation as Christian allegory dwells on the symbolism of names, numbers and smaller devices of the plot, but fails to tackle some of the more basic but intriguing questions the film raises. How is identity produced? What are the relationships between identity, intellect and body? To what extent do body, identity and gender inform and constitute each other? The concept of *The Matrix*, in which humans inhabit a virtual or cyber-environment, works as a sharp and efficient metaphorical tool when applied to questions of gender and the self.

The general importance of body, intellect and identity within the film should be clear to anyone who has seen it (and will be discussed at length in this analysis), but the role gender plays might not be as apparent. Gender, and specifically gendered and sexual bodies are the currency of (Hollywood) films. As a commercial visual medium, films depend on attractive, highly gendered actresses and actors to draw audiences. The way in which those actresses and actors subsequently perform or subvert gender roles is a way in which the film communicates with its audience. Thus, films are always concerned with gender. In an SF film which deals with identity and reality, a discussion of the constructedness of gender fits perfectly.

*The Matrix* contains very purposeful manipulations of gender and gender boundaries in its story and casting. One example of this is Trinity's (Carrie-Anne Moss) role in the film's opening scenes. The film begins with Trinity's action-packed encounter with the agents and police. "I think we can handle one little girl," a cop says, and then Trinity proceeds to unleash a bunch of wicked kung-fu on par with any male action star. Unlike women in most action films, she can outrun and outfight male characters. She appears feminine in her vacuum-sealed leather pants, but she seems to be the film's primary ass-kicker. In following scenes, Neo learns about the existence of the matrix, and is approached by Trinity in a club. When he discovers her identity and connects her with her impressive hacker past, he can't help but exclaim, "Jesus! I just thought you were a guy." It is this character, a female who excels in activities reserved for males, that introduces the film and alerts the audience to watch for more gender disturbances to come. P>As an male action hero, Keanu Reeves is as much against gender type as the character of Trinity. With his slim, relatively unmuscled body and mellow demeanor, Reeves is a far cry from fiercely hypermasculinized action icons like Bruce Willis and Arnold Schwarzenegger. In an actor profile from the [q online website](#) (written around the time *The Matrix* was released), he is described as ". . . fey-haired, a bit androgynous and given to acting with his hands. He had exotic, part-Chinese, part-Hawaiian and part-English lineage and a weird name that meant 'Cool Breeze

over the Mountain'. Too good-looking by far and not given to dating other movie stars, he was therefore widely assumed to be gay. . ."

Reeves exists in popular culture as a pretty face, not a set of muscles. As a celebrity, he is appreciated the same way a female starlet would be -- for his lovely name, the shape of his cheekbones and his hairstyle. *The Matrix* is conscious of Reeves' status, and constantly refers to it through dialogue. Cypher asks Trinity to look into Neo's "big, beautiful eyes," and the oracle tells Neo that he's cuter than she had expected (but not too bright -- another nod on the film's part to Reeve's reputation for being dim-witted).

Where Trinity steals the role of strong, capable hero from males, Keanu/Neo easily falls into the role she has left empty. He becomes the girl. For further evidence of Trinity and Neo's gender role switch, one need only consider the multiple comparisons of Neo to young girls from children's stories. "I imagine that right now you're feeling a bit like Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole," Morpheus tells Neo, and minutes later Cypher tells him "buckle your seatbelt, Dorothy, 'cause Kansas is goin' bye-bye!" Neo/Keanu accepts these characterizations as a vulnerable little girl without question, whereas a man from the Schwarzenegger school of action acting would surely take offense to insinuations of effeminacy or feminine vulnerability. In the final scenes, Trinity takes on the role of Prince Charming, saving Neo and awakening him, the film's chosen Sleeping Beauty, with a kiss. With Reeves playing Neo, *The Matrix* further communicates an agenda of gender role confusion.

But while the film is self aware and playful with the gender conventions of its genre, these masculine/feminine switches are more for the purposes of style than subversion. They float on the surface, and ultimately disturb very little. It is when the film situates its human subjects in cyberspace that compelling gender, sexuality and identity equations begin to form.

This is how Morpheus first explains the matrix to Neo. "The matrix is everywhere. It is all around us, even now, in this room. You can see it when you look out your window, or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth."

Substitute the word "gender" for "the matrix" in the first sentence, and suddenly Morpheus' description is an echo of Judith Butler's ideas of gender's constructedness. In her own words, "gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly (282)." When she examines the acts which constitute gender, she understands them "not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of *belief* (271)."

For Butler, the authorship of gender is ambiguous and includes both the gendered actor and culture as a whole. If we understand the matrix as a metaphor for constructed gender, then the film seems to say that people are the unsuspecting victims of culture's gender essentialist regime, their identities and lives shaped by an outside force which they cannot control and do not contribute to themselves. In this respect, when dealing with the genesis of gender, *The Matrix* is perhaps a weak metaphorical tool. But concerning gender's effects on individuals and identity, it is much stronger.

The real oppressiveness of the matrix, the agents and the machine civilization that controls Earth is that the humans trapped in the matrix are denied knowledge of their bodies. Their intellects are forever separated from their physical selves. Neo, aware of the matrix and the physical world beyond it, must fear that the life he lived in the matrix was entirely produced and assigned to him by the machines. Could it be that he has never shaped his own identity? Or a worse possibility still -- does he even *have* an identity? Or is he only a meat husk, filled with memories of a computer simulation? This fear is foreshadowed in the early scene in Neo's apartment, when his computer virus buyer flippantly remarks, "this never happened, *you don't exist* (emphasis mine)."

Later, Neo questions his false memories in the car with Trinity, and she reassures him that "the matrix cannot tell you who you are." Butler tackles this dilemma. "If gender attributes. . . are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal (279)." In other words, if Neo's life in the matrix was not the product of personal expression but actually a performance scripted by the matrix, then he is a creation of the matrix. "The distinction between expression and performativeness is quite crucial," Butler continues, "for if gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then *there is no preexisting identity* by which an act or attribute might be measured" (emphasis mine again). Uh oh. . . luckily for him, our hero is able to discard the life of Thomas Anderson, his matrix persona, and fully embrace the name and life of Neo, a persona he has created in cyberspace. It turns out he does have a preexisting identity, through which he is ultimately liberated as The One (a metamorphosis which will be discussed later).

Here is where the film sets up its most promising body/identity equation. . . and then fills it with the most disappointing, unexciting solution. We learn that Neo has never actually lived in a physical body, but has appeared inside the matrix as a residual self image (RSI) instead. An RSI, Morpheus explains, is "the mental projection of your digital self." Presumably, the matrix creates RSIs for its inhabitants which match their comatose bodies in the physical world. But the RSIs created by humans who are physically separate from the matrix seem self-designed -- fashion preferences and hairstyles change, and personal vanity and style figures into the RSIs of Morpheus and crew when they visit the oracle. They seem able to change their bodies to match their sense of self, but the changes they actually make are relatively minor. Except for the pleather trenchcoat and sunglasses, Neo looks remarkably like Mr. Anderson. In the words of Riki Anne Wilchins, his "sense of self matches closely with the cultural grid of what [he] should mean (40)." What a disappointment.

Think of the questions *The Matrix* could raise if RSIs and physical bodies were radically different. As it stands, Neo looks like Mr. Anderson because that is the only embodiment he has ever known. Or, as Wilchins writes, ". . . any understanding of my body comes via the construction of an imaginary body, one that is created from the reservoir of cultural signs" (144). Imagine the colossal genderfuck, *identityfuck*, that the film doesn't perform. What if Keanu Reeves' character woke up in that gooey red pod, covered with tubes, monstrous and just-born, in a body that wasn't Keanu Reeves? Suppose the matrix accidentally assigned him the wrong RSI, one that didn't correspond to his physical body. Hey, computer error, it happens. One minute, Neo knows himself as a male, the next minute Neo is embodied as a woman. Then s/he'd

really start worrying about notions of self and its relation to the matrix, and those worries would not be so easily dispelled.

It is disappointing that *The Matrix* doesn't follow through as transgressively as it might with the questions it raises. However, the film's depiction of Neo's transformation into The One offers a satisfyingly genderqueer philosophy.

It is Neo's ever growing awareness of the matrix and its constructedness that facilitates his growth into The One. When he begins his journey, he prepares to leave the matrix for the first time. Waiting for the pill to take effect, he sees his own fractured reflection in a nearby mirror. Suddenly the mirror flows and the cracks disappear, and Neo reaches out to touch the fluid mirror. There is a motif of mirrors and reflections in the film, which can be seen as symbolic of Neo's examination of self. He is always seeing reflections of himself in Morpheus' sunglasses and other surfaces, but this fluid mirror foreshadows not only the experience of fluid reality which is to follow, but the fluid, changeable identity which Neo will eventually embrace. His initial departure from the matrix is less like falling down the rabbit hole and more like falling into himself (which is exactly where the camera takes us, straight down his throat and into a bewildering new dimension of self.)

The defining moment of Neo's journey towards One-hood comes in the oracle waiting room, when he encounters the androgynous spoon bending kid. "Only try to realize the truth - there is no spoon," advises the little Yuri Geller wannabe, urging Neo to give the trick a try. "Then you will see that it is not the spoon that bends, it is only yourself." Sure enough, it works. Neo adopts the phrase "there is no spoon" as a mantra to give him courage in seemingly impossible situations, forcing himself to accomplish the seemingly undoable. But the wisdom of the spoon bending tyke is more precisely interpreted as the idea of bending oneself out of the grid of meaning enforced by the matrix. (Is it mere coincidence that the freedom fighting crew of the Nebuchadnezzar eat with sporks, the transutensil that is neither spoon nor fork?)

When Neo learns to bend himself, he melts the walls of the matrix and becomes The One. Instead of a metaphor for Christ, this One is a bringer of transgender freedom. He cannot yet destroy the matrix, but he can make it less of what Morpheus calls "a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. . . a prison for your mind." Similarly, Riki Anne Wilchins describes a gender regime as having five rules: "(1) there are only two cages; (2) everyone must be in a cage; (3) there is no mid-ground; (4) no one can change, and (5) no one chooses their cage (156)." In his final message to the builders of the matrix, Neo promises to liquidate their control. "You're afraid of change. . . I'm going to show these people what you don't want them to see. A world without rules and controls, a world without borders or boundaries. A world where anything is possible." Thus the film wraps up its gender metaphor, but not before Neo blasts off, flying high above the city. A fluid, changeable identity, a transgender sensibility of self is figured as the mental equivalent of flight, the ultimate physical freedom. A thrilling conclusion for the film, one which leaves the viewer busily imagining the world which Neo promises. With two sequels planned for 2002, *The Matrix* will have ample opportunity to create Neo's transworld on the screen -- but whether Hollywood will grant us a vision of that world's full transgressive potential is another matter entirely.

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## **WORKS CITED**

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