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 exciting," 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 installment of the trilogy, which had become a phenomenon thanks to the second film. "Everything that has a beginning has an end" declared a PR bit for the film. It was a slogan that sought at once to connect it to the earlier *Matrix* films and to place it in its own context: this was the culmination of the story and would enhance our understanding of it. But the reactions and reviews ranged from unenthusiastic to disappointed. Most people found the first part, *The Matrix* to be the best one, and neither *Matrix Reloaded* nor *Matrix Revolutions* convinced audiences, rather leaving them somewhat puzzled. What were the reasons for this? What did the creators of the Trilogy, the Wachowski Brothers, do wrong? One of the basics challenges of storytelling in films is to ensure that one does not have to go twice or multiple times to the cinema to understand a film. This is all the more true of a Hollywood blockbuster. Of course, filmmakers can and do 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 what a great success that *The Matrix* would become. Plans for a trilogy seemed unrealistic. Thus the first film has a stand-alone quality and the integrity of a story in its own right, a feature which may not have been so clear if a trilogy had been planned from the start. For example, at the end of part one, Neo is already able to manipulate the Matrix and prevail against the agents (Smith) within in. Only in the end

of *Matrix Revolutions* is there once again a high suspense in the final battle between machines and human kind. But what of the second part *Matrix Reloaded*? Where does it 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* leaves off, which means that to understand the third 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 conclusion comes in the third installment, it provides no great synthesis of either the motives or philosophical issues. Although watching *Matrix Revolutions* is an overwhelming aesthetic experience, and an achievement of computer generated graphics, on the level of philosophical exploration there is no real surprise or further development. The main philosophical points were already raised in the first *Matrix* film, and their repetition sans further elucidation has a rather disappointing, or even banal effect. One example, in the final fight scene between Neo and Smith Neo is almost defeated though he refuses to 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." At this point the audience received no sudden insight. The motif that human freedom stands over Smith's deterministic view is not new; it is simply rehashing 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-stage model from Vogler fits exactly with the first part *The Matrix* with the exception of its opening sequence. It is worth examining the *Matrix* films using Vogler's model.

Stages	Vogler's model	Outline "The Matrix"
	High tensional starting point, because it is completely unclear, why Trinity is chased, yet does one know is she the hero?	Running Matrix-Code, Trinity is chased by the police.
	Heroes are introduced in the	
1	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 RELUCTANT 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 crew member – 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.

Stages	Vogler's model	Outline "The Matrix"
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 threshold, experience a RESURRECTION, and are transformed by the experience.	Neo is killed by agents and is dead in the Matrix, through the love of Trinity he resurrects. The Matrix no longer controls him, he controls the Matrix.
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 broke down the Hero's journey into three formal acts. Act I finished with 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 to battle against the system and the agents, and ends with the liberation of Morpheus and the return of Trinity. The third act starts with Neo being pursued by the agents and ends with Neo calling for the end of oppression. Act III is the showdown. There are two other important features: the crisis and the climax. The crisis is, general speaking, either in the middle of the story (central crises) or at the end of act II (delayed crisis). In *the Matrix*, the crisis occurs at that point in the story where the crew loses their leader Morpheus. Either they will have to kill Morpheus, or Zion, the last bastion of human kind, will be placed in great danger. The climax is the crowning moment of Act III: Neo's resurrection through and by the love of Trinity, freeing him from the Matrix's control.

In *Matrix Reloaded* and *Matrix Revolutions* the Wachowskis follow this model only loosely and hence make it difficult to identify the story in the films. Instead of a "receive the CALL TO ADVENTURE," Neo finds the home of the Oracle empty. He becomes privy to his calling only after about a third of the film, which is about twice as long as it takes in the first film. The Oracle then tells him about the Keymaker, whose help is necessary to gain access to the Source, "where the path of the One ends". Can one see the

"FIRST THRESHOLD" (stage 5) in Neo's discovery that he is able to resist Smith's attempt to kill him by imprinting him with his code? In Act II Neo is in the "INMOST CAVE" (stage 7) when he meets with 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, which sees a reversal of the resurrection in the first film. Meanwhile in the Nebuchadnezzar, Morpheus' hovercraft, Neo reveals that "The prophecy was a lie. The One was never meant to end anything. It was all another system of control". The Sentinels destroy the Nebuchadnezzar and almost kill the crew as well, though now Neo can, in the real world and not only in the Matrix, miraculously intervene to stop the Sentinels, but the use of his powers knocks him unconscious. In the last scene we see Neo laying inert and with him the only survivor Bane (who has been taken over by agent Smith). *Matrix Reloaded* ends in the middle of stage 11: "They cross the third threshold" but there is as of yet no indication of another resurrection for Neo.

Matrix Revolutions begins exactly where *Matrix Reloaded* terminated; Act III of the second part is continued in Act I of part three. Neo has another semi-resurrection experience and is separated from Morpheus, Trinity and Seraph. Neo meets the Oracle and is for a last time encouraged to continue his struggle (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 crosses the "FIRST THRESHOLD" when he decides to go to the centre of the machine city. On his way he is blinded by Bane (agent Smith), but with the help of Trinity he is flown with the Logos to the machine city. At the same time, the battle around Zion has begun and persists. At this stage there is a double crisis in Act II, which is tied together by two 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 its denizens stop the Sentinels destroying the dock? Arriving at the INMOST CAVE (stage 7), Trinity dies and Neo is able to 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, he paradoxically wins it. He realizes their special relationship and 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. Even Smith realizes this in the few last seconds before he and all his doubles are 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." At this point there is no certainty that Neo will have yet another 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 was it 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 most enduring longings of human beings for freedom and redemption and to 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 reality, and raised the questions of freedom and redemption in a new and exciting genre. Am I in the Matrix or in reality? However, by virtue of a lack of attention paid to the basics of storytelling, they lost their common thread in the quite confusing second and third installments. In so doing, they damaged their entire project.