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The Construction of Masculinity in
The Matrix

The purpose of this paper is to explore the different modes of the representation of genders in the *The Matrix* (1999). Depicting a process of initiation and development, the film has for its major objective the production of a solo male protagonist that will fulfil the role of saving humanity from apocalyptic danger. This mission is a commonplace characteristic of films made in the science fiction/cyberpunk genre; the construction of the hero is, however, represented in a unique and contradictory way, especially with respect to gender and sexuality, and the phenomenon of masculinity crisis as the basis of identity formation. My claim is that in the formation of both the self and the social – two intertwined processes – performances of masculinities and femininities are determining. As the result of the homogenizing perspective of the film, femininity and masculinity come to be defined as mutually exhaustive categories in order to frustrate the notion of gender as performative. The final ascension of the triumphal, heteronormative masculinity reinforces gender hierarchy, underlining femininity as embodiment. Also, it serves to invalidate the homoeroticism the relationships between male characters are invested with throughout the film.

> "Welcome . . . to the desert . . . of the real."
> (Morpheus, *The Matrix*)

> "(T)he boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion."[1]

"Genders," writes Judith Butler, "can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived." Questioning any claim to truth, genders, nevertheless, can be credible bearers of the above attributes; they are *incredible* because they are copies that conceal the lack of an original.[2] Gender reality, then, is a simu-

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1. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), p. 149.

2. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 141.

lated one. Why is this reality, however, postulated as a generic necessity in the narrative of *The Matrix*? How does the film's recourse to the "real" relate to the construction of masculinity and dis/embodiment? Why does the notion of "reality" in the film necessarily produce a hierarchy of genders?

In this paper I will argue that *The Matrix*'s narrative capitalizes on establishing an alliance between the real and the nostalgically normative that serves to validate hegemonic gender and sexual identity claims that are voiced through the recoupling of masculinity and the male body. In the first part, I will locate my analysis of the film's representational strategy within the wider framework of the crisis of masculinity. In the second part, I will establish a relationship between the particular performances of masculinities and femininities and the supposedly anti-capitalist, anti-globalist ideology of the movie. In the third part I will underline how the annihilation of queers is necessitated by the narrative's interest to produce a universal, disembodied subject. This narrative strategy serves to erase any notion of the subject as a site on which open systems converge as a consequence.

1 The Masculine Problematic

Released in the USA on Easter Eve in 1999, the very year its story begins, *The Matrix* seems to have made use of the apocalyptic fears of a society highly influenced by catastrophic prophecies of the millennium and characterized by uncertainty about what its effects may be in a world controlled by technology, and computer technology in particular. This context was, ironically, highly similar to the pre-nuclear visions science fiction films about the New Bad Future depict. NBF narratives, writes film aesthete Fred Glass, are characterized by their portrayal of double/schizoid/split subjects that bear a metonymic relationship to the pre- or post-millennial chaotic urban structures and devastated landscapes where these films are typically located. The characters of the NBF subgenre live in a world that has either survived or is awaiting a nuclear apocalypse, and is governed by corporate power that has strong affiliations with the media, information technology, and commodity production. Portraying identities that are forged through mass media, NBF movies are sometimes willing to posit a muscleman character as protagonist. It is the result of the sexual commodification of the male body through its enhanced visual display in these films, and that they offer various ways of being a man, that masculinity appears as a visible category in the 1980s. The muscleman action hero can be read as the antithesis of the emerging image of the new man in 1980's cinema that supposedly represents feminist gains, like the figure of Harrison Ford in *Working Girl* (Mike

Nichols, 1988.)[3] On the basis of its repertoire of masculinities, *The Matrix* also shares a history with Cold War classics like *The Fly* (Kurt Neumann, 1958, and David Cronenberg, 1986) or cyberpunk movies such as *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) or *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoeven, 1990).[4]

The Matrix's mobilization of NBF cinematic tradition, as well as the religious subtext of the plot and the promising event of the day may well have contributed to the positive reception the film had. Websites and newspaper articles dealing with *The Matrix* phenomenon have been devoted almost exclusively to the investigation of the movie's connections to various sacred texts. Also, they have been emphasizing the parallels between Neo, the male hero and "Chosen One" of the narrative, the symbolic day of Jesus' resurrection and the closing millennium believed by many to signal the beginning of the Third Empire when God's power returns to Earth.[5] Apart from questioning the sexualization of the relationship between Neo and Trinity, the film's ultimate couple, none of these sources see the construction of masculinity – or, for that matter, that of femininity – problematic in the case of *The Matrix*'s absolute figure. They continue to underline the eternality of male leadership that is naturalized in the film that focuses on the reconstruction of idealized masculinity – whose loss has been thematized by men's studies since the 1990s.

1.1 The Crisis of Masculinity

The second wave of men's studies has been marked by the concept of masculinity in crisis. As Miklós Hadas observes in his review of the development of the field, the first wave of men's studies in the 1980s had for its objective the investigation of mas-

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3. Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London and New York, Routledge, 1993), 1.

4. Fred Glass, "Totally Recalling Arnold: Sex and Violence in the New Bad Future," in *Tarantino előtt: Tömegfilm a nyolcvanas években*, ed. Zsolt Nagy (Budapest: Új Mandátum, 2000), 121–138.

5. For such analyses, see Jake Horsley, "Gnosticism Reborn. *The Matrix* as Shamanic Journey," retrieved on September 30, 2005 <http://www.divinevirus.com/matrix.html>; Doug Mann and Heidi Hochenedel, "Demons, Saviors and Simulacra in *The Matrix*," retrieved on September 30, 2005 <http://www.home.comcast.net/~crapsonline/Library/matrix.html>. The premise of these arguments is the postulation of a hegemonic subject in the name of generic consciousness, where generic applies to Gnosticism and the Bible, respectively. In other words, these texts' performance and ambition of cracking *The Matrix*'s code is rather philological in the sense that they do not question the narrative's identity, i.e. the calculated interests in the filmmakers' act of choosing these very texts as possible points of reference.

culinities and male experience, and considered them to be unique and unstable so-cial-cultural-historic formations. Exploring non-normative masculinities, men's studies from the 1990s on have contributed to the renaissance of this relatively new male self-reflexivity but intended to break with the framework of modernism as ex-pressed through the investigation of "male-stream master narratives," the main con-cern of the first period.[6] Recent research in men's studies admittedly owes a lot to the conceptual revolution of feminist thinking, especially in the field of gender studies. However, as I shall argue, its self-declared postmodernity does not seem to be in harmony with current theories of feminism on the multiple dimensions of identity. The second wave of men's studies remains blind to the very logic of feminism's un-derstanding of multiplicity, although among others, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick liberates masculinity from male embodiment, and argues against conceiving it as self-identical or transparent:

> I would ask . . . that we strongly resist the presupposition that what women have to do with masculinity is mainly to be treated less or more oppres-sively by the men to whom masculinity more directly pertains. . . . As a woman, I am a consumer of masculinities, but not more so than men are; and, like men, I as woman am also a producer of masculinities and a per-former of them.[7]

Still subscribing to the specificity of male experience, however, masculinity stud-ies tend to respond to men's lost privileges in the economy, education, and the home with the problematization of the single gender that is supposed to correspond to maleness. As Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis and Simon Watson put it in *Constructing Masculinity*, "masculinity . . . is a vexed term, not limited to straightforward descrip-tions of maleness."[8] In the same volume, postmodernist theorist Homi K. Bhabha similarly argues against speaking of masculinity in general, *sui generis*, and ad-dresses masculinity as a "prosthetic reality – a 'prefixing' of the rules of gender and sexuality, an appendix or addition, that willy-nilly, supplements and suspends a lack in being." What he does not question, however, is the tyranny of sex that does not

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6. Miklós Hadas, "Hímnem, többes szám: A férfikutatások első hulláma," *Replika*, retrieved on March 25, 2003 <http://www.replika.c3.hu/4344/02hadas.htm>.

7. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Gosh, Boy George, You Must Be Awfully Secure in Your Mascu-linity!" in Maurice Berger et al. eds., *Constructing Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 11–20, p. 13.

8. Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson, "Introduction," in *Constructing Mas-culinity*, 1–7, p. 2.

seem to have lost its regulative privilege in the (re)production of the so-called male gender, that is, in his own account, the effect of "patrilineal perpetuity."[9]

In other words, biological maleness is continued to be taken as a natural given, allocated as the direct prerogative of this New Man's self: masculinity is in crisis because maleness is perceived to be there and not vice versa. Consequently, masculinity is seldom detached from the male body when underlined either as victimized or pathological. It is this prevailing orthodoxy that underlies the narrative of *The Matrix*, too.

The film can be seen as a hysterical response to this crisis as it strengthens the implication of the interrelatedness of sex, sexuality and power. Although there is a theoretical controversy about whether the crisis is a new phenomenon or it is what masculinity has always been, the starting iconography of the centrifugal character of the prospective hero clearly represents the deficit of manhood that is considered to have over-determining effects: the loss of ideal masculinity.

1.2 Contouring Neo, Materializing the Trinity

The character of Neo/Mr Thomas A. Anderson is given a fairly long time for contextualizing himself both in the inner and outer reality of the Matrix, since more than half of the film is devoted to his enlightenment. The film's sceptical hero learns that he is, or rather, he is going to become the Chosen One, although it remains unspecified who should have selected him. Also, he gains theoretical knowledge necessary for his spiritual development, and for the fulfilment of his 'mission' – the liberation of Earth from the totalitarian reign of the Artificial Intelligence. Though the spectacular action part is limited to the second half of the movie, the battle of the politically and technologically differing two worlds begin far back in the all-encompassing program named the Matrix. Within the rapidly evolving narrative, it is the sequence of the first three scenes that contour the primary trajectories of the narrative, foreshadowing its major controversies as well.

As *The Matrix* begins, we find ourselves enclosed right in cyberspace. The screen resembles that of a computer; we watch a trace program running and individuating a row of figures on the top. Simultaneously, we overhear the dialogue of Cypher and Trinity: he is doing a nightshift watch-guarding somebody that is believed to be the One, a man we cannot see yet; Trinity's presence is unexpected on the scene. Apparently a disbeliever, but certain that "it doesn't matter what I believe," Trinity's re-

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9. Homi K. Bhabha, "Are You a Man or a Mouse?" in *Constructing Masculinity*, 57–65, p. 57.

sponse to Cypher's cynical question, "You like him, don't you? You like to watch him" is a quick-spoken "Don't be ridiculous."[10] As the camera slowly closes to the numbers flickering green, the tension of the dialogue is then suspended by Trinity's worries that they are being tapped.

The camera then slides through the dissolving outline of the zero/cypher, and we arrive at the next short episode that gives a fairly graphic description of the film's yet unseen female protagonist. Chased by a trio of agents and a bunch of policemen, Trinity (Carrie-Ann Moss) kicks and jumps, and runs for escape to a phone cell where a ringing telephone awaits her. With a second of delay, the camera imitates a similar movement of sliding in than in the beginning – a clear allusion to her way out through the telephone line.

Then, in the next move, completing an anti-clockwise curve, the camera centers on the face of a sleeping young man. On his computer screen, online articles on a "terrorist" called Morpheus are being rapidly enlisted until a personal message arrives, awakening Neo (Keanu Reeves). The successive lines on his computer read: "Wake up, Neo. The Matrix has you. Follow the white rabbit." And: "Knock, knock, Neo." The couple of DuJour and Choi appear in Neo's apartment to buy illegal software and to invite him to an orgy-like gothic party. It is put quite clearly that the reason why Neo's final answer to the intruding presence of the couple is positive is neither DuJour's seducing appearance nor her promise that the party "will be fun" for him too, but his realization that her body has become the signifier of his way to Morpheus, bearing a tattoo, a symbol he is supposed to follow according to the message sent by the very man: the white rabbit.

It is the fluidity of spatial relations that characterize the reality that the sequence of the first three scenes introduce us into. The representation of space as fluid, temporal and permeable serves as a comment on the portrayal of the bodies involved. Characterized through their motoric functions and defined as the loci of superhuman power, these bodies are not conceived as border symbols; appropriating and transfiguring space through their bodily performances, Trinity and the agents even make it appear corporeal. Although the thematization of bodies with blurring boundaries and the consequent corpo-realization of any notion of the "real" within the Matrix are among the primary foci of the narrative, it nevertheless capitalizes upon a rather conservative politics of representation with respect to the construction of gendered

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10. "*The Matrix*: Script," <http://www.theforbiddenknowledge.com/the_matrix_script/index01.htm>. Date of retrieval: September 26, 2003. All quotations from the film are taken from this online resource.

identities. Allocated voyeuristic agency in the first scene, and sliding through the tissue of the plot in her gleaming, wet-looking latex costume, Trinity is invested with a dynamism that is unique in the NBF tradition of action heroines. The fact that she is also identified with an all-embracing symbol, however, indicates the narrative's further interest to relegate her to the role of the receptive and mothering female character, a stereotype in SF cinema. In other words, the gendered reality that the character of Trinity assumes until the very end of *The Matrix* may well be that of a butch lesbian. However, the narrative strategy to create a Trinity whose embodiment is to connote (hetero)sexual tension is apparent in the very first episode. Her assumption of a non-normative sexual identity, as coded in her appearance and her reserved sexuality, then, is violated and offered as a possible misrecognition from the beginning.

As Yvonne Tasker suggests,

> [t]he action movie often operates as an exclusively male space, in which issues to do with sexuality and gendered identity can be worked out over the male body. It is perhaps no surprise then that the heroines of the Hollywood action cinema have not tended to be action heroines.[11]

The hypermuscular male bodies in action/SF cinema thus may serve to articulate anxieties concerning manhood, heteronormativity, and male power that they seem to assert so powerfully. Scenes of physical work-out may resolve these fears as they both denaturalize these bodies by revealing their constructed nature, and underscore the manhood they stand for as accessible. The portrayal of musclewomen action heroines, however, posit further threats to transparent male identities by undermining the understanding of masculinity as inextricably linked to male embodiment. Reappropriating butch/lesbian imagery, and associating it with hyperactivity while establishing a relationship between hero and heroine in the very first scene, *The Matrix* constructs its female protagonist merely to produce an epistemological framework against which the hero's masculinity can be tested. The basis of epistemology here is sexual difference; serving as a medium for messages to Neo, Trinity's figure has limited signifying capacity to rework gendered relations of power.

Neo's body is read against dynamism (Trinity and the agents in the second episode) and female seduction (DuJour) – he is, after all, brought to consciousness by a message sent by another male: Morpheus, a character bearing the mythical name of the God of Dreams. Identified with a sleeping masculinity, the display of Neo as a

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11. Tasker, p. 17.

beautiful, passive young man evokes late-17th- and early-18th-century French painting. Mostly preserved for the portrayal of desirable young women, the techniques of representation in these paintings contour masculinity as something to acquire, to be achieved and to be initiated into, argues Abigail Solomon-Godeau. Their homoerotic effect destabilizes masculinity such that it forfeits "its previous transparency, its taken-for-grantedness, its normalcy." It is this loss of the transparency of the male sex that "underpins the now-frequent invocations of a 'crisis' in masculinity."[12] The political hinterland for the historical denial of the crisis as the very condition of masculinity was the preservation of the public for men and the relegation of women to the private sphere of life. The enhanced homosociality that characterizes these paintings thus attests to the fact that non-phallic – here: non-normative – masculinities are ideological as well.

Solomon-Godeau underscores the creation of hegemonic masculinities as an effect of male bonding. Women, suggests Sedgwick, are "objects of exchange" in the sense that they mediate the relationship of unacknowledged desire between men as the explicit and ostensible objects of discourse. Male homosocial desire – that may include homosexual desire as well – is characterized by its intense relation with the "structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power" and thus "may take the form of ideological homophobia, ideological homosexuality, or some highly conflicted but intensively structured combination of the two."[13]

In the third scene, Neo is literally awakened by Morpheus. Neo's quest – or "manhunt," as the headline of a site on his computer states – for Morpheus is made parallel to the agents' search; moreover, agent Smith (Hugo Weaving), Neo's chief enemy is there right in the second episode to complete a male trinity. As Sedgwick suggests, male bonding is in direct relation to the maintenance and reproduction of male power. The fact that the trinity is embodied in *The Matrix* by reinforcing the female-male binary underlines the function of the female protagonist merely as the material condition to its ontology.

The film's narrative strategy in connection to women is made obvious with DuJour's appearance. Neo's way toward absolution is made possible only by gaining information from female characters; Trinity's foes in the second episode, the agents, want her because she can lead them to either Morpheus or Neo. The various female figures in the film, DuJour, Switch, the Oracle, the Woman in Red or Trinity herself

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12. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Male Trouble," in *Constructing Masculinity*, 58–76.

13. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

are made easily interchangeable since they are present first and foremost as aids to the hero: they mediate male relationships, regardless of their physical and sexual iconography. Although the femme fatale DuJour and the butch Trinity may represent the two extremes on the narrative's axis of femininity, it is on the basis of their bodies, their suggested essential femaleness, that they are relegated to the same category.

In *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, Don Siegel's classic from 1956, extraterrestrials attempt to colonize, "steal" the bodies of human beings. It is the body that matters in *The Matrix*, too; however, it seems to be the interest of both worlds.

As opposed to the repertoire of genders established in the sequence, the narrative's underscoring female embodiment indicates a recourse to an essentialist framework of masculinity and femininity. According to its logic, dichotomy is the basis of gender; caught in the singular, masculinity and femininity are contoured as exclusive, though hierarchical opposites. As unified and mutually impermeable categories in complementation, masculinity and femininity correspond to biological fe/maleness – i.e., to an unproblematized morphology of the body. Built upon the lore of biological determinism, such representations propagate the predominance of sex as opposed to gender. Although the latter is considered to encompass masculinity and femininity as mere social constructs, the primacy of bodily morphology is not questioned. Sex, i.e. the possession of genitalia that makes a clear distinction between male and female bodies, has the strong implication of the natural.

2 The De/Construction of Sex

The view of sex as an exclusionary divide within materialist feminist scholarship was first challenged by Christine Delphy. Contesting the priority of nature/biology over culture, Delphy emphasizes that "part of the nature of sex itself is seen to be its *tendency to have a social content*/to vary culturally."[14] Naturalizing the hierarchy of difference, the biological essentialist approach posits sex as the expression of a natural dichotomy, while gender is conceived of as signalling a social dichotomy. However, argues Delphy, differences are multiple and are not necessarily oppositional and/or hierarchical. The relationship between and within sex and gender should thus be recognized as a relationship of mutual incommensurability. That is, they

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14. Christine Delphy, "Rethinking Sex and Gender," in Diana Leonard and Lisa Adkins eds., *Sex in Question: French Materialist Feminism* (London and Bristol: Taylor & Francis, 1996) 33. Emphasis in the original.

cannot be defined, evaluated and exhausted in terms of each other as they are devoid of a common measure. The conception of sex as a pure marker is an act of the social. This act is reductionist in the sense that it eliminates all but one variable of the sign in order to enable the use of sex as accounting for dichotomy. In Delphy's view, the sex/gender hierarchy is to be reversed with sex interpreted as part of "the way a given society represents 'biology' to itself."[15] The arbitrary nature of gender indicates its independence from sex, while "sex itself simply marks a social division ... it serves to allow social recognition and identification of those who are dominant and those who are dominated."[16] In other words, sex presupposes gender and it is gender that precedes sex.

The ideological background for the historical juridico-medical preference of gender as simply a mirror of sex is ultimately overthrown by Judith Butler. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler sets out to investigate the interdependence between sex and gender, and, following Foucault, underlines 'sex' not as a fact of nature, but rather as the product of scientific discourse. Contesting the immutable character of sex, she presupposes that sex is "as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all."[17]

Butler thus underlines both categories as constructs while retaining the notion of difference between their cultural formations. As sex is itself established as a gendered category, its suggested preliminary signifying existence in the sex/gender hierarchy produces a paradoxical ontology where the sexed body is conceived of as a passive object awaiting cultural inscription. However, argues Butler, bodies should be interpreted as signifying practices themselves as their meaning is dependent upon the framework of interpretation that characterizes a society; the construction of nature is the effect of this binary framework that establishes bodies as liveable/meaningful or unliveable/expelled/abject, calling into evidence dominant cultural assumptions about sex and sexuality. Gender is thus the means by which culture creates sex as a natural given, or, to put it differently, gender is the discursive/cultural formation that designates the production and establishment of sex in such a way that the latter category *appears as* prediscursive.

As the gendered body is constructed through exclusions and denials so that it is intelligible in the female/male binary, gender reveals its performative nature as per-

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15. Delphy, p. 35.
16. Delphy, p. 35.
17. Butler, p. 7.

formance is – as in Austin's linguistic theory on performative utterances – the re-enactment of a set of already established social cultural norms repeated through the enactments of identity. Nietzsche claims that "there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything."[18] On this analogy, Butler negates the existence of a core gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity, she argues, is "performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results." The notion of a fixed gender identity is thus a normative ideal, a regulatory fiction as gender does not behave as a noun but is always a dynamic process, a doing, "though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed."[19]

Realized through a series of acts, gender is materialized as through the process of the corporeal stylization of the body. Its performance invests gender identity with a "cultural/personal history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations." As the binary frame founds and consolidates the subject, but cannot be attributed to it, gender cannot be considered as a locus of agency from which various acts/performances will follow. Concealing its very performativity, the imitative practices that establish gender "construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction." In other words, gendered identity is "an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*."[20]

The body thus cannot be invested with a stable, fixed existence beyond the constraints of the systems of power/knowledge. The body that performs is constructed by and through signification, through performances that – continuously re-enacting what constitutes a gendered reality – reveal the impossibility of any recourse to an original or true gender. The maintenance of the ideal of a true gender core is, however, the interest of the dominant ideology that defines the co-existence of masculinity and femininity in performance as deviation from the norm:

> the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality.

18. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1969) 45, cited in Butler, p. 25.

19. Butler, pp. 25–26.

20. Butler, p. 140. Emphasis in the original.

Butler's contention is that both women and men are subject to the "regulatory fiction" that gender represents and which is not only sustained but can also be subverted through performance. However, Butler actively embeds the body in a purely discursive framework that cannot account for the social/material differences that allow for various modalities of recognition regarding identity *as* performance, let alone sustainable subversive performance. In this respect, then, Butler's theory is rather local. Whereas Delphy is more interested in the social construction of gender division itself, her emphasis on the discursive act of interpretation gives way to, but does not accommodate the material dimension of the sex(uality)/gender distinction. The binary frame of heterosexuality represents a gendered hierarchy that Butler and Delphy articulates in terms of the hierarchy of language/theory and materiality. However, as Stevie Jackson writes, "heterosexuality is founded not only on a linkage of gender and sexuality, but on the appropriation of women's bodies and labor."[21]

The normative understanding of sex as the dominant element in the sex/gender hierarchy is thus ideologically biased as it capitalizes upon the material interests of the sexual division of labour. The ideological positioning of the body as a domain beyond the operations of power results, on the one hand, in a social division which is – legitimized by the marriage contract – characterized by women's unpaid domestic and emotional work. On the other, it produces the docile, feminine bodies through the maintenance of gendered disciplinary practices.[22]

Portraying competing realities, the narrative of *The Matrix* plays out contesting notions of sexual identities, performances of masculinity and femininity, against the background of late capitalism. This is a focal point in the diegetic construction of the Matrix, the program itself.

2.1 The Female Dynamic: The Matrix and the Feminization of Technology

When they first meet at the party in the fourth scene, Neo is surprised to find that the Trinity he has sought, the one who cracked the I.R.S. database, is a girl:

> *Neo*   Jesus.
> *Trinity*   What?
> *Neo*   I just thought, um. . . you were a guy.

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21. Stevie Jackson, "Gender and Sexuality: A Materialist Feminist Analysis," in *Heterosexuality in Question* (London: SAGE Publications, 1999), 123–134, p. 129.
22. Jackson, p. 130.

> *Trinity*   Most guys do. . . . Please just listen. I know why you're here, Neo. I
> know what you've been doing. I know why you hardly sleep, why you live
> alone, and why night after night you sit at your computer. You're looking
> for him. I know, because I was once 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
> brought you here. You know the question just as I did.
>
> *Neo*   What is the matrix?

The dialogue underlines the intimacy of Neo's quest for Morpheus by locating it
in the privacy of the home. Exchanging the "him" for the "it" as the object of her
speech, Trinity offers a point of identification with Neo. This shared discursive space
of the "us" is defined by the quest/ion and is formulated to denote a communal force
of deviancy that is expelled from hegemonic discourse. The creation of spaces of
enunciation via their very disarticulation resonates with the body's entanglement in
and by forces of presence and absence in the program. For Trinity, vision, or the gaze
of – and off – recognition is one such force.

In the fourth scene, notions of sex and sexuality are subsumed under the bipolar
model of the sexual division of labour. Showing a Trinity that admits that most guys
take her for a man, the scene strengthens her butch persona via an uncritical appro-
priation of sex role-stereotypes that are superimposed, as Butler suggests, on lesbian
sexual identities from within the practice of heterosexuality.[23] Trinity appears here
as a woman who has usurped the male privilege of doing creative, even heroic intel-
lectual work by personifying the cult figure of cyberpunk, the traditionally male mas-
culinist hacker character.[24] Cracking the Integrated Revenue System database, her
figure communicates the outer world's anti-capitalism. A hacker himself, Neo is
again negatively characterized in the context of overwhelming female activity. At the
end of the dialogue, anxieties concerning sexuality and power are displaced onto the
idea of the matrix.

The matrix, this archetypal space of intellectual interaction is, according to cy-
berpunk writer William Gibson, "a 3-D chessboard, infinite and perfectly transpar-
ent,"[25] that allows for entrance provided the limits of the body are extended with
high-tech prostheses. Receptive and demanding by definition, and bearing a name
that means "womb" in Latin, the Matrix reflects on a hegemonic understanding of

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23. Butler, p.137.

24. Karen Cadora, "Feminist Cyberpunk," *Science Fiction Studies* 3 (1995), p. 359.

25. William Gibson, *Burning Chrome* (New York: Ace Books, 1987), p. 168.

the biology of the female body. Depicted as a global metropolis, and identified with the power plant, the program in Larry and Andy Wachowski's film of appears as a nurturing and mothering, and at the same time repressive phenomenon. As a technological mother, the Matrix operates on the basis of its total control over biology, gaining its energy by feeding the living with the liquidized remains of the dead in the infinite fields that contain the cells of the unconscious human beings. As it is put by Switch, a female member of Morpheus's hovercraft crew, the Matrix reduces human bodies to "copper tops." Through this formulation, the late capitalism of turn-of-the-century North-America is figured in the narrative, "copper top" being a reference to Duracell battery. Science fiction history is intertwined with the history of capitalism itself as the matrix serves to preserve "concentrations of data (those stored by corporations, government agencies, the military, etc.)."[26] In cyberpunk narratives, global economy is epitomized by the iconic corporations, such as the one Neo is employed by: Metacortex. The name of the software company underlines the hyperreal nature of production, locating it in the cortex, the tissue of the brain. Also, it clearly conveys the anti-individualist ethics of capitalism: as Mr Rhineheart, Neo's boss puts it, "every single employee understands that they are part of the whole."

This ideology characterizes the program itself. As the effect of a contract that was made between humankind and the Artificial Intelligence after their apocalyptic battle, the Matrix exists as a "consensual hallucination," in that "exactly the same hallucinatory landscape is experienced by everyone who 'jacks into' any one of the system's terminals."[27] Global and personal at the same time, the program's hyperreal, simulated world realizes the "ambivalent abstractness that defines capitalist production and exchange circuits."[28] The Matrix represents what Jean Baudrillard describes as the fourth phase of the image that "has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum."[29] Simulation is based on the "death of reference," that is brought about by the capital's objective to make possible the "pure circulation" of signs in order to accelerate the accumulation of profit. In this respect, the Matrix can be seen as a postmodern capitalistic venture, precisely with respect to its subjective overtones.

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26. Brian McHale, "Towards a poetics of Cyberpunk," in *Constructing Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 252–311, p. 254.

27. McHale, p. 254.

28. Lyn Phelan, "Artificial Women and Male Subjectivity in *42nd Street* and *Bride of Frankenstein*," *Screen* 2 (2000) 161–182, p. 166.

29. Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," in *Simulations: Foreign Agents Series* (New York: Semiotexte[e], 1983), 9–13, pp. 11–12.

The mass-produced and mechanized bodies of the power plant model a new kind of worker, and are thus, according to Lyn Phelan, "peculiarly emblematic of American industrial modes and might."[30] Uniform in their appearance and having the interchangeable names of Smith, Jones and Brown, the agents, the Matrix's sentient programs also serve as references to contemporary features of North-American modes of production and reproduction. As an effect of the erasure of the referent, late capitalism is characterized by an increased mobility, especially with regard to the transnational corporation that is, writes Rosemary Hennessy, the primary determiner of the transmission of capital. Production relies on the "heightened mobility, and on time and space compression" that has replaced the assembly line.[31] Moving in and out of the digital bodies of those who are not yet unplugged from the program, the figures of Smith, Jones and Brown serve as the narrative's comment on the dangers of the economy of the late 20th century. The film's seemingly anti-capitalist ideology is, however, intertwined with its sexual politics, played out in the interrogation room scene.

2.2 The Interrogation Room Scene

The scene introduces an overtly homoerotic dynamic to Neo and Smith's relationship through its emphasis on role-play that involves the imitation of intimate confessional dialogue, and bodily penetration. Pretending sympathy towards Neo, Smith offers him a fresh start provided Neo informs him about Morpheus, confessing that his colleagues believe that he is wasting his time with "Mr Thomas A. Anderson." Being called by his official name, Neo overcomes his so far uncertain masculinity when responding: "How about I give you the finger . . . and you give me my phone call." Neo's unexpected assertion of male power is defined against the threat of bodily penetration. This conception of power is, however, reworked sadistically and hyperbolically in the next pictures when Smith implants a bug in Neo's body.

The film's characterization of male-to-male physicality as violent, painful and predominantly infectious serves to validate its ambition to reinstate heteropatriarchy. Reinforcing the cultural assumptions of homoeroticism as threatening one's identity as well as their health, the scene capitalizes on the social construction of the AIDS pandemic, that is, as Tamsin Wilton suggests, a gendered disease in that it is perceived to affect men – and homosexual men in particular – more likely than

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30. Phelan, p. 167.
31. Rosemary Hennessy, "Setting the Terms," in *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 1–36, p. 21.

women.[32] The threat of the enhanced mobility that characterizes late-20th-century capitalism is thus reworked as a threat to the integrity of the body. According to the anthropologist Mary Douglas, permeable body boundaries represent a threat to the social order because they refer to pollution and endangerment; the permeable body is also conceived of as dangerous because it cannot be regulated.[33] As an effect, penetrative homosexuality is "almost always conceived within the homophobic signifying economy as both uncivilized and unnatural."[34]

Thematizing homosexual intercourse, the interrogation room scene also signals *The Matrix*'s anxiety concerning the technological. Hi-tech development has brought about the new global division of labour that magnifies the homogenization of social relations and fragments production to subnational localities with the sole objective of reducing the expenses and accumulating profit for the company. The interplay between these two components of production processes has, argues Hennessy, "registered in new forms of consciousness and transnational identity – multiculturalism for one, and more gender-flexible sexual identities for another."[35] The narrative, however, seeks the reconstruction of rigid and irreversible gender designations, elaborating its nostalgia by contesting realities that are symbolized by reproductive organs, the biotechnological femininity of the Matrix having its counterpoint in the Nebuchadnezzar, Morpheus's phallic hovercraft. The anti-capitalist attitude of *The Matrix* is thus developed by queering desire through the figure of the clone.

The mass-produced human bodies of the power plant foreclose the problem of genetic engineering, the program's reproductive technique that is metonymically realized through the uniform figures of the agents. In the interrogation room episode, associations between cloning and homosexuality are played out. As Jackie Stacey points out, cloning has homoerotic connotations in SF cinema; apart from a particular gay male style, commonly nicknamed as "the clone," narratives deploy the "more general assumption that same-sex desire is inextricable from narcissism, commonly understood as a desire for oneself or one's own image."[36] The physical resemblance between Reeves and Weaving establishes the narcissistic aesthetic of duplication. The scene also draws on the two actors' cinematic personae. Famous for

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32. Tamsin Wilton, "Sex, Texts, Power," in En*gendering AIDS: Deconstructing Sex, Text and Epidemic* (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), p. 2.

33. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, cited in Butler, pp. 131–134.

34. Butler, p. 132.

35. Hennessy, pp. 6–7.

36. Jackie Stacey, "She Is Not Herself: The Deviant Relations of *Alien Resurrection*," in *Screen* 44:3 (2003) 251–276, p. 269.

his role as the female impersonator Mitzi Del Bra in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Stephan Elliott, 1994), Weaving shares a queer cinematic history with Reeves who starred as the male prostitute Scott Favor in the cult movie *My Private Idaho* (Gus Van Saint, 1991) Assuming a relationship between genetic engineering and homosexuality, *The Matrix* identifies them as problematic, concomitant effects of late capitalist ideology.

Significantly, Trinity and Neo get the closest to each other physically when she is operating the bug out of him on the back seat of a car while driving towards Adams Bridge. On his way towards re/birth, the hero is offered the Neb as the space of phallic identification as *The Matrix* ultimately subscribes to a homogeneous perspective of gender. Eliminating the dangers of an infectious sexuality, the film exchanges the feminized, late capitalist economy of the program for the heterosexual matrix, i.e. "that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders and desires are naturalized."[37] The narrative's concern for a stable sex expressed through a stable gender is voiced through the representation of cloning as a deviant way of reproduction. The coupling of maleness with masculinity, and femaleness with femininity is the primary truth-claim of a society that "allows for bodies to cohere and acquire meaning within the dialectic framework of sex, and through the practice of heterosexuality."[38]

2.3 Un/Liveable Bodies

Performance, argues Butler, should be distinguished from performativity as the former is a bounded act whereas the latter represents the reiteration of norms. The "citational legacy" performativity is invested with precedes, constrains and exceeds the performer, disallowing for the moment of choice: "what is performed works to conceal, if not to disavow, what remains opaque, unconscious, unperformable."[39] Through a parodic reappropriation by the subject, however, performance can work as subversion. Recently reinterpreted as signifying an affirmative set of norms, the concept of "queer," for instance, has been able to provide a site for opposition through a theatrical appropriation of performance. Underlining the hyper-reality of truth-claims and recourses to the myth of the original in discourses on sex, sexuality and gender, "queer" embraces a definition of sexual identity as a protean, shifting set

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37. Butler, p. 151n6.
38. Butler, p. 151n6.
39. Judith Butler, "Critically Queer," in *Bodies That Matter* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 218–242, p. 234.

of meanings.[40] "Queered" into public discourse by homophobic interpellations, the subject performs – cites and reiterates – the term; the performance, revealing the contingency of the construction of meaning, is "theatrical to the extent that it *mimes and renders hyperbolic* the discursive convention that it also *reverses*."[41]

Engaging in nostalgia, *The Matrix* contests gendered systems of power/knowledge, disallowing for the affirmation of queer desire by locating it within a negative framework of postmodern science that is rejected precisely on the basis of its questioning natural, biological insemination as the basis of reproduction. As Heidi Hartmann argues, patriarchy represents "relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women."[42] Conveying a demand for heteropatriarchal dominance, *The Matrix* sets out to reinstate it through a series of performances that, in response, allow for the moment of choice in the case of queer sexualities, underlining them as the very effects of this choice, i.e. unnatural at the same time. The "material base" of patriarchy as contoured in the film narrative outlines which bodies matter, i.e. which are considered liveable or unliveable.

3 The Masculine Continuum

> "To be a subject is to *be* a man – to be male or literally empowered 'as' male in culture and society. . ."[43]

As power acts as discourse in the domain of the performative, the act of performance is bounded as it is always determined by the chain of conventions. Defined by the historicity of force, the performer's identity that is tenuously constituted in and through the performance is endowed with a relative stability, and a history. The construction and recognition of the "I" is thus possible only through the systems of power and knowledge; realized through the practice of reiteration, the "I" is a simulacrum itself, and as such, it is never fully recognizable. As the forming condition of the subject, the "I" is the necessary locus of action that is activated when the subject

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40. Wilton, p. xii.

41. Wilton, p. 232.

42. Heidi Hartmann, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union," in Lydia Sargent ed., *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 1–44, p. 14.

43. Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 94.

is interpellated as the effect of social recognition. In Butler's words, "it is the historically revisable possibility of a name that precedes and exceeds me, but without which I cannot speak."[44]

Denying the validity of Neo's identity on its own, that is, questioning the recognizability of the performances that have constituted his persona so far, Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) offers him a historical framework of subjectivity which, however, calls for uncritical and mechanical repetition:

> when the Matrix was first built, there was a man born inside who had the ability to change whatever he wanted, to remake the Matrix as he saw fit. It was he who freed the first of us, taught us the truth: 'As long as the Matrix exists the human race will never be free.' After he died the Oracle prophesized his return and that his coming would hail the deconstruction of the Matrix, end the war, bring freedom to our people. That is why there are those of us who have spent our entire lives searching the Matrix looking for him. I did what I did because I believe that search is over. . .

The "I" that determines the subject and that is, in turn, determined by it through the series of performances is thus allocated a coercive macro-dimension of history that mediates and regulates the subject's recognition in *The Matrix*. In other words, Morpheus's nostalgia catalyzes the very historicity of force while rendering it hyperbolic at the same time, assigning a discursive space to Neo only within a patrilinear framework that is empowered by the notions of nature and natural birth.

In order for Neo to become the One and not the Other, working concepts of identity – as defined by their micro-dimensional historicity – should be thus regarded as merely self-fashioning. The notion of a split, totalizing, decentred, centrifugal subjectivity is deprived of meaning outside the Matrix's hyper-reality. Morpheus's emphasis on a preliminary and all-determining masculinity establishes a relationship in the film between reality as expressed through the trope of the birth, and an uncritical model of objectivity – based on the transferability of truth – as the counterpoints of postmodern/capitalist subjectivity. While the latter encompasses and is founded by cross-cutting differences, the former is based on a hierarchy of differences, as expressed through the representation of the Neb. The focal place for Neo's emasculation, the hovercraft, walking its way in the service and waste systems of old metropolises, serves as a graphic, though not unproblematic, symbol for Morpheus's nostalgia for "true" masculinity.

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44. Butler, "Critically Queer," pp. 225–226.

3.1 Engendering Science

Female stars in action cinema pose problems to the binary constructions of gender, argues Tasker. Defined by their assertive physicality, and revealing the contestability of gendered relations of power, muscular action heroines strengthen male anxieties. The male body remaining the norm against or alongside which they are tested, these characters can be addressed as "musculine" insofar as musculinity "indicates the extent to which a physical definition of masculinity in terms of a developed musculature is not limited to the male body within representation."[45] Excessive and triumphal, action heroines give way to male nostalgia towards a clear-cut definition of power as realized in idealized accounts of private patriarchy,[46] or patriarchy before the rapid technological development of the late 1970s. SF heroines are often equipped with impressive weaponry or are the products of technology: in my view they challenge notions regarding the accessibility and ownership of power as male privilege, and economic privilege in particular. As Mary-Ann Doane suggests, SF narratives typically combine economic and social frustrations when portraying triumphal masculinities. In these films, "anxiety concerning the technological is often allayed by a displacement of this anxiety onto the figure of the woman or the idea of the feminine"[47] Marjorie Kibby attributes this relationship between female characters and/or femininity, and machines to the emergence of a nostalgic masculinity from the 1970s on. The radical changes in industrial structures in that period were parallel to the feminization of work. The growing number of female employees, and the simultaneous increase in the application of (computer) technology at the workplace resulted in male anxieties, since the new, emerging positions did not require creativity but reinforced passivity, and a lower social status. Writes Kibby: "men were retrained for positions they considered as less manly. . . . Those who lost their jobs were defeated by a combined force of technology and women."[48]

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45. Tasker, p. 3.

46. Private or domestic patriarchy is characterized by women's restriction to the private sphere. The transition from private to public patriarchy was the effect of women gaining political citizenship. Patriarchy is maintained by rendering the gendered differentials within "citizenship" – such as the actualization of the right to speak – invisible. See Sylvia Walby, "Is Citizenship Gendered?" *Sociology* 28 (1994) 379–395.

47. Mary-Ann Doane, "Technophilia: Technology, Representation and the Feminine," in Jenny Wolmark ed. *Cybersexualities* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1999), 25–34, p. 27.

48. Marjorie Kibby, "Cyborgasm: Machines and Male Hysteria in the Cinema of the Eighties," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies* 2 (1996), retrieved on May 12, 2003 <http://www.kibby.org/masculinity/cyborgas.html>.

As class and gender relations became relativized, a nostalgia for hegemonic masculinity started to develop. The (sub)cultural response to the phenomenon was the proliferation of science fiction films. From the 1950s on, S/F narratives have made realizable the restoration of patriarchy through defining both femininity and technology as the Other. Denying capitalist technical development, and giving way to nostalgia through the representation of its archaic, ravaged and underdeveloped technology, the devastated reality of *The Matrix* reproduces the very ideology it denies. Concerned about its own reproduction, the patrilinear frame of Neo's emasculation is embedded in a logic of belief in repetition and re-enactment; apart from Morpheus, it is empowered by the figure of the Oracle. However, this logic posits historical relativism/nostalgia against the program's capitalist relativism. This is apparent in the narrative construction of the two cities in the film: that of the program, and Zion.

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The Matrix creates the illusion of a chaotic, disintegrated global city that is in a metonymic relationship with its inhabitants, whose documentation is in harmony with that of Neo. The rarity of centre-heavy frames, the badly lit spaces of action and the reduction of close-ups to the momentary introduction of body parts give plastic descriptions of fragmentation. While the narrative maintains a relationship between the heterogeneity and instability of the subjectivities of the Matrix, and its excessive use of technology, the outer reality is not less characterized by technological fetishism, as expressed through the surgical reconstruction of gender in the case of Neo. As Jackie Stacey writes,

> [f]antasies of reproductive technology, such as in-vitro fertilization, have pervaded popular culture in the form of a technological fetishism, involving a disavowal of the mother's role, an omnipotent fantasy of procreation without the mother, enabling science . . . to fulfil the desire to father itself. [49]

49. Stacey, p. 259.

Stacey's model of masculinist systems of knowledge points at science's concern to reproduce itself while maintaining a gendered hierarchy as well. The dichotomy between the Matrix and the Neb offers a contested field of bodies of knowledge where the dialectics of body/mind, and nature/culture are played out. Allowing for the cyberspace of the program to realize the fantasy of in-vitro fertilization, *The Matrix* reinforces these binaries that stabilise femaleness as embodiment while liberating maleness from the constraints of the body, the emphasis on mind and culture allowing for the establishment of a universal subject position, an "I" that conceals its gendered character.[50] This dualism is the basis of the way matter and materiality are represented in the film; the contrast between the metropolis of the program and the reality of Zion, the last human city brings about the hierarchy of embodied and disembodied knowledges as Zion remains a utopian construct throughout the film.

The vision of a city that is "deep underground, near the earth's core where it's still warm" simultaneously catalyzes nostalgia through a recourse to the *arches* of the "earth" and "fire" in Zion's discursive construction, and through the idea of the natural that is expressed both through them and the genuineness of birth. The latter is represented by the muscular figures of Tank and Dozer; as Tank says, "me and my brother Dozer, we're both one hundred percent pure, old fashioned, home-grown human, born free right here in the real world. Genuine child of Zion." The idea of birth as an incontestable claim to truth is now coupled with the materiality of male power and will curiously underlie Neo's emasculation as Morpheus's proposition of the patrilinear framework of birth implies the reproduction of science through the biomedical reconstruction of Neo's body. Unplugged from the program, Neo is shown lying on an operating table, with needles in his body that Morpheus uses to rebuild the atrophied muscles. Morpheus's newly achieved medical authority underlies the interplay of the material and the cultural: through his effective use of biomedicine, Neo's body is established as an available site for the imposition of the social structures of masculinity. Although his motoric functions are strengthened in the traditionally male arenas of the dojo or the business district, the materiality of his bodily strength is simultaneously disavowed of in the loading program's neural-interactive simulacrum where these spaces of action are located.

On the Neb, Neo's figure is offered as an easy site of identification: apart from his failures throughout the training, the normative masculinity he is initiated into is also commodified as it appears downloadable from the deck program, the Construct. The iconography of Neo's masculinity as achieved on the Neb serves to frustrate his

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50. Donna Haraway, p. 187.

earlier gender performances. Connected to the deck computer, his body appears as passive, awaiting signification. However, the impossibility of the existence of the body beyond the realm of the systems of power and knowledge is underlined by Morpheus's recourse to biotechnology. The medical manipulation of Neo's body attests to the fluidity of the categories of "nature" and "truth" themselves. In other words, the surgical construction of gender, while outlining the essentialist norms it serves to reinforce, underscores that essentialism is a cultural construction itself.[51] Also, it attests to the concern of science to reproduce itself by securing the very patrilinearity that is underlined as the prerequisite for the transmission of truth. This particular application of biotechnology is parallel to the way the Matrix deploys genetic engineering. However, the narrative strategy to intimidate the material has the effect of silencing cloning; the technology that could challenge the film's biologism is rendered invisible as the construction of normative masculinity becomes the main focus in *The Matrix*. Still, male nostalgia indicates its alignment not only with technology but with capitalism itself.

3.2 The Annihilation of Queers

SF cinema is highly determined by the very capitalist ideology whose conflicts and injustices it thematizes. Succumbing to a past that appears as idyllic, these movies are accomplices to the ruling class: their objective of maintaining the status quo is expressed through the narratives' desire to re-establish the state of affairs that was destroyed by the appearance of the Others towards the maintenance of the status quo.[52] Problematically enough, science fiction films thus reproduce the very male anxieties they attempt to resolve.

The transhistorical perspective that characterizes SF in particular contours a model of objectivity that is empowered by the persistence of vision. Emphasizing that this model is also typical of Western thought, Donna Haraway draws a parallel between the contemporary technological investment of vision with new horizons and a notion of the real as completely knowable. The increased visibility of objects of investigation, she argues, conceals the invisibility of the scientist *him*self; abstracted away from – gendered – relations of power, the knowing subject is assigned an omniscient, universal, and consequently, a disembodied position:

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51. See Marjorie Garber, "Spare Parts: The Surgical Construction of Gender," in *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, p. 109.

52. Judith Hess Wright, "Genre Films and the Status Quo," in *Tarantino előtt: Tömegfilm a nyolcvanas években*, pp. 77–87.

> Vision in this technological feast becomes unregulated gluttony; all perspective gives way to infinitely mobile vision, which no longer seems just mythically about the god-trick of seeing everything form nowhere, but to have put the myth into ordinary practice.[53]

The masculine signifying economy of *The Matrix* systematically denies the multiplicity of locations from where to see, foregrounding its aspiration for a universal and univocal position by the naming of its hero. As a hysterical attempt to ultimately secure the privilege to see, the film mediates power-relationships through the force of the male gaze. It is this gaze that makes our entering the program possible as Cypher should not stop looking at Neo. Similarly, Morpheus claims that he has spent all his life looking for the One, and Smith tells Neo in the interrogation room that they have had and eye on him for some time. Neo's body thus appears as spectacle, objectified as he is made the passive recipient of the gaze. It is at the climactic action sequence at the end, that, stopping the bullets, Neo is able to return and manipulate the gaze: securing the impermeability of his body, he is able to reverse the homoeroticism Smith's gaze is invested with.

Action sequences have a crucial role in eliminating the unresolved tensions originated by the male gaze, argues Peter Middleton.[54] These scenes, however homophobic, depict male relationships at their most sexual as they allow for the otherwise prohibited contact of male bodies. Resolving and creating tension at the same time, scenes of physical brutality "show what is possible for men. These heroes can't keep their hands off one another, but when they touch, their desire turns to blows."[55]

Similarly to *The Matrix*, Anthony Mann's classical westerns offer a radical solution for the erasure of male anxieties – of the predominantly male audience of that genre – that could arise as a result of the eroticisation of the male hero's body when it is put on display. In Mann's films, writes Paul Willemen, the hero is cast diegetically in two distinct ways, one being consequent on the other. First his figure, emerging on the horizon against the bleak land of the prairie, or sometimes in action, is offered as spectacle; the hero is exposed to be eroticised through the viewer's voyeuristic admiration. As a second step, Mann destroys the hero's body in scenes of physical violence in order to deprive him of homoerotic connotations. The third stage of Mann's anti-homosexual narrative strategy encompasses the

53. Haraway, p. 189.

54. Peter Middleton, "Boys Will Be Men: Boys' Superhero Comics," in *The Inward Gaze: Masculinity and the Postmodern Subject* (London: Routledge, 1992), 17–51, p. 26.

55. Middleton, p. 34.

317

hypostasization and near destruction of the male body that is mutilated and re-stored through violent brutality – in the corresponding scenes we can see a trium-phant male body emerging. Apart from the previous three stages that result in the reconstruction of the hero's body, many of Mann's westerns accompany the pleas-ure/unquiet pleasure of looking with a quite marked anti-homosexual sentiment, most frequently represented as the murder of a supposedly or openly gay charac-ter. Through this denial of homosocial desire the anxiety of looking is ultimately resolved.[56]

Mann's narratives thus consciously act upon – describe and prescribe – the gendered audience's reaction while regulating on-screen relationships. The nostalgic construction of masculinity allows for such a double act in *The Matrix*, too. Apart from the opening sequence, the second half of the movie is based on positioning the male body as spectacle throughout the rapidly evolving action scenes. In contrast with his opening iconography, Neo is portrayed as becoming more and more active while his figure retains its homoerotic connotations, appearing in tight black clothes that reveal the silhouette of his body. The violent action allows for a more radical destruction of the hero's body than in Mann's westerns: in the ravaged subway sta-tion where these final scenes are located, Neo, significantly, has to die in order for heteropatriarchy to emerge.

As a side-effect of Neo's emasculation, Trinity's figure has been restyled: her solitary warrior role is exchanged first for that of the side-kick of the hero when he sets out to save Morpheus, and finally for the position of the "woman-as-romantic-interest." As Tasker points out, "if the male body is to be a point of security," the woman-as-love-interest "offers a point of differentiation from the hero and deflects attention from the homoeroticism surrounding male buddy relationships." Identified by her emotional work-out when providing audience for the hero's suffering, this gendered performance conceptualizes 'woman' as "a space onto which a variety of desires and anxieties are displaced."[57] Through a series of shots and counter-shots, the film establishes both Neo and Trinity's romantic relationship on the Neb, and allows for his resurrection as the consequence of her archetypal kiss that saves the world.

Trinity's figure, shown standing nearby a wounded Morpheus, also allows for the ultimate de-eroticisation of Neo's "manhunt" for him, while the ultimate action sequence back in the Matrix serves to eradicate the anxieties concerning queer de-

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56. Paul Willemen, "Looking at the Male," *Framework* 15–17 (1981) 10–18, p. 16.
57. Tasker, pp. 26–27.

sire. For Morpheus, Neo "is all that matters"; the revenge plot activated by a Neo that is ready to sacrifice his life for his master in response is, however, played out in order to eliminate the character that has been identified by infectious penetration. It is now Neo who penetrates Smith's body in the orgasmic scene that narrates their unification. Parallel to the sentinels' intrusion into the metallic body of the Neb, he projects himself into the digital body of the agent, hyperbolically reversing and re-enacting the interrogation room episode and signalling patriarchy's revenge for the threat of homosexuality.

Eradicating homosexuality and achieving gender intelligibility, Neo ascends towards the open sky. His hypostasis, and his voice-over message to the enemy as the screen symbolizes that of a computer again, signifies his acquisition of an omniscient, hegemonic subject position where the universal male "I" sees everything from nowhere while his body is abstracted away. Transparent and self-identical, heteronormative masculinity is achieved through a series of performances; in order to maintain its hegemony, this masculinity needs to deny any possibility of subversion, and, indeed, the performative nature of gender itself as well. Neo's becoming the One, i.e. the primary unit in the signifying economy of reality, and the final heterosexual coupling bring about what Butler identifies as the culturally sanctioned "annihilation of queers."[58] Still, this outcome is "haunted by the sexual possibilities so annulled."[59]

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In this paper I have investigated the representation of genders in *The Matrix*, establishing a relationship between the film's narrative strategy and the recent phenomenon of the crisis of masculinity. Interpreting the sequence of the first three scenes within this wider framework, I have argued that nostalgic masculinity is strongly connected to male embodiment. The performances of gender Neo goes through, however, underscore the body's non-existence outside the systems of power and knowledge. I have focused upon the construction of genders in the feminized space of the program, and on the phallic hovercraft of the Neb. Also, I have claimed that the idea of capitalism allows for the queer moment of identification. The realization of non-normative masculinities is, however, strongly disavowed of in the supposedly anti-capitalist reality of the narrative. Providing a constitutive outside for the construction of a universal, self-identical "I," male and female homoerotic pleasures are nevertheless subtextualized, disallowing for the resolu-

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58. Butler, "Critically Queer," p. 224.
59. Butler, p. 225.

tion of anxieties concerning sexual identity and embodiment. The crisis of masculinity thus appears as the condition to the ontology of genders in the narrative.

With the recourse to a single gender that is the expression of a stable sex as the exclusive point of departure, the theorization of masculinity crisis in men's studies is marked by its limitations. As long as men's studies shy away from breaking with the humanist concept of "man," masculinity, as we have seen, is unable to be considered a political category. Within this framework, any discussion of male subjectivity remains "a recuperative cultural fantasy."[60]

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60. Garber, p. 94.