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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the interesting narrative structure of the hero-quest myth contained within the 1999 film, "The Matrix," and explicates the implications of this message upon the audience. Initially, the relevance of myth to movies and the format of Joseph Campbell's hero-quest is illustrated. This format is then applied to "The Matrix" in order to highlight its coherence with the traditional hero-quest. New theory must be advanced to draw ontological states of being out of the philosophies of I. Kant and A. Schopenhauer in order to describe the phenomenal, pre-noumenal, and noumenal states of being among characters in this film. This proposed theory describes how "The Matrix" adheres to the stages of the hero-quest--separation, initiation, and return. This film is shown to be a powerful myth for alienated and disempowered individuals in technologically driven communities such as the United States. The narrative impacts of this film upon the rhetorical community in which it is couched are explicated; the empowering and disempowering aspects to "solitary enlightenment" are displayed in an effort to promote and protect the affected community. The maxim of "justifiably killing disillusioned humans in order to save them" by the "enlightened individuals" is particularly troubling in regard to issues of community security. "The Matrix," grossing over $350 million in under a year, was a very successful film with sequels currently in production. Rhetorical critics must look at this modern hero-quest and examine what makes it so effective at appealing to our heroic appetites and what benefits and dangers it offers in regard to audience action and reaction. Contains 47 references. (Author/RS)

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Another Face of the Hero: "The Matrix" as Modern Hero-Quest.

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Abstract:

This paper analyzes the interesting narrative structure of the hero-quest myth contained within the 1999 film, "The Matrix," and explicates the implications of this message upon the audience. Initially, the relevance of myth to movies and the format of Joseph Campbell's hero-quest is illustrated. This format is then applied to the "The Matrix" in order to highlight its coherence with the traditional hero-quest. New theory must be advanced to draw ontological states of being out of the philosophies of Kant and Schopenhauer in order to describe the phenomenal, pre-noumenal, and noumenal states of being among characters in this film. This proposed theory describes how "The Matrix" adheres to the stages of the hero-quest—separation, initiation, and return. This film is shown to be a powerful myth for alienated and disempowered individuals in technologically driven communities such as United States. The narrative impacts of this film upon the rhetorical community in which it is couched are explicated; the empowering and disempowering aspects to "solitary enlightenment" are displayed in an effort to promote and protect the affected community. The maxim of "justifiably killing disillusioned humans in order to save them" by the "enlightened individuals" is particularly troubling in regard to issues of community security. "The Matrix," grossing over $350 million in under a year, was a very successful film with sequels currently in production. Rhetorical critics must look at this modern hero-quest and examine what makes it so effective at appealing to our heroic appetites and what benefits and dangers it offers in regard to audience action and reaction.

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Introduction

Film is a powerful medium for the transmission of socializing ideas, political concepts, and spiritual attitudes (Engnell, 1995). A powerful role that film can occupy in society is as the conveyor of myth; of the types of myth, arguably the most important is the "hero-quest" (Campbell, 1986). The Warner Brothers science fiction film, "The Matrix," is a powerful contemporary example of a hero-quest myth or narrative. This paper will argue that this film portrays a modern hero-quest to viewers with powerful implications for audience reaction with impacts on their respective community.

This 1999 film was written and directed by Larry and Andy Wachowski, and has been a huge success in the United States and abroad. International gross profits are over $350 million ("Keanu Reeves," 1999) and deals have already been signed for production of "The Matrix" parts two and three ("Matrix nets," 1999). The wide dissemination of this movie both in the United States and internationally necessitates a closer examination of its structure and implications for viewer action. Frentz and Rushing (1993) indicate that films can impact not only the audience, but also the society in contact with the universal symbols latent in the video text. A rhetorical examination of the methods this film uses to affect its audience would serve as a community-centered act of criticism that should be undertaken.

This paper analyzes the interesting narrative structure of the hero-quest myth contained within "The Matrix" and explicates the implications of this message upon the audience. Initially, the relevance of myth to movies and the format of Joseph Campbell's hero-quest shall be explained. This format will then be applied to the "The Matrix" in order to highlight its coherence with the traditional hero-quest. This shall be accomplished in three sections, describing the separation, initiation, and return of the hero, respectively. The implications of this modern hero-quest shall then be examined, with some concluding thoughts on the significance of this movie for the viewing community. "The Matrix" will be shown to be a powerful myth for alienated and disempowered individuals in technologically driven societies.

Methodology of Myth

Campbell (1990) indicates that societies necessitate some type of myth or myths in order to function effectively. These myths can be simple or complex; at the root of any efficacious myth is the aspect of it that transfers the mystic import of the cosmos to the individual. The individual is then demonstrated to be part of the order of the world, in harmony with all and under the protection of divine manifestations (Campbell, 1988). The central locus of this mystical

union and its concluding communal salvation is the hero, the man or woman "whose blow, whose touch, whose existence, will liberate the land" (Campbell, p. 16, 1973).

Heroes and their myths can be readily evident in the narratives and movies of today. Jameson (1981) indicates that narratives, such as movies, require an accommodation of the unconscious (or mythological) in order to truly further their interpretation. While Jameson favors Freud more than Jung in his attribution of mythical elements to narratives, mythologists have confirmed the validity of claims concerning the existence of common archetypal themes in human myths. As Jung (1989) indicated, the elements of myth should be relatively equivalent over the distributed collective psyche of humanity..

The effects this communal sense of myth has were noticed by Cassirer (1946; 1972) in his analysis of language. He suggested that the use of language carried with it not only the ability to rationally convey information, but also the ability to create myths about linguistic and non-linguistic worlds. The early work of Otto (1960) was important in empirically furthering this theory by identifying similarities between eastern and western mysticism and mythology. More recently, the ability of narratives to contain mythological concepts was extended by the work of Fisher (1987), who argued that language use was intrinsically tied to narrative formulation. Narratives were labeled as "Kantian concepts," similar to the concepts of "space" and "time." According to Fisher, narratives are constructs that humans must use to understand the world around them. Rushing and Frentz (1991) indicate that these narratives, when instantiated in media such as film, can advocate courses of action and reaction to the audience. Thus, the myths entrenched in films can have effects on and relevance to modern society.

The specific narrative of the hero-quest has been described by the pre-eminent American expert on mythology, the late Joseph Campbell (Segal, 1990). In Campbell's (1973) seminal work, The Hero with a Thousand Faces, a model of archetypal hero-quest is illustrated. The following analysis of "The Matrix" will use this format to illuminate the hero-quest myth within its narrative. By finding analogous characters, issues, challenges, and resolutions, the hero-quest of this film can be explored and discussion about its implications upon the rhetorical community undertaken.

Initially, a short description of some of Campbell's hero-quest is in order. Campbell (1973) argues that all hero-quests intrinsically involve three stages: separation (departure), initiation, and return. This "monomyth" of the hero-quest is summarized at length by Campbell:

> The mythological hero, setting forth from his [or her] commonday hut or castle, is lured, carried away, or else voluntarily proceeds, to the threshold of adventure. There he [or she] encounters a shadow presence that guards the passage. The hero may defeat or

> conciliate this power and go alive into the kingdom of the dark…Beyond the threshold, then, the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which give magical aid (helpers). When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward. The triumph may be represented as the hero's sexual union with the goddess-mother of the world (sacred marriage), his recognition by the father-creator (father atonement), [or] his own divinization (apotheosis); intrinsically it is an expansion of consciousness and therewith of being (illumination, transfiguration, freedom). The final work is that of the return…The boon that he brings restores the world (elixir) (p. 245-246, 1973).

Campbell indicates that this model is followed with relative, albeit not absolute, precision by most myths involving some variety of hero.

This process of separation, initiation, and return all are evident in "The Matrix." The plot of this movie shall be analyzing following Campbell's ordering of the hero-quest (Foss, 1996). After explaining portions of Campbell's hero-quest, the corresponding sections of "The Matrix" will be explicated and analyzed. All character dialogue shall be taken from Stanley's (1999) transcription of "The Matrix;" additional clarification is made by film observation or screenplay comparison (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1996). While the fit of film to hero-quest monomyth will not be perfect, it shall be demonstrated that all major elements are included in this modern myth. Also, Dundes (1990) argues that analysis of myth deviation from archetypal form is as valuable and telling in different respects as absolute conformance to form. Additional theorizing will be required to explain the innovative process that "The Matrix" uses to achieve the various stages of the hero-quest, and these will be explained in the appropriate sections.

Separation

Campbell (1973) describes the separation of the hero from the world of everyday activity as taking place through the issuance of a "call to adventure" by a character labeled the "herald." These relate as a "preliminary manifestation of the powers that are breaking into play…[that] can be termed the 'herald'; the crisis of his [or her] appearance is the 'call to adventure.'" (Campbell, p. 51, 1973). The herald is the impetus to action on the part of the soon-to-be hero. This agent is approached cautiously, as "the herald or announcer of the adventure…is often dark, loathly, or terrifying, judged evil by the world; yet if one could follow, the way would be opened through the walls of day into the dark where the jewels glow" (Campbell, p. 53, 1973). While this herald is surrounded by dangerous overtones, the soon-to-be hero is touched by an irreversible curiosity for the implied adventure or quest:

> In these adventures there is an atmosphere of irresistible fascination about the figure that appears suddenly as a guide, marking a new period, a new stage, in the biography. That which has to be faced, and is somehow profoundly familiar to the unconscious—though unknown, surprising, and even frightening to the conscious personality—makes itself know; and what formerly was meaningful may become strangely emptied of value...Thereafter, even though the hero returns for a while to his [or her] familiar occupations, they may be found unfruitful. A series of signs of increasing force then will become visible, until—the summons can no longer be denied (Campbell, p. 55-56, 1973).

Not only does curiosity propel the individual toward the herald and the quest of the hero, but also the inevitability of this call soon manifests itself. The individual is called upon to depart from the world of the ordinary and to pursue his or her quest in the realm of the extraordinary.

"The Matrix" focuses on the ordinary life of Thomas A. Anderson, a software designer who works for the company "Metacorp." Shortly after the movie starts, Anderson (whose hacker alias is "Neo") is seen asleep as his computer is rapidly searching worldwide Internet sources. The screen goes blank and becomes the mysterious medium for the initial "call to adventure." The screen types, "Neo, wake up" and then proceeds to instruct him to follow the "white rabbit." Neo is shocked when some hacker friends invite him to go to a dance club; one of the ladies has a tattoo of a white rabbit on her shoulder. At the dance club, Neo meets the famed hacker, Trinity, who mysteriously warns him that "all I [Trinity] can tell you is that you're in danger. I brought you here to warn you." Here we have a mysterious figure initiating the request that Neo separate from his world and take part in some sort of heroic journey. Neo seems to be resisting Trinity's call, so she adds, "I know why you are here, Neo. I know why you hardly sleep...why night after night you sit at your computer. You're looking for him...I was once looking for the same thing. And when he found me, he told me I really wasn't looking for him. I was looking for an answer. You know the question just as I did." To which Neo responds, "The Matrix." Trinity continues, "The answer is out there, Neo. It's looking for you. And it will find you, if you want it to." Neo has not been heeding the call at this point, but the powers influencing him are growing in strength and mystery.

Neo is late to work the following day, and after receiving a chastising by his boss, returns to his non-descript cubicle. In an exhibition of uncanny timing, a deliveryman brings Neo a package that contains a cellular phone. As soon as he opens it, the phone rings and the man he knows as Morpheus addresses him. Morpheus warns Neo "They're coming for you...and I don't know what they are going to do." After seeing police and three "men in black" entering his

office. Morpheus guides Neo via phone through a harrowing attempt to escape from the office. Neo loses courage and eventually surrenders.

Morpheus appears to be the true herald in this myth; here he has summoned Neo and demonstrated his power through his ability to know the timing and placement of events before they unfold. After Neo is captured, he confronts the agents whom are interrogating him about his connections to Morpheus. These agents describe Morpheus as being "considered by authorities to be the most dangerous man alive" and as a "known terrorist." Here the figure of the herald is shown as scorned by society as dangerous and evil. These mysterious agents are introduced as the "threshold guardians," whom Campbell (1973) indicates as guarding the approach to adventure. The complete nature of these threshold guardians shall be exposed later; needless to say, they do attempt to thwart Neo's separation from the world of the normal.

Neo eventually cannot resist the call to adventure any longer; he arranges a meeting with Morpheus, the herald figure. At this meeting, Morpheus, sharing the name of the Greek god of dreams (Bulfinch, 1979), foreshadows the coming separation of Neo from the ordinary world once he embarks on the hero-quest:

> Morpheus: You have the look of a man who accepts what he sees because he is expecting to wake up. Ironically, this is not far from the truth... You're here because you know something. What you know you can't explain. But you feel it. You've felt it your entire life. That there's something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is but it's there, like a splinter in your mind driving you mad. It is this feeling that has brought you to me. Do you know what I'm talking about?
>
> Neo: The Matrix?
>
> Morpheus: Do you want to know what IT is? The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us, even now in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.
>
> Neo: What truth?
>
> Morpheus: That you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else you were born into bondage, born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. A prison for your mind.... Unfortunately, no one can be told what the Matrix is. You have to see it for yourself. This is your last chance. After this there is no turning back. You take the blue pill, the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the

red pill, you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes....

Remember, all I'm offering is the truth, nothing more....

Here Neo is warned of the adventure; he is getting the chance to quest after the truth and to separate from this world of illusion he finds himself mysteriously enslaved by.

Neo takes the red pill, and is next shown as he is "waking up" in a strange alien world. It turns out that he, like the majority of humanity, is serving as a source of energy for artificially intelligent machines that humans have been struggling with since the "early twenty-first" century. The majority of humans are now grown in cocoon-like pods, in which their entire life is spent in a dream-like state while their body heat is processed by the machines for energy. The matrix turns out to be the machine created "virtual-world" of 1999; the reality that Neo formerly knew was merely a playpen for the minds of captive human slaves in the future. Neo, however, completes his separation by waking up on a ship that is commanded by human resistance fighters. These individuals, commanded by Morpheus, lead virtual-excursions into the world of the Matrix to fight the controlling machines.

It is at this point that some novel theorizing should be explored to explain the process by which the separation of Neo from the ordinary world takes place. Some critics have used Baudrillard's concept of "simulation" and "simulacra" (Baudrillard, 1994) to examine "The Matrix." The omnipresence of images (simulations) and signs (simulacra) eventually leads to the implosion of the boundary between the real and the unreal; thus, what is left is the simulacra without the referent reality (Hawk, 1999; Rovira, 1999). While Baudrillard's conceptions are present in this movie, I think a theory that is more sensitive to the ontological elements observed in the film can be proposed.

In order to explain the mechanism this film uses to separate Neo from the ordinary world, it is necessary to use some of the precepts from Kant and Schopenhauer's view of human perspectival existence. Both Kant and Schopenhauer posited that all beings with senses observe things as they appear (the phenomenal world), not as they really are (the noumenal world)(Kant, 1996; Schopenhauer, 1969). These two perspectives on the epistemological state of objects that humans perceive can be adapted to serve as an analogical ontological description of the states of existence displayed in "The Matrix." The *phenomenal* world or state of existence can be described as totally conditioned by the "brute" senses; as Magee (1997) indicates, the emphasis here is the reliance on sensation as determining the "real." This is the world of the matrix; individuals' views of the world are so dependent upon sensation that the illusion of a false world can be readily adhered to by them. Unlike Descartes, this is one dream that few can manage to wake from (Dicker, 1993). The *pre-noumenal* world is the world that is occupied by Morpheus,

his rebels, and Neo; they are enlightened enough to have escaped from a state of sensuous dependence so extreme that illusion passes as reality. This state of being is, however, still intertwined with individualized points of existence and reliance on sense data. The world that transcends these previous two states is that of the *noumenal*. Schopenhauer's "improvement" upon Kant's theory mainly rested in his declaration of the noumenal as undivided and beyond individualization. This state of mystical union with the all of creation does not appear until later in "The Matrix." Baudrillard's theories can be used to highlight one major aspect of the matrix; its nature as a controlling mechanism (Hawk, 1999). However, the ontological significance of characters existing in the matrix, outside of the matrix, and outside of individuated perspectives is better served by the previously proposed theory.

Neo's separation from the *phenomenal* world is complete; he now is fully aware of the nature of the matrix's illusions, and he exists in the more real, albeit still sensuously conditioned, world of the *pre-noumenal*. It is here that Morpheus becomes a helping father-figure to Neo, and trains the young hero in the task of finding the power within. Campbell (1973) indicates that the hero must overcome his own ego and fear if he or she is to mature into one worthy of initiation. In training Neo, Morpheus identifies the threshold guardians to him, the black-suited agents that patrol the artificial world of the matrix. He indicates that they are called "Sentient programs...they are the gatekeepers [of the matrix]. They are guarding all the doors. They are holding all the keys, which means that sooner or later, someone is going to have to fight them." These threshold guardians not only attempted to prevent Neo's separation form the ordinary, *phenomenal* world, but will also prove to be his greatest external obstacle to initiation.

Initiation

Campbell (1973) argues that the hero is initiated when he or she can conquer his or her own ego and the essence of duality itself. The individual ego is what separates each human from the mystical oneness that is reality; religions ranging from Hinduism, Buddhism, Gnosticism, Sufism, to some sects of Christianity observe salvation by overcoming this very foundation of duality (Parrinder, 1995; Smith, 1986). Extending the theory presented above, the goal is union with the *noumenal* world, in which individuation is sublimated by the mystical "oneness" pervading the cosmos. Campbell (1973) indicates that the hero must confront various challenges and obstacles before this enlightenment is had, the greatest of which is one's own ego.

Neo's quest for initiation and the *noumenal* state of being begins with Morpheus explaining his abilities within the *phenomenal* world, the matrix:

> Morpheus: I've seen an agent punch through a concrete wall. Men have emptied entire clips at them and hit nothing but air. Yet their strength and their speed are still based in a

world that is built on rules. Because of that, they will never be as strong or as fast as you can be.

Neo: What are you trying to tell me, that I can dodge bullets?

Morpheus: No Neo. I'm trying to tell you that when you're ready, you won't have to.

The idea that Morpheus is trying to impress upon Neo is that his strength is that of spirit and mind, not of language, computer code, or physical material. Neo has the potential to transcend the world of the phenomenal and the pre-noumenal due to his possession of a mind; the important aspects of this are not the rational and reflecting ego, but the latent subconscious elements within himself.

How Neo is to transcend his individuated ego is couched in his quest to become the "one," or the savior of humanity. Morpheus and Trinity believe Neo to be the "one" prophesied by the Oracle who would save the humans from their fate of the matrix. In the movie, Neo is taken to see this Oracle in order to determine if he truly is the "one." On the way to see the Oracle, Morpheus and Neo converse about her abilities to see the future:

Neo: And she knows what, everything?

Morpheus: She would say she knows enough.

Neo: And she's never wrong.

Morpheus: Try not to think of it in terms of right and wrong. She is a guide. She can help you to find the path.

Neo: She helped you?

Morpheus: Yes.

Neo: What did she tell you?

Morpheus: That I would find the one.... I told you I can only show you the door. You have to walk through it.

Here we have the theme of the "path" being of utmost importance for Neo's transcendence of the ego: his status rests less on right or wrong diagnoses and more upon a self-sustained journey of transformation. Morpheus indicates that the Oracle will help Neo find his path; this will be of supreme importance in that Neo will incorrectly take the Oracle's statements in a factizing, right/wrong context.

Neo approaches the Oracle with utmost respect, especially since he has been told "she is never wrong." The conversation over his status as the one goes as follows:

Oracle: So, what do you think? You think you're the one?

Neo: I don't know.

Oracle: You know what that [a wooden sign on her wall] means? It's Latin. Means

'Know thyself'. I'm going to let you in on a little secret. Being the one is just like being in love. No one can tell you you're in love, you just know it... You already know what I'm going to tell you.

Neo: I'm not the one.

Oracle: Sorry kiddo. You got the gift, but it looks like you're waiting for something.

Neo: What?

Oracle: Your next life maybe, who knows? That's the way these things go.

The Oracle highlights an important Latin saying that can be found in philosophers ranging from Socrates to Kant—"know thyself." The challenge posed by Neo's hero-quest is to know who he is; he is charged with finding the "one" within himself. The idea of future lives emerges here, as this will be an important theme in Neo's supreme ordeal still to come. At this point in the movie, Neo still doubts his status as the "one," and the Oracle seems to be not only providing guidance on the path which Neo is to follow, but also help in the way of deflating his ego through "telling him what he needs to hear." Later in the movie, after Neo utilizes his powers in a way indicative of "becoming the one," Morpheus assuages Neo's doubts by saying "She [the Oracle] told you exactly what you needed to hear, that's all. Neo, sooner or later you're going to realize, just as I did, there's a difference between knowing the path and walking the path." Neo is progressing down the path, but his journey is still not complete until he overcomes the duality inherent in his own self (Campbell, 1973).

As an interesting aside, one can note the deviation from many of the mythic forms portrayed in Campbell's book to the extent that the oracle is a *woman*. In many cases, Jungian analysis and mythic studies find the "wise old man" archetype as synonymous with the oracle/prophet archetype; in this case, the filmmakers deviate from this normal aspect of the ritualized hero-quest and include a powerful female character. In doing so, the film also departs from dominant cultural norms, placing a *woman of color* (the oracle is African-American) in a position of omniscient knowledge and power.

At the climax of the movie, Neo is racing to find an exit from the matrix as the seemingly indestructible agents are viciously pursuing him. Meanwhile, Morpheus's ship is under attack in the pre-noumenal world and cannot escape danger until Neo is safely back on board. As Neo is racing into the room containing the exit from the matrix, an agent shoots him several times in the chest, at which point Neo falls to the ground dead. At the side of his [dead] pre-noumenal body on board the ship, Trinity confides to him that "Neo, I'm not afraid anymore. The Oracle told me that I would fall in love, and that man, the man who I loved would be the one. And so you see, you can't be dead. You can't be, because I love you. You hear me? I love you.... Now get up."

After being kissed by Trinity, Neo is resurrected not only in the phenomenal and pre-noumenal worlds, but also in the noumenal realm as well. He proceeds to stop all of the agents' bullets with a mere wave of his hand, reminiscent of the Buddha stopping the thousands of arrows and demons with a mere gesture (Rahula, 1974). Neo, becoming one with the matrix (transcending his personal ego-image), leaps into an agent and explodes his very essence. The matrix and the remaining agents all bend to his transcendent will because "He is the one."

Neo accomplishes his initiation in three ways, similar to Campbell's (1973) model of the hero-quest: his "supreme ordeal" (with his concurrent divinization), his symbolic "marriage with the goddess," and his "atonement with the father" (p. 245, 1973). Neo's transcendence of duality and his individual ego (with its limited power) is accomplished through facing his opponents, dying to his past self, and being reborn. As Campbell indicates, "the traditional rites of passage...teach the individual to die to the past and be reborn to the future" (p. 15, 1973). Neo must die to his past self, the self that was unsure of its true, subconscious power and purpose in life. While his past self doubted he was the "one," he became the "one" after his ego-ridden past self was consumed by the agents he feared. This resurrection could not have taken place without his symbolic marriage with Trinity, the "goddess" figure in this hero-quest. What saves Neo's progress down the "path" is the very human indication of meaning, love. Trinity never really believed she would fall in love with Neo, but at the end that does not matter; as the Oracle indicated, "No one can tell you you're in love, you just *know* it." She feels at one with Neo, and the workings of fate and his own subconscious pull him back to life in the noumenal state of being. As with the oracle, the standard hero quest is being bent to a modern angle with the salvation of the main male hero coming through the emotional care given by the feminine character. As opposed to traditional heroes who triumph based upon upholding justice with might, Neo must use his intelligence and love to resurrect himself and to overcome his ego.

As all of this progresses, Neo is also atoned with the father-figure, Morpheus. Throughout the entire movie, Morpheus believed in Neo and had unremitting faith in him; Neo rewards this by following the path and finding his own true self. The movie culminates with Neo's own divinization; he is a god-like figure able to save the humans in the pre-noumenal world and bend the matrix to his will. His transcendence to the noumenal state seems to be complete, and he exudes a sense of being at one with the mystical powers of the cosmos, and more importantly, his own subconscious self.

Return

As Neo becomes a virtual "god," his next task is of the return to the world of the ordinary, in which he must bestow use "boon" or "elixir" to restore society (Campbell, 1973). As Campbell indicates:

> This brings us to the final crisis of the round, to which the whole miraculous excursion has been but a prelude—that, namely, of the paradoxical, supremely difficult threshold crossing of the hero's return from the mystic realm into the land of common day...Driven from within...he [or she] has yet to re-enter with his boon the long-forgotten atmosphere where men [and women] who are fractions imagine themselves to be complete. He has yet to confront society with his ego-shattering, life-redeeming elixir (p. 216, 1973).

Neo must return to the ordinary world and attempt to save the people from ego-inflicted harm. The interesting aspect of this movie is that while Neo returns physically to the phenomenal world via virtual reality input into the matrix, he cannot return ontologically. Neo is trapped not only in the ontological "world" or state of the pre-noumenal, but also in the noumenal state itself. Fortunately for him, it is the noumenal that gives him control over the matrix and his own ego. The movie ends not with society being saved, but simply with the savior being born into society; Neo announces his intentions to keep resisting the matrix and the "path" is set for sequels in the future. Neo returns to the cage of the matrix to free the enslaved human minds, but he cannot ever return to the state of ignorance he occupied when he believed his fractional existence in the matrix exhausted his true being.

Concluding Implications

While much has been said of the "The Matrix" following the *form* of the hero-quest as indicated by Campbell (1973), its *content* and implications on audience action/reaction must now be examined. The hero-quest in and of itself is not morally positive or negative; it is merely a form, albeit powerful and persuasive, to convey truths about the nature of reality and our individual lives. "The Matrix" will be shown to have both positive and negative implications on the viewing public. It is imperative that both of these sides be examined by rhetorical critics concerned about issues of community. Violence in the media has been labeled as causal factors in violent activity by individuals, especially youths ("Anatomy of," 1999); Crabb (1999) indicates that this movie in particular was severely attacked in the aftermath of the tragedy at Columbine High School. This analysis extends its critical examination by discussing two relatively empowering themes and one dangerous narrative of "solitary enlightenment" which are available to modern audiences of "The Matrix."

"The Matrix" contains within its classical hero-quest the powerful theme of individual empowerment and enlightenment. In order to discern the effectiveness of this message, one must examine the demographic that is exposed to this movie; younger audiences that are maturing in technologically based capitalist societies. Additionally, one must look at the response this artifact provides to the exigencies of the immediate rhetorical situation (Bitzer, 1968). Rothstein (1999) indicates that the matrix plays on the fears that Americans have concerning the all-encompassing growth of information technology; a person's entire history and habits can be accessed on the Internet. Bennett (1995) argues that individuals of today's industrialized countries often feel alienated or disempowered through the machinations of "big business" and the often corrupt political process. Baudrillard (1994) extends this analysis by indicating the very system we create to organize our lives controls us: this system is perceived as too strong for any individual to wield any power against its damaging ways. Medhurst (1993) concludes that most Americans believe that they do not control their own lives—personal worth is largely eradicated.

The hero-quest of Neo serves as a model for how individuals can find power in and through their lives. Raglan (1990) points out that myths are narratives to live one's life by: "The Matrix" definitely can fulfill that purpose. In a similar state of alienation and disempowerment, Thomas A. Anderson found the immense power of his "hacker" alias, Neo. At the start of the movie, Anderson (Neo) had a ordinary life, in an ordinary apartment, working in an ordinary job at a bland cubicle, and had little that gave his life any sort of transcendent value beyond his role as a piece in the capitalist machine. This fate is very similar to many of the viewer of this movie: one can argue that powerful motives of identification are at work here. The message of this identification of the viewer with Neo is that everyone can transcend the ordinary word and be a hero like Neo. Johanson (1999) indicates that "The Matrix" "plugs right into the fantasy of every intelligent, disenfranchised, socially inept, outcast science fiction fan…It turns out that Neo [like the viewer]…is destined to save the world" (p. 3). Rothstein (1999) argues that the "Hacker Myth" is also at play; individuals rebel against the technological control of information and freedom in order to let the "truth set us free." Comte (1994) indicates that "heroes represent values…ideals…[and] ambitions" (p. 105). In a world that is not amiable to personal worth, "The Matrix" shines as a beacon to inform all members that salvation is to be found from within oneself (Sheridan, 1986). Just as Neo had to conquer his own ego, the audience members can also transcend their own controlled lives by taking control of their ego-image. As Rank (1990) illustrates, myths can help solve problems and more importantly, sublimate drives and desires; the audience's desire for personal meaning is likely to be addressed by Neo's hero-quest and triumph over technology and alienation. In an age of weakened organized religions (Campbell, 1988),

heroic myths such as this can be very powerful in illuminating views and paths for disillusioned audience members to take. Anyone can essentially be the same as Neo--that is, a hero.

Another positive message that is sent is the capability of humanity to triumph over its technologically spawned environmental problems. Nelson (1999) points out that "films [can] argue in important part through mood" (p. 1). This argument by mood is part of the postmodern use of ethos--persuasion through identification with a certain feeling or atmosphere. Kracauer (1960) anticipated this postmodern aspect to film by indicating how film can put viewers in contact with sensual elements of the reality being depicted on the screen. These elements of mood all come into play when Morpheus is describing (and showing) how humanity has wrecked the most visible sign of the environment in their quest to destroy the tyrannical machines they created:

> We don't know who struck first, us or them. But we know that it was us that scorched the sky. At the time they were dependent on solar power and it was believed that they would be unable to survive without an energy source as abundant as the sun. Throughout human history, we have been dependent on machines to survive. Fate it seems is not without a sense of irony.

The very technology that we depend on for life can also become our destroyer. The vivid scene of turbulent coal-black clouds filling the terrestrial sky could lead the audience to consider the environmental costs to progress; this "irony" could be further highlighted when coupled with the audience's knowledge of human-induced pollution, extinction, resource depletion, and threats of nuclear annihilation. Woodward (1993) indicates that most individuals of industrialized societies realize the costs in terms of environmental sustainability that technological benefits have wrought. The audience is aware of the damage that we can do and have done to our environment (Armstrong & Botzler, 1993). Here the narrative "may implicitly advocate any number of courses of moral action in relation to the [specified or implied] end"(Rushing & Frentz, p. 391, 1991). "The Matrix" pushes the audience toward adopting not only the attitude that technologically based environmental harms are undesirable, but also that they should actively oppose these harms. Unlike Neo, their path is not laid out in the movie; the audience members must take what the movie gives them in terms of general positioning back to their respective communities and then mobilize for constructive action.

One dangerous narrative of "solitary enlightenment" is available to modern audiences of "The Matrix." This mythic lesson risks potentially dangerous transmission of action-guiding maxims to audience members. The theme of individual salvation runs deep in Neo's hero-quest in "The Matrix." Neo must individually separate from the ordinary world, die to his old self

individually, and be reborn into the noumenal state by himself. While this serves as an empowering mythic theme, negative stances can be drawn from it as well. When describing the nature of the threats to Neo and the others within the matrix, Morpheus says:

> The Matrix is a system, Neo. That system is our enemy. But when you're inside, you look around. What do you see? Businessmen, teachers, lawyers, carpenters. The very minds of the people we are trying to save. But until we do, these people are still a part of that system, and that makes them our enemy. You have to understand, most of these people are not ready to be unplugged. And many of them are so inert so hopelessly dependent on the system that they will fight to protect it...*If you are not one of us, you are one of them*...Sentient programs. They can move in and out of any software still hard wired to their system. That means that anyone we haven't unplugged is potentially an agent. Inside the Matrix, they are everyone and they are no one.

Neo is instructed that anyone that is not part of the "enlightened" bunch of rebels in the pre-noumenal state of being is an "expendable" or dangerous shadow of the enemy; dozens of humans in the phenomenal world of the matrix are slain by Neo alone in the film. Keeping in mind that the rebels in the pre-noumenal state are attempting to destroy the matrix in order to free the minds trapped in the phenomenal state, an interesting issue arises. How does one go about treating these phenomenal individuals? Morpheus's answer, as indicated by the pragmatically motivated statement above, is that these people can be destroyed in order to save them (or humanity at least). As a member of the "enlightened cause," the hero (Neo) is allowed to kill real individuals (putatively innocent, since they are not aware of the matrix or the machine/human war).

Unlike teachings in the religions of enlightenment, specifically Hinduism and Buddhism (Hiriyanna, 1996), Neo's principles of action do not include teaching the "trapped" and "disillusioned" souls in the matrix; instead, they can be cast aside and murdered in the name of the greater goal of freeing humanity from the domination of the matrix. Neo is licensed to kill them in order to save them. This narrative of "solitary enlightenment," or a lack of active concern for other individuals, is invested with further consequence upon the rhetorical community when Baudrillard (1993) reminds us "of the necessity of checking the [hegemonic] system in broad daylight. This, only terrorism can do"(p. 163). The message of individual supremacy in light of community issues is frankly disturbing. It appears that this film espouses the view that if the individual believes he or she has the correct position or view, he or she becomes the hero of society when he or she solitarily acts upon it. While some level of personal initiative is desirable for the community, extremes of harmful and restrictive behavior can

become dangerous to promote in rhetorical narratives such as this movie. The line between vigilante/tyrant and enlightened sage needed to be further clarified by the narrative enshrined in "The Matrix."

In all, "The Matrix" is an interesting modern example of the hero-quest myth. As Campbell (1973) indicates, this quest is comprised of three stages: separation, initiation, and return. This movie has been demonstrated to closely follow this description of the hero-quest myth, with new theory being generated as an explanatory mechanism to illustrate how the stages of "separation" and "return" are accomplished in this particular story. This new theory has drawn ontological states of being out of the philosophies of Kant and Schopenhauer in order to describe the phenomenal, pre-noumenal, and noumenal states of being among characters in "The Matrix." The narrative impacts of this film upon the rhetorical community in which it is couched were explicated: the empowering and disempowering aspects to solitary enlightenment were displayed in an effort to promote and protect the affected community. "The Matrix" was a very successful film with sequels in production; rhetorical critics must look at this modern hero-quest and examine what makes it so effective at appealing to our heroic appetites and what benefits and dangers it offers in regard to audience action and reaction.

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