

## The Hero's Journey between Illusion and Reality

It was the biggest film event in 2003. On the release day November 5th, the New York Times wrote: 'In a first-ever global theatrical debut, the movie will open Wednesday on 10,013 screens in more than 50 countries and in 43 languages [...] the movie is also being released for the first time simultaneously in Imax theaters in nine countries.' Besides being an attempt to stave off piracy, the universal release of 'Matrix Revolutions' was a giant media event: "We think it's theatrical, it's fun, it's exiting," Mr. Horn [president of Warner Brothers Entertainment] said. "We talk about having event movies at Warner Brothers, and this is a way to further event-size our movies." (New York Times, Nov 5th, 2003, E1).

There were high expectations for the final part of this trilogy, which had become a phenomenon. 'Everything that has a beginning has an end' declared the publicity for the film. It was a slogan that sought at once to connect it to earlier Matrix films and to place this one in context; this was the end of the story and would enhance our understanding of the entire story. But the reactions and reviews ranged from unenthusiastic to disappointing. Most people found the first part, 'The Matrix' the best one, but neither 'Matrix Reloaded' nor 'Matrix Revolutions' were convincing and most left the cinema puzzled. What are the reasons for this? What did the creators of the Trilogy, the Wachowski Brothers, do wrong? One of the basic challenges of storytelling in films is, that one does not have to go twice or more times into the cinema to understand a film. This is all the more true of a Hollywood blockbuster. Of course filmmakers can make very disturbing films which do not follow the principle of a linear plot or story i.e. 'Lost Highway' David Lynch 1997.

## The problem of the Trilogy

It is worth remembering that in 1999 the Wachowskis were newcomers to Hollywood. They were known as screen-writers for 'Assassins' (1995) and 'Bound' (1996). No-one could foresee the great success 'The Matrix' would become. Plans for a trilogy seemed unrealistic. Thus the first film has a stand-alone quality and has the integrity of a story in its own right, a feature which may not have been so clear if a trilogy had been definitely intended. For example at the end of part one, Neo is already able to manipulate the Matrix and to win against the agents (Smith) in the Matrix. Only in the end of 'Matrix Revolutions' is there again high suspense in the final battle between machines and human kind. But what of the second part 'Matrix Reloaded'? Where does this fit in? The solution developed by the Wachowkis is to offer the second part as an extension of the ending of the first part. The action is increased and intensified. The philosophical thoughts are more complex. It is doubtful if this was a successful strategy. The unique action scenes are so long, that the audience grew tired, the philosophical issues about human freedom are confusing rather than clear and logical.

Strictly speaking 'Matrix Reloaded' and 'Matrix Revolutions' are not two independent parts. 'Matrix Revolutions' begins exactly, where 'Matrix Reloaded' has finished, which means that to understand the last part it is necessary to have seen the second one. Obviously the Wachowskis do like to promote the concept of the three Matrix films as a Trilogy, but they have to accept, that although the surprising solution comes in the last part, there is no great synthesis of motives, or philosophical issues at the end of the third part. Although watching 'Matrix Revolutions' is an overwhelming esthetic experience, and a achievement of computer generated graphics, on the level of

philosophical exploration, there is no real surprise or development. The main philosophical points are already raised and known from the first Matrix film, and their repetition, without further elucidation, has now a rather disappointing and banal effect. One example: In the final fight between Neo and Smith - Neo is almost defeated though he does not give up - Smith asks Neo: 'Why, Mr. Anderson, why? Why, why do you do it? Why, why get up? Why keep fighting?' Neo: 'Because I choose to.' On this point the audience did not get a sudden insight. The motif that human freedom stands over Smith's deterministic view is not new, it is repeating what the audience already knows.

## **The Hero's Journey - Mythic structure for storytellers and screenwriters**

In 1992 Christopher Vogler wrote a book 'The Writer's Journey' about the 'simple idea: **All stories consist of a few common structural elements found universally in myths, fairy tales, dreams, and movies.** They are known collectively as **The Hero's Journey.**' (p 1) Interestingly the twelve-stages model by Vogler fits exactly with the first part 'The Matrix' - except the opening sequence. It is worth examining the matrix series of films using Vogler's model.

Stages Vogler's model

Outline "The Matrix"

*High tensional starting point, because it is completely unclear, why Trinity is*

Running Matrix-Code, Trinity is chased by the police.

*chased, yet does one know is  
she the hero?*

- 1 Heroes are introduced in the ORDINARY WORLD, where : Neo at home in front of his computer, he is waiting with cracked software for his friend.
- 2 they receive the CALL TO ADVENTURE. A message from Trinity at Neo's computer screen: 'Wake up Neo ... The Matrix has you ... follow the white rabbit' She is warning Neo about the agents.
- 3 They are RELUCTAND at first or REFUSE THE CALL, but Neo is not able to get out of the office building, the Agents hold him.
- 4 are encouraged by a MENTOR to Morpheus is looking after him, Trinity strengths Neo to take the further step.
- 5 CROSS THE FIRST THRESHOLD and enter the Special World, where Neo has to take the decision between the red and the blue pill. He decides to know the truth, the reality and takes the red pill. Then he is plugged out of the illusionary world of the Matrix and rescued by Morpheus and his crew.

6	they encounter TESTS, ALLIES, AND ENEMIES.	On board the Morpheus hovercraft Neo has to absolve a training program (Kung-Fu) to fight against the agents and to be ready to enter the Matrix. Cypher – a crewmember – does not believe in Neo and will betray him.
7	They APPROACH THE INMOST CAVE, crossing a second threshold	For the first time Neo enters the Matrix and meets the Oracle. He does not believe that he is the chosen One.
8	where they endure the ORDEAL.	Neo rescues Morpheus from the hands of the agents.
9	They take possession of their REWARD and	They are going together back to the reality, of the hovercraft.
10	are pursued on THE ROAD BACK to the ordinary World.	At the same time agents pursue them and only Morpheus and Trinity are back to the reality safely. Neo left in the Matrix is fighting against the agents.
11	They cross the third	Neo is killed by agents and is dead in the

threshold, experience a Matrix, through the love of Trinity he  
RESURRECTION, and are resurrects. The Matrix no longer controls him,  
transformed by the he controls the Matrix.  
experience.

- 12 They RETURN WITH THE ELIXIR, a boon or treasure to benefit the Ordinary World. Neo believes in himself, he is the One, who will end the oppression of the machines.

Vogler distinguished the Hero's journey in three formal acts. Act I finished by the FIRST THRESHOLD (stage 5), Act II - the longest part of the film - finished between REWARD (stage 9) and THE ROAD BACK (stage 10) and Act III is the shortest part in the film after stage 10. In 'The Matrix', the first transition is the meeting between Morpheus and Neo, the search is over. The first threshold is Neo's decision to take the red pill. The longest act is Neo's training against the system, against the agents and ends with the liberation of Morpheus and the return of Trinity. The third act starts the pursuing of Neo from the agents and finished with Neo's message of the end of the suppression. Act III is the showdown. There are two other important features: the crisis and the climax. The crisis is either in the middle (central crises) or in the end of act II (delayed crisis). In the Matrix, the crisis is at that point in the story, where the crew lost their leader Morpheus. Either they have to kill Morpheus or as a consequence Zion, the last place for human kind is in great danger. The climax is the crowning moment of act III. Neo resurrected through and by the love of Trinity and is now no longer controlled by

the Matrix.

With 'Matrix Reloaded' and 'Matrix Revolutions' the Wachowskis follow this model only vaguely and hence make it difficult to identify the story in the films. Instead of 'receive the CALL TO ADVENTURE' Neo finds the place of the Oracle empty. He gets his call after about a third of the film. That is about twice as long, in comparison to part one. The Oracle tells him about the keymaker, who is necessary to go to the source, 'where the path of the One ends'. Is the 'FIRST THRESHOLD' (stage 5) that Neo is able to resist Smith's attempt to kill him by imprinting him over? In Act II Neo is in the 'INMOST CAVE' (stage 7) by the architect of the Matrix. He can either chose to save Zion or to save Trinity. He chooses to save Trinity (stage 8) and brings her back, in a kind of resurrection scene, but this time its vice versa. Back to the Nebuchadnezzar, Morpheus hovercraft, he reveals that 'The prophecy was a lie. The One was never meant to end anything. It was all another system of control'. The Sentinels destroying the Nebuchadnezzar and almost the crew, although in the real world and not in the Matrix Neo can wondrously intervene to stop the Sentinels, but he pays with unawareness. On the last scene we see Neo laying unaware and with him the only survivor Bane (agent Smith). 'Matrix Reloaded' ends in the middle of stage 11, 'They cross the third threshold' but there is no experience of a resurrection for Neo, not yet.

'Matrix Revolutions' begins exactly there, where 'Matrix Reloaded' has finished. Act III of the part two continued with Act I of part three. Neo gets his resurrection experience to be freed from Morpheus, Trinity and Seraph. Neo meets the oracle, his last time to be encouraged (stage 4) 'Neo, this war is going to end. Tonight, the future of both worlds will be in your hands ... or in his' (Smith's). Neo is crossing the 'FIRST

THRESHOLD' as he decided to go to the centre of the machine city. On his way he will be blinded by Bane (agent Smith), but with the help of Trinity they fly with the Logos to the machine city. At the same time the battle around Zion goes on. On this point there is a double crisis in act II presented by both hovercrafts. On one hand the question is; Will the Logos reach the center of the machine city and can the blinded Neo rescue Zion? On the other hand: Will the Hammer arrive at Zion and can they stop the Sentinels destroying the dock in Zion? On the INMOST CAVE arriving (stage 7) Trinity dies and Neo can convince Deus Ex Machina, that only he can stop agent Smith: 'The program 'Smith' has grown beyond your control. Soon he will spread through this city as he spread through the Matrix. You cannot stop him, but I can.' By taking on agent Smith, Neo brings an end to the war between machines and human kind. In 'Matrix Revolutions' the final fight between agent Smith and Neo is the climax (stage 11). Though Neo is loosing the fight, paradoxically he wins it. Neo has realized their special relationship, he is now ready to sacrifice himself, to be imprinted by Smith: 'Your were right, Smith. You were always right. It was inevitable.' As the Oracle told Neo: 'He is you. Your opposite, your negative, the result of the equation trying to balance itself out.' The One cannot exist without agent Smith and vice versa. And even Smith realizes this in his last seconds before he and all his doubles will be destroyed: 'Oh, no, no, no. No, it's not fair.' The last scene plays in the Matrix, in the time after war between machines and human kind. The last lines are between programs: Oracle, Architect, Sati and Seraph. Sati: 'Will we ever see him (Neo) again?' Oracle: 'I suspect so. Someday.' Seraph: 'Did you always know?' Oracle: 'Oh no. No, I didn't. But I believed. I believed.' There is no certainty that Neo will have a resurrection experience, an 'ELIXIR,

a boon or treasure to benefit the Ordinary World'. It seems that he sacrificed himself for the benefit of the community or for a fourth part 'Matrix Resurrection'?

The fascination and strength of 'The Matrix' was its attempt to portray and explore some of the deepest and enduring longings of human beings - to freedom and redemption and combine this with incredible action, high suspense and a new level of film visual effects. The story of 'The Matrix' told by the Wachowski Brothers left the audience with a kind of uncertainty about the reality and raised the questions of freedom and redemption in a new and exciting genre. Am I in the Matrix or in the reality? However by lack of attention to the basis of telling a story, they lost their 'red thread' in a quite confusing second and third part. And in so doing damaged their entire project.

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