

The Monomyth and the Matrix

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In his seminal work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* Joseph Campbell outlines the architecture of mythology's hero journey. An assiduous, life-long student of world mythology, Campbell recognized that, "in all times and under every circumstance, the myths of man have flourished; and they have been the living inspiration...of the activities of the human body and mind."<sup>1</sup> Campbell also noticed that all of these myths shared similar themes and characteristics. In particular, all bodies of myth include stories about a hero embarking on a journey. These stories shared the same basic structure despite originating in different times and cultures. Campbell called this structure the Monomyth.

The Monomyth is comprised of seventeen stages, which can be broken down into three categories: the departure, the initiation, and the return. Using the 1999 science-fiction hit *The Matrix* as a template of design we will explore the basic elements of the Monomyth.

The hero's adventure begins with the five stages of the departure stage, which are:

1. The Call to Adventure
2. Refusal of the Call
3. Supernatural Aid
4. The Crossing of the First Threshold
5. The Belly of the Whale

Some of these stages are self-explanatory, such as the call to adventure and its subsequent refusal. In *The Matrix* Trinity visits Neo at a nightclub and initiates his call to adventure, which erupts into action the following day. While at work, Neo receives a telephone that puts him in

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1973), 3.

contact with the enigmatic Morpheus. Neo is informed that agents, the film's antagonists, are on their way to apprehend Neo.

Neo chooses to flee and begin his adventure. However, his path leads him to the edge of a high-rise office building. Symbolically, Neo must decide to make a leap of faith. His fear overwhelms him and Neo refuses the call to action. Instead, he hands himself over to the authorities. Eventually, Neo accepts the call and the movie enters the next stage, supernatural aid. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* Campbell writes that after accepting the call "the first encounter...is with a protective figure...who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass."<sup>2</sup>

For Neo that supernatural aid comes in the form of a debugger. While riding in a car with Trinity, Apoc, and Switch. Trinity uses a frightening looking device to find a reptilian like creature hidden in Neo's body. The creature, which turns out to be a mechanical tracking device represents the "dragon forces" that Neo will encounter and his debugging provides Neo with the clandestinity essential to his success.

Next, Neo arrives at an old apartment building where he encounters more aid and meets the threshold guardian, Morpheus. Although Morpheus does not meet Neo with contention he does confront Neo with a one-time, all-or-nothing choice: do you want the red pill or the blue pill? Neo must decide whether or not he will cross the first threshold or permanently end his adventure. Neo chooses to continue and enters a new zone of experience.

According to Campbell, the hero does not simply travel from one zone to another, but is reborn, "Instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, [the hero] is swallowed

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 69.

into the unknown, and would have appeared to died.”<sup>3</sup> The Matrix delivers a stunningly-literal visualization of this process. Neo actually awakens in a womb, attached to multiple umbilical-like cords. His body is pale and cadaverous. The system then rejects his body, disconnects the machinery, and swallows him into a tube. Neo travels down the canal in a symbolic rebirth before being spit out into the world. His limp body appears dead as he is pulled into a hovercraft.

Sex stages comprise the initiation stage:

1. The Road of Trials
2. The Meeting with the Goddess
3. Woman as the Temptress
4. Atonement with the Father
5. Apotheosis
6. The Ultimate Boon

Next, “having traversed the threshold, the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials.”<sup>4</sup> Again, the filmmakers achieve a remarkably literal manifestation of this stage. Morpheus explains to Neo that his former world was actually a computer-generated virtual reality—the matrix. They teach Neo how to plug into the system and, ultimately, how to manipulate that reality. In a simulated world Neo encounters infinite whiteness, changing landscapes, and pliable cement. He must undertake a series of challenges intended to strengthen his mind within the matrix such as sparring with Morpheus in a virtual dojo.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 97.

Neo then encounters not one, but two Goddess figures. Firstly, Trinity, whose name evokes the divine, becomes the figure of the “Queen Goddess.”<sup>5</sup> However, the film also introduces a mother-like figure, the Oracle. In a clever depiction of the thematic duality underlying the film, the Oracle balances Neo’s mind while Trinity balances his heart.

The Wachowski brothers introduce another clever take on one of the Monomyth’s elements—the temptress. While participating in a simulated exercise within the matrix, Neo encounters the woman in the red dress. She is a beautiful woman intended to distract the hero from focusing on his goal. As soon as he takes the bait then the woman morphs into an agent and the hero has failed the mission.

Morpheus becomes the father figure with whom Neo achieves the atonement necessary for the next stage of his development. Throughout the movie Morpheus pushes Neo relentlessly towards a destiny he refers to as *the one*. Neo struggles to believe Morpheus; he does not share the same faith in himself that Morpheus invests in him. However, Morpheus winds up sacrificing himself to ensure Neo’s survival. It is through this act of mercy, coupled with his authoritarian instruction, which enables Neo to see Morpheus as a complete being and, in return, understand himself. Neo decides to rescue Morpheus from certain doom and in doing so puts in motion the events that will lead to his apotheosis.

While trying to escape agents after successfully rescuing Morpheus, Trinity finds herself in a perilous situation. Neo summons the faith in himself that he needs in order to transcend his limited consciousness and transform himself into a higher being. In doing so, he learns that he has amazing new powers as well as the ability to manipulate the matrix with his mind, the ultimate boon.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 109.

The final stage, the return, is also comprised of six stages:

1. Refusal of the Return
2. The Magic Flight
3. Rescue from Without
4. The Crossing of the Return Threshold
5. Master of the Two Worlds
6. Freedom to Live.

Shortly, after obtaining the boon, Neo makes a choice to stay within the matrix in order to fight an agent. He is not ready to return. According to Campbell when the hero fails to return home or his boon is opposed by a guardian then the final stage becomes a pursuit. After Neo remains in the matrix, he finds himself pursued by agents seeking to destroy him. They fear that if he can escape with the boon that it will mean an end to their tyrannical rule.

The hero may not always be able to escape on his own. Campbell writes that he “may have to be brought back from his supernatural adventure by assistance from without. That is to say, the world may have to come and get him.”<sup>6</sup> This is precisely what happens in *The Matrix*. An agent unexpectedly shoots Neo multiple times. He seems dead. Hope seems lost. However, Trinity, speaking to Neo from the other world, reveals her love for him. This act enables Neo to lose the final shred of his previous ego, which, in turn, allows Neo to be reborn again—this time in his transcendent self.

Neo is now the master of two worlds. He has the ability to “pass back and forth across the world division.”<sup>7</sup> The film again succeeds in adapting this concept quite literally. Neo confronts

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 229.

the three agents. They shower him with bullets, but Neo stops the assault with his mind. As he looks upon their world he no longer sees its superficial façade. Instead, Neo can see its essence—the code from which it is constructed. He can manipulate the world to his will. In a final act, Neo dives inside the body of an agent and vanishes. Within seconds the agent’s body begins to bubble, crack, and radiate light. The agent explodes into nothingness, leaving only Neo. Symbolically, Neo has brought light into a dark spot of the matrix; he has replaced oppression with illumination.

That only leaves the freedom to live. During this final stage the hero shares his boon with the world. In the movie, Neo delivers a brief epitaph. He informs the matrix that he will shatter their control and show the people the freedom of the real world, “a world without rules and controls, without borders or boundaries, a world where anything is possible.”<sup>8</sup>

Neo has become the ultimate hero; he has traversed the stages of the Monomyth. Even in modern times, in a tale about future worlds, Joseph Campbell’s insightful mythic structure holds true. We have seen how *The Matrix* was constructed from the same blueprints as ancient myth and, as a result, we have been given our own insight into the nature of *the one*.

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<sup>8</sup> *The Matrix*, dir. The Wachowski Brothers, 136 min., Warner Home Video, 1999, DVD.

## Bibliography

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New York: Princeton University Press, 1973.

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