



# Nonviolent utopias: heroes transgressing the gender binary in *The Matrix Resurrections*

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## ABSTRACT

*The Matrix* franchise constructs its narrative and aesthetic elements using a global frame of reference, drawing on many film genres to build its cyberpunk world and heroes. Despite the original film's utopian visions, *The Matrix* fell short of its promises in favour of traditional Hollywood ideals, including binary gendered relations and an individualistic hero. The issue was further compounded with *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) and *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003) and their irresolution of the trilogy's central man versus machine conflict. With *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021), the franchise is able to shift its focus and re-present its heroes as inversions of traditional gender norms. This paper explores *The Matrix Resurrections*' deviations from the original trilogy and proposes a re-reading of "The Matrix" and its heroes as embodying a nonviolent, queer utopia. Strengthened through its religious narratives, the film reconstructs Neo's heroic masculinity and presents Trinity as his inseparable counterpart, with both characters attaining heroism through their mastering of the body. *Resurrections* is ultimately able to depict a utopian vision beyond gender binaries and fulfil the promises set out with *The Matrix* (1999).

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## Introduction

The original *Matrix* trilogy of films (1999–2003) incorporates into its cinematography and narrative elements from many film genres, including cyberpunk, martial arts/wu xia films, anime, Westerns, and more. Scholars have asserted that, despite their referencing and borrowing from global cinema, the trilogy of films ultimately reinforces ideology typically associated with Hollywood cinema (Laura Bartlett and Thomas B Byers 2003; Jason Haslam 2005; Tim Iles 2007; Lisa Nakamura 2005). In particular, such an ideology focuses on "the Western individual as a universal redeemer" (Iles 2007, 1) and "bourgeois-liberal heroes who must save their communities" (Bartlett and Byers 2003, 36). *The Matrix* trilogy embodies these qualities through its messianic hero, Neo, whose rise to "liberate" the human race from abject slavery in a world ruled by machines across the three films promotes "political assumptions (...) about race, gender, and the posthuman aspects of

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the function of technology” (Iles 2007, 1), with the trilogy ultimately insisting “on a hegemonic valorisation of the figure of the individual” (Iles 2007, 5). The films were written and directed by Lana and Lily Wachowski, auteurs whose transness is apparent across their oeuvre and particularly in the case of the *The Matrix* trilogy with its thematic incorporations of the conditions that allow the false world of “the Matrix” to arise and its lead characters to suffer: “late capitalism, postmodernity, biopolitics, virtuality” (Cáel M Keegan 2018, 24).

Though the *Matrix* would eventually expand into a transmedia franchise across animated features, video games, and comics, the original trilogy of films remained hugely influential across popular culture, with the character of Neo continuing to embody the qualities of the messianic hero and individual redeemer. With the release of the fourth film, *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021), directed by Lana Wachowski, the franchise was afforded an opportunity to reinterpret its many influences, re-characterise its iconic hero, and renegotiate its commitment to Hollywood ideology, particularly in its relations with posthumanism, race, and gender. Working as a reboot, remake, and continuation of the original trilogy’s narrative within a new socio-cultural context, *Resurrections* is uniquely placed to renegotiate the franchise’s position on gender, specifically in its (re-) depiction of the hero character and his embodiment of forms of masculinity which are typically subversive of Hollywood expectations. This article brings together Judith Butler’s theory on nonviolence within the individual alongside the changing forms of masculinity, atypical for a Hollywood blockbuster, depicted in *The Matrix Resurrections*. The authors propose to think of “The Matrix” as depicted in *Resurrections* as a utopian vision of gender norms, rooted in and strengthened by religious narratives such as the Buddhist samsara, the Theosophical hermaphrodite, and the Gnostic gender trinity. *Resurrections* is thus a film offering new potential into the lineage of both utopian texts, with its revisionist approach to earlier entries of the transmedia franchise, and of nonviolent heroics, subverting the Messianic Neo into an emblem of transformed masculinity, both of vital consideration for scholars of feminist media studies.

### ***Geek masculinities and the individual***

While a full plot outline of the original trilogy is redundant, some key points on the original films are useful to note in order to situate *Resurrections* in its wider context. In *The Matrix* (1999), renowned hacker Thomas Anderson (Keanu Reeves), disaffected with the world around him, meets with the elusive Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) and is reawakened from the simulation of The Matrix to a world ruled by machines. In the “real world,” Thomas Anderson is Neo, and he must fulfil his destiny as “the One,” a prodigy tasked with saving the last remaining human city, Zion, from enslavement by machines. When Neo re-enters the Matrix, he is able to adapt his mind and body to the simulated world and is imbued with superhuman abilities, such as flight and slowing the flow of time. While the original film works as a standalone entry into the franchise, the sequels, *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) and *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003), were filmed simultaneously and released 6 months apart, thus working as complimentary chapters in the overall narrative with similar thematic and ideological concerns. In the sequels, we learn that the Matrix is in its sixth iteration. In a fateful meeting with The Architect, a creator-program, Neo learns that he is the sixth “chosen One” and faces the same choice as his predecessors; whether

to save the Matrix from an apocalyptic crash or to save his love, Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss). Neo chooses the latter. Meanwhile, a program in the Matrix known as Smith (Hugo Weaving) has now become a virus, threatening to take over both the Matrix and the real world if not stopped. Neo travels to the Machine City to make a deal with their leader, Deus Ex Machina; in a moment of messianic sacrifice, Neo offers himself up in order to defeat Smith in exchange for lasting peace in Zion.

Neo's position as the hero-saviour has been singled out as subverting the film's own aspirations. Bartlett and Byers note that at the end of the first *Matrix*, despite Neo's ascension to hero-status, "the film does not end with any indication of change in, or even any continuing concern about, the real material conditions for which the Matrix earlier served merely as an opiate" (Bartlett and Byers 2003, 40), adding that the human race remains at the mercy of the machine. Though *The Matrix* presents itself as "subversive of an understanding of reality," the film ultimately ends up "reasserting that understanding" through its insistence on the role of Neo as a saviour for humankind from its false consciousness. According to Haslam, the film's "ultimate problem," in spite of its professed subversions, is that "it is Neo, the One, who saves the day" (Haslam 2005, 104). His position as the hero figure means the film ultimately conforms to the typical Hollywood representation of the hero a "as an individual (...) assured of his own place within a verifiable, objective reality which will further validate the hero's self-aggrandisement. This validation goes beyond simply affirming the hero's individuality; it confirms his racialised and gendered value, as well" (Iles 2007, 11).

In part, the original *Matrix* serves as origin story for Neo as a hero of the cyberpunk canon. Owen R. Horton links the USA's national trauma following 9/11 with a generation of male cinematic heroes who must suffer deep trauma before their heroic awakening: "the trauma is what creates the hero" (Owen R Horton 2016, 77). While origin stories "are a crucial part of superhero films after 9/11," the "breakdown of a masculine mythos was already in evidence before 9/11" (Horton 2016, 76). *The Matrix* might be considered a film of evidence of this breakdown. Before his awakening as Neo, Thomas Anderson's trauma is his life following the geek archetype suffering from ennui; by day he attends the daily grind in his office cubicle, and by night he is a skilled hacker who sits alone in a darkened room. This ennui is typical of other Hollywood films of the late 1990s which sought to explore the lives of the (sub)urban neoliberal; *The Truman Show* (1998), *American Beauty* (1999), and *Fight Club* (1999) each depicts jaded male figures navigating the comforts and psychological trappings of their workaday family lifestyles. Anxieties around the "domesticated male" (Martin Francis 2002) have been linked to fears around a perceived crisis in masculinity, and some cultural texts have been seen as providing solutions to this hypothesised crisis. For its depictions of the politics of male violence and mythopoetical masculinity, *Fight Club* has become a hugely influential work for both its dismantling of male fantasy (Henry A Giroux and Imre Szeman 2001) and offering a route to the top of gendered politics for the disaffected male (Peter C Baker 2019). While *The Matrix* depicts its hero overcoming the cultural trauma of his position of the disaffected male, Thomas Anderson embodies a form of geek masculinity to fulfil his role as a cyberpunk hero.

Geek masculinity is a form of masculine subjectivity tied with gendered stereotypes on men's prowess and women's respective lack of skill in the technological domain (Fergus Murray 1993). Once a highly subordinated form of subjective masculinity, described as "powerless" in relation to perceived hegemonic masculinity (Raewyn Connell 1995), for

some men geek masculinity offered the only route to a form of masculine identification (bell hooks 2004). Around the release of *The Matrix*, television and film depictions of the software developer or programmer moved toward depictions of social ineptness and high-level intelligence (Nathan Ensmenger 2010). Stereotypes pervaded these depictions, as the geek image “defaulted” to the white, male, middle-class subject (Lori Kendall 2011). Over time, and with the cultural hegemony of technology and its associated forms, geek masculinities have maintained an outfit of victimisation while obscuring “relations of dominance which are maintained through the control and assertion of technological power” (Michael Salter 2018, 251). In turn, geek masculinities have used this assertion of technological power to inform the development of new technologies and online cultures (Salter 2018). Since the original *Matrix* trilogy, the “rise of the geek” has coincided with Gamergate and the alt-right, whose typically male subjects have developed their own cultural signifiers and codes, many of which lean into misogyny and co-ordinated online abuse (Megan Condis 2016; Salter 2018). One of the most prominent of these codes is that of the “redpill,” where literal red pills are used across *The Matrix* franchise to denote the choice one can make to open themselves to the hard truths of the real world beyond the Matrix itself, and since co-opted in far-right and “neoreactionary” ideologies (Geoff Shullenberger 2021) and with strong links to online antifeminist and incel communities situated in online settings (Debbie Ging 2019; Samantha Kutner 2020; Angela Nagle 2017).

Furthermore, the individualistic and heroic form of masculinity embodied by Neo is also based on religious narratives (Glenn Yeffeth 2004). Neo, especially his depiction in the original *Matrix*, is often seen as embodying the Messiah figure, which then gets transformed throughout the sequels. Before exploring the relationship between masculinity, queerness and religion, let us recap the religious tropes and changes that are happening in *Resurrections*. Neo, “the chosen One,” is often seen as a Jesus figure, sacrificing himself before rising again. This interpretation is mainly based on the prophecy Morpheus recites in the first movie: “When the Matrix was first built, there was a man born inside who had the ability to change whatever he wanted . . . .” Note the use of “man” in this instance, as it will become important later. However, what he rises from is the illusion—much more related to Buddhism than to Christianity. The concept of *samsara* parallels that of the Matrix, it is an illusion self-made by the human mind of the world, emphasising the importance of choice. Meditation, disciplining the mind and body is crucial to overcome this state of mind—and can be seen in Neo’s training by Morpheus in the *The Matrix* and *Resurrections*. He then “follows the Path of the Bodhisattva” (Nate Bostian 2021), a crucial figure in Buddhism, especially Mahayana Buddhism. It might be said that Neo is a specific Bodhisattva: Maitreya, the future Bodhisattva, a successor of Gautama Buddha, who will be the Great Teacher of the World—often paralleled with Jesus in popular reception. Neo becoming the Bodhisattva is the embodiment of a specific (un-)gendered experience of religious asceticism. This, however, is countered by the importance of Trinity, as will be discussed below.

However, there is one aspect of the Bodhisattva that Neo heavily transcends: he uses violence. As illustrated above, in the fashion of counter-masculinity, Neo learns how to use counterviolence as a tool to fight against his opponents within *The Matrix* as well as in “the real” world. As said, this form of body control is crucial for developing the status of one’s mind, but nevertheless, a strict adherence of Buddhism would have told Neo to renounce violence. Still, what is defined as

violence highly depends on the political context and the position of power that it is articulated from (Judith Butler 2020, 1). Often, counter-violence is not seen as a form of violence, nor is violence as self-protection. Counter-violence as well as self-protection can be seen as acceptable forms of violence—in the case of individual selves and systemic structures of power (Butler 2020, 2). Consequently, the arguments used for violence often state that there is actually no real choice “whether or not to enter into violence through one’s action,” because “we are already inside the field of violence.” This way, “whether or not to act in a violent way is a privilege and luxury” (Butler 2020, 7). Nonetheless, different approaches to violence and nonviolence are possible and, since notions of bodily power are heavily informed by gender constructs, they might transgress gendered boundaries, as will be shown in the case of Neo in *Resurrections*.

### ***Rebooting masculinity: the interdependent male***

While functioning as a reboot and continuation of the first *Matrix* film, the first act of *The Matrix Resurrections* is broadly concerned with retelling the original story. Thomas Anderson is again trapped in a simulated world, disaffected with his life and those around him. He meets with Morpheus (this time played by Yaya Abdul-Mateen II) and is again reawakened in the “real world”; we learn that 60 years have passed since Neo’s sacrifice to end the ongoing war, and humans and machines now live in relative harmony. Neo, however, has his own concerns, and seeks to be reunited with his love, Trinity. The film’s second and third acts are focused on their reunion and are ultimately far less concerned with the fate of humanity, or indeed with the people who remain plugged into the Matrix. On a narrative level, then, *Resurrections* is concerned with retelling and refocusing the stories of its chief characters. Thematically, and ideologically, the film proves to be wildly different from previous entries in the series. As such it is equipped to reinterpret some of the original films’ influences and frames of reference while applying meta-commentary on the socio-cultural context of its own creation, particularly Hollywood ideology.

In particular, *The Matrix Resurrections* is uniquely placed to depict changes in masculine dynamics since the release of the original trilogy. At the beginning of the film, Thomas Anderson is once again suffering the ennui of the daily grind, this time with the *mise en scène* and cultural signifiers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century such as smartphones, treadmills, and lattes, and he must once again reawaken from the simulated world in which he’s trapped. Thomas is simultaneously plagued by his memories of the “real world” and his missing relationships, particularly his love Trinity. This loss of identity works as the necessary trauma through which Thomas Anderson must once again reawaken as his true self, Neo. As an auteur creator of a revolutionary video game (which is, ostensibly, the first *Matrix* film), the Thomas Anderson of *Revolutions* is a misunderstood artist whose voice is lost in the mire of his co-workers and their many interpretations of the original Matrix and its cultural importance (both Thomas’ in-movie video game and the actual 1999 film). This may well be a reference on Wachowski’s part to the co-option and misuse of terms such as “redpill” in male-dominated online communities (Condis 2016, Ging 2019; Nagle 2017), and her dismay at the widespread adoption of such an interpretation of the original film’s

metaphors (a dismay underlined with an infamous Tweet from Wachowski directed at Ivanka Trump and Elon Musk over their use of the term “redpill” (Lily Wachowski 2020)).

Thomas Anderson’s “geek” co-workers are depicted as sociable, in tune with cultural signifiers, and enjoy working for what appears to be a highly profitable software company. Thomas Anderson remains mostly silent in these scenes, but where his unsociability in the first film was a reflection of the geek masculine stereotype of the time, his silence in *Resurrections* adopts a “tortured artist” sentimentality that contrasts with the brash codes and signifiers of his co-workers. Chief among these is the character of Jude, who embodies an overtly misogynist geek masculinity emblematic of online masculine gaming cultures in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Condis 2016; Nagle 2017). He spells out internet-borne acronyms such as “oh em gee” and “double-you tee eff.” He uses his brashness to control social situations; in one scene, while accompanying Thomas to the coffee shop, Jude sees Tiffany (Trinity’s yet-to-be-awakened persona in the new Matrix) enter with her children. While the meek Thomas does not want to interrupt Tiffany’s time with her family, Jude approaches her against his wishes. Earlier, Jude brands Tiffany a “total effing MILF.” Through these coded actions, Jude can be read as a product of Gamergate, a movement whose cultural signifiers (including the use of “redpill”) have been linked to online misogyny, harassment, and real-world violence (Condis 2018; Bailey Poland 2016; Salter 2018).

*Resurrections* is keenly aware of online cultures and their real-world outputs, further exemplified with the introduction of Tiffany’s husband (later revealed as an element of the Matrix’s control of Trinity), aptly named “Chad,” a stand-in caricature within online cultures for the attractive, sexually successful male who dominates the subordinated “beta” males (Ari Ben Am and Gabriel Weimann 2020; Nagle 2017). At many turns, *Resurrections* shows an awareness for changes in contemporary gender dynamics and user relationships to network experiences and online cultures. At one point, the character Jude states plainly: “I’m a geek. Raised by machines.” Jude is, literally, raised by the machines that made The Matrix in which he lives, and his comment maintains an air of positivity and appreciation for his masters. While the original trilogy presented an “overwhelmingly negative presentation of biotechnology” (Bartlett and Byers 2003), enforced with the character of Tank praising his and his brothers’ purity as “homegrown” (conceived and born in the “real world,” outside of machinations of The Matrix), *Resurrections* shows many instances of humans and machines cohabiting. In the real world, humans have adapted machines to assist with agriculture and transportation, and Morpheus is depicted as a program of The Matrix that appears in the real world via a nanobot body. Inside The Matrix, Jude’s comment and the *mise en scene* of Thomas Anderson’s life as a software developer seem to acknowledge an increasingly blurred distinction between the online and the offline as well as human and machine; such a hard differentiation is difficult to formulate (Brigitte Jordan 2009), and *Resurrections* wavers from the original trilogy’s depiction of this hard binary in favour of cohabitation and harmony, a theme consistent throughout the film, and exemplified through Thomas’ new video game project, “Binary”.

As mentioned earlier, Neo’s character, his form of masculinity, and his role as a religious saviour cannot be adequately captured by either Christianity or Buddhism. This is because *The Matrix* franchise shows a very specific reception of Christianity and Buddhism: that of modern esoteric Gnosticism (Frank Seifferth 2022). Adaptions of modern esotericism in

popular culture are not uncommon, the best-known being Dr Strange (Cole Hornaday 2021). Most importantly, within this interpretation of Gnosis—a presumed form of early Christianity of which there are no accounts from within (Christoph Johannes Marksches 2001)—the figure of the savior as well as the human of the future are non-gendered beings: the Divine Hermaphrodite (H. P. Blavatsky n.d.). This use of religious narratives as a critique of contemporary constructions of gender, e.g., the male hero as the physically strong and superior one, becomes even more explicit in *Resurrections*. In this way, *Resurrections* solves the religious problems of the previous movies. For instance, Austin Cline argued that there is a conflict between Buddhism/Gnosticism and the Matrix, because in these religious traditions, the escape from the world of illusion would result in a disembodied, immaterial existence. This is very much not the goal in the trilogy in which the saving of the “real” world is the aim (Austin Cline 2019). However, as Neo and Trinity stay within the Matrix and re-make it as they see fit, they symbolize this disembodied perfect being—genderless, as they are now inseparable.

Neo’s independent individuality, which was already put in relation to Trinity and Smith in the original trilogy, is the crucial change in this fourth movie. Whereas in the first three, Trinity and Smith function as affirmatory elements in Neo’s development—in the end, it is always him who makes the decisions – *Resurrections* depicts Neo as completely unable to perform without being pushed by the various others. Likewise, Smith and Trinity are re-awakened because of Anderson’s change. These shifts in the conceptualization of the self are bound to two interrelated aspects: gender and violence.

### Utopian transgressions

Instead of reaffirming structures of violence, as the trilogy does, *Resurrections* tries to creatively constitute new structures. This, we will argue, is possible, because it transcends from its dystopian elements of the trilogy and envisions various utopian ideas, such as the city lo and the alliances between the programmes, the synthients, and humans. Another utopian aspect is that of transgressing gender binaries and structures of violence. In order to create new selves, drawing on religious narratives becomes even more important as those enable utopian imaginations.

### Trinity and gendered inversions

The original *Matrix* contains key moments of gender inversions; upon Neo’s awakening of his powers and battling with the Agents, he is eventually grazed by one of their bullets and falls to their mercy. It is Trinity who is able to bring a gun to the Agent’s head and ultimately “saves the day” with use of a phallic symbol (Haslam 2005, 101); as exemplified by other action sequences including her first chase scene at the beginning of the first film, Trinity is apparently able to manipulate The Matrix in similar ways to Neo. However, despite this deliberate blurring of gender codes, the original trilogy remains mired in gendered stereotyping, from a scene in *Reloaded* where Neo must “penetrate” her to save her after she’s been shot, to her final self-sacrifice in the name of love in order to save Neo in *Revolutions*, while Neo’s self-sacrifice reinforces his status as the messianic hero (Haslam 2005). With their union at the end of the first *Matrix* film, we also see, moments later, Neo’s ascension as the hero as he takes flight in the world of The Matrix. Though the scene is

backed by Neo's "utopian claim" (Keegan 2018, 42) on the possibility of a "world without borders, where anything is possible," Michelle Chilcoat notes that the heterosexual union of Neo and Trinity renders the speech a "cliche of science fiction promising radically altered realities and then repeating the same old story" (Michelle Chilcoat 2004, 165). Haslam notes further "sinister implications" to Neo's speech in that it exposes the "performative nature of his identity" and renders him unable to "maintain his own dominant position" outside of the Matrix (Haslam 2005, 105). These failed promises continue beyond *The Matrix* and into the sequels, which "withhold the heroic arrival" (Keegan 2018, 46) promised in the first film and "cast doubt on the very idea of heroic identity narratives" (Keegan 2018, 52) with their emphasis on The One in its sixth iteration and Neo and Agent Smith existing in an opposed yet fundamentally dependent relationship. Keegan notes the camera's movement through virtual lettering at the end of Neo's closing speech, as it "transits through the negative space between the coded layers of the 'M' and 'F' and into the blackness beyond" (Keegan 2018, 42). *Reloaded* and *Resurrections* revealed this blackness to be a deconstruction of gendered, bodily heroics.

By contrast, *Resurrections* reverts the sequels' inversions and turns the blackness into a space of colour. While the Neo of *Resurrections* betrays his own dominant position in favour of nonviolence (see below), the film's wider approach to gendered relations (and inversions) reveals that his position even as hero is somewhat compromised. While the Neo-Trinity relationship remains a focus of the film's narrative, *Resurrections* doubles down on its importance and, in turn, deviates from expectations laid out in the previous films. Following Neo's reawakening, the reclamation of his relationship with Trinity becomes his primary motivation. Neo is no longer concerned with the reawakening of any other human minds or with the ongoing war between humans and machines. In his first meeting with Tiffany, the two share a coffee while Thomas listens to her concerns. The scene is calm and tender. He does not want nor to ask anything of her, only confirms the things she says before closing the conversation with a moment of acute honesty perhaps unfamiliar to the typical cyberpunk hero: "This is the best thing I've done in a long time." He discusses his therapy sessions with The Analyst, a therapist who is later revealed to be using his diagnoses and prescriptions to maintain the Matrix's control over him. Indeed, it is Tiffany in this scene who displays attributes more commonly associated with Hollywood masculinity. She confesses to having played Thomas' video game and notes that she spends much of her time on motorcycles. The upending of gender norms between the two characters is underscored when Tiffany says to Thomas, "You have your analyst, I have my bikes"; the inversion of these coded signifiers represents an inversion of gendered norms and further reveals Neo as an embodying a unique cyberpunk masculinity.

That Trinity's name has changed to Tiffany does not surprise as names are crucial throughout *The Matrix* franchise. Thomas (the Doubting Thomas) Anderson (the Son of Man) is Neo, the New One, the one made through spiritual rebirth. Likewise, Trinity's (Holy Trinity) false name in *Resurrections* is Tiffany, coming from Theophany,— "manifestation of God" (Bostian 2021). Coming now to *Resurrections* explicitly, the way Tiffany treats her false name is directly related to transgender experiences as are many other aspects of the movies, most prominently the idea of living in a false world and a wrong body, as was confirmed by the writer Lana Wachowski (Louise Griffin 2020). However, *Resurrections* pushes towards the dissolution of the binary, gendered as well as apparent in the relationship between humans and machines and



the line between the Matrix and the “real” world – *Resurrections* specifically denounces this separation, as the world Neo and Trinity are staying in to change and, thereby, save, is the Matrix (Sam Moore 2022). As others have examined, the relationship between Neo and Trinity is queering—and thereby changing—the Matrix’ inherent binary structure, which is why they have to be kept apart as noted by the Analyst (Dan Schindel and Juan Barquin 2022). The necessary relationship between the two is not new to the movies, even though it was more subtle before *Resurrections*. It was Trinity’s kiss that awoke The One, his love for her that made him break the cycle of Zion’s destruction (Craig Elvy 2021). It is often said that the role of Trinity queers the Christian Passion story: Neo is only the one *for her*, drifting away from the male-centered salvation story. However, this conceals the inherent queerness of the resurrection of Jesus, as made out by queer theologians (Lisa D Powell 2023). Therefore, for writers immersed in philosophical and religious material decidedly creating a trans analogy, especially in *Resurrections*, Trinity had to become the essential character of the story, thereby changing the conception of Neo’s masculinity.

By the film’s end, Trinity is offered the decision to break out of the Matrix and is granted the ability to fly, whisking them away from attacking helicopters. Following an extended chase sequence, the scene is suitably anticlimactic, a departure from the brash Hollywoodisms of the earlier films. The moment marks Trinity’s transcendence from her own body, and she now portrays hero status alongside Neo. Trinity and Neo’s achievements by the film’s final scene firmly underscore the difference between *Resurrections* and the earlier trilogy. Bartlett and Byers note that, by the end of the original film, we are given no “indication of change in, or even any continuing concern about, the real material conditions for which the Matrix earlier served merely as an opiate” (Bartlett and Byers 2003, 40). People remain plugged into the Matrix, serving as a mere energy source for the machines. Indeed, these material conditions did not change by the end of the trilogy, where *Revolutions* concludes with ostensible peace declared between humans and machines with no reality of freedom for those still remaining plugged-in. By contrast, *Resurrections* ends with Trinity remarking that she’d like to “paint the sky with rainbows,” not only underlining her desire (and ability) to change the material conditions of the Matrix but also further emphasising the film’s removal of hard binaries as a thematic focus in favour of a rejection of Hollywood ideals. Like Neo’s embodiment of nonviolence, Trinity’s active position as hero by the end of *Resurrections* exemplifies the film’s rejection, through both form and content, of traditional Hollywood ideologies. As such *Resurrections* is no longer “repeating the same old story” (Chilcoat 2004, 165).

### ***Nonviolence and the mastering of the body***

The original trilogy’s depiction of Neo as hero relies heavily on his bodily status. Imbued with special powers inside The Matrix, Neo’s position as hero is solidified by his transcendence from physical norms; he moves at incredible speeds, defies gravity, and takes flight. Haslam refers to this effect as representing a “traditional masculine ontology,” and as “showing Neo’s ability to transcend the body through his mental control” (Haslam 2005, 101). Indeed, that Neo is imbued his powers via mental “program updates” in the real world reinforces the metaphysical nature of his being and status as hero; while the films move toward the possibility of posthuman subjectivity, Neo’s position as “The One,” and

the other characters' reliance on him is solidified through his ability to transcend his physical limits via the mind.

Throughout *Resurrections*, however, Neo's use of his physical form emphasises the film's reluctance to fall into the explicit binaries of the earlier trilogy, while revealing its concerns with wider applications of power and social dynamics in the context of the film's release, particularly around gender relations. Shortly before Neo's reawakening in the real world, we are told that the image Thomas Anderson (and the audience) can see of himself is not the same Thomas Anderson that other characters in the simulation can see. This is a "DSI," a digital self-image used to hide Thomas from his actual appearance in *The Matrix*; that of a much older, bald man who bears little resemblance to the Keanu Reeves with whom we are familiar. Ostensibly another form of *The Matrix*'s control over Thomas Anderson, the reveal of this hidden body suggests that the hero of *Resurrections* is not the same as the one from the previous three films. Indeed, *The Matrix* is being used to present Thomas' outward appearance as something different from his interior self. In his coffee shop meeting with Tiffany, a brief shot of her reflection on the table reveals a woman with blonde hair. She, too, has had her appearance altered by *The Matrix*. Importantly, the characters can see each other's true selves instead of what *The Matrix* attempts to present them. The Neo and Trinity of *Resurrections* may, then, be read as allegories for transness; both their names and appearances are imposed upon them, and the film traces their attempts to reclaim their true identities and attain their genderless inseparability. While the earlier films' allegories for transgender identification are well documented, especially given its "threat with assimilation into the state's biopolitical regime" (Keegan 2018, 58), *Resurrections* points instead toward a route of escape. Keegan notes that the original trilogy "simultaneously cautions against any simple narratology of transgender as a stable or heroic subject position" (Keegan 2018, 50). Neo and Trinity's ability to see each other through the *Matrix*'s illusions underlines a simplicity in trans identification denied in the earlier films. In this sense, the film's title takes on a new meaning. Both characters undergo a process of resurrection, not merely from their selves as imposed by *The Matrix*, but from their former, gender-conforming depictions of the previous trilogy.

When given the opportunity to once again defy his physical norms through action sequences, this iteration of Neo is revealed to have little interest in conflict and violence. At the beginning of the film's climactic chase scene, as Neo and his crew flee a coffee shop with an awakened Trinity by their side, Neo is asked if he can fly to aid their escape. He attempts to take off from the ground but causes only a minor ripple in the pavement, conceding that it's "not happening." Neo's remark is loaded with potential reference to impotence and emasculation. This is emphasised in an earlier scene where he does not triumph in a fight against Smith, when the other crew members remark that "he's going to get us killed" and claim "he's lost his mojo." Notably, Neo's reclamation of his "mojo" is positioned in relation to rescuing Trinity. The nonviolence embodied in this depiction of Neo extends to the visual; the original Neo of the original *Matrix* was in part defined by guns as an extension of his body, able to be conjured up at will, with many film posters and other promotional materials using a gun-toting Neo to convey the film's cyberpunk aesthetic. In *Resurrections*, Neo does not wield any firearms. Importantly, the film is careful to show instances in which Neo is still able to use his abilities but rather chooses not to. Upon his reawakening from the *Matrix*, Neo is reluctant to fight, initially only acting in self-

defence. In a sparring scene with his once-mentor Morpheus, Neo states “I’m done fighting,” taking each of Morpheus’ blows without retaliation. Morpheus responds that he knows Neo’s true desire, and that he must “fight for her.” At this point, Neo sends Morpheus flying backwards and destroys the stage of their battle. The Neo of *Resurrections* is not so much emasculated as he is aware of his body, form and abilities, and the moments in which he can employ them.

Bringing self-defence and counterviolence into the discussion of nonviolence, it is crucial to examine the construction of the self here. When the self, as Butler argues, is always already part of the other, then who is protected by self-defence? As in the real world, living beings are related to each other by social relations. There is no independent self, but always only an interdependent one: The “one self is implicated in another self” (Butler 2020, 8–9). This is even more so the case throughout *The Matrix* films, especially *Resurrections*, where Neo and Trinity’s survival after is linked to the stability of The Matrix. Neither violence nor nonviolence is, therefore, based on individualism: “Violence against the other is, in this sense, violence against oneself, something that becomes clear when we recognize that violence assaults the living interdependency that is, or should be, our social world” (Butler 2020, 25). Neo accepts the inherent interrelatedness of all beings and forms of living and, therefore, rejects to continue to fight for something that he did not want for himself, but that others made him want—something, that actually never worked out previously. This posits the possibility of nonviolence as such. However, as Butler also made clear, it is necessary to pass through the struggle and the norms in order to overcome them (Butler 2020, 10). In this way, the trilogy can be seen as this passing through the limits and boundaries of the binary construction of the world in order to transcend them in *Resurrections*. Nonviolence, then, can be a form of strength that posits a new form of political agency (Butler 2020, 20–23).

Neo’s embodiment of nonviolence corresponds with what Butler defines as a “form of resistance to systemic forms of destruction (. . .) that embodies ideals of economic, social and political freedom and equality” (Butler 2020, 21). On the level of metanarrative, given the film’s troubled production at the hands of its studios intent to make a fourth *Matrix* film with or without the involvement of the original directors (explicitly referenced in *Resurrections* in Thomas Anderson’s company’s intent to produce a sequel to his game with or without his consent), Neo’s adherence to nonviolence can be read as the film’s adherence to the same codes. Where traditional Hollywood practices would require the return of an iconic hero character with better abilities and bigger guns, *Resurrections* defies the expectations placed on its hero and itself, inserting in place of the old Neo a quieter hero with no interest in throwing punches or shooting guns. Studio interference and the Hollywood ideology that may determine the practices and behaviours of its hero characters act as the “systemic forms of destruction” through which Neo’s, and *Resurrections* as a film of rebellion, are able to embody ideals of, at least creative, freedom, and reject traditional Hollywood ideals.

## Conclusion

Though widely lauded on their release for their wide-ranging influences and utopian aspirations, the original *Matrix* trilogy was seen to reinforce Hollywood ideology, particularly in its depictions of gendered stereotypes, heterosexual relationships, and through

the cyberpunk masculinity of its messianic hero Neo. The fourth film entry into the franchise, *The Matrix Resurrections*, gave the series an opportunity to deliver on the utopian promises from the franchise's beginnings, particularly in its relations of gender and its positioning of the hero figure. Through a re-iteration of Neo against contemporary norms of gendered relations, particularly his embodiment of geek masculinity, the film offers a multi-layered shedding of binary oppositions in favour of progressive togetherness, strengthened by religious narratives such as the Buddhist samsara, the Theosophical hermaphrodite, and the Gnostic gender trinity. As Neo embodies a practice of nonviolence in line with Butler's conception of an interdependent self, his masculinity in *The Matrix Resurrections* reflects changing sociopolitical dynamics and offers a stark contrast to the individualistic heroism of the previous films, emphasised with Trinity attaining hero status. *The Matrix Resurrections* is unique in both its ability and willingness to not only revisit and revise the promises set out in the franchise's original entry but also to revert the subsequent subversions of the second and third films. As a utopian text, the film directly challenges notions of heroics and the gender binary, finally fulfilling the utopian vision of the original film after 22 years by offering alternatives in the form of Butlerian resistance, nonviolence, and interdependence. As such, as our analysis has shown, it points towards possibilities of utopian futures in which religion and gender come together to establish something new instead of repeating the pitfalls of normative Hollywood ideologies.

## Disclosure statement

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