

## The Performance of Male Subjectivity in *The Matrix Trilogy*

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### Abstract:

The trilogy of *The Matrix* essentially speaks of, indeed demands, the constitution, development and stabilization of a male subject. [...] In the figure of Neo as the Chosen One the trilogy permanently reproduces a consistent concept of active masculinity in the form of male heroism by means of the formal principle of recursive (presup)position as an ongoing process. That this male subjectivity is a performance is one of the trilogy's most essential, constitutive messages, which the films never acknowledge openly but keep producing on a formal level. [...] At first glance, the films thus seem to represent a stabilizing trend of the Hollywood cinema dispositif. At the same time, however, the trilogy is perilously situated on the brink of an abyss when the production process of this masculinity exposes its own constitutive dependence on a femininity whose visible and representative manifestation could hardly be more energetic, nimble and clever. Thus, the trilogy of *The Matrix* figures as the prototype of contemporary manifestations of a dispositif that seeks to (re)consolidate the severely shaken status of male heroism by employing strategically its whole array of technological possibilities.

1 When *The Matrix*<sup>1</sup> by the brothers Wachowski was released in 1999 the film was celebrated frenetically as a masterpiece worldwide. Even the academic world chimed in with the praises of the extent of self-reflection to which contemporary mainstream cinema was able nowadays. By means of an enormous amount of psychophysical-technical simulation<sup>2</sup> the film raised the topic of alienated human existence to the latest level of the post-modern condition. Critics declared that its powerful imagery constituted a seductive vortex which amounted to an elaborate critique of the mass media.<sup>3</sup> Since then two sequels have been produced: *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix: Revolutions*.<sup>4</sup> Because of its narrative density and the ironic finesse with which it treats the highly topical virtualization of the world as well as of the self, *The Matrix* was appraised as matchless and unique. In spite of the serial character established by its sequels, it was retroactively allocated the status of a closed entity. Accordingly, the academic verdict on *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix: Revolutions* could only be scathing. Regarded as mere continuations of something unique, the sequels

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<sup>1</sup> *The Matrix*. Dir. Andy and Larry Wachowski. Warner Brother, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> That is, a simulation generated by directly bombarding the optical nerves with electro-technical stimuli in an interrelated series.

<sup>3</sup> By now the Wachowski brothers have created a complex, commercialized *The Matrix*-universe, including online computer games and a computer animated compilation of short films, *The Animatrix* (2003). This rouses the suspicion that the success story of the *Matrix* films is indeed a stroke of genius planned from first to last by Hollywood mega-capitalism and that the films might in fact be mere add-ons of the computer games.

<sup>4</sup> The sequels were released world-wide in 2003 with only a couple of months separating them.

were belittled as purely commercial action-movies and mass-produced articles. And yet it is this recalcitrant reception, I would argue, which paradoxically attests to the basic principle of the films, a principle they expose and at the same time work with: the principle of consistency as regards content and narration, which is intimately connected with that of *production* and therefore always accompanied by a potential surplus that precludes closure as such.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the three films do in fact form a unit, but one which is potentially infinite and open, since they point out that stability can always only be achieved through recursion, that something appears as consistent only if something else is retroactively posited as foreclosed. This, of course, is precisely what the concept of performativity maintains in regard to the production of subjectivity, as Slavoj Žižek and, in regard to gender identity, Judith Butler have pointed out.<sup>6</sup>

2 My thesis therefore is that the trilogy essentially speaks of, indeed demands, the constitution, development and stabilization of a male subject. Reviewers have commented extensively on the figure of the Chosen One, the eschatological willingness to sacrifice oneself, and the almost epic-scale heroism around which the films revolve. Each of these paradigms can be folded back onto that of the development of (modern) subjectivity. I would like to argue that in the figure of Neo as the Chosen One the trilogy permanently reproduces a consistent concept of active masculinity by means of the formal principle of recursive (presup)position (Žižek, *Die Nacht der Welt* 154). Subjectivity, especially when it takes the form of male heroism, is an ongoing process and therefore a performance; this is one of the trilogy's most essential, constitutive messages, which the films never acknowledge openly but keep producing on a formal level. Neither a pre-existing entity nor located in the natural biological body, masculinity is always contingent and relational. Inserted into the context of an undiminishedly powerful heteronormativity, it is at the same time conceivable and above all representable only in relation to femininity as its delimiting difference. At first glance, the films thus seem to represent a rather conservative, stabilizing trend of the Hollywood cinema *dispositif*. At the same time, however, the trilogy is perilously situated on the brink of an abyss when the production process of this masculinity exposes its own constitutive dependence on a femininity whose visible and representative manifestation could hardly be more energetic, nimble and clever. Moreover, the object's circulation in the symbolic circuit, which here takes the form of the search for a riddle's solution, lays bare the constitutive flip-

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<sup>5</sup> For this reason, the commercial exploitation of the Matrix-hype by the Hollywood industry becomes visible as a clever reaction rather than a fully intended instrumentalization of this phenomenon.

<sup>6</sup> Especially Butler's concept foregrounds the compulsive nature of this process, which is brought about by social interpellation. Gender identity exists only in the permanent (re)production of the normative contents of this interpellation. Film as a mass media genre can be said to function analogously in that gender is not simply a natural given but necessarily conceptualized as something constituted and negotiated in this medium.

side of active subjectivity as such, that is, its fantasmatic supports. Its final solution, though, which identifies the hero himself as this very object around which the whole story has revolved all along, can neither be interpreted as an act of self-recognition by the Cartesian cogito, nor as a system-constitutive error. Thus, *The Matrix* trilogy figures as the prototype of contemporary manifestations of a *dispositif* that seeks to (re)consolidate the severely shaken status of male heroism by employing strategically its whole array of technological possibilities. The time of an essential, unchallenged masculinity figuring as emblem of universal humanity is definitely over; and yet its status is reclaimed again and again with the help of the latest in film production technology. In this essay, then, I would like to explore the two (retroactively posited!) preconditions which formally constitute the indispensable functional supports of male subjectivity; and I will further explain their effects in the course of the whole trilogy. But first we should recall what the matrix itself might stand for.

3 From the narrative universe of *The Matrix*, broadly speaking, there emerge the features of a messianic hero who is to liberate humanity from the ubiquitous yoke of the machines. This process is embedded in the thematic context of individual human freedom and collective fate, that is to say, of contingency and determination. As Elisabeth Bronfen in "Erlöserfiguren ungewöhnlicher Art. GATTACA und Matrix im Vergleich" has made clear in her analysis of *The Matrix*, the films offer no reliable statements about their eschatological content or the utopian dimension of the notion of salvation. Very perceptively, she also remarks that the hero is interpellated by a performative gesture and by this means summoned to the status of savior in the first place. This "production process" of the One can be characterized, Bronfen claims, as a digital series of 0 and 1, in which Neo becomes the One because all the differences previously raised in the film dissolve in his person. At the very moment when Neo emerges as an essentially immanent unpredictability of a technical system, he is uniquely enabled to change it as a whole. With his insider's knowledge of the code he can change the rules in his (own) favor as he goes along, as well as bring it to the attention of others. I want to argue, however, that any narrative fixation of this status is already superseded by the production process itself. *The Matrix* produces a surplus which cannot be contained in one narrative only and thus demands a radically different theoretical perspective.

4 In the second part of *The Matrix*, the architect enlightens us concerning Neo's relation to the system: he is indeed the One, not, however, because he can change the system, but because he figures as that deviation which the system needs to establish itself in the first place. To paraphrase Žižek, an ideological system exists only as the effect of a collective fantasmatic presupposition on part of its subjects (Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*

118).<sup>7</sup> The idea of a controlling power constitutes a scenario in which the subject is never able to attain some kind of unity. The film allocates this constellation of fundamental lack, collectively externalized as alienation, a perfectly fitting image: the matrix. This is how Žižek describes it:

What, then, is *The Matrix*? Simply the Lacanian "big Other", the virtual symbolic order, the network that structures reality for us. This dimension of the "big Other" is that of the constitutive alienation of the subject in the symbolic order: the big Other pulls the strings, the subject doesn't speak, he "is spoken" by the symbolic structure (Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 216).<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the Matrix provides the meaningful hold onto reality without which subjects cannot exist at all. Its simulations do not obfuscate the "real" reality (be it material or ideal), but they obfuscate that there is nothing whatsoever "out there" which the subjects could symbolize (the Real, whatever its contents might be). The oppressive ideological system, which has to be changed (if only from the inside), has this single function: to draw attention away from the fact that a non-alienated existence is unattainable *per se*. There is no way, however, that a systemic change could be induced by any act of agency on the side of the subject, since active subjectivity is nothing but an imaginary, fantasmatically supported concept itself. Only the act of assuming responsibility for one's own status as a passive object, which corresponds with the notion of a manipulating, invisible mastermind as the second "real" support of human existence, could induce any kind of "systemic change." According to Žižek, the second scenario of unattainability is represented in that sequence which shows the human beings, attached to tubes, lying in tubs.<sup>9</sup> For him the matrix is a thematically consistent image for the symbolic order and as such represents the *sine qua non* of human existence. His readings seek to discover the fantasmatic supports necessary for the production of subjectivity in the whole symbolic realm of the films. Following Žižek and, indeed, going beyond his analysis, the whole *The Matrix* trilogy can thus be interpreted as an apparatus which is able to produce successfully a consistent concept of the male hero only by (re)producing its two necessary, preceding supports. The imaginary, closed concept of masculinity entails above all Neo's acceptance of his symbolic mandate as savior. The acceptance of his "destiny", however,

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<sup>7</sup> The thesis of a manipulating mastermind behind the matrix must already be seen as a phantasm of this film.

<sup>8</sup> The virtual reality represented by the matrix differs from the symbolic order only in its status as a secondary induction. Phenomenologically, it is defined through images. However, it too needs to adhere to the structural laws of the symbolic order insofar as activity is still only enacted through an other who represents the subject. The subject therefore can never be completely in control of its own agency. See Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* 127-167

<sup>9</sup> According to Žižek, this sequence offers a rather naive scenario. For it is this content of the Real alone - i.e., the phantasma of passivity - which constitutes the condition humaine as such. Žižek has elucidated this conception, especially in regard to the domination of the visual in cyberspace, by applying the model of interpassivity; his specific example is the Tamagotchi-phenomenon. See Žižek, *Liebe Deinen Nächsten?* 201-226.

renders such issues as free will, extent and quality of impersonation and the question of how a mask can create authentic subjectivity problematic. That his status as the Chosen One rests on the witness of a community of simple-minded believers such as the group around Morpheus, is an important factor here. Žižek's interpretations of the notion of destiny and especially of symbolic impersonation highlight the formal nature of this issue. The figure of the savior is not defined by his inherent qualities but rather by his function which is strictly bound up with a position in the intersubjective network the three films spread out. The shifting meanings of his task only serve to underline this kind of determination. It is therefore Neo's (self)sacrifice which finally makes him the savior in the eyes of those who already believe him to be the savior. Yet the content of the two supports, I would argue, is not identical with that claimed, because desired, by Žižek.<sup>10</sup> In what follows, I will demonstrate and explain this other content.

5 In the first frame of the second sequence of *The Matrix* we see a monitor in close-up, on which a newspaper article, uploaded from the internet, is displayed. The article features a bold looking, colored man; its headlines declare him to be the worldwide most dangerous terrorist. This is one of the central characters of the film, the leader of the *résistance*, Morpheus. A male figure has fallen asleep in front of the monitor, his head resting on the desk. In a slow tracking shot, the camera moves toward this figure from behind. At this moment we do not know yet that it shows us the protagonist of the film, Thomas A. Anderson alias Neo. The camera cuts to Morpheus' face in half-profile on the monitor. Then, in a reverse-shot, it moves closer to and beyond the head of the dozing figure, who is wearing headphones. It is suggested that the muffled music we hear in the voice-over issues from those headphones. In this way, the camera creates an increasingly intimate connection between the two figures even while neither of them is able to perceive the other consciously. Even before the protagonist wakes up and starts to act, the film establishes a special relation between him and Morpheus. In the guise of a digital or virtual self, Neo's future mentor is already watching over the pupil he has elected and will train to be the "Chosen One." The mode of representation already suggests that what we see is located completely in the symbolic. This suspicion hardens during the next frames. After a series of cuts has established the room the dozing male figure is situated in, the camera returns to a close-up shot of the

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<sup>10</sup> At the same time this figure is revealed on the formal level of production as an empty signifier the competing forces equally can refer to, so that the operations of both, the *résistance* as well as the machines, follow the same logic. The savior is therefore not an iconoclastic figure, as the films seem to claim at first, but basically consolidates the symbolic universe as a whole. The only serious threat to the films' veritable flood of images is posed by Agent Smith, who is himself contaminated with the essentially human stain of desire and longs for a material based reality beyond images and technologies of representation.

back of his head, then re-focuses on the monitor in reverse-shot. The newspaper articles disappear, the screen turns black, and a bright green cursor starts to gleam and writes the following line: "Wake up, Neo!" All this time we still hear electronic dance music in the voice-over. The camera cuts back to the figure who raises his head, squints into the camera and asks in surprise: "What?" Then, irritated about this unwanted intrusion into his digital privacy, Neo tries to interrupt it by pressing the EXIT-button. To no avail, the interface persistently keeps transmitting two messages: "The Matrix has you" and "Follow the white rabbit" - two baits which will initiate his quest. Apart from the fact that the sender of this message remains anonymous, one might well wonder how the figure could have reacted to these messages at all. How is it possible that he is woken from his sleep without any audible stimulation? This is indeed a remarkable scene, since the film suggests that we witness a moment of semiotic identification with the name on the screen while this is utterly impossible according to the "hard," physical facts. Even if the computer were able to generate a human voice, Neo would de facto not be able to hear anything but music since he is wearing headphones. Yet he opens his eyes and, almost at the same time, utters in response: "What?" Again, he has in fact not been able to see the line on the monitor. That the protagonist is at first in a state of narcissistic, pre-symbolic self-sufficiency from which he awakes in order to enter the process of becoming a subject, falls short as an adequate interpretation. On the contrary, the film offers several clues that the very conditions necessary for the constitution of subjectivity are already completely established in the form of the symbolic network.



Fig 1.



Fig 2.



Fig 3.

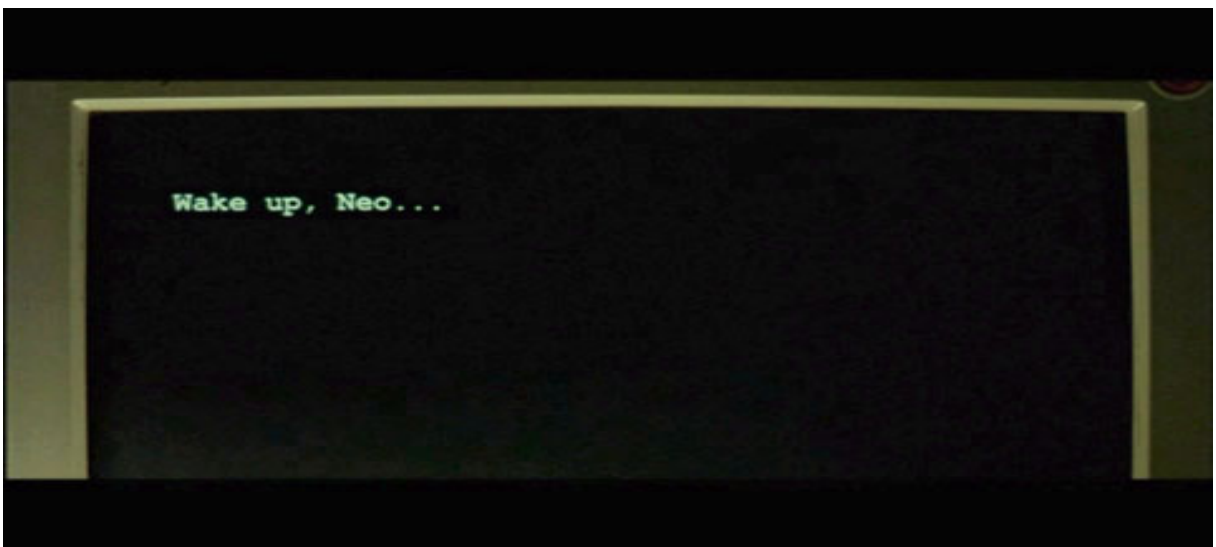


Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.

6 This is clearly demonstrated in the first sequence of the film which follows the intro. The intro starts with the by now famous cascading lines of numbers and signs, pulsating and shimmering in an iridescent green on the black screen. During this simulation of a digital code, several signs are arrested, turn a gleaming white and form, one after the other, the film-title *The Matrix*. While the moving letters and numbers appear the wrong way round, the title corresponds to the standardized western spelling. The design of this interface foregrounds and challenges the conventional positioning of the human being, firmly rooted in physical reality, toward the machine. This mirroring positions us not as viewers looking on a computer screen, or rather, into the computer, but reveals that we are already positioned inside. The world which we gaze at from this perspective and into which the camera takes us when it moves forward through the columns of numbers and signs, when it penetrates the membrane of the monitor, is nothing but our "reality." This is to say that reality is indeed always already virtual insofar as it is only accessible from within the symbolic order which provides it with structure and meaning. At the same time, the film shows that what we are going to see has not only the status of a fictional narrative but also that it is a simulation, equally subjected to the laws of the symbolic order, yet with a qualitative difference.

7 After the title has dissolved, a green pulsating cursor appears on the black screen and writes the command protocol for a trace program (first the command: Call trans. Opt.: received. 2-19-98, 13:24:18 Log>, then: Trace program: running). On the voice-over we hear a dialogue between a man and a woman, apparently belonging to an organization whose aims



are, however, not made explicit. In the manner of a telephone conversation, the voices talk about a third male "person." It soon becomes clear that this telephone call is risky, that it puts the figure belonging to the female voice in a precarious situation, and that the members of this group are divided amongst themselves concerning this said male "person." Both voices are disembodied; any connection to a visual figure is avoided. Their controversy about the "person" regards his status, here already claimed to be unique since he is "chosen," and his safety, which however cannot be guaranteed at the moment. Even before we can form an image of this person who will somehow play a special role in this narrative, the way in which the voices talk about him establish him as an object. In turn, they constitute him in language, they "bespeak" him. This makes clear that the "person" has *not* existed as the Chosen One before this moment, but is *per se* constituted exclusively through a symbolic structure which obviously always already precedes it. The actions of the agents at the end of this first sequence, after Trinity - the figure belonging to the female voice - has managed mysteriously to leave the telephone cell she has been trapped in -, can be interpreted analogously. The actual target, according to the agents, is not Trinity but that figure the group is searching for and whose name is here uttered for the first time in the narrative: Neo. In other words, like the two voices, the representatives of the system of order, too, precede Neo.

8        Within the symbolic texture, however, this "person" is known at first as Thomas A. Anderson. He is Joe Regular, whose everyday world is dull but quite intact and who yet has a suspicion that there must be somehow "more" to his conventional, bourgeois existence, because "something goes wrong all the time" (as Morpheus tells Neo in the fifth sequence). Known as a hacker under the alias Neo, he pursues this suspicion each night in the Internet, where it crystallizes into the search for an answer to the one, urgent question: "What is the Matrix?" He is driven by the desire for this particular knowledge even before Trinity promises him the answer in the second sequence. Neo's waking up from his sleep, therefore, is supposed to mark the moment when his suspicion becomes focused and is directed toward the realization that his life is alienated and manipulated by an invisible ideological power which he has to find and fight. So far the (rather affirmative) reading the film offers on the surface. The special circumstance, however, that Neo can identify with his intrepid *alter ego* on the monitor, Morpheus, without having heard or seen him, points into yet another direction if we take into account that he has emerged as the "One" from a symbolic act in the previous sequence. Based on this, the second sequence should not be misread as an initiation in the sense of a passage from a pre-symbolic state into the symbolic order. When in the following scenes Neo faces the choice whether he wants to follow the white rabbit he has been predicted

to encounter, or not, we do not witness the moment of the "original choice" but rather are introduced to the leading motif of the film: how to accept a symbolic mandate, how to impersonate efficiently a mask imposed on one. The sequence shows without doubt an important moment, yet it constitutes not a beginning but is merely the precursor of a specific kind of incision whose meaning can be more closely specified with the help of the third sequence.

9        Here we are introduced to a typical day at the office for Thomas A. Anderson. He works in a software company and, because he spends his nights in front of the computer and therefore has a problem with getting up early, he gets in trouble with his boss every day for showing up late for work. After having been rebuked for this by his boss, he withdraws to his office box where he receives a phone call on a cellular phone that has been delivered to him by a parcel service just a moment ago. It is Morpheus who warns Neo that he is being followed and should flee. He offers his help by suggesting an escape route. The way Neo reacts to this call allows us to draw conclusions as to the actual abyss looming behind his suspicion that something is wrong with his life. Instead of trusting himself implicitly to Morpheus' guidance, who demands of him to perform acts which, judged in terms of common sense, necessitate superhuman daring and outrageous risk, he spontaneously puts up resistance. In the end he refuses, as common sense tells him to, to balance along the window ledge of a skyscraper in order to climb onto a scaffolding at a dizzy height. Although this leads to his being arrested, Neo chooses the security of his "normality," his every-day life. Why does he not accept Morpheus' authority? When Neo takes the phone call, Morpheus merely asks: "You know who I am?", whereupon Neo calls him - for the first time in the film narrative - by his name (Neo spontaneously, but insecure: "Morpheus?"). This sudden, seemingly unfounded certainty that his suspicion will now be confirmed can be placed in analogy to his waking up in front of the computer screen in the second sequence, especially when we take into account that the connection between the two figures is established there in the first place. What does not occur, however, is a change in the quality of that relation, since Neo again does not encounter Morpheus in persona. At the very moment when Neo is convinced of Morpheus' identity, this identity turns out to be not to a substantial being at all but rather a disembodied voice: "I can guide you, but you must do exactly as I say," Morpheus tells him on the phone. This voice resounds with authority, and it sticks out from the narration in that it is exclusively self-legitimized. Yet this authoritative status of the voice is not isomorphic with the moment of the subject's interpellation by an ideological authority, but stands primarily for something else which the subject cannot see, for "an object, which

stares back" (Žižek, *Zurück zur Naht* 15). The shock Neo experiences accordingly stems from his having to acknowledge the symbolic debt he has accrued in becoming a subject by seeking to hide part of himself and his desire from the gaze of the "big Other." What makes this moment so unbearable is not that Neo arrives at the certain knowledge that his hitherto peaceful life is merely a fiction generated by an ideological authority. Rather, this is a moment of horror because the voice occupies the very place that marks the rupture in the symbolic fabric of his world, indicating thereby that there *is nothing* behind it (Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 58-59). This correlates with the overwhelming realization that the other is not an entity but "pure semblance" (Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 40). These scenes are therefore surprising, if not because there is a mysterious power which makes itself known to Neo and guides him on the way into another existence. Shot increasingly from Neo's perspective, they rather deal with his realization that the symbolic world and its web of meaning is bound up with the very conditions of his own subjectivity, and is therefore as delicate and fragile as a cobweb. What is more, the encounter with this voice turns out to be so abysmal in effect because the rupture it indicates highlights that what Neo has until that moment perceived as a stable, reliable reality is in fact only himself in the form of an object, that is, the Lacanian *objet a*. For him to accept these presuppositions unconditionally is utterly impossible, because this would be more terrifying than the simple unveiling of an ideological authority.

10 This is also a decisive moment because of what emerges simultaneously with the act of interpellation: Neo is obviously certain that he is being addressed personally by this interpellation, even if this certainty is at first articulated *ex negativo*. Just before being arrested by the agents, he expresses this conviction as follows: "'I'm nobody! I didn't do anything! I'm gonna die.'" This is the very constellation described by Žižek: the subject is being confronted with fatal events at a moment it perceives as utterly contingent - "Why me? Why was *I* chosen?" (Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 12) The sudden conviction of being someone special derives from the subject's profound misrecognition that it has been chosen as addressee of this interpellation because of its inherent, positive qualities. This, however, ignores the performative nature of an ideological interpellation which defines the addressee solely according to its position in a symbolic structure in which it happens to be at that very moment. The addressee as such exists only from that very moment of interpellation onwards.

[W]hen I recognize myself as the addressee of the call of the ideological big Other (Nation, Democracy, Party, God, and so forth), when this all "arrives at its destination" in me, I automatically misrecognize that it is this very act of recognition which *makes me* what I have recognized myself as - I don't recognize myself in it because I'm its addressee, I become its addressee the moment I recognize myself in it. (Žižek, *Enjoy*

In those "fatal" scenes when Neo obviously experiences the workings of a mysterious power, two things are happening simultaneously. They represent a traumatic rupture in the symbolic texture through which Neo encounters the true content of his own message, that he is not a subject but an object. This is not a primal traumatic event but its repetition in the symbolic order. Yet at the same moment the production of the illusion that he is indeed the addressed subject of the interpellation sets in. When he identifies with the message of the interpellation - i.e. that he is someone special - he accordingly succumbs to the misrecognition that he might have existed as a subject before this moment of interpellation. The illusion consists, of course, in being a coherent subject and has to be seen here as a *reaction to the evocation of a repressed content*. This content, however, possesses no positive quality of its own either and is therefore produced as pre-existing only in the very moment of closure. Where can this constitutive content, this fantasmatic support be found which supports the process of active subjectivity, a process which in this case is ushered in by the misrecognition of being chosen?

11 Let us return to the first sequence. During the telephone conversation between the man and the woman in the voice-over, the columns of ciphers and letters start cascading down the black screen again. The camera moves slowly towards the screen and, in between two ciphers which in this close-up perspective form a zero, dives into its darkness. At this moment the female voice asks her partner anxiously: "Are you sure this line is clean?" (Whereupon he answers: "Sure, yes, I'm sure.") "I'll better go now." Just then a small white point appears on the completely black screen, which increases to a round halo. After the camera has gained some distance from it, this turns out to be the pane of a switched-on flashlight directed at the viewer. The camera's focus widens to include the immediate surroundings of a rather derelict entrance hall. We see police officers on duty, probably looking for or pursuing somebody. After a cut, the camera shows a figure from behind, seated at a table in front of a laptop. Another cut shows the figure in a close-up from a high-angle position: It is the female

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<sup>11</sup> Any experience of one's life being determined by a higher power, for example when a prediction comes true, contains such a radical moment of contingency, since from the subject's perspective this experience entails acting out the will of an other quite independently from what it perceives as its own essential qualities. Fatal moments, therefore, are almost unbearable because they confront the subject with this contingency. The teleological notion of 'destiny' serves to assuage this contingency by ascribing meaning to it, for example as a conviction of "being chosen." The Lacanian notion of the letter which always arrives at its destination reveals the teleological circle as a structure working retroactively. That the letter always arrives is due neither to the subject's essential identity nor the content of the letter itself but rather to the meaning ascribed retroactively to it: "[...] 'a letter always arrives at its destination': it waits for its moment with patience - if not this, then another contingent little bit of reality will sooner or later find itself at this place that awaits it and fires off the trauma." For Lacan, then, fate is both contingent (as regards its factual trigger) and at the same time ineluctable because the repressed will always return at the apposite moment. "Fatal" in this sense is the reception of a message the subject has sent out (externalized) previously and which is now returned by the symbolic order with its true content revealed: that surplus generated by the subject of enunciation which escapes control and symbolization.

character Trinity, who is committing illegal computer transactions in a room of the deteriorated *Heart O' The City* hotel. The policemen's entry into the room is followed by that famous, computer-animated scene which quotes the overdrawn martial arts style typical of Eastern kung-fu films: Trinity fights suspended in the air and thus easily defeats her adversaries.<sup>12</sup> Under Morpheus' telephonic guidance, she then tries to escape over the neighboring rooftops at incredible speed and to save herself by a super-human jump over a street. Only the agents who arrive belatedly on the scene are able to keep up with her. In their capacity as special forces for unusual tasks they are also able to predict that the police will not be capable of dealing with this "*one* little girl," as one lieutenant boasts. His gross (and literally fatal!) misrecognition of the semantic surplus of the word "one" becomes immediately apparent. For this female figure is indeed unique, distinguished by her super-human abilities which enable her to assert herself actively against the seemingly superior force of her male adversaries. In this, she does not meet the belittling description of the police officer at all, but rather, as Agent Smith's dire prediction about the outcome of that fight implies ("No, Lieutenant, your men are already dead"), she emerges as the fulfillment of their destiny in the sense of a return of the repressed with a vengeance.

12 The final frames of this sequence show Trinity's attempt to reach a telephone booth before the agents do. Those are already in position with a lorry in order to destroy the booth. Although Trinity manages to reach it, the way this scene is cut suggests that this is a hopeless situation. The figure is inside the phone booth, receiving a call - the question is, how and where to she can possibly escape from there. Just before the lorry crushes the phone booth to bits, the camera shows Trinity's face in a close-up, illuminated by the headlights, her face rigid with fear, fading into whiteness. At this very moment, she raises her arm in a protective gesture. (With the same gesture Neo will succeed in fending off the agent's bullets at the end of the film.) The next frame shows from a high-angle position the agents assembling in front of the ruins of the phone booth. Soberly and calmly they observe Trinity's disappearance. Obviously, she has vanished mysteriously, has "got out," as the agents put it. This does not only imply that apparently she is not dead, but that she is in another place on the "other" side, the outside to an inside. Far from interpreting this as some kind of obscure metaphor, I would suggest to read this scene with its open, ambiguous ending as the symbolic death of this

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<sup>12</sup> These scenes are shot by means of the so-called bullet-time technique, which creates the illusion of the camera moving continually around the figures while in fact they are shot one by one after another in front of a green screen. The digitized images can be manipulated so that the movements of camera and figures respectively can be combined as needed. The position of the viewer itself is inscribed as a digital code as well. The camera is moving rapidly around Trinity who by this means seems to be suspended motionless in the air. Thus, time is foregrounded as a significant factor in a way impossible to achieve by analogue recording techniques, which are limited by physical, real time.

figure. It is followed immediately by the second sequence in which Neo "wakes up," stirred more by a premonition than by an interpellation. Trinity's symbolic death therefore constitutes the first fantasmatic support necessary for Neo's entrance into the process of assuming a subjectivity as the Chosen One. In other words, her death in the symbolic order constitutes the content of the repressed that correlates with and is produced by the imaginary closure of the concept of the Chosen One. Functioning as its constitutive element, this support is the very precondition for the hero's becoming a subject, for his being able to act as a subject. Already at the beginning of the trilogy, Trinity thus also represents the impossibility of the fulfillment of his desire.

13     However, *The Matrix* also establishes a further interpretive pattern for the concept of the Chosen One. It develops in the third sequence from that series of scenes in which Thomas/Neo is being arrested by the agents and taken to a police station for a questioning. Thomas/Neo is sitting at a table in a cell. This scene is taken from an extreme high-angle position. We see several monitors on which this scene is reproduced from the perspective of a surveillance camera. This multiplication of the visual anticipates by analogy Neo's fragmentation we will encounter again in the architect's room at the end of *The Matrix Reloaded*. Then the camera moves closer to one of the monitors, its disembodied gaze selects one version of its mediated object and enters it through the screen. Thus, it assumes the position of a superior, invisible and omnipotent power. In analogy to the second-to-last sequence in *The Matrix Reloaded*, this scene already exposes the status of the One as a fiction and, on the level of content, predicts its function as a system-constitutive deviation. The sequence, I would argue, negotiates the notion of human alienation through the manipulations of an institutional authority, represented here by the agents. In the face of this authority, the subject is utterly helpless, its only weapon is subversion; in Neo's case, his hacker activities in the Internet are subversive. It is this illegal activity Agent Smith refers to when he starts the questioning with the words: "As you can see, we've had our eye on you for some time now, Mr. Anderson." According to the logic of oppression and subversion, Thomas/Neo cannot accept the cooperation offered by Agent Smith - immunity from persecution for information -, and his attempt to insist on his legitimate civil rights (a phone call to his lawyer) is in effect a gross misinterpretation of the situation, since the very consistency of a despotic power is guaranteed by an arbitrariness that defies all other claims to legitimacy. This arbitrariness is put into practice when, in a telling and powerful gesture, Thomas/Neo is robbed of language and thus excluded from participation in the symbolic: manipulating the matrix, the agents have his lips grow together and thus his mouth is sealed effectively. In this situation of

symbolic impotence, his body is contaminated with an electronic bug which is inserted through his belly button. In entering his body, it transforms into a moving, living "animal." As the hidden representative of a virtual power that operates through the media it will from now on control the subject from within. The spectacle of total, passive subjection to this thing enacts an effeminization of the figure. What is truly horrific about this being penetrated by a machine is less that it demonstrates the possibility of absolute access, but rather the subject's confrontation with the *jouissance* it derives from being an object. Just as he has woken up in front of the computer screen after Trinity's symbolic death, Thomas/Neo is roused from these scenes as from a nightmare. In this, both sequences enact formally what is strictly impossible on the level of content. This impossibility - that what happens outside his "reality" nevertheless has a direct impact on it - constitutes the second fantasmatic support for the fulfillment of the Chosen One scenario, of which Morpheus' interpellation forms a part.

14 This scenario entails, moreover, the process of becoming a male subject, which Neo embodies first in the role as the One, then as savior and finally as (self-)sacrifice. The process is initiated in the third sequence and arrives at its ideological closure when Neo escapes from the matrix. The message externalized thereby necessitates its own circulation within the symbolic; it does so in the form of a fateful narrative. Bound up in this narrative is the question of Neo's status as the One within a community of believers, his acceptance of this symbolic mandate and its realization as he impersonates the mask of the savior. In the course of the trilogy, however, this disburdened subjectivity<sup>13</sup> and the free agency it is capable of, is presented as constantly threatened by the very conditions it is based on, because it is forced to go back to them again and again, thereby triggering a process of recursion. It is this process I wish to demonstrate from the relevant scenes from *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix: Revolutions*.

15 At the end of the first film, Neo is defeated in a fight with three agents and finally shot by Agent Smith in the matrix, whereupon Trinity whispers to him from without the matrix: "I'm not afraid anymore. The Oracle told me that I will fall in love and that that man, that the man I love, would be the One. So, you see, you can't be dead. You can't be, because I love you." At this point, Neo regains consciousness in the matrix and continues the fight. From this moment on, he has the power to not only perceive the code of the matrix but also grow beyond the restrictions its laws impose and thus to master it. The fight ends when Neo penetrates Agent Smith and lets him explode from within. Seeing this, the other two agents take to their heels. Trinity awakens Neo by giving voice to the impossible: Neo *is* not dead; he

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<sup>13</sup> "Disburdened subjectivity" refers to that condition of the subject in which an other is being active in its place while it can remain passive itself.

cannot be dead since he is beloved by her. He becomes the One who is able to fend off the agents' bullets, who can read and change the code of the matrix, on ground of the fact that he is the man beloved by Trinity. This performative speech act is not only the second condition (the first one being Morpheus' interpellation) for Neo's successful impersonation of his symbolic mandate. This gender-inverted version of Sleeping Beauty possesses a deeper meaning since it differs significantly from Morpheus' tautologically structured, self-fulfilling prophecy of the savior (Neo is the One because he is the savior, and vice versa). Through his death in the symbolic realm (the matrix), Neo is reduced to passivity. In order to rise again and continue the fight in it, he needs Trinity's declaration of love. And yet he cannot go on being her lover, because he has to become the One. In the symbolic realm of the matrix, male subjectivity and agency are coupled with the impossibility of living this love.

16 Thus, the constellation of the first sequence is repeated, yet under inverted circumstances. When the hero, in single combat with Agent Smith in an underground station, identifies himself as Neo and hence with his identity as the One outside the matrix ("My name is Neo"), The Matrix asserts that he has accepted his symbolic mandate and thus produces closure. The surplus of active agency which Trinity has initiated in waking up Neo, however, cannot be completely contained in the narrative of *The Matrix*. Hence, *The Matrix Reloaded* also begins with a repetition of Trinity's symbolic death, again in the form of a nightmarish vision of Neo's, in order to sustain this agency. That freedom, then, which Neo gains at the end of the first film and which is claimed as securely his in the second part, namely his successful impersonation of the symbolic mandate of the One, again grounds in the two phantasms described above: male passivity and the enactment of the non-fulfillment of his love for Trinity. Only on these conditions can Neo accomplish his task of liberating the key-maker who is held captive by the Merowinger in *The Matrix Reloaded*. And this also can only be achieved under a specific, remarkable condition.

17 After the Merowinger has refused to release the key-maker, his wife, Persephone, offers them a deal. In return for the key-maker's freedom, she insists on a kiss from Neo. And he must kiss her just as if he were kissing Trinity. Her aim is to evoke a memory of something she herself has experienced a long time ago, that is, she wants to produce a "sample" of this experience, a file she can call up any time. This scene, then, is about the paradox of authentic love simulated as a memory in a recursive loop. Love, or rather, desire again serves as the pledge or the motor for Neo's ascent to the next "level" in this game of fulfilling his purpose as a savior. He passes this test only at the second try. Only when he impersonates convincingly what he seems to be, Trinity's lover, does he become a "true lover." However, it



is not Trinity he is kissing at this moment, but Persephone. Thus, Neo again constitutes himself as Chosen One through this scenario of his impossible love for Trinity.<sup>14</sup> This is affirmed by the following scenes just before the three - Neo, Trinity and Morpheus - succeed in liberating the key-maker from his cell. In a TV-room with a large television set Persephone introduces them to two of the Merowinger's bodyguards, programs "from a much older version of the Matrix" that "caused more problems than they solved." On the screen, we see scenes from Terence Fisher's *Brides of Dracula*.<sup>15</sup> They show a young beautiful girl, obviously a female vampire, who emerges from a coffin and approaches another female figure. Simultaneously, Persephone mutters laconically to herself before she kills one of the bodyguards with a heavy handgun: "How many people keep silver bullets in their guns?" In regard to the image of the female vampire, the revenant, Persephone's sentence (which because of the Oracle's previous comments on the werewolf nature of older programs can also be referred to the bodyguards) becomes ambiguous and thus disrupts the narrative consistency. The images on the monitor stick out from the narration as "pure objects"<sup>16</sup> and as such represent the reverse side of femininity, namely, of being per se the impossible object of desire. Žižek uses the term *femme fatale* to describe its function: it is a femininity to which the subject finds itself in a relation of absolute, destructive dependence.<sup>17</sup>

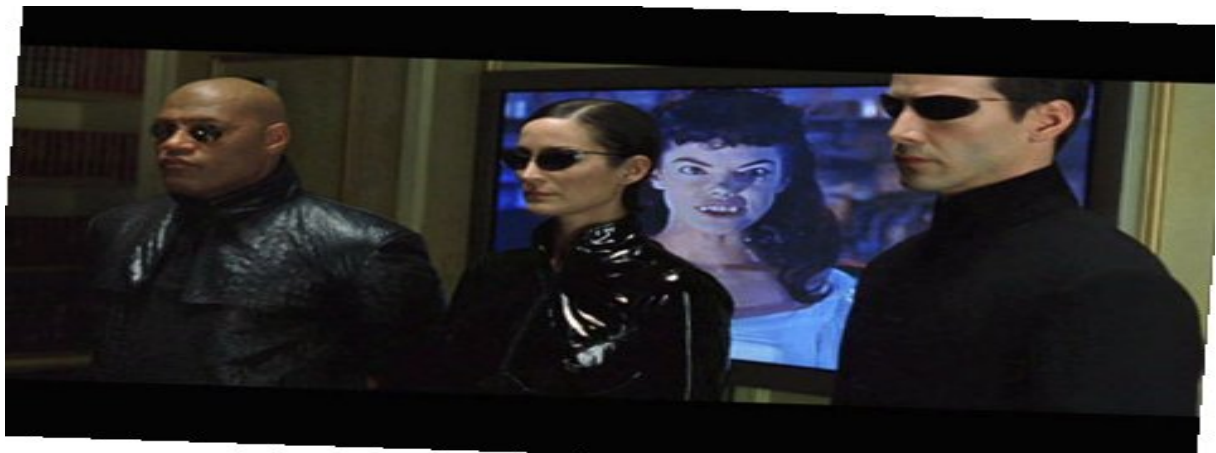


Fig. 6.

<sup>14</sup> It does not invalidate my argument that there actually is a love scene in *The Matrix Reloaded*. For the fulfillment of this love in the act of sexual intercourse is aborted by, tellingly, a return of Neo's vision of Trinity's death. On the contrary, this demonstrates the fantasmatic nature of his desire or rather, its fulfillment, because at this very moment, this fantasmatic "filler" breaks down. The phantasm of fulfillment apparently does not prevent love but rather constitutes its necessary support.

<sup>15</sup> Dir. Terence Fisher, 1960, featuring Peter Cushing as vampire slayer Dr. Van Helsing.

<sup>16</sup> This "pure object" represents the innermost kernel of the subject and constitutes its surplus; since it is split off, it remains forever unattainable.

<sup>17</sup> On Žižek's explications of the function of the *femme fatale*, see esp. Žižek, *Die Furcht vor echten Tränen* 243-81. English Edition: *The Fright of Real Tears, Kieslowski and The Future*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001.



Fig. 7.



Fig. 8.

18 The visual setup of the scene suggests that the vampire "bites" Neo's neck and thereby recalls as a grotesque repetition of the scenario at the end of *The Matrix*, when Neo becomes the passive receiver of a female breath of life. Again, love is represented as per se unattainable because it is permanently deferred, in this instance projected onto a screen. It becomes clear what the *real* object of exchange in *The Matrix Reloaded* is: Neo himself. At the very moment when his active male subjectivity is at stake (the kiss), the fantasmatic scenario of non-fulfillment is staged in order to maintain stable the imaginary illusion of his function as the Chosen One. Its projection onto the screen has the effect of both containment and subversion. When Neo resuscitates Trinity in the symbolic towards the end of *The Matrix: Reloaded*, her remark "Guess that makes us even now" fails to grasp precisely this

constitutive structure of their relationship. For he does not save her because he loves her, but because he needs to affirm his position as hero, which he has to fulfill as part of his role as system constitutive deviation. This is why the possibility of free agency outside the matrix, claimed and partially validated by the end of the film and affirmed by the architect, is the rigorous, seamless continuation of the imaginary illusion of active subjectivity which cannot be contained in a single plot but in turn initiates a further surplus.

19 That Neo fends off and defeats the robot guards, the "squiddies," outside the matrix with his super-human abilities is less due to his positive status as savior than to the narration's need of an expanded scope that leads directly to the next narrative. However, since this concept needs its symbolic supports, Neo's defense of his combatants and his lover leads up to a unique state of coma. Although he is not logged into the matrix, his neuronal activity suggests that he is not merely dreaming but is in touch with the world represented by the matrix. In this liminal state he is literally somewhere beyond both the matrix and the real world, in the underground station *Mobil Avenue*. Although these scenes insist on the impossibility of a clear distinction between virtual and real worlds, at the same time they assert the possibility of the agency of the free subject. In turn they reproduce a *scenario of passivity* similar to that at the end of *The Matrix* from which Neo, whose attempts at escape from the tunnels of this antechamber to hell literally make no progress whatsoever, is released through Trinity's love and becomes an active subject again. She trades his life for that of the Merowinger in a risky transaction.

20 In keeping with the continuation of a consistent male subjectivity as an imaginary illusion, Neo's actions in *The Matrix: Revolutions* focus completely on the quest for the task that will lead him to fulfill his destiny as the savior. In his subjective view, this task consists in saving the human population of Zion, while in fact he is responsible for the protection of the real as well as the virtual worlds in the universe of *The Matrix* as a whole. Neo knows exactly who is his antagonist on this mission - Agent Smith. That his own "visions" of the way to the machines' city remain fragmentary is just as befitting as the fact that the means by which he is to reach his destination remain in the dark, for he himself is the riddle that will be solved at the end of his fateful journey. When he lies there, connected to the machine god's tentacles, suspended completely motionless and passive in its clutches, we encounter the last scenario of passivity. Here the true content of his message is returned to Neo, here the circulation of the object, as which he himself figures, ends. Neo has arrived in himself, as Žižek puts it with regard to the myth of Oedipus:

The same horror emerges with the fulfillment of symbolic "destiny", as is attested by Oedipus: when, at Colonnus, he closed the circuit and paid all his debts, he found

himself reduced to a kind of soap bubble burst asunder - a scrap of the real, the leftover of a formless slime without any support of the symbolic order. [...] The unpaid symbolic debt is therefore in a way constitutive of our existence: our very symbolic existence is a "compromise formation", the delaying of an encounter. (Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 21-22)

In these last scenes Neo is reduced to pure substance of life, to an amorphous mass (Žižek's "leftover"), he might even be dead already. Previously, the fundamental support, introduced as an impossibility of fulfillment, that is, his love for Trinity, has been ended abruptly and rigorously since by then it has lost its functional meaning. Before she and Neo, who is already blind, reach the machines' city, Trinity is wounded mortally when their severely damaged ship crashes. This time there are no attempts at reanimating her since Neo is completely focused on fulfilling his destiny, that is, his act of self-sacrifice. As a distinguished individual, Neo functions as a purely imaginary filler in the matrix program as well as in the film's symbolic universe as such. This is why its consistency is ensured by his illusion of a coherent subjectivity.

21 When at the end of *The Matrix: Revolutions* he offers himself to the machine god as an instrument, as a weapon in the final fight against Agent Smith within the matrix, he is being active through the other for the last time. The film does not deny this status of passivity at all. Its visualization enacts a passive self-abandon that forms the content of that phantasm which Žižek has already described in regard to *The Matrix*; this time, however, the passivity is not deferred onto another object. With this, the illusion of a coherent subjectivity in the guise of the Chosen One basically collapses. The last frames of *The Matrix: Revolutions*, then, expose on the levels of content and visualization the very conditions of subjectivity. On the formal level of discourse, however, the trilogy keeps denying the corresponding inconsistency of the Other and the interrelated recognition that the subject can indeed lose what it has never possessed in the first place. Moreover, Neo's self-sacrifice is not a radical act of abandoning the supports of the symbolic order altogether. With the disclosure of the machine god as "hidden agency," it is established as the still very effectual representative of the fantasmatic functions of the matrix. The threatening extinction of its symbolic universe through Agent Smith is averted. Since Trinity is dead and Neo is at least incapable of acting, the conventional happy ending of the lovers surviving the end of the fight is displaced onto Niobe and Morpheus. The very last frames, which feature a beautiful sunset above a metropolitan skyline in the matrix, attest to the consolidating force of the symbolic order. And to the extent that the films productively orchestrate a stabilizing interplay of production, containment and surplus, they are representative of a generation of blockbuster movies that draw financial

profit from a postmodern aesthetic with its playful reflection on its own conditions and modes of being. The male, active hero consequently has to assert again and again a status of consistency in the face of a continually threatening loss, if he does not want to be extinguished by the disclosure of his own passivity.

22 In this respect, *The Matrix* trilogy goes far, though not beyond this one almost absolutely certain realization: The confrontation with destiny produces per se a surplus, and with it enjoyment born from the "unpleasure" of incomplete satisfaction. The encounter with death therefore can always only be an asymptotic approximation, an endless deferral. And this is what is inscribed in the end of *The Matrix: Revolutions*, too. If we then take into account the trilogy's desire for stability and containment, we will in all probability meet Neo again in a fourth part of *The Matrix*.

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