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# Trabajo Fin de Grado

“Goodbye, Mr. Anderson”: Transgender Issues  
in *The Matrix* (Lilly and Lana Wachowski, 1999)

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## Introduction

*The Matrix* (Lilly and Lana Wachowski, 1999) can be considered one of the most relevant and ground-breaking science fiction movies. As Eli London notes in a piece published twenty years after the film's release, "for its time, the film was a monumental accomplishment in the fields of sound, cinematography and special effects" (2019). *The Matrix* has been thoroughly studied and analysed since its release, with a special focus on science-fiction and race issues. However, even after both directors came out as transgender women, there has not been a lot of analysis focused on transgender issues in connection to the film. This BA thesis argues that *The Matrix* presents Neo (Keanu Reeves) as a non-binary transgender person and that the development of the narrative in fact establishes clear parallels with the common phases of a general medical transition.

In order to analyse the transgender dimension of the film, it is necessary to contextualise the movie itself. *The Matrix*, which came out in 1999, showcases a post-apocalyptic world, in which humans are being used for power supply while their consciousnesses are uploaded into a virtual world called the Matrix. Through the movie, we follow the journey of the hacker Neo to discover the existence of the Matrix and find ways to fight against it.

This movie has been studied before in different fields. More specifically there have been studies on the importance of race in the movie, such as Nakamura's "Race in the Construct, or the Construction of Race: New Media and Old Identities in "The Matrix"" (2002), where the multiculturalism of the people inhabiting the hovercraft *Nebuchadnezzar* is analysed, and Boyd's "The African American Presence and the Resolution of Race in The Matrix Trilogy" (2004) which argues that, while there is not an explicit mention of race, there are cultural signifiers that represent African American

struggles. There has also been research done related to the topic of cyberpunk and science-fiction as a genre with examples like *Cyberpunk 2.0: Fiction and Contemporary* (Elias, 2009)—a book in which he analyses the cyberpunk aspects of contemporary fiction in media such as comics, videogames or movies, and explores contemporary cyberpunk figures—or *The Matrix Trilogy: Cyberpunk Reloaded* (Gillis, 2005), a collection of critical essays on *The Matrix* phenomenon—including not only the trilogy but also the videogame and websites—discussing cybertheory, cyberpunk and simulacra among other themes.

However, the focus of this essay will not be on these topics. As C ael Keegan explains in his book *Lilly and Lana Wachowski* (2018), there is a lack of research in the field of transgender studies in relation to the movie, especially considering that both directors are trans women. Both sisters were closeted by the time the movie came out in 1999, but they made their gender identity public years after (Lana in 2008, and Lilly, a few years later, in 2016). In an interview for the BBC in 2020, after being asked about *The Matrix* as a transgender metaphor, Lana admitted that “that was the original intention but the world wasn't quite ready”. This statement has been one of the starting points for this BA thesis.

One of the few works that has analysed *The Matrix* from a transgender perspective is the aforementioned *Lana and Lilly Wachowski* (2018), in which Keegan looks into the Wachowski's filmography from a transgender perspective. In his analysis, Keegan enumerates six different phases of a medical transition for a transgender person without going into much detail. In this BA thesis, I am going to try and take a step forward by taking these phases as a reference and comparing them to several scenes from the movie as to show how Neo can be read as a transgender character. These steps are dysphoria, identity realisation, name change, hormonal therapy, surgery and social

reintegration. To these points, I will also add the term non-binary and explore how it can also be applied to Neo, since this has been an overlooked dimension of the character and non-binary identities are general under researched.

To provide context for these terms, I will now offer a brief explanation and definition of each of them, since they will be mentioned throughout my analysis. However, before we go into detail with these terms there needs to be a clarification: Even though these are the most common phases for a person to transition, not every transgender person goes through all of them. Every trans experience is different, and this list just tries to showcase the most common experiences that transgender people can go through.

The first term we are going to focus on is dysphoria. Dysphoria, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary is “a state of feeling very unhappy, uneasy, or dissatisfied”. However, there is a specific type of dysphoria that will be the one used in this BA thesis, and that is gender dysphoria. According to the American Psychiatric Association, gender dysphoria “refers to psychological distress that results from an incongruence between one’s sex assigned at birth and one’s gender identity.” In other words, it is the feeling of being born in the wrong body and the distress it can cause.

The next relevant idea would be that of identity realisation, which refers to the moments in a person’s life in which they question their gender and realise they are transgender. Through this process, some people try to negate it or avoid it as being transgender is not always safe or comfortable. An example of this is described by Jennifer Rubí, a Spanish transgender woman in the anthology *(h)amor<sup>6</sup> trans*. In her chapter “Mi reflejo” she says “and your world falls down trying to be someone you are not, just so you can be accepted” [my translation] (2020, p. 205-226), showing how it is

sometimes hard for transgender people to live the life they want, even after realising their identity.

Another central concept is name change, which seems basic but is one of the turning points for transgender people. It is also a highly relevant element in my analysis. Essentially, it is the choice of transgender people to choose their own name and, later on, be able to legally change it.

Another phase of transgender transition is hormonal therapy. As Thompson defines it, “gender-affirming hormone therapy (GAHT) refers to sex steroids administered in various forms to produce or enhance secondary sex characteristics that promote physical affirmation” (2021, p. 404). There are different types of hormones which not only depend on the gender assigned to the person at birth, but also on what their doctor sees more fitting.

Then there is the concept of surgery. The problem with this term is that, while it is one of the first things people relate to being trans, it cannot be reduced to just “the surgery”. There are different kinds depending on the sex you were assigned at birth, but even those with the same genitalia can have different options. However, to summarise, we can generalise them under two umbrella terms: top surgery and bottom surgery.

Another central term is social reintegration. This refers to the concept of transgender people living their lives as their true gender, most likely after having transitioned. It is in this phase when some transgender people think about their stolen youth and the experiences they missed just from the fact of being trans. This is something Iki Yos Piña Narváez Funes, a non-binary Afro-Caribbean writer, reflects on in their chapter “¿Has probado la leche travesti?” (2020, p. 87-100). They denounce transgender stolen youths and question if anyone can bring those missed experiences, such as writing love letters, back. They also criticise society by saying “my transvestite

friends died without writing a love letter” [my translation], which puts into perspective all those transgender lives who have died for being transgender.

Lastly, there needs to be an explanation of the term non-binary in relation to gender. Non-binary people are those who define their gender outside the binary of woman/man. It is an umbrella term under which we can also find many more identities. Non-binary people can have any gender expression, although it is sometimes assumed that they have androgynous appearance. They can also use any pronouns like he, she or they, or neo pronouns—new third-person pronouns used to describe people out of the binary of men and women—such as xe/xem/xyr, ze/hir/hirs, and ey/em/eir. Now that these phrases and terms have been defined, a closer analysis of each of them will be offered, comparing scenes from the movie to these terms in order to showcase how Neo can be seen as a non-binary transgender person.

## **“Call Trans Opt: Received”: Instances of Dysphoria**

Dysphoria can manifest in different symptoms for different people and in the case of *The Matrix*, we can observe some of its particularities. Throughout the movie, but especially at the beginning, we can find different symptoms that have been attributed to dysphoria. They can be categorised in two groups: Those related to specifically dysphoric situations, and those related to depression. The importance of the last ones comes from the fact that gender dysphoria can in fact cause depression. The NHS page about gender dysphoria states that “this sense of unease or dissatisfaction may be so intense it can lead to depression and anxiety and have a harmful impact on daily life.” (National Health Service [NHS], 2020).

Some of the depression symptoms that can be found in *The Matrix* are depersonalisation, insomnia, lack of sociability or littering. We can find clear examples of this at the beginning, when we see Neo's apartment, full of things everywhere, showing the state of his mind with the messy state of his apartment. Right afterwards, Choi knocks on his door, and he asks: "You ever have that feeling where you're not sure if you're awake or still dreaming?" Choi relates that feeling to drugs, but it could be seen as Neo not feeling completely himself, closer to the feeling of depersonalisation. Depersonalisation disorder is "sometimes described as feeling like you are observing yourself from outside your body or like being in a dream" (Casarella, 2020) and it is closely tied with depression. Another symptom of depression caused by his gender dysphoria can be seen later on, in the club, when he speaks with Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss), and she mentions that Neo hardly sleeps. According to Debra Fulghum Bruce, depression can be a cause of insomnia as "there is a definite link between lack of sleep and depression. In fact, one of the common signs of depression is insomnia or an inability to fall and stay asleep" (2021). In that conversation she also mentions how he lives alone, which is an indicator of his lack of sociability. This lack of sociability can also be found at the party. The camera pans left showing first a shot of Choi and his friends having fun at the club, and then moving towards Neo who is against a wall, holding a beer, and trying not to interact with anyone. He seems to be alone in a room full of people. Neo only starts to fit in with his surroundings when Trinity appears and starts talking to him, making her come into his world as someone who has been in his shoes before. She even says so, comparing her experience of looking for Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) with his. However, this scene will be analysed in more detail later on, when identity realisation is discussed.





Fig. 1. Litter on Neo's desk.



Fig. 2. Neo alone in the middle of the crowd.

Moving on from depression, I would like to focus on those symptoms that are intrinsically dysphoric. For this I am going to look into the scene in which Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving) interrogates Neo. To begin with, I would like to highlight a sentence Smith says: “It seems like you’ve been living two lives”. The inclusion of this line is important since it shows two sides of the same transgender coin. On the one side, there are references to dysphoria, as seen in the grimaces Neo makes every time they speak about his office work or call him ‘Thomas Anderson’. On the other, there is gender euphoria, when he answers to the name Neo comfortably, which could be seen as his true gender. Gender euphoria refers to “the enjoyment or satisfaction derived from concordances between their gender identity and gendered features associated with a gender other than that associated with their sex assigned at birth” (King and Restar, 2021, p. 353-354). The other moment worth mentioning in this scene as a sign of

dysphoria is when Neo's mouth disappears. This could be seen as a metaphoric way of expressing dysphoria since his own body does not feel like his, and dysphoria can also distort the way transgender people see themselves. Obviously, in real life, no one's mouth disappears, but here it symbolises the discomfort in your own skin that dysphoria can produce, accentuated by the fact that a bug is planted into him making the scene more uncomfortable. In a way, what society imposes on someone, can aggravate dysphoria, making transgender people feel like they cannot speak up and making them feel uncomfortable in their own skin.



Fig. 3. Neo's mouth disappearing during Agent Smith's interrogatory.

## **“Wake up, Neo”: The Journey towards Identity Realisation**

Figuring out someone's own identity as part of the LGBTQIA+<sup>1</sup> community is a common experience that more often than not happens gradually or multiple times throughout a person's life. It is not something people suddenly realise one day, but a long process of trial, error and conflicted feelings. This makes every transgender person have a different and unique experience when realising their own identity. However,

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<sup>1</sup> This term has been chosen instead of others such as LGBT or LGBTQ since it is more inclusive, as it represents parts of the community that are usually overseen or ignored such as intersexual, asexual or agender people among others.

what this journey has in common for every person is that it begins at some point. This moment is represented in *The Matrix* by showing the beginning of Neo's story which could symbolise the first realisation of being transgender and learning about the existence of other trans people.

The first scene in which Neo's journey towards identity realisation begins coincides with the first scene we see him on screen, when the computer reads: "Wake up, Neo". This sentence is not only read in the literal way, making him wake up from his nap, but it can be read metaphorically. What the computer message really suggests by telling Neo to wake up is to invite him to see beyond what is there in the first place, to see beyond the Matrix or, in this case, see beyond cisgender society. This would be the first time he is confronted by this possibility, a feeling which soon after intensifies when he meets Trinity. Trinity symbolises what Neo aspires to be, and he sees her as a reference for what he wants to achieve. As a person figuring his own gender out, Neo would look up to people who have already transitioned—in this case, been out of the Matrix—and Trinity would relate to him since she was once in his place. During this scene, she says:

"You're looking for him. I know, because once I was looking for the same thing. And when he found me, he told me I wasn't really looking for him. I was looking for an answer. It's the question that drives us, Neo. It's the question that drove you here. You know the question, just as I did."

With these words she is not only relating her experience to his, but also letting him know that, deep inside him, he already knows who he is. They were not really searching for Morpheus, but for themselves.



Fig. 4. The computer screen reading: "Wake up, Neo".

Lastly, I would like to point out that the journey of self-discovery is not linear or something that has a clear end or destination, since people in the LGBTQIA+ community can question their gender or sexuality throughout their whole lives. This process has its ups and downs and there are some other scenes in the film which represent other stages of this journey, although not everyone goes through them. One of those scenes would be Neo's negation of the Matrix when he has just come out, which represents the internalised transphobia that some transgender people suffer while discovering their identity. He does not want to believe what is in front of him because he knows his life would be easier and safer if his life had stayed the same, even if he was not happy. Another example of a very different stage would be the scene in which Neo visits the Oracle and the kids teach him how to bend a spoon. This scene can be seen as a reflection of the way transgender people learn new things about themselves throughout their lives. In this case, younger trans people can teach experiences they have lived to older people who might not be familiar with them. This is more common nowadays due to the importance of the internet. Younger people get familiarised with terms and experiences that older trans people might not be aware of and can find that information in their younger generations. This makes more sense if we take into account

that the kids in the film are in the Matrix, which is a virtual reality, almost as if they were living on the Internet.



Fig. 5. Young kid teaching Neo how to bend spoons.

## **“Goodbye, Mr. Anderson”: Importance of Name Change**

One of the big steps in a transgender journey is that of choosing your own name. It is not only a way of feeling more connected to your own gender but also a way of having control over how people perceive you and a way to reinforce your gender identity. While this is not a mandatory step to be recognised as a transgender person, it is a common stage of transition. Some people choose to keep their “deadname”, but that choice in itself can also be identity-defining. Throughout the entirety of *The Matrix*, but especially at the beginning and the end of the film, there is a duality between Neo and Thomas A. Anderson. For the purpose of this analysis, it is safe to assume that Neo would be his chosen name and Thomas Anderson would be his deadname. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines deadname as “the name that a transgender person was given at birth and no longer uses upon transitioning” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In this section, I will focus on the different impact both names have at the beginning of the

movie in contrast with the end. More specifically, how he gets more comfortable with the name Neo and ends up rejecting the name Thomas Anderson.

The first important fact about the character's name is that he is introduced as Neo, his chosen name, and that is how most people outside the movie universe refer to him. However, in the beginning, he is only referred to with this name by people who know who he is or what he does. Furthermore, this name, at first, is only used in safe spaces<sup>2</sup>: his apartment and when he meets Trinity. It is also worth highlighting that the name Neo appears for the first time in his computer screen, which symbolises how the only place he has been himself is online, where he can use his real name.

Neo's reaction to both of his names in the beginning of the movie is also very telling. When he meets Trinity in the party he asks: "how do you know that name?". He seems surprised, but he never denies that it is his name, and he seems comfortable being referred to as Neo. However, later on, in his office, the delivery man calls him Thomas Anderson, and he seems more defeated answering "yeah, that's me", almost as if he regretted answering to that name. This distress towards his own name is amplified in the scene where Agent Smith interrogates him. It is Agent Smith who says:

"As you can see, we've had our eye on you for some time now, Mr. Anderson. It seems that you've been living...two lives. In one life, you're Thomas A. Anderson, program writer for a respectable software company. [...] The other life is lived in computers, where you go by the hacker alias Neo, and are guilty of virtually every computer crime we have a law for. One of these lives has a future, and one of them does not."

Agent Smith analyses Neo's life and official records, by which we can appreciate the façade Neo sometimes builds to please society and his true self. Moreover, Smith's

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<sup>2</sup> Safe space: "a place (as on a college campus) intended to be free of bias, conflict, criticism, or potentially threatening actions, ideas, or conversations" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

words are quite relevant if we take into account that Smith was right when saying only one of those lives had a future, but he got wrong which life was to survive.

This takes us to the end of the movie, after Neo has already made peace with who he is and most characters in the movie just know him by his chosen name. The only character still referring to him as Mr. Anderson is Agent Smith. After shooting him and making sure he's dead, Smith adds: "Goodbye, Mr. Anderson." This is a turning point both plot-wise and for this analysis since, when he revives moments later, he is not Thomas Anderson. He is Neo. That "goodbye" is his way of killing his closeted self, the person who still did not know who Neo was. From that point on, he cannot be hurt by any of the Agents—who represent a transphobic society. He is proud of who he truly is. In a way, this scene represents how Neo is reborn as his true self, leaving Thomas Anderson behind.

## **Red Pill or Blue Pill: The Choice of Hormonal Therapy**

As it has already been mentioned, *The Matrix* has been widely analysed in the past few decades, and one of the best-known scenes is that in which Neo has to choose between the red pill and the blue pill. Even nowadays, this scene is used as a political analogy, as some right-wing celebrities like Elon Musk or Ivanka Trump have posted tweets trying to reclaim the term 'red pill' as a way of representing Covid-19 negationists, although Lilly Wachowski disapproved of this, as seen on the image below. However, for this analysis, the focus is not as political. Instead, this scene can be seen as a metaphor for hormonal therapy. When cisgender people think about transgender issues, they tend to automatically assume every transgender person uses hormones and has gotten or will get surgery. While we will discuss the second subject in the next part, there needs to be

some clarification on this: although it is a common practise and needs to be mentioned in order to show an “ordinary” transgender journey, not every transgender person decides to transition through these treatments.



Fig. 6. Extract of the twitter interactions between Musk, Trump and Wachowski.

The pills scene can be analysed in a way in which one pill is a good choice and the other one is bad, seeing that one helps him leave the Matrix and the other leaves him in it. However, in this section, I would like to look at this scene in a different way, analysing what it truly is: a choice. Hormone therapy is first and foremost a personal choice that most transgender people have to make at some point in their lives. This choice is intensified by the way this scene is shot. Morpheus shows both pills, one by one, explaining their differences, while this happens, both pills reflect on his glasses, as well as Neo’s face. Neo’s double reflection portrays the hard choice he has ahead. We can see both of his possible futures: one with the blue pill in which he stays the same, and one with the red pill in which he goes through a change. This change would symbolise going through hormonal therapy.



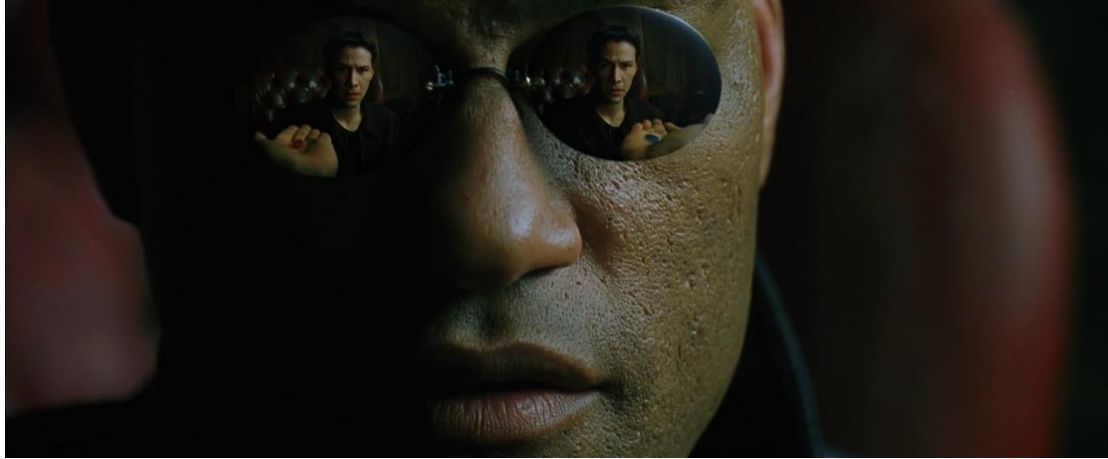


Fig. 7. Both pills reflecting on Morpheus's glasses, representing Neo's possibilities.

This idea of the red pill as hormonal therapy goes beyond the screen. Taking into account what we are shown in the movie, Neo would be a transgender person assigned male gender at birth—also known as AMAB. For AMAB people, hormone therapy is usually based around oestrogen pills, which can contain other natural hormones produced in the ovaries such as oestradiol. One of the most common treatments used is Elleste Solo™ which, as described by trans woman Juliet Jacques in an article describing her hormonal therapy, are “small orange-pink tablets” (Jacques, 2011). This colour is similar to that of the red pill in the movie, as the pill is partly translucent and its colour looks lighter in some shots.



Fig. 8. Elleste Solo pills, and their colour similar to that of the red pill (@uwurosie, 2021).

The last issue to comment on regarding hormonal therapy is related to the effects of oestrogen and other techniques used for transition by AMAB people. Dylan Mulvaney, a trans woman sharing her transition journey on TikTok and Instagram, explained how oestrogen does not affect voice change in the same way testosterone might for transmasculine people. She explained that “a lot of trans women end up going to speech therapy or vocal therapy to find their new ‘woman voice’” (Mulvaney, 2022). A metaphor for this process of voice training could be found in the training Neo does once he is out of the Matrix. Even after choosing the red pill and going through multiple surgeries—this will be further explained in the next section— he still needs to train with Morpheus to be able to walk freely in the Matrix or, in a more transgender way, to pass. In this case, Neo, as an AMAB person, decides to go through hormonal therapy, and then, train himself to be able to fit in with the rest of the world. Following these concepts, we can also find Morpheus as a therapist or a tutor, being not only the one that gives him the pills, but also the person who helps Neo train.

## **“Am I Dead?”: Transgender Surgeries**

Transgender surgeries are a difficult topic to navigate. When they are discussed, people with no information about the subject often tend to talk about “the surgery”. The truth is that surgeries not only depend on whether the person is AMAB or AFAB, but even under those categories there are still multiple options. As an example, in female to male (FTM) top surgeries, up to five different procedures can be found as seen in the Gender Surgery Amsterdam webpage. Since this topic is so wide, for the analysis of this section I have focused on parts of the film that resemble surgery or in which a physical change is done to Neo’s body. The scenes in which this can be better appreciated would be the

ones happening after Neo leaves the Matrix. However, there is also a previous scene that could be seen as the beginning of his journey towards gender affirmation surgery.

This previous scene would be the one in the car, when Trinity takes the bug out of Neo. The bug in Neo, as aforementioned in the body dysphoria section, is something society has imposed on him against his will. It is a representation of what a cisgender society expects from him in order to fit in. The removal of the bug would be the first step towards transition through surgery. This could be seen in the same way breasts or penises define femininity or masculinity by societal norms, and how some people go through intervention to have those removed—or use techniques like binding or tucking to hide them—in order to be seen as their own gender.



Fig. 9. Bug extraction as a way of surgery

However, that is only a small step in comparison to the sequence that appears after Neo leaves the Matrix. This series of scenes give the feeling that Neo is going through a gender affirmation surgery both in terms of what it is shown and the way it is shot. On the one hand, we have the experiences Neo goes through and how they can be related to surgery due to the things that are happening to his body. The first instance of this would be when he is separated from his pod, an initial way of separating the body he had in the Matrix from his real body. The next scene worthy of attention takes place when Neo wakes up on the ship, while his body is full of needles. He is disoriented and

confused, asking if he is dead, as if waking up from anaesthesia. This is what resembles more closely a real surgery as Morpheus' crew are trying to modify his body, only using needles instead of scalpels. The use of needles makes the scene more impactful for the viewers, highlighting the invasive effect surgeries can have on people, since it looks uncomfortable, as seen in the picture below. The use of needles also adds to this feeling, since even people who do not have a fear of needles may find this image disturbing. The last example is also similar to a real procedure, and it is the moment when Morpheus and Dozer take Neo's chips off his body after the needles have been removed. Once again, by removing the metal parts from him, they are removing the things that connected Neo's body to the Matrix, which, in a way, could be seen as leaving behind the parts related to the gender assigned to him.

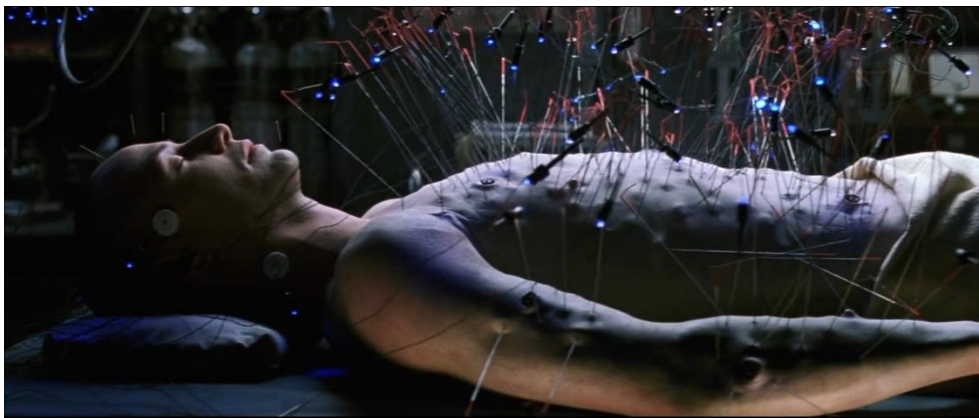


Fig. 10. Needles in Neo's body showing the invasiveness of the intervention.

On the other hand, the way some of these scenes are shot can remind the viewer of surgery scenes. By featuring Morpheus and Trinity talking off-screen, while the screen is black and then introducing a flash of white light, the scene simulates the effects of waking up from anaesthesia. That, combined with blurriness effects on the frame and Neo's whisper of "Am I dead?" can make the spectator empathise with Neo's confusion. This point-of-view shot with a strong source of white light, with the lens

gradually focusing on what is seen and a low-angle view from the main character's perspective is common in scenes where someone wakes up after a surgery. These scenes can be found in multiple types of media before, contemporary with and after the release of *The Matrix* in 1999. Among the examples that were released at roughly the same time as *The Matrix*, there is the TV show *Roswell* (1999-2001), which includes a shot similar to this in episode 21 of the first season ("The White Room"). Instead of having a character wake up from surgery, it uses the same stylistic choices, like the white light and playing with the focus of the camera, to simulate the main character falling asleep due to anaesthesia. As for movies and TV shows posterior to *The Matrix*, we can find multiple examples of this in hospital or police dramas such as *The Good Doctor* (2017-present), *House* (2004-2012) or *Criminal Minds* (2005-2020), and superhero movies like *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), as well as other action dramas. Apart from these examples, there are multiple others in which this type of low-angle shots and visual effects have been used in the past, and are continued to be used nowadays, making this scene a powerful and recognisable way of portraying surgery.

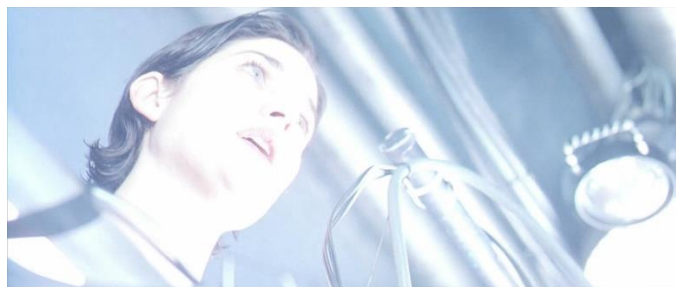


Fig. 11. Surgery shot, with the white light and Trinity coming into focus.

## **Back into the Matrix: Social Reintegration**

The focus on transgender people is usually around their transition or their journey towards their identity realisation, but a question that is not asked very often is: what happens next? While discovering their gender identity and transitioning is part of transgender lives, the rest of their lives is equally important. Walking through society after transitioning, commonly known as social reintegration, is probably one of the least spoken subjects in transgender studies, but it is equally important, and we will be analysing it in this section. In *The Matrix*, we can identify this process with the scene in which Neo goes back into the Matrix for the first time to go see the Oracle.

The first detail worth mentioning is that, in real life, it is not common to be completely isolated from the rest of society while transitioning, as Neo is. After learning the truth, Neo leaves the Matrix and goes through his surgeries and training in a safe space for him. It is not until he has fully ‘transitioned’—in the sense of knowing himself and having trained enough to be able to defend himself—that he goes back into the society he grew up in. While transgender people’s experiences are not as extreme as what Neo goes through—it is more of a gradual process people usually go through when transitioning—the reactions to what he is living are similar to those of transgender people when they start being recognised by their own gender.

One of these experiences is the intensity with which people feel the world around them. This is shown when the group walks out of the building they spawn in. We can see how the frame closes in on Neo’s face as he looks around. At the same time, the scene turns into slow motion while the volume of the music goes up, letting the audience empathise with Neo’s feelings. He is looking around and seeing the world with different eyes. He can see that, while the world is technically still the same, he has

changed enough to see it in a different light. He looks amazed by how real everything around him is, even though he now knows it is a virtual reality.

This new way of seeing the world is also evident in the car ride with Trinity and Morpheus. Neo keeps looking out the window, seeing the streets he has walked a million times as if it were the first time. He remembers things from his life, like a noodle place he used to go to before learning the truth. He talks about it with normalcy, but also aware that things will never be the same, much like a transgender person goes through their normal life after coming out. After legally transitioning and being perceived as their gender, day-to-day life seems different, new. People go back to places they used to frequent, but now they are perceived in a different way and thus, the way they see the world around them is different from the way in which they saw it before they transitioned.



Fig. 12. Neo looking out the window into the Matrix, seeing things differently.

Another feeling shown in this scene, this time through Neo's words, is the feeling of a stolen life. While sitting in the car, Neo says, "None of them happened, what does that mean?" in reference to the memories about his previous life. Now that he knows the truth, he feels like every memory he has made is fake, much like a transgender person could feel their life before figuring their gender out was. Every

experience lived before accepting their gender identity could feel as if they were living a lie. These feelings can lead to confusion, explaining why he would be asking Trinity and Morpheus “what does it mean?”. The answer in this case comes from Trinity, which makes sense taking into account that up until that point, Neo has been following her steps and seeing her as a role model. While Morpheus seems like a greater figure, someone to admire, Trinity is someone who has walked the same steps Neo is walking and is able to answer his doubts, since she has also had similar or even the same thoughts. Her answer to the question is “that the Matrix cannot tell you who you are.” With this statement, she is reassuring him that what happened before does not matter. What matters is who he truly is, and society cannot change that. Regardless of the experiences Neo has previously had and his life as Thomas Anderson, he would have always become Neo.

## **Out of the Binary: Neo as a Non-Binary Character**

Up until this point, the focus of my analysis has been the general transgender metaphor that develops throughout *The Matrix*, with Neo as the main focus. However, Neo’s gender has not been questioned in this BA thesis yet. This is what Cael Keegan does in his analysis of the film from a transgender perspective. In his book, *Lilly and Lana Wachowski* (2018) he researches transgender issues in the movie and connects them to race issues. For this final part of my analysis, I would like to dig deeper into the concept of Neo as a stereotype of a non-binary person. A non-binary person is an umbrella term used to talk about every gender outside the binary of men and women. This group of transgender people tend to face problems that most binary transgender people do not. As Bergman and Barker explain in the chapter “Non-binary Activism”, “over three



quarters of non-binary people avoid situations for fear of being misgendered, outed, or harassed; and two thirds feel that they are never included in services, with very few feel able to be out at work.” (2017, p. 31-51). Other issues non-binary people go through are mental health issues, as they “may experience greater risk for negative mental health outcomes than their binary transgender counterparts”, Matsuno and Budge note (2017, p. 116-120). These mental health issues are aggravated by the fact that “counselors/therapists often have little awareness or knowledge about non-binary identities” (Matsuno and Budge, 2017, p. 116-120). Due to lack of information on non-binary identities and the diversity found under that term, it is hard to read a character as non-binary. However, the focus on this section is on visual aspects in the film as well as in certain stereotypes used to describe non-binary people.

There are two specific scenes where there is an explicit reference to being out of the binary. The first one appears at the beginning of the movie. The first time we see Neo, he is in apartment 101, a clear reference to the binary system. By choosing to follow the white rabbit and leaving his apartment, Neo is leaving the binary society, going towards the truth in the film’s universe. He leaves the small enclosure titled 101 to go meet Trinity, who will become a role model in his journey, and will help him leave the Matrix, the binary society made entirely of a binary code. The second scene is the last scene, while Neo is saying his final speech. The sentence “Call trans opt: received” appears again and right afterwards, we see a popup message saying “System Failure”. The camera zooms in on that sentence, getting closer and closer until it goes through the screen between the “M” and the “F”. The camera passes between both letters and the shot re-emerges by showing the end of the telephone that Neo is holding. While Cael Keegan analyses this shot just as a “sensing beyond fixed forms” (2019, p. 46), I believe the use of this shot—going between the letters commonly used as gender

markers for “Male” and “Female” and ending up with a close up of Neo’s face—can symbolise that he is between those genders, neither a man nor a woman, but something else. A non-binary person.

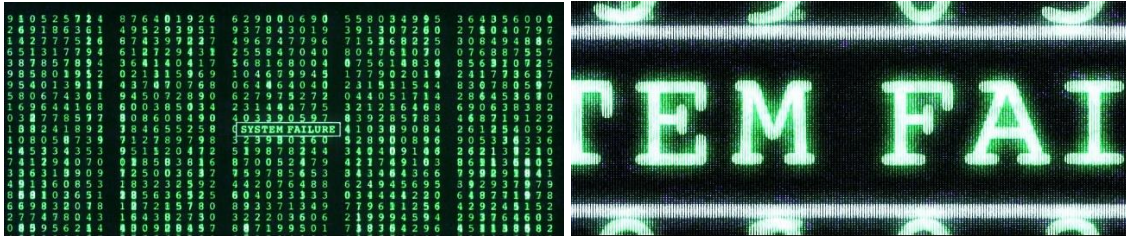


Fig. 13. and 14. Zoom between the M and F in System Failure at the end of the movie.

All of this makes even more sense when considering the idea of Trinity as a role model. In one of the first interactions between Neo and Trinity, he admits he thought she was a man, and she answers that “most guys do”, already showing that she breaks the gender stereotypes imposed on her. As it has been mentioned before, Neo sees Trinity as a role model, since she is someone who has already experienced everything he wants to achieve. Following this train of thought we could consider Trinity as another non-binary person helping Neo navigate through his own gender identity journey.

Trinity’s role as a non-binary role model can be backed up by one of the most common stereotypes used for non-binary people: androgyny. Since non-binary people are out of the binary of men and women, people tend to identify them with an androgynous gender expression. While this is not the case for all non-binary people, we can see this stereotype being used for both Trinity and Neo. They dress almost identically, in tight-fitting black leather clothes, black sunglasses and their short hair slicked back. This way of dressing, alongside their slim body type, gives both of them a feel of androgyny. As we can see in the image below, Trinity’s short hair, Neo’s lack of

facial hair, their rosy lips, and their similar clothing and sunglasses make them look alike.



Fig. 14. Close up of the poster “Believe the Unbelievable” for *The Matrix* (B.D. Fox Independent).

## Conclusion

Throughout this BA thesis, I have analysed *The Matrix* in order to compare Neo’s experience throughout the movie with the clinical transitioning of transgender people. For this reason, the BA thesis has focused on seven different terms. The first six—gender dysphoria, identity realisation, name change, hormonal therapy, surgery and social reintegration—have to do with transitioning and the last, non-binary, is a reflection on how Neo could be seen as a transgender person that does not identify with the binarism of man or woman.

When analysing dysphoria, I have dealt with the relation between dysphoria and depression and how that is depicted at the beginning of the movie through Neo's apartment and way of behaving. The body is also sometimes used as a metaphor for gender dysphoria, such as when his mouth disappears during the interrogation.

Neo's gender realisation could be seen at first with the message "Wake up, Neo" on his computer screen, as a way of Trinity telling him to see what is really true. In this journey towards gender realisation, he is not alone, as he meets Trinity and she guides him through it.

As for the name change, the film highlights the difference between Thomas Anderson and Neo and the reactions he has towards them and how the protagonist's feelings towards both names change throughout the movie. In this case, Thomas Anderson would be his deadname, and Neo the name he chose for himself. This tension between both names ends with the death of Thomas Anderson so that Neo can truly live.

In the section dedicated to hormonal therapy, I referred to the pills as a choice between taking hormones or not using them in a transition journey. This same choice is one that transgender people have to make when thinking about their transitions. In the end, the red pill, a metaphor for oestrogen hormones, signals the protagonist's choice of hormonal treatment.

Surgery in *The Matrix* is more explicit than other transgender elements, as Neo undergoes surgery once he is out of the Matrix, since his muscles are atrophied. Scenes like the one in which the bug is removed or the one in which Neo's body appears surrounded by needles symbolise the surgeries some transgender people go through in their transition. The changes in Neo's body can be seen as references to the changes transgender people's bodies typically go through.

During the social reintegration part of the film, two specific feelings common to transgender experiences can be appreciated. On the one hand, Neo sees the world with new eyes, trying to truly understand the world around him. On the other hand, there is a sadness in relation to the loss of his youth, knowing that the experiences he had were not truly his.

Lastly, to identify Neo as a non-binary person, I have focused on two aspects. The first one is the way in which Neo leaves the binary multiple times: going out of room 101, leaving the Matrix which is a giant binary code, or the shot in which the camera seems to pass between an M and an F to end up with a close up of Neo's face. The other aspect concerns the stereotype of seeing non-binary people as androgynous, since Trinity and Neo are both using similar clothing and have similar hairstyles both in the movie and in the promotional pictures.

Another important detail found throughout this analysis is the figure of Trinity, who can be seen as a role model for Neo. As someone who has already left the Matrix and has gone through the same journey he is going through, Neo trusts her and follows her example. This can be seen in the way he easily trusts her when they first meet, or in the fact that they have the same general appearance.

To conclude, I would like to highlight the importance of *The Matrix* for transgender issues. *The Matrix* has a great relevance in transgender cinema and has had a remarkable influence in other films made by or about transgender people. This is due to the fact that it is a movie made by two transgender women, even though they were still closeted and had not begun their transitions. The fact that they were both closeted when the film came out was one of the main challenges when researching this topic alongside the fact that not every transgender experience is the same. In this BA thesis, the focus has not been to search for an explicit transgender character since, much as in

Boyd's race analysis of the film (2004), there are not explicit mentions of it. Instead, I have tried to find a transgender metaphor through the structure of the movie, seeing Neo's journey as a reflection of that of a transgender person. This kind of analysis could constitute a fruitful approach to do further research on other movies, trying to consider the representation of minorities or other collectives not only explicitly, but embedded within the film's internal structure.

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