From Ludwig Janus' Desk

Thoughts on the film "The Matrix"

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Introduction

The film "The Matrix" opened in the American cinemas at Easter 1999. It was directed by Larry and Andy Wachowski and stars Keanu Reeves, Laurence Fishburne, Carrie-Anne Moss and Hugo Weaving. It was one of the most successful films of the years and was awarded four Oscars i n the categories film editing, visual effects, sound and sound effects editing.

The film is about the inner individuation of a young man who leads a double life: Thomas Anderson working for a large software company by day, and a criminal hacker under the name of Neo by night. He finds out through his computer about a mysterious program called Matrix and a certain Morpheus, who can explain this matrix to him. As a result of his contact with the mysterious Morpheus, he also starts being pursued by very violent agents, who turn out to be working for the Matrix system of rule which governs not only the world, but also reality. These agents are fighting against the rebel Morpheus and his group, who have risen against this system of rule. They try to win him over, and when this doesn't succeed, they insert a mini-transmitter in the form of a scorpion into his navel. This all just seems like a bad dream. However, Morpheus and his envoy Trinity make contact with him again, convince him to join them, take the bug out of his navel and take him to Morpheus' base, the submarine Nebuchadnezzar. There, Morpheus explains to him that the entire world as we know it is an illusion, a computer program that merely leads people into believing that it is reality. Humans are therefore caught in the Matrix with no will of their own, slaves of a foreign power of intelligent machines. Neo discovers from Morpheus that he is "the One" who can fight against the Matrix if only he wants to. He has to make the decision: If he takes the blue pill, it will take him back to his previous life and everything will remain as it was before for him; if he takes the red pill, he will learn the truth and enter a new world. Neo takes the red pill.

After that, the first task is to locate him in the Matrix system. The humans are fetal beings bred in huge fields in eggcup-like containers so that the intelligent machines that rule the Matrix and hence the world can feed on their biological energy. Morpheus and his group locate Neo's fetus-like body in one of these containers and free him from the painful wiring that has been inserted into his body. After he has been released from this fixation symbolising the uterus, a sinister process of birth begins: He

slips through passages, is thrown back and forth and almost drowns before he is finally grabbed and pulled into the submarine again. He is now in the real world of the submarine and is no longer his own dream, as he was before.

Morpheus explains to him the background to the dynamics of the Matrix world. At the beginning of the second millennium, humans invented hyperintelligent beings who turned against the humans and tried to seize power, but were dependent on solar energy. The humans fought back by altering the bioelectricity of the atmosphere, thereby producing constant storms and clouds, blocking out the sunlight. The machines' response was to take control of the humans, to keep them in the breeding grounds as sources of energy and to keep them quiet by maintaining a computer-generated illusion of life around the year 1999. The earth itself is a destroyed desert without any forms of life. All that remains are the breeding grounds and the computers that rule the Matrix on the one hand and on the other Morpheus and his group in their submarine, which mainly operates in the sewers of huge ghost towns, and a mysterious human settlement called Zion, where a group of remaining humans have survived. Their organisation also depends on a central computer. Morpheus is the only one who knows the core codes. One of the goals of the Matrix agents is to catch Morpheus and to force him to tell them the core codes, which would allow them to destroy Zion. The rule of the Matrix would then be complete.

Morpheus is convinced that Neo is the One (an anagram of Neo) who can overcome the rule of the Matrix. A complicated training programme has been designed to this end, consisting mainly in Chinese martial arts. A further step is the ability to take giant leaps across terrifying abysses. The idea is therefore to develop superhuman powers or to develop his potential so that he is up to doing battle with the agents.

After he has completed this training programme, Neo is taken to a woman called Oracle, who has the power to identify the fate of the individuals in the group. Oracle is a kind of mummy figure in her kitchen baking biscuits, but she also radiates a great deal of enigmatic femininity. She has prophetic powers and primeval maternal knowledge. She tells Neo that he is not the One, but Morpheus is so convinced he is that he sacrifices himself for Neo. It is in Neo's power to prevent him from doing so or to save him. This gives Neo the motivation to develop his powers to the full.

The opportunity to do so arises immediately, as there is a renegade in the group called Cypher, a kind of Judas or Lucifer who betrays the group, in particular Morpheus, to the Matrix agents. The agents are thus able to locate Morpheus and his group in a large building and deploy police units to capture Morpheus and the group. It seems at first as if they can escape through gaps between the walls for the sewage pipes, but the group is discovered there too and Morpheus is overpowered, while the rest of the group, in particular Neo and Trinity, are able to escape. The traitor Cypher, who has taken over command in Nebuchadnezzar, is finally able to be overpowered by a seriously injured member of the crew. However, Morpheus is in the agents' power, is interrogated by them and is given an injection to weaken him and make him reveal the core codes of Zion. The only option for the group in Nebuchadnezzar is to kill Morpheus' body, which is in Nebuchadnezzar while his cerebral identity in the virtual Matrix world is in the hands of the agents. If his body in Nebuchadnezzar were to be killed, Morpheus would also cease to exist in the virtual world and would not be able to give away the core codes.

The alternative would be to rescue Morpheus from the skyscraper in the virtual Matrix world, the agents' central base. However, this base is heavily policed. Nevertheless, Neo decides to take on this adventurous rescue mission with the assistance of Trinity. Heavily armed, they overpower the guards in the entrance hall and on the roof of the building and hijack a helicopter to get to the storey of the building where Morpheus is being interrogated by the agents in an office. They open fire on these agents and manage to free Morpheus. Morpheus and Trinity manage to get back to Nebuchadnezzar, while Neo has to deal with Chief Agent Smith, who is in pursuit. The fight against Smith in an underground station becomes the central battle of the film. Neo manages to centre himself in his true self as it were and to overcome fear and terror, which puts him in a better position than the agent. He manages to overpower the agent by using his inner force and to make the agent explode. At one stage of the fight, Neo appears to already be dead, but is revived by Trinity's love and in the end is able to overpower his opponent. The initial split personality of Thomas Anderson and Neo is thus overcome, and he now has the coherent personality of Neo.

"The Matrix" as an Individuation Process

"The Matrix" can be interpreted at various different levels:
- "The Matrix" as the myth of the feelings of reality and identity of the Internet generation
- "The Matrix" as a film discussing the philosophical question of what is real in the world of virtual realities

- "The Matrix" as a film portraying Christian ideas of salvation and Buddhist/Chinese methods of self-orientation in the cyberworld
- "The Matrix" as a mystical initiation into the scenery of special effects
- "The Matrix" as a shaman's journey
- "The Matrix" as a fairy-tale amid the harsh realities of the modern finance and hi-tech world or
- "The Matrix" as a parable of modern depersonalisation and disintegration of the ego in the face of the overwhelming confusion of complex, mechanised social dominance

The film can be interpreted from all these viewpoints, and that is the strength of the film, together with the fact that, like every authentic work of art, it provides an authentic, original answer to the questions and emotional challenges of an age through the power of creative fantasy. The range of possibilities offered by film as a medium in this context is quite remarkable, which is why it now plays such a dominant role as an artistic medium.

With their carefree Californian attitude, the Wachowski brothers avail themselves of the resources of mythologemes, philosophemes and religious ideas of salvation from East and West to create a terrific psychomix. The specific idea for the Matrix world was derived from science fiction literature: The conceptual world of the novels of Philipp Dick, the Hardboiled comic by Geof Darrow and the Shadowrun role play, which features a matrix world. In terms of style and aesthetics, the Japanese Manga comics are no doubt significant. The basic structure of the story follows that of the hero's journey presented by Joseph Campbell in Hero with a Thousand Faces and given to the Hollywood directors by Christopher Vogler as a kind of recipe for writing the script and directing the film. The basic outline of the hero's journey which all myths and fairy-tales with initiations follow is intelligently transposed into cyberspace by the Wachowski brothers.

I would now like to outline my understanding of the film along the lines of the individuation process of a young man progressing from a state of conflictual disintegration to higher degree of personal integrity. In the course of the plot, the initial discrepancies between his life as a software programmer and his life as a hacker prove to be the expression of extreme disintegration in his sense of existence, which explains the intensity and radical nature of his individuation process. His ambivalent apparent pseudo-conformity begins to crumble when his immediate manager says to him that it seems as if he thinks he is someone special and that he is not complying with the company's rules. If that doesn't change, the manager says,

he'll have to go. As a result of this social verdict, the pseudo-conformity he has achieved as an adult begins to crumble and he has to go through puberty again as it were, because the ambivalent identity he has achieved proves not to be socially viable.

The subsequent events are the portrayal of a regressive individuation trance that begins with his sense of reality beginning to crumble and at the same time being caught up by the inner call of a paternal imago, a father who believes in him and his future. As Morpheus is the son of the night, he also has the dual male/female dimension of archaic parental imagoes. This belief by the father in his son or by parents in their child and his or her future is the force that enables constructive individuation to take place despite all the confusions and contradictions of the world and of our being in the world. This force is conveyed by the imago of Trinity, the holy trinity, whereby the Holy Ghost has female qualities here in the sense of an anima. She brings the call and the message from Morpheus to the prospective hero Neo. The latter is thus at the same time confronted with his disintegrated assertiveness or aggression, with which he is projectively faced in the form of the agents. Neo's disintegrated assertiveness or aggression is the reason why he was not able to resolve the ambivalence in his social life between his existence as a software programmer and as a hacker in a socially mediated way. The more dominant and threatening the invasion of the destructive tendencies projectively externalised in the form of the agents, the more important the contact with Morpheus and his confidence in him as the saviour of the world becomes, whereby this is the portrayal of the collapse of a personal/social world through failure in his job shown against the backdrop of the collapse of the entire world and its deliverance. Morpheus thus stands for the individual's primeval vitality and self-affirmation attached to the father or the parents, portrayed projectively in the father's belief in his son or the parents' belief in their child. As a result of Morpheus' belief in him, he finds a niche for self-contemplation after the collapse of his ambivalent identity. Morpheus is thus a kind of self-analytical authority in that he makes primeval knowledge accessible again that has been lost sight of as a result of disastrous experiences and creates a space to enable this self-contemplation on the conditions of the individual's own existence. This occurs in the film in the form of explanations given by Morpheus: The dream-like blindness in the human condition in the form of an apparently "normal reality" is the expression of a disastrous primeval conflict or struggle in the past between humans and superior intelligent machines that has led to the actual core state of being alive/

being fixed in a kind of uterine fixation dependent on superior intelligent machines. Here, an individual problem is being examined at the social level. Humans find solutions to social emergencies, e.g. socialism, or even a technical innovation that seems to "intelligently" overcome the traumatic situation of social or economic need, but at the price of shifting their dependency onto the system, which is reflected in, or amounts to, a prenatal fixation. Due to the ephemeral nature of our age and the options open to us with regard to information, we now have an eye for how such systems of dependency arise and also how they collapse.

However, in the case of the hero, we are not dealing with a social problem, but the solution of an individual problem reflected in a social conflict or a social disaster. This disaster is only accessible to the film implicitly in the projection onto the social conflict, and only its consequences are described. However, the symbolic description allows real events in the hero's development to be unravelled which substantiate his central weakness in a fetal fixation, preventing him from constructively asserting himself in the contradictions of the social world.

I see the central weakness of his core self as being derived from birth by caesarean section and subsequent care in an incubator, which is experienced by the child as violent and threatening. The predominance of a technicalised birth does not allow the child to find its emotional home in a postnatal relationship, but instead leads in his or her imagination to an imprisonment in the security of prenatal containers. However, this security is distorted by the distressing experiences in the incubator that results from being attached to various tubes and recording instruments, as used to be customary practice particularly in intensive obstetric care. In order to enable them to bear the deprivation in the incubator, the children were "mildly" sedated. The dazed state is repeatedly interrupted by a number of invasive measures, particularly by blood samples being taken to be tested. The child finds itself in a distressing dazed state confronted with an overpowering, dehumanised mechanical reality. The positive relationship to Morpheus, the intense belief in Neo and his potential overcome the negative binding forces, release the uterine fixation and allow a kind of postnatal process to take place such that he is subsequently really born and is released in the first step from the projective imprisonment in a matrix symbolising the uterus.

The dependency that continues to exist is symbolised by the imprisonment of the rest of the world in the Matrix existence. Further liberating steps require the self-constitution to be further strengthened. This takes place through Asian martial arts designed to

strengthen the hero and for him to develop his capacity for movement and action centred in the self. In developmental psychology terms, the aim is to use these ritual martial arts to subsequently develop the motility of the individual as an infant and as a young child which has been weakened by premature birth and hence to fully realise his physical potential. A sense of physical force and of being centred allows a life of potential for aggressive conflict. Here, the giant leap across abysses symbolise the precarious leap from dependency to one's own identity. Only then is the individual able to contemplate his or her own projects in life.

This occurs during the meeting with the mother figure Oracle. In developmental psychology terms, this is about finding oneself in the emotional force field of the relationship with the mother, who is both a specific mother figure and a mythical figure. Just as the maternal dimension of the Matrix (womb) became the individual's paralysing fate as a result of the disastrous conditions of birth, the positive mythological mother figure Oracle becomes a source of self-awareness. Her psychological wisdom motivates Neo to avail himself of all his energy to "save" the father figure Morpheus, to whom he partly owes his individuation.

When Morpheus is betrayed by Cypher and is captured by the Matrix agents, this presents a new challenge and a test for Neo's motivation. In order to free Morpheus, he mobilises the resources of his ego and achieves a capacity for action that makes him a match for the Matrix agents, which proves the increasing coherence of his ego. In dangerous situations, he no longer experiences projective fear, as a result of which he can only save himself by escaping, but instead can now take up battle with the agents. He manages to rescue Morpheus, and all Neo now has to do is to prove his superiority and the new identity he has taken on in a final battle with Agent Smith. At first, it looks as if he is going to be beaten and he already seems to be dead. This battle takes place in virtual reality; Neo's real body is lying in a kind of trance in Nebuchadnezzar. There, Trinity follows what is happening and in the moment of crisis expresses her love for him by kissing him, thus following a prophecy made by Oracle that the man she falls in love with will be the One who can save the world. Her love revives Neo, and he regains all his energy and presence to such an extent that he loses all fear, which can be seen by the fact that he can stop the bullets and they bounce off his hand held up in defence without causing any harm and fall to the ground. At this moment, he is able to find his way in his thoughts into the projection of his aggression, the agent, and hence to cancel out its effect. He is able to identify with his

own assertiveness and his aggressive potential without fear, and in doing so he also frees himself from the dominance of the Matrix, which also takes effect for the group.

Parallel to the virtual final battle, the Matrix attacks Nebuchadnezzar using a kind of killer spider, which is sawed up using laser saws. I presume that the experience of caesarean section during which the womb is cut open is repeated here. Since the final battle is won, this recapitulation in Nebuchadnezzar of birth by caesarean section is no longer an unprocessed and centrally weakening experience of being overwhelmed, as it was in the original situation, but instead becomes an experience of liberation and of retaining inner vital consistency in the face of the predominance of the machines. The killer spiders lose their effect.

The fact that technology- and computer-related elements are dominant in the film distracts us from the fact that it is ultimately about issues of personal individuation under the given conditions of life and not a large-scale social fight for survival between humans and machines. This large-scale social conflict is the backdrop for the projective portrayal of Neo's actual individuation process.

The Position of the Matrix in the Psychohistorical Individuation Process

It is not only individuals who go through several stages of individuation in the course of their life, of which adolescence and mid-life crises are particularly pertinent examples; societies as a whole also go through a psychohistorical process of development and individuation of the identity of their members. Here, the change in identity that takes place in the Enlightenment is particularly significant for our sense of identity. Whereas in the religious world view of the Middle Ages and the early Modern Age the actual core of personality was externalised in the experience of the trinity of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost and their representatives on earth, the Pope and the Emperor, in which social and individual identity was anchored, the Enlightenment marked the beginning of a shift in the way personality was organised in the sense that, as Schiller put it, the individual sought his reason for being in himself. This was associated with the hope that orderly forms of life could be developed through reason. Psychoanalysis, modern art and the disaster of the two world wars showed that there are irrational forces at work deep within us that are as profound as the religious forces that used to be projected and that have to be overcome within us.

Psychoanalysis initially sought to explain this by means of a phylogenetically determined castration complex and then in an innate "death instinct", which was eternally struggling with an urge for union. The recognition of the effect of prenatal and perinatal experiences and traumas, as described by Rank and Graber, opened up new horizons to explain the dimension of magical and mythical feelings of the self and the world. Findings in psychotherapeutic settings of a preverbal nature, such as body therapy, LSD therapy, hypnotherapy, regression therapy etc., supported this view.

Sloterdijk recently summarised the relevant findings following the ideas of the psychohistorian Lloyd DeMause from a philosophical point of view, compressed into Chap. 8 of his work Sphären I ("Spheres I"), which deals with the social presence of prenatal experience. Here, he shows in particular that the theology of the Holy Trinity is ultimately a psychology of the prenatal mother-placenta-child relationship. This primeval relationship constitutes the primeval three-in-one structure of the self, which serves in a projectively externalised form as a point of reference in the social space. The threefold structure is repeated in the relationship between the Father, the Son and the believer, an earlier form of which already existed in Ancient Egypt in the relationship between Horus, the Pharaoh and the people with its many different symbolic manifestations.

In connection with the psychohistorical position of the Matrix, it is relevant that the decline of religious projections burdens each individual with archaic conflicts between the ego and the self, which were formerly dealt with projectively in the rituals of the church. The individual thus seemed to be relieved of a burden, but on the other hand had to endure the primeval conflicts in archaic enactments of war. The news that God was dead only reached the educated classes at first, but has increasingly become social reality over the past decades. In this situation, archaic primeval conflicts that can no longer be dealt with in the projective space provided by the church are thus examined, inter alia, through the medium of modern films. A striking example of this is "The Matrix", which takes the example of Thomas Anderson / Neo to examine the possibility of emotional individuation in the sphere of influence of multinationals and the Internet. It appears that the primeval force of human self-constitution, which all rituals, fairy-tales and myths always contain in the same form, can be realised even under the modern conditions of a pluralistic society that put a strain on identity and of technical possibilities that jeopardise emotional integrity. The characteristic style of the film follows the hero's journey to the hereafter as elaborated

by C.G. Jung and illustrated by Campbell in his Hero with a Thousand Faces using many examples of myths. Rank had already developed the perinatal aspects of these heroic myths in 1909 in his Der Mythos von der Geburt des Helden ("The Myth of the Birth of the Hero").

The fascinating, powerful potential of human identity and individuation is no longer projected into the religious sphere and the Chosen One is no longer sought in heavenly realms, but is instead the individual him- or herself in the charisma of his or her own primary potential. This potential can be referred to as primary narcissistic potential as defined by Freud or as the possibility of having a will of one's own, as Rank described it in his psychology of the will. This is particularly instructive with respect to the Matrix insofar as, due to the overwhelming state of dependency, the individual's own will can initially only manifest itself in negative forms, in this case Neo's activities as a hacker. In this self-will, which can initially only be negative, lies the core of constructive creativity, as later realised in the new Neo. Whereas Freud primarily emphasised the aspect of "paternal protection", i.e. the significance of Morpheus in the film for constructive individuation, Rank focused on the self-will of the son. As the film shows, both can only lead to constructive individuation by interacting with one another, as the archaic knowledge contained in all myths and religions ultimately tells us.

The message of the film about the opportunities and the happiness derived from an integrated identity in a reality full of contradictions is very similar to the message of the currently much cited Harry Potter, which is also that even the most difficult early traumas can be overcome using the individual's very own charisma of his or her identity if given even a minimum amount of support.

Concluding Remarks

In view of the perfection of its technical effects and the cultural mixture of mythical elements from all over the world, "The Matrix" is a typical product of Hollywood and of the Californian culture of internationality, which uses and combines highly specific cultural traditions in a typically American pragmatic manner focusing on psychological special effects. However, "The Matrix" is also an authentic work of art in that it is a film which, in the way the script is written and in the imagination shown in the film, it constitutes the Wachowski brothers' genuine response to issues of identity that are typical of our age and provides the youth of today with powerful mythologemes on the journey of identity in the way they choose to live. I assume they are working

through their own experiences of prenatal and perinatal trauma, which have given them a sense of insecurity in terms of the nature of their reality. In interviews, they have talked about their basic doubts about what is real. According to their brief biographical notes, little is known about them apart from that.

In the opening credits of the DVD version, they appear as elf-like American boys whose playful nonchalance gives them an air of extreme intelligence and alertness, constantly on the move and fidgeting. One of them is constantly stroking his cheek with forceful rubbing movements, while the other clasps his leg as if rummaging for something. This gives the impression that they are countering or compensating for a feeling of depersonalisation by touching themselves. This would be consistent with the impression of early experiences of depersonalisation given by the whole film. There is no nature, nothing cosy in the film; the prevailing atmosphere is one of intense depersonalisation and coldness. Only a very few scenes show any intimate personal contact, and such contact is seen more in jokes. Alienation and vulnerability are the prevailing features, which is typical after a premature birth. As we know from observations made by the parents of premature babies, children who have been in an incubator find it difficult being touched and having contact with people for a long time afterwards. Under favourable conditions, this can be integrated, but under unfavourable conditions, a sense of alienation or of glass remains as a relic of the experience in the incubator. In situations of crisis, these early experiences of deprivation then resurface and may at the same time be a vehicle to face up to real individuation and to accept the challenge it poses. Experiencing invasive techniques at the beginning of life may create a particular awareness for the emotional and mythical dimension of technology. Perhaps it is ultimately not really important whether one or both of the Wachowski brothers were born prematurely or whether they only assimilated the ubiquitous images in the media of invasive, technicalised birth in their mythopoetic imagination. They manage at any rate to create mythologemes for present-day individuation.