I can see it in your eyes. You have the look of a man who accepts what he sees because he is expecting to wake up. –Morpheus

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The Matrix may be viewed as a postmodern critique of capitalist society, where realities and simulations are difficult to distinguish (Lutzka, 2006), and characterized by a nostalgic longing for a less fake present, like the more “real,” personable, and less technology-ridden past. Part of The Matrix’s widespread appeal lies in intertextuality, its homage to a range of philosophical ideas, Western literature, television, and film. In the beginning of the film, when Neo is in his apartment and guests arrive to buy a pirated disc, Neo has it hidden within a hollowed-out book by Jean Baudrillard (1981), Simulacra and Simulation. There are further references to The Neuromancer (1984) by William Gibson, Gulliver’s Travels (Swift, 1959), and Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (Carroll, 1977), which all entail entering an alternate reality or fantasy world, calling into question interpretations of what is “real,” as well as societal power relations based on the real. There are references to the television series Get Smart (Nelson, Bilson, Adams, Kormack, & Brooks, 1965-1969), for doors and phones are integral to The Matrix. There are striking similarities to one of the original Star Trek episodes, The Menagerie: Part II (Butler & Daniels, 1966), in which “Talosians” place Captain Pike (Jeffrey Hunter) in illusory worlds inspired by his memory or imagination. Once scarred and crippled beyond recognition, Captain Pike ultimately chooses to live out his life in this fantasy paradise of youth, strength, and physical beauty. Finally, there are plot and character similarities with various classic sci-fi films, including Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Kaufman, 1978; Siegel, 1956), Soylent Green (Fleischer, 1973), Logan’s Run (Anderson, 1976), Blade Runner (Scott, 1982), and Total Recall (Verhoeven, 1990), films that figure alternate realities faced by a small band of freedom fighters, wedded to the pursuit of “reality,” seeking truth and freedom from government oppression.

With subtle overtones of evolution in racial and gender parity, The Matrix combines elements of traditional and evolving masculinities that merit ongoing scrutiny, in the present era of inquiry into men’s studies, experiences, and identities (Heasley & Stewart-Harris, 2010; Weaver-Hightower, 2003). Celebrating the film’s 10th anniversary Blu-ray release, White (2009) claims, “No one (not even the Wachowski brothers themselves) has been able to match its pop-culture resonance or its balance between ambitious style and engaging storytelling.”

Taking The Matrix as an analytic frame, the present critique queers interpretations of men’s power and identities in popular culture and society with evolving concepts of masculinities and male sexualities. In queer theory, queer is used as a verb to rigorously investigate knowledge that is provocative and anti-status quo (Gosse, 2008; Ruffolo, 2008), in order to forge revisionist ways of knowing and understanding, through the primary lens of sexuality. Key tenets of queer theory (Capper, 1999; Gosse, 2006; Jagose, 1996) include raising thought-provoking, and what are for some, troubling or taboo topics; unraveling status quo assumptions, beliefs, and commonplace understandings; destabilizing heteronormativity; exploring social and educational phenomena through the critical lens of sexuality; refocusing themes on who and what is included/excluded, when, how, and why; and heightening awareness of those silenced and made invisible, or knowledge that is difficult to bear.
My analysis covers four parts, each of which interrogates aspects of identity of the chief protagonist in *The Matrix*, Thomas Anderson (or Neo, as he becomes known): the warrior icon and nerdism; racism and sexism; misandry; and homoeroticism and male rape.

### THE WARRIOR ICON AND NERDISM

Concepts of masculinities, including that of White, straight, working men, are in transition (Gosse, 2009a), which is reflected in *The Matrix*. Sparks (1996) states that the action films of Schwarzenegger, Stallone, and others, are a reaction against instability in modern concepts of masculine gender identities. Traditionally, “real manhood” seems a precarious standing that males are incited to attain against great opposition—a heroic quest for qualities of self-direction, discipline, and absolute self-reliance (Gilmore, 1990). Horrocks (1994, p. 90) argues that boys construct an adamant armour against femininity, and strive to be tough, loud, and belligerent, repressing such feminine qualities as tenderness, affection, and sentimentality. Males learn to fetishize females, to build friendships with other men contingent on homophobia and misogyny. Similarly, action heroes embody traditional warrior qualities, such as nobility of purpose, physical strength, courage, action over reflection, and emotional restraint, while conversely today’s North American culture appears to repudiate such historical “manly” virtues (Kleinfel, 2006).

Neo is somewhat different from characters in the line of Stallone or Schwarzenegger, in keeping with Wick’s (1996, p. 94) supposition that the “manly man” action hero of the nineties was undergoing a transformation. Neo is the embodiment of a sleeker, more technologically advanced anti-hero, rather than the oversized, over-muscled, and hyper-masculinized bodies of his predecessors (Lee, 2005). Whereas many action heroes continue to be brawny, married, and somehow connected to law enforcement in their daily jobs, Neo is what is vernacularly called a *computer geek* or *nerd*, single, and physically unimposing,¹ at least until he transforms into a martial arts and weapons expert. A *nerd*, according to Kendall (1999, p. 353), combines aspects of hypermasculinity (intellect, lack of sartorial display, lack of “feminine” social and relational skill) and perceived feminization or subordinated masculinity (lack of sport ability, small body size, deprivation of sexual relationships with women). Nerds usually have the latest in technology but live in rudimentary conditions. Neo’s apartment is described in the movie script as a “technological rat nest” (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1998, p. 12) with cables everywhere and equipment on table tops. Thomas Anderson, or Neo as he is known as a hacker, is a well-reputed hacker showing superior computer intellect. His interpersonal skills with the clients/friends are strained; they come knocking at his door having to convince him to go out for the evening and leave his computer. He has a non-

¹ His body type is closer to the androgynous Calvin Klein or GAP model look of contemporary beauty standards, which is an evolution from the rock-hard, body builder action hero.
imposing, un-athletic physique, particularly when he is initially severed from the Matrix, with his atrophied muscles never having been used. He never alludes to wive or girlfriends, unlike most action film heroes who are usually marked by the motivation of protecting daughters and wives or avenging wrongs done to the females in their lives. Furthermore, Neo appears curiously impervious to Trinity’s overt romantic interest in him for much of the film’s duration.

Unlike Mellencamp’s assertion that college students distance themselves from Thomas Anderson (Mellencamp, 2001), Neo’s nerdism, and subsequent transformation into a warrior, are key to his popularity.2 What explains nerdy Thomas Anderson/Neo’s ongoing popularity? He is clearly no Rambo or Rocky—at least not in the early stages of The Matrix. The answer may lie in his transformation from “sissy boy” to “warrior man.” Thornton (1993, pp. 124, 152) claims that male viewers vicariously live out fantasies of violence through their gaze as spectators. He refers to the implicit sexual tropes of fighting, sexual prowess, domination, and victory contained in sports and action films, all of which linked to the male viewer’s identification with the athlete or action hero. Sweetman (1997, p. 26) suggests that White middle class men often hold jobs that require responsibility and rationality, traits viewed as non-warrior-like and, therefore, feminine. These men may readily identify with nerdy Neo, who becomes increasingly warrior-like as the film progresses. Furthermore, the male body as spectacle allows for concepts of masculinity and heroism to objectify male bodies, while neutralizing homoerotic implications, presenting them as inspirational. This may help explain why many boys and men are die-hard spectators for sports such as football and hockey and so-called “guy” action flicks rather than more romantic “chick flicks.”

Neo’s appeal, then, lies in his becoming a hero/warrior, not in his being one from the start. When Neo is “downloading” martial arts (into his brain), Tank declares in admiration, “Ten hours straight. He’s a machine” (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1998, p. 47), followed by Neo’s body spasms, relaxing as his eyes open, and breath hissing from his lips, as if in orgasm. Teenage boys spend on average 17 hours playing video games per week, and many more surfing the net (Sax, 2009). Boys are also far more likely to feel bullied or harmed at school (Yau & O’Reilly, 2007), and to be victims of theft and serious and violent victimization at greater rates than girls (Freeman, 2004, p. 50). Therefore, the average teenage boy may relate to the nerdy aspect of Neo, and vicariously celebrate Neo’s transformation into a warrior and superman. Abetting the ready appeal of Neo’s Pygmalion transformation from mouse to superman, The Matrix is a twist on the Old Testament “David and Goliath” story sure to resonate with Judeo-Christian audiences.

Additionally, war metaphors are often used in business in North America (Molloy, 1999, p. 96), and Neo is portrayed as a nondescript office worker, al-

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2 However, it may be that a broader and perhaps older and less technologically savvy audience, may relate to the theme of technological alienation, and self-liberation, as Barton (2006, pp. 55-56) suggests.
lotted a cubicle in a big office. Analogously, he may be viewed as a disembodied sort of lowly infantry soldier on the technological front. Similar to the infantry soldiers in Glory (Zwick, 1989) or Full Metal Jacket (Kubrick, 1987) who are verbally abused by their drill sergeant, he is subject to a ‘tearing down,’ or harsh lecturing and belittlement by his superior, the office manager, in order to make him conform to company procedures and values, such as being on time for work. This may be interpreted as part of Neo’s passage to manhood. Males who are still establishing themselves career-wise and low on the corporate ladder, will appreciate the element of escapism from their humdrum lives when identifying with Neo, who as the insignificant, lowly, slacker employee eventually gets to beat his enemy in the form of serialized clones dressed in the standard blue suit wardrobe of corporate executives. Escapism has regulatory implications, as it may serve to temporarily brighten their spirits, giving them an illusion of power, so that they return to work with less resentment, thereby contributing to keeping them in line: productive for the capitalist machine.

This film, moreover, may build on, then assuage, spectator fears in the looming competitive world of technology, as doltish Neo is overwhelmed by, then masters and defeats, the Matrix/computers. Molloy (1999, p. 4) suggests that within a racialized discourse we subsume the Other we fear. Substituting technology for race as an “Other” to be feared, The Matrix may show how certain citizens fear technology. The film’s shots of confined spaces, interspersed with great heights, and infinite, white spaces, may serve to add to a sense of insignificance, powerlessness, and isolation, indeed, cosmic loneliness. In popular culture and media, this reflects what Kingwell (1996, pp. 44, 55, 110, 122, 293) calls “Gumpism,” a fear of intellectuals and technology, often incorporating conspiracy theories, that frequently associates mental deficiency with virtue. Kingwell finds irony in the fact that, “We North Americans find ourselves, on the brink of the third millennium, living in a high-tech society in which, paradoxically, stupidity is our highest badge of goodness” (p. 44).

It comes as no surprise, then, that Neo is nerdy. While a computer hacker, Neo is also something of a social dullard, rarely emoting, robot-like, showing little verbal skill, meager philosophical reasoning or indulgences (he learns to solve his problems with brawn not brain), socially awkward, and referred to by the Oracle as, “Not too bright, though.” Furthermore, conspiracy theories may be viewed as a way of rationalizing why certain individuals have limited control over life, indeed as escapism in its worst sense—encouraging the individual to believe he is the crux of existence (“A very ugly,” 1999). Ever striving to achieve an ultimately illusive control over one’s surroundings and the familial and societal respect and prestige it engenders, may be at the core of many males’ sense of accomplishment and failure in life. Therefore, a film such as The Matrix may reinforce the average male’s self-esteem and sense of adequacy in the real world, for a similarly mundane worker may be equally easily transformed into a world-saving super hero. Tracing Neo’s journey to a stereotypical sort of warrior-manhood, The Matrix also evokes, like other American action/war films such as Gladiator (Scott, 2003), Saving Private Ryan (Spielberg, 1999), and the Hurt Locker (Bigelow, 2009), a mixture of patriotism and nostal-
gia for hyper-masculine and warrior skills native to a capitalist world but increasingly impractical in a post 9/11, recession pressed, increasingly socialist society, where brains, interpersonal skills, and critical and imaginative thinking are needed to thrive (Gosse, 2010a; Rosin, 2010).

**RACISM AND SEXISM**

Morpheus, played by Laurence Fishburne, is the stereotypical “black buddy” of action film, sacrificing himself for the White³ man, a hybrid of the intellectual Thomas and father-figure John Rawlins in Glory (Zwick, 1989). Morpheus is also seemingly unable to be killed, following the racist Southern myth that you can’t kill a Black by rape or beating. Morpheus undergoes a brutal Rodneyesque type beating at the hands of police, which may serve to help White audience members identify with his character, but how is unclear. On the one hand, they may feel outrage over a Black man being punished like Rodney King (Gray, 2007). Then again, Morpheus is a virtuous man, unlike King who was a career criminal. Morpheus is also superhuman, impervious to pain by normal thresholds, so his beating may serve to minimize King’s beating in people’s eyes—if Morpheus survives and ends up fine, then, maybe, King’s beating wasn’t so bad, so White conscience is alleviated. Either way, the film’s Kingsesque beating is an ambiguous scene that shows Morpheus’ articulated willingness to sacrifice his life for Neo, yet another example of a Black man Uncle Tomming, that is, showing subservience to a White man (Modleski, 2000), of which cinema is rife. For instance, in The Green Mile, the main Black character, John Coffey, is innocent of the rape and murder of two White girls. Yet, he is convicted, tried, and eventually electrocuted, despite the “good” relationship he develops with his guards who discover he is not only innocent, but also gifted with healing powers readily employed to their advantage. The Black man is but another means to empower or enrich the White man, whether deportations, massacres, forced labor, or slavery have been used (Fanon, 1963, p. 79). Therefore, Morpheus’ willingness, indeed enthusiasm to die for a White man, so that Neo attains hero status and thus manhood, is in keeping with colonial history and prejudice. In addition, Morpheus, like John Coffey in The Green Mile, shares another stereotypical trait: the directors work very hard at establishing their stature and strength, connotative of sexuality, in keeping with the “big, Black buck/stud” stereotype.

The Oracle (played by Gloria Foster), an Oprah Winfrey-like spiritual leader/mother figure, resembles a Black governess of White plantation children, with a dash of African spiritualism and mystique thrown in. Her duty is to provide advice to the Chosen One, the one who will liberate humans, and like Neo, most neophytes in her parlor appear to be White, and those who are not, are light-skinned. She is the image of the traditional (grand)mother, do-

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³ Keanu Reeves’s father has Chinese and Hawai’ian heritage, but Reeves “passes” (Piper, 1991) for White; everyone I asked to define Reeves’ ethnicity responded, “White.”
mesticated, baking and cooking in the kitchen, replete with apron, dispersing ageless wisdom with a sweet smile to dullard Neo. Her power is not portrayed as an executive, lawyer, doctor, university lecturer, or any other contemporary image of women’s liberation, but rather as a parody of a 1950s domesticated, nurturing mother, secure in dispelling advice and cookies, remote to the blood and guts reality of the physical battles that the predominantly male characters engage in. The African American character of the Oracle, like Morpheus, is a subordinate, secondary one, used to prop up Neo on his passage into manhood and heroism, as he saves the world.

Phiel (1993, p. 135), claims that in action films, women are frequently presented either as domesticated servants or as love toys. However, queering the roles of women in action films may expose the sacrifice of males in real life towards girls and women, who dominate in matters of home life, sex, and love, and rarely place themselves in life threatening occupations such as soldier/warrior (Farrell, 2005). Furthermore, women’s mortality rates in the workplace are far below that of men for men dominate in occupations where working conditions tend to be dirtier, entail exposure to the elements, unconventional hours, physical prowess and stamina, and increased risk of physical harm. For instance, in Canada between 2006-2008, there were 987 workplace fatalities among men against 43 among women, with most deaths occurring within the male-dominated occupations of transport, equipment operation, construction, processing and manufacturing, machine operation, assembly, and labour (Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, 2010). In film, approximately 96% of those killed are male; women are rarely killed in film, as compared to men, and almost never if they appear in three or more scenes (Farrell, 1993, pp. 224, 225), and this film is no exception. In The Matrix, sexy, blonde Switch is silently and painlessly killed as her cerebral plugin is withdrawn, as opposed to the legions of male characters who are endlessly slaughtered in bloody fight scenes, receiving mortal knives wounds, frenetic beatings, and bullets to head and body. Trinity, the principal female warrior, is never actually beaten or wounded in The Matrix, as she usually flees from the agents.

However, Trinity does save Neo’s life in one scene, and dispatches men at various times throughout the film, showing that The Matrix is at times a transitional film for gender roles, for she is sometimes a fighting warrior. In real life, men frequently put their lives at risk, often to be chief breadwinners, in the most dangerous occupations (Men at Risk, 2003, 2008). Similarly, in action films, male characters usually fight to either protect, avenge, please, or impress their girl and women kin—whether a love interest such as Trinity or a guiding matriarch/mother figure such as the Oracle. The latter is calling the shots in implicit and explicit ways, for Morpheus says, “When he [Neo] died, the Oracle prophesied his return and envisioned that his coming would hail the destruction of the Matrix, an end to the war and freedom for our people. That is why there are those of us that have spent our entire lives searching the Matrix, looking for him” (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1998, p. 43).

Moreover, Trinity is a problematic female warrior—similar to her predecessors Zena, Warrior Princess, and Buffy, the Vampire Slayer, or in more recent years, Aeon Flux (Kusama, 2005) and Alice of Resident Evil (Mulcahy, 2007; Witt,
— in that depictions of female warriors present women with new sets of unattainable ideals. Played by leather-clad Carrie-Anne Moss (an ex-model), Trinity’s physical beauty and athleticism, like more contemporary female action heroes, remains unattainable for most women, and an impossible ideal for most men to aspire to date. As Cypher (an operative who preferred the Matrix to the real world) says to Trinity, after she has brought Neo—the potential Savior—his food and lovingly pulled a blanket over him, “I don’t remember you ever bringing me dinner” (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1998, p. 52); and upon viewing her coma-like body, “You know, for a long time, I thought I was in love with you, Trinity. I used to dream about you...” (p. 87). The top warrior-hero-to-be gets the beautiful woman, unlike his lesser counterparts, who have been doggedly fighting for years to win her attention.

In addition, the irony and allure of female beauty is compounded in this Woman in Red, the Marilyn Monroesque-type cyber-sprite that the youthful character Mouse creates and attempts to prostitute to Neo, who, in his nerdiness, declines. “The Woman in Red,” from a feminist perspective, may be seen as objectification of women at its most clichéd. Mouse attempts to prostitute her to Neo, and uses her as his personal love toy. She is the misogynist nerd’s dream girl—“She doesn’t talk much...,” brags Mouse (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1998, p. 63). She is a blonde, beautiful, hip-swinging parody of sexuality, willing and able to please sexually, and there are no strings attached—you merely unplug yourself from the computer program once sexual gratification has been achieved.

Yet she embodies what an average nerd may never attain—the attention and sexual companionship of a beautiful, lustful woman, unless he becomes Bill Gates’ rich. Mouse further defends her existence: “Pay no attention to these hypocrites, Neo. To deny our impulses is to deny the very thing that makes us human.” Sex, whether for men or women, need not be looked at with puritanical distaste, albeit in school, children are taught that, “Sex is dirty. Boys initiate the dirt” (Farrell, 2007). This paradox serves to (i) empower girls and women sexually, for they are the gatekeepers of sex, and achieves this through repudiating loose women such as prostitutes like the Woman in Red; (ii) portray boys and men who desire sex as sexually deviant and, therefore, girls and women as purer and morally superior. This helps propagate a sexist dualism, juxtaposing the intrinsic virtue of women, and the “vice” of men (Segal, 1990).

Many of the female characters in The Matrix are accordingly unattainable, modèlesque visions for the average girl/woman, and equally unattainable for the average guy, or real life nerd, reinforcing a moralistic, sexually punitive gender divide. While the African American Oracle dons the apron of a domestic servant, Trinity is erotically garbed in black like an s/m mistress when she brings Neo dinner, and reveals her erotic feeling toward him. Overall, The Matrix, while presenting Switch and Trinity as warriors, nevertheless propagates unrealistic ideals of female beauty and athleticism, objectifies and stereotypes women, reduces them to secondary roles to prop up the hero’s heterosexuality (so that heterosexual males will better relate to him), and serves to reinstate the traditional male’s altruism towards girls and women.
Stereotypes continue along this familiar train in what viewers may initially see as a progressive film, since Trinity has “masculine” qualities of toughness, resolve, physical prowess, and aggression. Inevitably, Trinity also conforms to the “damsel in distress” leitmotif of action films, for without Neo’s Herculean feats, she would have perished several times. To emphasize the interchangeability and misandric expendability of men in the film, the agents have the ability to instantaneously inhabit any person’s body. Although an agent does at one point inhabit the body of an old woman, he is not killed in this body. However, agents are often killed when inhabiting men’s bodies, and in brutal fashion. One receives a knife in the head, another is crushed beneath a subway train, several are plummeted with bullets, and another’s head explodes, for example. Men, supposedly, due to their brutish nature, are expendable, and killing them is sport.

The widespread cultural belief that men are fiends and rapists dates back decades: “Whatever they may be in public life, whatever their relationships with men, in their relationships with women, all men are rapists, and that’s all they are. They rape us with their eyes, their laws, and their codes” (French, 1977, p. 433). Solanas (1967) infamously wrote:

Eaten up with guilt, shame, fears and insecurities and obtaining, if he’s lucky, a barely perceptible physical feeling, the male is, nonetheless, obsessed with screwing; he’ll swim through a river of snot, wade nostril-deep through a mile of vomit, if he thinks there’ll be a friendly pussy awaiting him. He’ll screw a woman he despises, any snaggle-toothed hag, and furthermore, pay for the opportunity. Why? Relieving physical tension isn’t the answer, as masturbation suffices for that. It’s not ego satisfaction; that doesn’t explain screwing corpses and babies.

Due to ideological feminism’s phallocentricism, or privileging of the hegemonic, masculine phallus and sexuality in meaning-making, contemporary audiences have been duly cued to react with horror at White women being threatened, beaten, or especially potentially raped, and to acknowledge the potentiality of men as physical, psychological, and sexual aggressors where they are not made protectors or avengers of girls’ and women’s honor, as seen in Panic Room (Fincher, 2002), The Brave One (Jordan, 2008), The Road (Hillcoat, 2009), and The Book of Eli (Hughes & Hughes, 2010). This may enduringly depend on the trope of amour courtois gaining popularity in the Middle Ages (Bayliss, 2008; Wollock, 2011), and persisting in cinema and throughout society to this day: the lover tries to make himself worthy of his mistress by acting

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4 Nathanson and Young (2006) claim that “ideological feminism” presents all issues from the point of view of women and, in the process, explicitly or implicitly attacks men as a class. They conjecture that ideological feminism is silently reshaping law, public policy, education, and journalism.
bravely, honorably, and nobly, and by doing whatever deeds she might desire. The premise of courtly love, with its exaltation of the feminine, stipulates men’s chivalrous avenging of wrongs done to girls and women.

The counterpart of courtly love and chivalry is that men may be injured, or even killed, in their duty towards womenfolk. This implication is so embedded in popular culture, and has endured for so many centuries, that moral outrage rarely manifests itself over the abuse, maiming, and slaughter of boys and men in action films. In real life, younger men are fodder for war (Epstein & Johnson, 1998), and Männerbund, or male bonding and expression of love between males, is so ardently policed that it can only occur outside of heterosexual relationships, and without homophobic reprisal, during war, or metaphorical elaborations of war, such as in the world of sport. This may imply fathers’ emotional distancing from their sons. Society’s endorsing of violence towards boys, young men, and mature men, may be seen as part of an on-going toughening-up process, one that can only accord transitory manhood status to males, for manhood must be constantly reaffirmed and re-earned. Indeed, audiences appear desensitized to the killing of males in film, and regard violence towards boys and men as popular entertainment.

After having kidnapped Neo and shoved him onto a car, the beautiful androgyne Switch points a large gun at him and warns, “Listen to me, coppertop! We don’t have time for twenty questions. Right now there is only one rule. Our way or the highway.” The message is: do it our way, either be a man of action and fight for us, or you are useless, and will be pushed out of the car and killed/alienated from female society. Neo, anagrammatically, may be given “one rule,” not various messiah references: he is not empowered but presented a single manly route—that of warrior, or else a living death plugged (back?) into the matrix (Greek for womb). And the choice of warrior means probable death: embattling seemingly immortal and invulnerable agents.

Deconstructing manhood in action films, another sexual incongruity surfaces. Cypher eroticizes Trinity’s helpless body but does not touch her when she is plugged into the Matrix. Yet, Trinity eroticizes over Neo’s body towards the end, her kiss transforming this lifeless man into a superhero,5 but rare would be the audience member who would think of her as “perverted.” If the roles were reversed, would the same be true? Juliet can kiss Romeo’s corpse and it is romantic, but could Romeo do the same and provoke a similar spectator reaction? This asymmetry may be reflective of androgenophobia (Gosse, 2011) or widespread popular cultural conventions that maleness, the male body, and male sexualities (these are indelibly wedded in North American consciousness in particular) are unclean, perverse, and menacing.

Rather than the Grimm Bruder’s “Sleeping Beauty,” who retains her “feminine” beauty, delicacy, and goodness, Neo is a modern “Sleeping Brute,” who

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5 Once awakened from Trinity’s unsolicited kiss, Neo violently wins the world from evil, suffering multiple gunshot wounds, brutal, exaggerated hand-to-hand combat, laughable in its hyperbole of masculine willpower and strength, and the gruesome head exploding scene of his antagonist, Agent Smith.
awakens from a kiss to become a “masculinized,” mean, tough, tenacious killing machine—all due to the love and erotic attention of a woman. (Sleeping) Beauty and Brute are the outdated, binary antithesis two sides of a cinematic gender coin. Accordingly, and as reflected in films like The Matrix, it is acceptable for a man to act like a beast if he will save a woman, for to her he transforms into a hero and prince (Farrell, 1993, p. 84).

To judge audience response at this point is obviously delicate and problematic given the often historical or futuristic settings of action movies. Women encouraging men to become warriors dates back centuries. During WWI, women in the British Commonwealth gave able-bodied-looking men on the street white feathers to symbolize the men’s apparent cowardice (Simkin, 1997-2011), since they were not away fighting overseas. Some more modern women enduringly admit to valuing toughness, power, and wars of various sorts (Sylvester, 1987, pp. 501-502) and lament the demise of traditional, hegemonic masculinities in lieu of a more emotive, sensitive, and thus “feminized” New Millennium male (Eckler, 2002). This creates a bombardment of mixed messages for many present boys and men who strive to find mates who respect non-hegemonic male identities, beyond the goofy, immature, and violent stereotypes rife in popular culture.

From the start, Trinity finds Neo attractive due to his promise and, ultimately, his displays of fearlessness, aggression, courage, strength, and warrior prowess. The fantasy that the lowly, powerless worker-drone can accomplish incredible feats, and reap the prestige of a beautiful woman to “love,” or rather, respect him, is an age old facet of European lore—women are often what a man fights for (Hartsock, 1987, pp. 141-142). If a soldier can prove his courage and valor in battle, he may indeed merit a beautiful female, even one whose station in life is above his. She, in turn, benefits from the prestige and creature comforts, and hence security, that his heroism has earned. Seeing beautiful, ex-model Carrie-Anne Moss as Trinity, enamored by nerdy Thomas Anderson as Neo, connotes a regulatory message, giving men temporary respite in fantasy, to live vicariously, and fulfill society’s expectation of “work, marry, and support a family” (Farrell, 1986, p. 298) with nary a whimper. Meanwhile, men’s American reality offers chilling images of growing unrest, depression, drug abuse, alcoholism, health problems, lowered life expectancy, and increasingly low educational attainment (Gosse, 2011).

HOMOEROTICISM AND MALE RAPE

_Homo_—derived from Latin and Greek, means _the same_, or having similar characteristics (Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, 1995), whereas _erotic_, stemming from the Greek god of _love_, born of Chaos, connotes the personification of love and desire in all aspects (Bobo, 1995). When one combines _homo_ and _erotic_ together to form _homoerotic_, the most common interpretation would

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6 Russell Crowe became a worldwide sex symbol for millions of women following his role as the bloody, violent warrior Maximus in _Gladiator_ (Scott, 2000).
denote homosexuality, or sexual desire directed toward, or actualized with, a member of the same sex. The two are intimately linked. However, homoeroticism need not manifest itself in what contemporary society would necessarily term gay or queer lifestyle. Many men who display homoerotic desire would never qualify their desire as homoerotic or homosexual, or themselves as queer or gay. Rather, repudiation of the homoerotic is often viewed as an affirmation of one’s heterosexuality, and war (like competitive sport in popular culture) wedd the homoerotic and homophobic where men must bond around the proviso of homosexuality (Horrocks, 1995, p. 11). Therefore, the fine line between manifestations of homoeroticism, homosexuality, and heterosexual concepts of masculinity in males often appears intricately interwoven and equivocal. In sum, the homoerotic entails that which is desired and associated with one’s own gender, which may or may not involve sexual desire (desire can latch onto traits or qualities viewed as masculine), whereas homosexual entails actual direct physical, sexual contact between two or more males.

Homoeroticism of a sexual content is rampant in Black/White men’s cinematic interplay. In The Green Mile (Darabont, 1999), Coffey lays his hands on his guard’s crotch (Edgecombe, played by Tom Hanks), and after some homoerotic struggle and groaning, Coffey thereby cures him of a nasty urinary infection. Edgecombe then proceeds to hurry home and pleasure his wife four times in one night, a feat his forty-four year old body hadn’t accomplished since he was nineteen. Through the homoerotic exchange between the two men, the Black man infuses not only some of his strength in to the weaker White men, but also some of his legendary sexual prowess.

Similarly, in The Matrix Keanu Reeves’ character Neo has homoerotic encounters that need to be counteracted in order to ensure White male heterosexual identification with his character. Before being rescued by the Zionists, agents kidnap Neo and question him in a white, windowless room. The agents gag him, hold him down, and proceed to penetrate his belly button via a hybrid insect/machine creature that acts as a homing device. Homophobia may in part be articulated as a fear of male penetration/dominance, and can bond straight males together. Neo’s symbolic experience of male rape solicits the attribution of evil to its agents, the antagonists, through its homosexual connotation, and of heterosexuality to its victim, Neo, through the horror it visibly inspires in him. Where Scarce (1997, p. 59) proposes that males who do not conform to traditional notions of manhood run a greater risk of being sexually assaulted—Neo, the nerdy, weak, disembodied underdog, conforms to this pattern.

Heteronormativity is constantly reinforced in The Matrix (Bahng, 2006), so Neo’s assaulted by White men, his being mentored by Black man Morpheus and bossed around by White women, has to be heterosexualized and masculinized. On Morpheus’ orders, Trinity uses a machine to get the creature out of Neo’s belly, thereby restoring some semblance of his masculinity. By sending two women warriors (Trinity and Switch) to rescue Neo, Morpheus underplays Neo’s homoerotic rape by the agents, restoring Neo’s heterosexuality; Neo literally puts himself in the hands of two women, disrobing for them in order to be “cured” of the phallic creature the agents put inside him. Again,
some of the legendary, (hetero)sexual prowess of a Black man has been bestowed on a White man.

It is postulated that male victims of sexual assault may act out their feelings later, often in violent ways, and that the stoic way of dealing with pain is typically male (McMullen, 1990). Neo’s rape is indeed a step towards his embracing of violence, although such a supposition may carry misandric overtones—women who are raped are victims, men who are raped become violent. Male love/homoeroticism is only permitted to develop in full intensity in the presence of suffering and death, for relationships among heterosexual as well as homosexual men risk being perceived and punished as deviant. Wicks (1996) suggests that sports are commonly used for the expression of friendships, but emotions of caring or love among males are vigilantly held in check, even among buddies who have known each other for years. Frequently a mentor-protégé relationship transpires, as between Morpheus and Neo in The Matrix. Neo engages in homoerotic battle with his mentor, Morpheus, played by Laurence Fishburne, soon after his recuperation, both cloaked in s/m black leather garb and standing nose to nose. Not incidentally, Neo’s belly button, is unequivocally severed from all semblance of femininity now that the insertion site of the umbilical cord (referring one to one’s mother, and hence to one’s omnipresent feminine side) has been re-opened, abused, and reclosed. Now Neo can journey toward his rebirth as a “real man”—a traditional warrior—away from his nerdy past persona, through Morpheus’ tutoring and “tough love” martial training. In society, as in film, males are only permitted to engage in physical intimacy or show love to one another in the presence of death or war or their metaphorical deliverance. Therefore, although it may be argued that Thomas Anderson’s rebirth occurs once unplugged from the Matrix, laying on a table in the “real” world (Emig, 2006), Thomas’s true rebirth into masculinity lies not only in the reversion of his rape but also in his intricate relationship with Morpheus.

Morpheus, whose name means changer, transforms Neo from boy to man, imbuing him, under his tutelage, with uncommon strength and power. Morpheus masterminds the capturing of Neo from the evil clutches of the computers/machines, who use him as a human battery. In the homoerotic vent, Morpheus has been “watching” Neo for a long time via computer, connoting a voyeuristic fascination. To mask the homoerotic connotations of Morpheus saving a White man, as opposed to the acceptable, standard “damsel in distress,” Morpheus first sends Trinity, then Trinity together with another Zionist female, Switch, to be his emissaries. Finally, Neo is figuratively reborn. In fact, Morpheus relates to him that he had not been born, but grown in huge fields devoted to growing human babies. This is similar to armies’ “rebirth” of recruits away from females in hazing rituals, where “feminine” qualities such as caring and tenderness are mocked, scorned, or satirized. In The Matrix, once Neo has undergone some medical attention and wakes up, the first person he sees and talks to is Morpheus. Neonate Neo now belongs to him.

7 Unfortunately, The Matrix conforms to this, as with its misogynist and racist elements, sending disturbing cues of what is “normal” and acceptable.
Morpheus then asserts a sort of homoerotic dominance over him by guiding a coaxial line into the jack at the base of Neo’s head, so that a man has yet again penetrated our nascent hero. To counteract the gesture, Neo has to fight a bloody battle with Morpheus using martial arts. Metaphorically, Neo must now assert and prove his manhood and heterosexuality via physical prowess and courage, in order to earn the respect of Morpheus and the other Zionists. Morpheus pummels his new recruit, rather effortlessly dominating him. Then Neo has to jump from one building to another, and falls to the ground, symbolically dying, to be reborn as a warrior, capable of the “manly” feats of mastering his fears, fighting skills, and inner- and physical strength. Homosocial birth brings to dominance Neo’s supposedly innate, warrior might. Morpheus’ devotion is so strong to Neo that he eventually offers to give his life for him (a returned favor), as a love relationship would warrant. Neo’s passage into manhood is long and arduous. Since masculinity is contingent on a however constantly shifting demand, he must continuously pursue it.

The only way for a man to earn it forever is to sacrifice his life, as in war, which Neo proceeds to do. He winds up saving the life of kidnapped Morpheus toward the end of the film, rescuing him from the evil clutches of the agents. By saving Morpheus, Neo has symbolically killed him as leader (Harcrter, 2006), thereby committing a metaphoric patricide, reinstating the archetypal masculine qualities of stoicism, self-reliance, and ultimate autonomy (Gosse, 2009b; Pollack, 1998, pp. 23-25). In this scene, we see how the tortured Morpheus appears to receive something like virility from Neo, the White man. Roles have been reversed. In this way, Neo has asserted dominance over the Black man; the protégé has become the master, thus reaffirming White power, and his prerogative to gain the damsel in distress, the most sought after female, Trinity.

Ultimately, Neo progresses from becoming “The One” an anagram of his name, “Neo,” to the ultimate archetype of traditional masculine heroism, “alone/alone” or “one” man against evil, a Jesus-line savior who follows what may be the “one” or major rule for males—sacrifice yourselves for others, particularly females, and you may just win their love, and social acceptance.

CODA

Viewed anew from a queer perspective on sexuality as well as a sympathetic, yet academically rigorous view of boys’ and men’s place in the gender order (Gosse, 2010b; Young, 2007), The Matrix may be re-read as a futuristic and matriarchal film, in which female characters live safer, more protected, and more stable lives and identities, as opposed to the male characters who are continually putting their lives at risk to protect, serve, and avenge them, while experiencing life altering revelations and transformations that upset their sense of self, reality, and psychological and physical security in society. Moreover, The Matrix can be viewed as a catalyst for examining alternate realities in which men live and struggle to find more settled and accepted masculine identities, and sense of agency, in an age where traditional hegemonic masculine traits occupy a progressively precarious site of contestation. Although situated in a veneer of patriarchy, for there are no evil female agents, women characters such
as the Oracle and Trinity hugely influence and indeed mastermind the unfolding of the plot towards a nebulous victory, for they manipulate the thoughts and actions of the protagonist, Neo, and that of secondary characters such as Morpheus, the spurned Cypher, and the sacrificial, more nerdy digital warriors, Mouse and Tank, who never fully reach Nietzschean Übermensch status before getting killed.

Increasingly, Western culture prizes brains over brawn, and communication and interpersonal skills (Rosin, 2010) rather than a dive-in, give ‘em hell attitude typical of traditional action films redolent of the “Boy Code” (Fine, 1999; Pollack, 1998, p. 23-25) valuing brute strength, aggression, and lack of emotionalism. What consequences does this have for boys and men? As Freire suggests, oppression is most complete when it is not even recognized (2000).

The premise of boys’ and men’s hegemonic power, commonly framed within feminist discourses of patriarchy, must be rigorously questioned. Compared to girls, boys receive more negative attention from teachers, dislike school, are more often victims of bullying and assault, take fewer advanced placement courses, assume fewer leadership roles in extra-curricular activities in high school, drop out of school, and commit suicide in far greater numbers (Gosse, Parr, & Kristolaitis, 2010; Zheng, 2009). Men occupy the most hazardous jobs in society (Farrell, 2005; Staff, 2008), die much earlier than women, account for a majority of the homeless (Farrell, 2007), attend university in fewer numbers (Frenette & Zeman, 2007), and increasingly are minorities in the most prestigious professions—education, law, and various branches of medicine (Finley, 2007; Hoff Summers, 2007). Are men, and women, clinging to dualistic and increasingly outdated gender stereotypes, reflected in action films but not reflecting current manifestations of power in society at large?

The Matrix’s nerdy, technologically savvy, socially inept, pretty boy anti-hero, may pass beyond the bulky, meathead Rocky or Rambo soldier-type of the 1980s and 1990s, albeit the former does eventually transform, or revert, into the equivalent of the latter. The film does show evolution in staging female warriors such as Trinity and Switch, but also lapses into the typical “damsel in distress” leitmotif that endures in most movies today. Increasingly, chief action hero protagonists are female.8 All of these women action heroes slaughter scores of men in these films but rarely women.

I propose that the current phenomenon of women action heroes, taking on what have traditionally been seen as hegemonic masculine traits (brute

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8 This applies widely from the martial arts assassin “The Bride,” played by lanky, blonde Uma Thurman in Kill Bill, Vol. I (Tarantino, 2003) and II (Tarantino, 2004), deadly Alice in the Resident Evil (Mulcahy, 2007; Witt, 2004), played by former supermodel Milla Jovovich, as well as her similar warrior role in Ultraviolet (Wimmer, 2006), and likewise with the violently vengeful Aeon Flux, played by former model Charlize Theron (Kusama, 2005), to the various assassins played by celebrated beauty Angelina Joli, including her roles in Lara Croft: The Cradle of Life (Bont, 2003), Lara Croft: Tomb Raider (West, 2006), Wanted (Bekmambetov, 2008), Mr. and Mrs. Smith (Liman, 2005), and Salt (Noyce, 2010).
strength, stoicism, lack of emotionality, extreme and gory physical violence) signifies two major cultural trends: (1) a shift towards acknowledging women’s increased power in society, and (2) an indication of men’s decreased sense of empowerment, since men now frequently (i) occupy the “man in distress” position in many of these films, (ii) are physically and emotionally weaker than the female action hero, (iii) are utterly besotted and a servant of women’s will, and/or (iv) occupy the position of the one-dimensional malevolent antagonist. None of these new male roles can be assimilated with the hegemonic male power postulated throughout gender theory.

Towards the end of The Matrix, now a fully transformed and victorious warrior, Neo, like a converted Anthony de Mello follower (1992, p. 133), chides the ruling agents with glib Eastern philosophy:

I believe deep down, we both want this world to change. I believe that the Matrix can remain our cage or it can become our chrysalis, that’s what you helped me to understand. That to be free, you cannot change your cage. You have to change yourself. (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1998, p. 125)

As society continues to evolve, as conceptions of historical gender and identity roles increasingly unravel, it will be interesting to see whether hegemonic traits associated with capitalist “ruling,” may transform beyond the persistent controlling, violent, and bloody vent of gender, whether male or female. How might these new traits then be reinvented, represented, and reinterpreted in cinema and popular culture? Can subtle psychological manipulation be equally acknowledged as salient elements of power, over the historical panacea of gender? How can the pull of sexual and sensual shades of power be better understood? How might policing of boys and men’s (and girls’ and women’s) masculinities—especially for those who do not conform to gender, racial, class, sexual orientation, mobility/physical prowess, communication, and sundry identity expectations—be better studied, and thus, indeed, transformed?

Films & Television Series Referenced


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