

“The Matrix”: An Allegory of the Psychoanalytic Journey

David Mischoulon, M.D., Ph.D.

Eugene V. Beresin, M.D.

Objective: “The Matrix” has been a huge commercial and critical success and has spawned a series of books and essays exploring the philosophical and religious themes in the story. **Methods:** The authors propose is that “The Matrix” can be interpreted as an allegory for an individual’s journey into spiritual and mental health, achieved by overcoming one’s intrapsychic conflicts with the help of psychodynamic psychotherapy or psychoanalysis. **Results:** Neo’s story parallels the journey undertaken by the individual who chooses to enter psychotherapy and illustrates several themes of analytic psychotherapy, its benefits, and liabilities. **Conclusion:** The movie may therefore serve as a teaching tool for psychiatric residents about the goals, functions, and intricacies of psychodynamic psychotherapy. (*Academic Psychiatry* 2004; 28:71–77)

During a medication management session, a patient who one of the authors (D.M.) had been following for 1 year mentioned some interpersonal difficulties that he was having, and asked whether he might benefit from insight-oriented psychotherapy. The patient had undergone psychotherapy before, but had not succeeded in accomplishing his therapeutic goal, which was to overcome issues relating to his parents and his upbringing. It was suggested to the patient that one possible reason for his lack of success was that the therapeutic technique might not have been optimally suited for his needs. The patient then asked: “What is the ‘optimal’ therapy really supposed to do?”

The doctor responded by quoting “The Matrix,” a movie the patient enjoyed: “It’s like taking the red pill. Do you want to see how deep the rabbit hole goes?” The patient understood the analogy. After further discussion, he acknowledged his ambivalence about therapy and said that he would give the matter more thought.

This exchange between doctor and patient suggested that “The Matrix” might be a suitable tool for educating psychiatric residents—and perhaps some

patients—about the goals and functions of psychodynamic psychotherapy. The first installment of “The Matrix” trilogy has been a huge commercial and critical success and has spawned a series of books and essays exploring the philosophical and religious themes in the story (1–5). Yet none of these have delved into another perspective that may be relevant to the movie’s appeal. We propose that “The Matrix” can be interpreted as an allegory for a man’s journey into spiritual and mental health, with the help of psychodynamic psychotherapy or psychoanalysis.

This paper will explore similarities between “The Matrix” and psychotherapy. We will focus primarily

Dr. Mischoulon is Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts, and Assistant in Psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts. Dr. Beresin is Director of the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Residency Training Program at Massachusetts General Hospital/McLean Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts. Dr. Beresin is also Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Co-Director of Mental Health and Media at Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts, and serves as Media Column Editor for *Academic Psychiatry*. Address correspondence to Dr. Mischoulon, WAC-812, 15 Parkman St., Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA 02114; dmischoulon@partners.org (E-mail).

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on psychodynamic, or insight-oriented therapy, which is based on psychoanalytic principles and is most clearly relevant to "The Matrix." The journey of Neo, the film's protagonist, will parallel the journey undertaken by the individual who chooses to enter psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapies.

"The Matrix" as Therapeutic Journey: Neo the Analysand

Neo, a.k.a. Thomas Anderson, is a software engineer who works for a large, world-class urban firm. He is handsome, good-natured, intelligent, and successful—the embodiment of the American dream of the cyber-age.

But Neo is unhappy. He does not enjoy his job, which requires him to labor in a sterile "Dilbert-like" cubicle, and his boss reprimands him for his frequent lateness to work. He lives alone in a tiny apartment and has no girlfriend and few friends, except for some acquaintances with whom he shares pirated software. He spends the night surfing the Internet and committing hacker crimes, for which he is under government surveillance. As Neo will learn, his erratic behavior stems from a feeling that he is living a falsehood and that "there's something wrong with the world."

Patients who choose to enter psychoanalysis or psychoanalytically oriented therapies often fit this particular mold. They tend to be intelligent, educated, and affluent individuals who feel that something in their life is "not quite right." The acronym YAVIS, a slang expression for Young, Attractive, Verbal, Intelligent, and Successful (6), represents, according to psychoanalytic lore, the "ideal" patient for psychoanalysis and describes Neo perfectly. His dissatisfaction with life leads him to accept Trinity's offer of an introduction to Morpheus, a legendary hacker who claims to possess the answer to Neo's question about what is wrong with the world.

In the analytic framework, it can be said that Neo's problem stems from a conflict between his belief and the perception of his senses. Since the world is not what it appears to be, his ego is unable to provide its executive function, which is to mediate the satisfaction of his instinctual needs (both libidinal and aggressive) and those of the external world and the superego (7–9). The tracking "bug" that the agents have implanted inside Neo's body may there-

fore represent the impact of the environment on the individual and conflicts with the satisfaction of instinctual needs. Being implanted may also be consistent with resistance to change. Literally and figuratively, Neo's resistance (the "bug") must be overcome and removed if he is to succeed in his therapeutic journey.

Morpheus as Psychoanalyst / Psychotherapist

Buddhist philosophy states that when the student is ready, the master appears. This proverb is especially relevant in the psychotherapy arena because the patient must be ready for therapy in order to work productively with a therapist (10). Early in the story, Trinity hacks into Neo's computer and instructs him to "wake up," signifying that Morpheus—who represents the analyst/therapist—has determined that Neo is ready to begin the therapeutic journey. Trinity makes reference to Morpheus "finding her" when she became ready to learn. This could represent the therapist "finding" the true inner self and inner conflict (and helping the patient to do so) through psychotherapy. Neo's awakening and agreeing to "follow the white rabbit" (one of several references to Alice in Wonderland suggests that he has attained this state of readiness for the psychotherapeutic journey.

When we first meet Morpheus, he stands tall and dignified, his eyes hidden behind a pair of mirrored sunglasses that reflect Neo's face. This suggests that, as proposed by Winnicott and Kohut (8,11,12), Morpheus will serve a mirroring function and reflect Neo's true self back to him. As a master computer hacker, Morpheus is an interesting symbolization of the therapist. Through probing, he may reveal the patient's inner conflicts that are amenable to modification, a function akin to breaking into a computer system and reprogramming it.

Morpheus invites Neo to sit down for their initial "session," as if to determine whether therapy work is feasible between the patient and therapist (10, 13). "All I'm offering is the truth, nothing more," Morpheus says. "No one can be told what the Matrix is. You have to see it for yourself." Here, Morpheus is summarizing the function of the analytic therapist. By using a variety of therapeutic interventions—such as interpretation, confrontation, clarification, and others (9, 10)—Morpheus will guide Neo so that Neo can figure out for himself who he really is.

Alliance

The beginning of therapy involves the establishment of a therapeutic alliance (10). Neo will have to trust that Morpheus will do right by him, just as a patient who enters therapy must have a reservoir of trust to give to the therapist (14). But this is difficult for Neo because he is not a trusting person by nature. At the end of the first "session," Morpheus offers Neo the choice between taking a blue pill or a red pill. The blue pill will erase Neo's memory of his encounter with Morpheus. The red pill, on the other hand, will enable Neo to learn about the Matrix (i.e., the computer program that contains the illusory world in which humans have been living for two centuries).

In the therapeutic context, the Matrix may represent our societal set of beliefs, values, and ideals that may or may not be healthy for society, as well as social norms into which we are indoctrinated and are not especially conducive to individual development. Psychotherapy may help individuals master this conflict between individuality and social norms. Likewise, the Matrix may represent a blend of our own fantasies about ourselves and the world, from which we need to be freed. This is suggestive of Freud's view of psychoanalysis as a tool for obtaining freedom from illusion or fantasy (8, 13).

Like the patient who is considering psychotherapy, Neo must weigh the dangers of the path to self-knowledge. Insight is not easy to obtain (10). Therapy can be difficult and at times very painful (10, 13). Neo opts for the red pill (i.e., to abandon the imaginary world of the Matrix and see "how deep the rabbit hole goes"). Morpheus has succeeded in establishing the treatment alliance, and Neo will begin the psychotherapeutic journey. Appropriately, Neo's exit out of the Matrix begins with his "melding" with a mirror, which, like Morpheus' glasses, suggests a reflection of Neo's soon-to-be-discovered true self (8, 11, 12).

Transference and Countertransference

Psychoanalytic theory proposes that "transference" to the therapist must occur as one of the requisites of successful treatment (10, 15–17). Defensive structures derive from early conflict, and these conflicts are replayed in adult life (8, 9, 15, 18). Thus, the patient who experiences transference will reenact his conflict

in the therapy setting and "turn" the therapist into whatever is at the heart of the conflict—a parent, a lover, a friend, and so on. The therapist must then clarify, confront, and interpret the transference to help the patient modify his defenses (if unhealthy) and resolve the conflict. We will observe the manifestation of transference with Neo and with Morpheus' other crewmembers.

The most common transference reactions that occur toward Morpheus seem to be of the "paternal" and "idealizing" types (8,10,12,19). Morpheus' followers see him as a father figure. Tank even says to Morpheus, "You're more than a leader to us. You're our father." Neo never mentions his own parents from his Matrix "life," but his lonely existence suggests no familial attachments and, perhaps conflicted or repressed memories of his "virtual" childhood. Upon being removed from the Matrix, he realizes that he is, for practical purposes, an orphan who has been adopted into a new family. Neo's indoctrination into the crew may represent the child's adopting a new family as a defense against rageful destruction of his biological parents or a search for a missing—and idealized—parent (8, 9, 12).

The crewmembers of the Nebuchadnezzar, particularly Trinity, appear to have total faith in Morpheus. In the psychotherapy setting, this could be called an "idealizing transference" (9, 12, 19). Self-psychological theorists consider this transference not only good, but necessary (8, 9, 12). On the other hand, some object relations theorists such as Kernberg posit that the idealizing transference should not be permitted and is interpreted as a distortion of reality, a fantasy of an all-good object that can never truly exist (8, 9).

The idealizing transference may result in disappointment and letdown when the patient realizes that the therapist is imperfect. Therapeutic undoing and regression may follow (9). On the other hand, this disappointment—particularly when empathic failure on the therapist's part occurs and is addressed in the therapy—can also lead to new intrapsychic mechanisms of adaptation for the patient (8, 10, 12). Neo and the crewmembers will eventually have to come to terms with Morpheus' limitations as a leader and in the process develop their own resources and strengths so that their mission can succeed.

Cypher's conflict with his crewmates illustrates the dilemma of the therapy patient who questions the

value of therapy and of the therapist. Cynical and bitter, Cypher reminds his crewmates that they have been eating tasteless food and living a dreary existence since leaving the Matrix, which may represent the arduous journey of psychotherapy. Morpheus' promise of the truth, and implicitly, of a better life (analogous to therapeutic success) has not been fulfilled for Cypher.

Therapeutic progress can indeed take a long time (9), and patients often become dissatisfied when they do not see results soon enough. The de-idealization that follows and the negative transference with ensuing disappointment and rage may result in a positive or a negative therapeutic experience, depending on how the patient and analyst manage it. If worked through, therapeutic progress can occur. If not, the patient may terminate treatment prematurely. In Cypher's case, his dissatisfaction results in "premature termination," as seen when he chooses to betray his crewmates.

Countertransference reactions are defined as the emotional reaction of the therapist to the patient, which may be based on the therapist's prior relationships (9, 10, 18, 20). Morpheus appears to have complete faith in Neo's potential. He believes that Neo is "the One" (i.e. the man who was prophesized to come back to free humanity), much like a therapist may want to believe in a patient who he finds especially likeable or may see as the ideal child he never had. Morpheus also appears to see himself as having rescued Neo and the others from the Matrix, with the ultimate goal of rescuing all of mankind. This may illustrate the rescue fantasy, a countertransference reaction in which a therapist desires to rescue a patient from a difficult situation (13, 18).

Patients may develop rescue fantasies toward the therapist if, for example, the therapist becomes ill. In such cases, a patient may reach out to the therapist in order to help him or her. This situation occurs when the Agents capture Morpheus. Rather than euthanizing Morpheus' body, Neo chooses to try to save him, even though he has been warned that his own life may be lost in the process. This might represent a rescue fantasy taken to an extreme when a patient develops an intense, idealizing transference to the therapist.

Alternatively, Neo's attempt to save Morpheus may allude to the life and death struggle of the dyadic relationship and how a child's destructive rage may

raise fantasies of killing off the libidinal object before the loss of omnipotence (8, 9, 21). This is a classic expression of the depressive position, a pre-oedipal fantasy and fear first described by Melanie Klein (22) and elaborated by Winnicott et al. (8). The defensive posture here is to use a primitive method of reaction formation (i.e., the transformation of an unacceptable impulse into its opposite) (8, 9) and save the parent (or therapist) who the child hates and wishes to kill.

In Neo's case, both of these elements may coexist. He may harbor an unconscious wish to kill Morpheus in order to achieve omnipotence—for example, by becoming the new leader of the crew. Or, more likely, he may want to rescue the benevolent parental figure that he has found and could not bear to lose.

Resistance

Resistance is a common obstacle to therapeutic progress and represents the patient's struggle to counter change and preserve the current defensive structure used to repress and deny primitive impulses, as revealed in the underlying conflict (9, 15, 18). In such cases, the patient resists the therapy, sometimes by "acting out" (16) in the therapy by not showing up for appointments, not paying the therapist's bills, or failing to apply what he or she learns in the therapy sessions (9, 10, 18).

Neo the "analysand" demonstrates resistance throughout the story. He reacts with denial and rage when he learns that the world in which he has lived—in the Matrix—was an illusion. When Morpheus explains that Neo is "the One," Neo remains skeptical, even as he progresses in his training. Morpheus must constantly challenge Neo's mistaken views and assumptions so that he may break free of them and overcome the perceptual manifestations of his conflicts in therapy, as represented by the war against the artificial intelligence (AI).

Patients may fear having to give up old, dysfunctional—but familiar and comfortable—patterns of interacting with the world (10). Such patients may discontinue treatment if their defensive patterns are too strongly ingrained. Morpheus points out that it is preferable to recruit people out of the Matrix during childhood, because children have a better chance of "letting go," before the false cognitions become too strongly set in the mind. This alludes to Freud's position (now abandoned by most analysts) that ad-

vanced age may be an obstacle to psychoanalysis (8, 10, 23). A similar argument has been made in defense of child/adolescent psychoanalysis and psychotherapy (9, 24).

Cypher can be said to embody therapeutic resistance taken to an extreme. Despite once having believed in Morpheus, he eventually rejects him. He acts out by striking a deal with Agent Smith, agreeing to betray Morpheus in exchange for being replaced in the world of the Matrix. Cypher is symbolically choosing to leave therapy and regress to his former, "unanalyzed" state. His choosing the sensual but purely illusory delights of the Matrix such as good food and wine may represent an escape from the reality principle, which involves the delay of immediate gratification (7–9), and a return to the pleasure principle, which is governed by the id (7–9) and drives the individual to avoid pain and seek primitive pleasure without thought of any negative consequences (7–9). Similarly, Cypher's regression may symbolize the patient's turning to drugs and alcohol, another form of acting out, or even trading his therapist for a psychopharmacologist and the implied promise of a new "pill" that will make him better quickly and without effort on his part.

Finally, Cypher invokes the theme of the Oedipal conflict (8, 25). He has a romantic interest in Trinity, who is the Nebuchadnezzar's second in command, a maternal figure to complement Morpheus' paternal figure (though Morpheus and Trinity are not romantically involved). Cypher tries to woo Trinity and convince her that Morpheus has deceived them, but Trinity rejects his advances. Cypher's desire to kill Morpheus may originate from an unconscious hope that Trinity, the motherly object of his desire, will then become his own. In the end, Cypher is defeated and pays the ultimate price for his therapeutic resistance.

Consultation

In the course of psychotherapy there are times when the treatment may come to an impasse. In such cases, the therapist may consult with a more experienced colleague in order to clarify the source of the problem and identify potential solutions to the impasse (26). The meeting with the Oracle would appear to represent such a process.

After Neo has progressed to a certain degree, Morpheus takes him to meet the Oracle before the

rest of his training can proceed. The reason for this meeting is unclear. Morpheus seems to have no doubt that Neo is "the One." As mentioned earlier, this may represent countertransference or the therapist's hope for the ultimate success of his patient. But Morpheus has failed before in his quest for "the One." (NOTE: in the original screenplay (27) Morpheus trained five candidates before Neo, and they died in their attempts to defeat the Agents). The visit to the Oracle may represent Morpheus' need to reassure himself that he is doing the right thing for Neo, just as a therapist may question his or her own ability and choose to consult a senior colleague (28). Morpheus may also be hoping that encouragement from the Oracle might help Neo to have more faith in his own potential—that is, she might help him to "identify strengths" (18).

The Oracle, in the psychoanalytic tradition (8, 10, 14), does not reveal much to Neo, at least not with regard to the question he and Morpheus press: is Neo "the One?" She warns Neo of the challenges and dilemmas he will have to face, but does not tell him whether or not he is "the One." Only Neo specifically suggests that he is not, and the Oracle neither agrees nor disagrees with him. Again in the analytic tradition, the consultant may believe that she is serving the interests of the patient by allowing him to reach his own conclusions, rather than by supplying him with all the answers.

Working Through

Psychotherapy typically involves many successes and failures along the way to resolving the conflicts that underlie the neurosis (29). Resolving the conflict is referred to as "working through" (8, 10, 29). Once having entered psychoanalysis, it can be said that the patient's mind changes—expands. After learning the truth about the Matrix, Neo wakes up prone in his bed, with Morpheus sitting by him. Their respective positions suggest an analyst watching over the patient on the couch. Neo asks, "I can't go back, can I?". Morpheus tells Neo that he can not return to the Matrix, but in the analytic tradition, he immediately follows the answer with a more important question: "If you could, would you really want to?" Like the patient who gains insight can not go back to being exactly the way he was before entering therapy, Neo

realizes that he can never return to his old world and must attempt to work through his conflict.

Much of Neo's training focuses on martial arts. Morpheus trains Neo inside a "Construct," a small-scale replica of the "Matrix" used for instructional purposes. This "Construct" is suggestive of the therapist's "holding environment" (30), where the patient can face his own weaknesses and strengths in a safe and nonthreatening setting. The emphasis on fighting techniques may represent therapeutic confrontation, literally and figuratively, as well as the breaking down of old, unhealthy defenses and the building of new, healthier ones (8–10, 18).

Morpheus uses physical combat to confront Neo's misconceptions about the physical world so that he may eventually achieve superhuman abilities and transcend the "rules" of the Matrix (e.g., stopping bullets, learning to fly). Here, Morpheus seems to be drawing on Beck's cognitive theory, which challenges the patient's mistaken assumptions and cognitions about himself and the world (9,31), and is also consistent with the psychoanalytic tradition. Morpheus could therefore be considered an "eclectic" therapist who draws on several schools of thought and applies them as needed into an individually tailored program for his patients. This certainly reflects the current state of psychotherapy, as most therapists presently use cognitive restructuring in their work, and few therapists work on the basis of a single theory.

The patient's defenses—both mature and immature—often emerge in the therapy and may hinder therapeutic progress (10). At times, Neo will resort to phallic and narcissistic defenses, as seen when he plans to rescue Morpheus. His proposed strategy? "Guns. Lots of guns." But in the end, Neo must abandon his primitive defenses and defeat the agents without any weapons except his own mind. Neo's initial misconceptions about his training and abilities parallel some of the common misconceptions patients have about psychotherapy. He asks Morpheus, "What are you trying to tell me, that I can dodge bullets?" Morpheus responds, "When you're ready, you won't have to."

This exchange reflects the analytic notion that the overcoming of our conflicts frees us from the need to act them out. Neo would like to be able to dodge the bullets from the Agents (the bullets representing a direct threat from his conflict), but he will learn that

the bullets are real only if he views them as such. Returning to the patient mentioned at the start of this paper, this scene also proved instructive. He asked whether therapy would allow him to confront his parents effectively. Paraphrasing Morpheus, the doctor responded: "If your therapy succeeds, you won't have to."

Completing the Analysis

Psychoanalysis must eventually reach its natural completion or termination. Like the psychotherapy patient, Neo must also complete his own "therapy." In his case, therapeutic success is measured by his ability to successfully confront the Agents, who may be said to embody Neo's conflict.

After he is killed, Neo returns to life when Trinity expresses her love for him. This "rebirth" alludes to Freud's idea that that capacity for love (as well as for work) is vital for the achievement of mental health and maturity (32, 33). By accepting Trinity's love, Neo accomplishes his last therapeutic goal and is now fully equipped for his final confrontation with the Agents. Neo's moment of epiphany is presented in a simple and elegant manner: when he faces the Agents, he no longer sees their human facades, but rather their underlying computer codes. Neo has fully understood the nature of his conflict and can now overcome it. He effortlessly stops the bullets and destroys Agent Smith.

However, as the movie's last scene suggests, completing one's analysis is only the beginning: "I didn't come here to tell you how this is going to end," Neo says. "I came here to tell you how it's going to begin." Neo must now apply what he learned, as he prepares to lead Morpheus' crew into the all-out war against the artificial intelligence that enslaved humanity. Neo, the successful analysand, has come full circle.

CONCLUSION

"The Matrix" could be said to represent the psychoanalytic/psychotherapeutic journey into self and the overcoming of one's conflicts under the guidance of the psychoanalyst/psychotherapist. We propose that this movie may serve as a teaching tool for psychiatric residents who may appreciate an allegorical dramatization of the benefits, liabilities, and intricacies of psychodynamically oriented psychotherapies.

In addition, the movie may serve as a discussion vehicle for psychiatrists and patients with a philosophical bent, who are considering the long and arduous journey of psychotherapy, but do not know what it may involve or what it's really supposed to do.

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