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The Infamous Afterlife of Popular Films

Metaphorical Production of Meaning in the Manosphere through *The Matrix*

ABSTRACT

The paper explores the audiovisual dimension and film reception within the Manosphere. The starting point is the assumption that online videos exert significant influence due to their affective and emotional impact, as well as their ability to activate interpretive frameworks that people may not even be aware of. This makes them particularly suitable for persuasive processes, i.e., the subtle shaping of attitudes, beliefs, intentions, and behaviors. Within the online video culture of the Manosphere, popular films and series are frequently used as metaphorical resources. From a metaphor-theoretical perspective, they serve as a source domain that is mapped onto a target domain—such as neomasculinist societal critique. This allows for the low-threshold communication of ideological concepts. This phenomenon will be examined in greater detail through a specific case study, particularly considering that popular films themselves already rely heavily on audiovisual metaphor formation, from which they derive much of their impact. Using the example of the recontextualization of *The Matrix* (1999)—a foundational text of the Manosphere, as argued in the introduction—the analysis will focus on the use and function of popular culture. Prior to this, discussions on the connection between the Manosphere and fandom will be summarized, and *The Matrix* will be revisited in terms of its metaphor formation.

KEYWORDS

The Matrix, Manosphere, YouTube, metaphor theory, film culture

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Introduction: Taking the red pill

The cultural impact of *The Matrix* (US 1999, Lana and Lily Wachowski) is remarkable—even for a Hollywood blockbuster. Within less than ten years of its release, ten books were already published discussing the film (and its sequels) as a philosophical work (cf. Gunkel 2008, p.817). Another ten years later, it had become a reservoir of key metaphors for far-right discourse formations and arguably the most memefied[1] film in online culture. Within the Manosphere, *The Matrix* is so pervasive that the infamous 'red pill' is understood as the foundational concept of neomasculinist online communities (cf. Ging 2017; O'Malley/Holt/Holt 2020). Debbie Ging describes the "red pill philosophy" (Ging 2017, p.3 and p.8) as the pivotal concept that terminologically unified the Manosphere in the 2000s and 2010s, popularizing and radicalizing it beyond the Anglophone world. Andrew Jones notes that the 'red pill,' initially an unspecific internet cliché, was almost entirely co-opted by chauvinistic online movements during the 2010s (cf. Jones 2019, pp.103f.).[2]

Inspired by *The Matrix* protagonist Neo, online neomasculinists see themselves in a fundamental binary decision-making situation—as those who choose to recognize the uncomfortable truth (the 'red pill') and reject a supposed ideological delusion (the 'blue pill'). This loose network of online homosocial male groups and content producers is united by the belief that they have become victims of a feminist, left-liberal, or 'cultural Marxist' hegemony (with varying emphases) in cultural, societal, and political contexts—a hegemony they must recognize, reject, and, if necessary, combat. The fundamental assumption that (white) men have been undermined and that a new form of masculinity is needed unites the radical and sometimes conspiracy-theory-driven factions. The Manosphere promises enlightenment that, while painful, is necessary to lead a self-determined life. Depending on the subculture, different approaches are cultivated, ranging from coaching as a self-optimization strategy (cf. King 2018) to male separatism (cf. Lin 2017; Wright/Trott/Jones 2020), online harassment campaigns (cf. Blodgett/Salter 2021), and the resignation of incels (cf. O'Malley/Holt/Holt 2022; Lindsay 2020). The latter, in contrast to the self-improvement-oriented 'red pillers,' describe themselves as 'black pillers,' who, due to their perceived inferiority within a society defined by the 'socio-sexual hierarchy,' embrace isolation and depression.[3]

1 In the sense of digital content circulating in chats, forums, social networks, and image and video platforms (cf. Díaz 2013, p.97; Seiffert-Brockmann/Diehl/Dobusch 2018), it typically consists of a humorous video, image, phrase, or a multimodal combination of these elements, which are copied, imitated, or creatively reworked (cf. Körber/Zündel 2024).

2 Left-leaning content creators, in turn, lament the politically right-wing appropriation of *The Matrix* in this context (cf. MacDowell 2024, pp.126f.).

3 In addition to redpilling, another crucial common feature of the Manosphere is the rhetoric of self- and external positioning within a 'socio-sexual hierarchy' or 'male dominance hierarchy.' This framework, inspired by wolf pack dynamics,

It seems oddly underexplored that a film provides a crucial framework for the genesis and dissemination of the Manosphere, even though it is not, in terms of content, a dedicated subculture of fandom. While this is understandable given the theoretical and methodological challenges it poses, research informed by media and film studies would be highly promising. Within the cultural machine of the internet, radical neomasculinism—even beyond *The Matrix*—is characterized by an expansive and pervasive fabrication and reception of cultural formats with narrative, aesthetic, design, ludic, and moral-ethical qualities (cf. Reckwitz 2017, p.227). (Cinematic) popular culture forms an important basis for countless remixes within neomasculinist online video culture. This is evidenced by an almost endless array of profile pictures, text posts, memes, and remix videos that highlight the popularity of intermedial recontextualizations of (specific) films and series—particularly their protagonists—within the subcultures of the Manosphere. Examples range from *The Matrix*'s Neo to Tyler Durden of *Fight Club* (US 1999, David Fincher) and *American Psycho*'s Patrick Bateman (US/CA 2000, Mary Harron) to Homelander of *The Boys* (US 2019-, Eric Kripke), to name just a few.

Methodologically and in terms of research practice, the Manosphere (and the fandom within it) presents a significant challenge, as it encapsulates many of the typical problems faced when researching online contexts. Many websites no longer exist, and subforums or topic-specific posts have been depublished due to their extremist content (notably, channels like those of Andrew Tate or the website *Return of Kings*).[4] The platforms of the online-constituted Manosphere are heterogeneous and have included blogs, advice or doxing websites,[5] forum boards (Reddit, 8chan, 4chan), X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and YouTube channels, as well as dedicated platforms of organized neoreactionary political movements. The content is particularly characterized by its ephemeral and fleeting nature, illustrating the problem of what Jonathan Gray terms "Paratextual Ephemeralia" (2016). In an era of booming online fan cultures, their economic relevance and theoretical reflection, paratexts are so vast and fast-moving that they paradoxically risk being overlooked. Automated data collection tools are sometimes used, which particularly facilitates the extraction of metadata or text contributions, favoring studies that focus on the spread, language use, and cryptolect of neomasculinist subcultures (cf. Gothard et al. 2021; Górska/Kulicka/Jemielniak 2022), rather than on (audio)visual expressions. Very few studies on the Manosphere, such as those by Anda Iulia Solea and Lisa Sugiura (2023), stand as exceptions—most notably lack qualitative material analyses.

In this contribution, I aim to explore the audiovisual dimension and film reception within the Manosphere, starting from the assumption that online videos are particularly impactful. They function on an affective and emotional level, activating interpretive frameworks unconsciously, often through an immersive appropriation via smartphone and headphones, including tactile interaction with app interfaces. This makes them especially suitable for processes of persuasion, that is, the subtle influencing of attitudes, beliefs, intentions, and behaviors.[6] Within the online video culture of the Manosphere, popular films and series are frequently used as metaphorical resources. From a metaphor-theoretical perspec-

hierarchically categorizes masculinities, primarily distinguishing between Alphas and Betas (and sometimes Deltas, Gammas, Omegas, and Sigmas) to classify and essentialize male identities.

4 Studies therefore sometimes draw on extensive open source datasets such as the Pushshift Reddit Dataset in order to access previously deleted posts and subforums (cf. Gothard et al. 2021).

5 Private personal data was/is published on them.

6 In this sense, Thomas J. J. Scherer (2024), for example, fruitfully researches campaign films oriented towards the common good, also with a focus on persuasion through metaphor formation.

tive, they serve as the source domain, which is symbolically applied to the target domain—such as neo-masculinist societal critique. This allows for the low-threshold communication of ideological concepts. I seek to investigate this phenomenon, considering that popular films themselves already rely heavily on *audiovisual metaphors*[7] from which they derive much of their impact. By examining the recontextualization of *The Matrix*—which, as argued earlier, can be regarded as a foundational text of radical neomasculinism—I aim to explore the use and function of film in the Manosphere. The questions that guide me in this process are: why has *The Matrix* become the lingua franca of the Manosphere, in what ways and with what implications is it being (re)constructed? To set the stage, I will first recap discussions on the connection between the Manosphere and fandom, followed by a brief examination of *The Matrix* from the analytical perspective of its metaphor formation.

Toxicity and metapolitics: Manosphere and fandom

Most studies on the Manosphere name the 'red pill' as a central thought construct of neo-masculinism, but do not question it further, nor the film reception of corresponding online communities in general. However, the role of fandom in the Manosphere, and in particular the other neo-reactionary movements that have overlapped with it in the past decade, has been discussed in various ways, whereby focal points can be identified, essentially two of which are outlined here.

I would like to headline one field of discussion with *Geeks, Toxic Fandom, and Totemic Nostalgia*. A fan discourse is identified as central to the political consolidation of the Manosphere in the 2010s: Gamergate—a discussion about ethics in gaming journalism, that often manifested itself cases as a large-scale harassment campaign against women and non-binary actors in the gaming industry (cf. Nagle 2018; Jasser/Rothermel 2024). Since the great public interest in Gamergate and the associated emergence of a sometimes aggressively chauvinistic fandom on 4chan, Reddit, YouTube and the like, discussions about the role of games, films, series and music for political community processes have been intensifying in the cultural and social sciences as well as in popular debates. Protectionist claims towards original popular culture texts and the 'good times' of a supposedly apolitical popular culture are marked as a reference and starting point, which has been discussed under keywords such as 'geek masculinity' or 'toxic fandom'[8] (cf. Ottemo et al. 2024; Blodgett/Salter 2018). William Proctor (2017) fruitfully explored the role of totemic nostalgia based on observations of an aggressive protectionism displayed towards franchises (of one's own childhood), as Proctor argued along the discussion around the female-cast *Ghostbusters: Answer The Call* (US 2016, Paul Feig).[9]

7 Following on from the *Conceptual Metaphor Theory* of Mark Johnson and George Lakoff (1980), *Audiovisual Metaphor Theory* assumes that metaphors should be understood less as rhetorical figures than as patterns that profoundly shape everyday thinking. Conceptual metaphors are not only basic patterns of speech but also structure the perception of reality and human action. Thinking in metaphors makes it possible to imagine abstract, complex relationships and concepts such as time, death or life as well as 'invisible' emotional states such as anger, grief or love in a gestalt-like way (cf. Fahlenbrach 2010, p.34). *Audiovisual Metaphor Theory* examines how metaphorical concepts are implemented and conveyed (multimodally) in film, television, and other audiovisual formats.

8 The more recent conceptual history of the 'toxic masculinity' on which the term is based deserves a more in-depth discussion, which I cannot provide here. However, reference should be made (for German-speaking countries) to Gisela Zifonun (2023).

9 He therefore links the discussion about ('toxic') fandom to theories on media nostalgia, which can be identified today in the age of media convergence as a driver and strategy of major film production, which in its management of tried-and-

The popularization of online masculinism, observed as a result of Gamergate, brought its own celebrities. As both bourgeois-intellectual and proletarian figureheads of the Manosphere, Jordan Peterson and Andrew Tate in particular mark two (habitually) opposing poles of prominent neo-masculinists. They are part of a neo-reactionary English-language 'alternative influence network' whose actors attract mutual attention by referencing each other and inviting each other to YouTube formats, for example (see Lewis 2018). Peterson and Tate's videos reach tens of millions of views but have so far (only) been the subject of rudimentary research. For example, Craig Haslop et al. (2024) presented an empirical study investigating Tate's influence on British male teenagers.

This leads us to the striking major focus of the discussion: *New Right Metapolitics*. One of the guiding principles is the right-wing reception of the Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci and his theory of cultural hegemony, which the French Nouvelle Droite of the 1990s already adapted, which is why Ico Maly, for example, speaks of "metapolitics 2.0" (Maly 2024, pp.66ff.) today. With Donald Trump's first election campaign, the New Right is increasingly viewed from the perspective of a culturalization or 'culture warfare' of political discourse, which culminates in the "memetic warfare" proclaimed in this very first Trump election campaign (cf. Nagle 2018; Sotirakopoulos 2021, pp.83ff.). This refers to strategies that explicitly seek to occupy a pre-political space of everyday and popular culture. New Right theorists sometimes explicitly understand this as metapolitics, which initially aims to achieve cultural hegemony, from which majorities for libertarian or far-right political projects can be generated (in a second step, following the culture war, that is possibly taking place currently). Corresponding to the pre-political orientation, discussion contexts (in a predominantly English-speaking Internet and a globalized popular culture) are often internationally effective. In this sense, the Manosphere can be understood as a male hegemony project in two ways. As such, it aims, on the one hand, to shift discourse within the framework of popular cultural online discourses, such as those of fandom. On the other hand, the Manosphere itself is a project of *hegemonic masculinity*[10] that serves to reinstall or perpetuate male dominance (cf. Ging 2017).

From the perspective of new-right metapolitics, Nikos Sotirakopoulos speaks of a counter-cultural right (cf. Sotirakopoulos 2021, p.84) and thus strikes a similar chord to Angela Nagle (2018), who emphasizes the extent to which new-right online movements identify themselves through a gesture of rebellion against a hegemonic culture (previously associated with the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s)—an image that resonates with the following case study. From this perspective, Simon Strick (2021) describes the Manosphere as a masculinity-modelling wing of the alternative right, which has the role of interpreting the politicized present for the adolescent male target audience in a sexual-

tested franchises relies to a particular extent on totemic media nostalgia and its binding forces and corresponding online discourses, which function not least as marketing (cf. Brinker 2022, pp.81ff.; Golding 2019, pp.9ff.).

10 *Hegemonic masculinity* is arguably the most prominent guiding concept in masculinity studies and traces back to Raewyn Connell (1987; 1995). In this tradition, hegemonic masculinity is understood as a culturally produced and normative ideal of (archetypal) masculinity that legitimizes patriarchal structures. Importantly, it is not to be understood as a timeless, fixed catalog of traits. Instead, it originally refers to time-specific behavioral patterns and practices that serve to justify the dominance of the patriarchal system. Despite this openness in attributes, certain traits are often associated with it, which may exhibit relative stability: physical strength, dominance and aggressiveness, success, power and status in the public sphere, heterosexuality and the subordination of women, emotional restraint, and rationality. Hegemony is maintained not primarily through violence (although this can play a role), but through cultural practices, societal ideals, and institutional power—that is, within institutions such as the family, school, military, and economy, as well as the media (as a cross-sectional dimension because it carries all discourses).

political, affective, and action-optimizing way. In this sense, online fandom and lifestyle-guide-culture became a gateway and means to an end for a culture war from the right.[11]

Matrix' audiovisual metaphors

The first part of the *Matrix* trilogy, which will be the focus here,[12] tells the story of Thomas Anderson, who—actually employed as a software programmer by a large corporation—leads a double life. At the beginning of the film, he wakes up from sleep in front of his PC, where he works nightly as a hacker under the pseudonym 'Neo' and trades in data. His monitor prompts him to wake up and follow a sign (famously the white rabbit). Behind the message is Trinity, a member of a hacker group, whose leader Morpheus will find with Trinity's help. When they meet, Morpheus tells him that he can explain to him why he is so alienated from the world and what his unease is due to. In reality, he is a slave, born into a prison without even knowing it. However, he must see this for himself in order to understand and believe it. Morpheus offers Neo the choice between two pills: blue for ignorance, red for knowledge. Neo chooses the red pill and wakes up in the disturbing real world, learning that what he thought was reality is a computer simulation called Matrix.[13] He thought he was in a major US city at the end of the 20th century, but in the actual post-apocalyptic reality some two hundred years later, humans are being bred by intelligent machines and tapped as energy sources after all earthly energy resources have dried up. The Matrix, meanwhile, is played on human consciousness via cables as part of life support measures. Neo becomes part of the resistance group and trains to fight the machines, specifically in the form of Agent Smith—effectively the personification of an anti-virus program that seeks to prevent humans from breaking out of the Matrix. Neo learns to manipulate the rules of the simulation (a form of embodiment of hacking), because as the 'chosen one' he is supposed to free humanity from the rule of the machines.

In *The Matrix*, the protagonist splits up by placing an 'authentic' version of himself—Hacker Neo—alongside his bourgeois self, Thomas Anderson, who will eventually replace Anderson completely. As employee Anderson, he works in an anonymous company—captured in a strong lower view of a high-rise building and an open-plan office—and is reprimanded by his superior at the beginning of the film for his lack of work ethic, believing that he is something special and that the rules do not apply to him. Anderson leads a socially isolated life, which, with Neo, will dissolve into a community of like-minded resisters and a love affair with Trinity. Only as Neo does he become a subject.

From the outset, *The Matrix* unfolds binary and antagonistic structures (cf. Gunkel 2008, pp.817f.)—Neo and Anderson, Neo and Agent Smith, red and blue, day and night, wakefulness and sleep, sight and

11 This becomes tangible, for example, in film reviews on the right-wing media platform Breitbart, which have been widely shared and referenced as shareables and important keywords in online discourse. Examples include the text by Milo Yiannopolous (2016) on the aforementioned *Ghostbusters: Answer the Call* and by John Nolte (2018) on *Black Panther* (US 2018, Ryan Coogler) (on the latter, see Varda/Hahner 2020).

12 Matrix is an extensive and complex multimedia story universe, including films, games and series, which should not be the focus here as a whole, let alone be presented exhaustively. Especially in view of the fact that the references central to the Manosphere are taken from the first part of the film trilogy, this is recapitulated here in the dimensions that are decisive for me in this text.

13 The motif of transforming the mathematical matrix into a three-dimensional, spatial representation of the digital already existed before and can be found, for example, in the cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* (1984, William Gibson) and in *Tron* (US 1982, Steven Lisberger). In both cases, however, it is still clearly oriented towards early computer graphics and not a realistic simulation of reality (cf. Haar 2019, pp.142ff.).

blindness, power and powerlessness, individual and mass, reality and simulation. The binaries interlock extremely functionally with the Hollywood-style *protagonist-driven story movie* (cf. Gaines 1998) and the corresponding traditional structures of the classic hero's journey, making the popularity and impact of the film comprehensible. A central metaphorical structure is (1.) that of sleeping and waking up, which is repeatedly constellated in the film. At the beginning, when Neo is awakened by Trinity's message in front of his monitor, it is repeated when Neo meets Morpheus and is enlightened about the actual circumstances of his life and the world. Morpheus offers Neo the red pill to initiate 'the awakening'—the process by which Neo (i.e., his actual body) will be localized and separated from the simulation. It culminates in Neo opening his eyes and, to his shock, finding himself naked, hosed down and wired up in a capsule filled with transparent slime alongside thousands, probably millions, of others. He awakens from a state of induced sleep, whose dream represents the Matrix, as Morpheus will explain.

The Matrix extensively utilizes the motif of awakening and intertwines it with other binary oppositional motifs, among which (2.) 'the individual vs. the masses' can be highlighted here. As an individual, Neo breaks free from his state of objectification, degraded to the level of a battery. He thus emancipates himself into an enlightened and empowered subject within an anonymous mass of human bodies who believe themselves to be in the Matrix and, therefore, mistakenly in a real world at the end of the 20th century. Audiovisually, this structure is not only found in the fundamental (hero's journey) dramaturgy of the film and the awakening scene but also in the famous depictions of the 'construct'—a program used by the rebels to simulate the Matrix for training purposes. Here, Neo and Morpheus walk against a stream of uniform passersby dressed in business attire. Finally, before we turn to the case study, I would like to at least barely point out the more complex opposition (3.) 'human vs. machine.' While *The Matrix* is built on the typical foundational conflict of the science fiction genre, it portrays human consciousness in a way that equates it with a computer or a hard drive. This is evident when the mind is interfaced with the Matrix via cable connections, or when Neo and the rebels connect to their own simulations to practice combat techniques. The fluidity of this metaphor in the film is also tied to the fact that Neo and the other resistance members empower themselves as hackers of technology. With their ability to program reality-specific constructs, they effectively act like gods.

The metaphor of waking up is both culturally significant and closely tied to the body, thus relating to universal human patterns of experience—sleeping, dreaming, and waking up. In Kathrin Fahlenbrach's words, it is thus both culturally shaped and pre-conscious and pre-conceptual, functioning on a reflective cognitive level as well as intuitively affecting and emotionalizing (cf. Fahlenbrach 2010, p.11 and p.49).[14] Such conceptual metaphors provide schemata for communicability and for understanding invisible, complex, or abstract relationships like time, death, and life but also complex emotional experiences such as love or happiness (cf. Fahlenbrach 2020, p.11; Lakoff/Johnson 1980). Time, for example, is often captured using a money metaphor ('spending time,' 'wasting time'), love relationships are metaphorically spatialized along roads ('to go our separate ways,' 'We're stuck') and happiness becomes a physical force that bursts ('bursting with happiness'). Conceptual metaphors such as these are not only or primarily aesthetic constructs that can be thought about, but concepts that are used for thinking—and usually

14 According to Fahlenbrach, three areas of perception can be differentiated, which generate meanings in a specific way as semantic subsystems and are at the same time closely interlinked: perception (stimulus processing and preconscious perception), emotion (both precognitive diffuse affects and goal-directed emotions), and cognition (consciousness, remembering and thinking) (cf. Fahlenbrach 2010, p.49).

without reflecting on them as powerful abstractions with specific implications. The fertility of the application of conceptual metaphor theory to audiovisual media (as audiovisual metaphor theory) is so great because in the synthesis of image and sound they take up the structures of conceptual metaphors much more concretely than language, which as a predominantly arbitrary sign system is abstraction (cf. Fahlenbrach 2010, p.12).

In *The Matrix*, then, sleep and waking up represent the bodily source area for a target area of the metaphor, which can be described as enlightenment, insight or—to stay with the traditional metaphor—'awakening experience.' The metaphor functions as bodily and universal by appealing to the feeling of waking up (from a dream experienced as real), culturally through its association with various religious beliefs, (especially also ideology-critical[15]) intellectual-historical theorems and their (popular) cultural formation. Michael Butter as well as Sabrina Berens describe the constellation of the 'awakened' versus the 'sleeping masses' as a typical image of conspiracy theories (cf. Butter 2018, p.113; Berens 2024, pp.194f.).[16] It corresponds (as prototypically in *The Matrix*) with a widespread metaphor of 'swimming against the current,' which expresses the attractiveness of an integral and resistant individual subject as a foil for identification and can be considered as being culturally preconditioned through a protagonist-driven popular film history (cf. Berens 2024, p.195). After analyzing a large number of interviews with conspiracy theorists, cultural anthropologist Alan Schink points out in this sense that *The Matrix* functions as a strikingly important text within the conspiracy culture (cf. Schink 2020, p.42).

The Matrix. By Andrew Tate: The modulation of *The Matrix* in a YouTube case study

Let us now turn to a specific example. Despite (or perhaps because of) his ban on various platforms—including YouTube and TikTok—an overwhelming amount of re-uploaded Andrew Tate content continues to circulate. After the former British kickboxer gained popularity through Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok, becoming an icon of the Manosphere (cf. Haslop et al. 2024; Solea/Sugiura 2023, p.316),[17] he remains a fixed part of an online video culture where remixes of pre-existing material dominate, and authorship is heavily relativized. In this vein, the nearly sixteen-minute video titled "The Matrix Don't Want You to Know This – Andrew Tate," uploaded to YouTube in 2022, compiles four different Tate interviews with stock footage into a video essay with an enlightening tone, complete with a tit-

15 Reference should be made here to the concept of ideology in the Marxist cultural theory tradition of the 20th century. This aims at hegemonic ideas that contribute to legitimizing a ruling power as a natural and/or just order (cf. Eagleton 1993, p.7 and p.14). Crucially, this ideological structure—like the matrix—is accepted as normality. I will return to this connection in the final paragraph.

16 I use the term conspiracy theory here for pragmatic reasons, but I would like to point out its difficulty. Carolin Lano rightly emphasizes the problem of a universally valid definition precisely because the term is a predominantly delegitimizing external attribution, its use seems to lead inevitably into the arena of discursive battles of interpretation (cf. Lano 2023, p.21). Lano also rightly points out that in the political and economic sphere, for example, agreements with conspiratorial tendencies are commonplace. Nevertheless—and here I largely count corresponding discourses in the Manosphere—there are those in which the right-wing extremist, chauvinist, anti-Semitic (etc.) content, for example, clearly over-shapes a possibly appropriate media critique.

17 Anda Iulia Solea and Lisa Sugiura point out that blocking Tate on TikTok has had little impact on curbing his popularity. Instead, TikTok brought Tate and similar Manosphere influencers into the mainstream in the first place, their clips continued to spread and the platform continued to actively promote them (cf. Solea/Sugiura 2023, p.316).

le card: "The Matrix. By Andrew Tate." It is one of many comparable examples that remix pre-existing Tate material into essayistic forms and/or motivational content for YouTube and TikTok, and has currently garnered three million views.[18]

Seven sub-chapters structure the sometimes rather loose argumentative context: "Intro," "How They Control You," "Money Control," "The Scam of Uni," "Freedom," "How To Escape The Matrix," and "What's Next For The World." This creates a line of argument within which Tate explains that people in modern societies are slaves, controlled by an elite and propaganda. The invisible power elite ("way above the government"), which he nebulously describes as "they," is a group of people who have held the actual power for a long time (of course, the argumentation on this point is at least compatible with anti-Semitic fantasies of inferiority). Liberation was only possible through wealth, which had to be strategically planned. Education plays no role here; on the contrary, schools and universities, along with the media, are part of the lamented context of blindness (the 'matrix'), within which an elite tries to keep the rest of the people away from wealth and keep them in the status of slaves. This also includes the fact that freedom of opinion and speech is massively restricted, which social media actively and deliberately contributes to. Gender self-determination is contextualized by Tate as an expression of the power of the matrix. If a government can make people believe that they can legitimately identify as 'panda,' it can do anything else, he polemicizes. A critique of cemented economic inequality (atypical for the Manosphere in this form) increasingly leads to economically ultra-libertarian positions (quite typical for the Manosphere) paired with male tribalism and the propagation of the nuclear family as a protective space—for example parents are asked to educate their children against "all of society." Complaining about injustice is a waste of time, instead one should understand the 'rules of the game' in order to find a way to 'win' (on this point, Tate's choice of words resembles the traditional neoliberal metaphor of the game for real-world economic contexts, as coined by Donald Trump and Tony Schwartz 1987 in *The Art of the Deal*).[19] Ultimately, immense wealth alone makes it possible to live outside of social institutions—outside of the 'matrix.' Paradoxically, Tate does not accuse such an (economic) elite of the problematic concentration of power; rather, belonging to it is the desirable goal.

Formally, the video alternates between shots of Tate speaking and stock footage that illustrates his statements. His voiceover dominates as a centrally placed insert, further shaping the visual layer (with the exception of the intro). Both rhetorically and visually, *The Matrix* is referenced extensively, directly, and indirectly. Metaphors that define the film (or were popularized by it) are employed on a verbal level and modulated on a visual level. In Tate's explanations and the corresponding inserts, at least 13 passages can be identified that reference *The Matrix* (not including the frequent use of the word "slave," which also appears in the film). Six passages refer to a government-enforced societal delusion (explicitly called the "Matrix" in five instances), two allude to the programmability of human consciousness and draw parallels between humans and computers, and three invoke the metaphor of awakening:

18 See also "WATCH THIS EVERY DAY – Motivational Speech By Andrew Tate [YOU NEED TO WATCH THIS]" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BX1WpL2VlhM) (Nov. 5, 2022); other videos like "THE POWER OF HARD WORK | Motivational Speech by Andrew Tate" or "Andrew Tate: No Easy Way Out | Motivational Video" have been removed due to violations of YouTube's terms of service.

19 In his dissertation *Antifeminism in Neoliberalism*, Henry S. Price (2021) convincingly argued along the lines of Incels that the Manosphere is not to be understood as an amalgamation of small extremist and remote subcultures of the Internet, but as part of hegemonic neoliberal culture and can only be understood in terms of its popularity and impact in this way.

1. “just look at the world and feel like, kind of like we’re in the Matrix” (00:04)
2. “people at the bottom […] they don’t seem to wake up because the people in charge try very hard to keep them asleep” (00:19)
3. “It’s absolutely incredible that people are not awakening” (00:32)
4. “What the Government wants is slaves” (00:50)
5. “If you actually wake up and look around you, you realize you’re being destroyed in real time” (01:57)
6. “the government is never gonna tell you anything that wake you up” (02:02)
7. “we’re all programmed” (02:28)
8. “you need to […] defrag” (02:49)
9. “they try very hard to prevent you from correcting your reality” (03:25)
10. “people inside the Matrix don’t understand what’s happening” (05:53)
11. “and this was my chance to escape the matrix” (12:35)
12. “there are people who live outside the matrix and once you live outside of it once you get to a certain level of income and wealth everything becomes free” (14:12)
13. “the matrix, we’re inside the system, we need to escape” (14:51)

The compiled video material initially consists of depictions of predominantly faceless crowds or distantly captured urban scenes in time-lapse (such as construction sites and an aerial drone view of a traffic intersection). In its visual language, the video is immediately aligned with the audiovisual-metaphorical configurations outlined in *The Matrix*, such as the homogenized crowd in the construct through which Neo attempts to navigate. In the YouTube video, shots of anonymous urban crowds are contrasted with Tate, who, as an individual, dominates the repeatedly intercut medium or close-up shots. Through the choice of material and its editing, the video formally reinforces what is conveyed in the voiceover and inserts: an individual (male) subject endowed with critical consciousness and agency, asserting itself against an unenlightened, anonymous mainstream, observing and analyzing it from an elevated position.

“The Matrix Don’t Want You to Know This – Andrew Tate” offers a functional channeling of outrage about economic inequality and lack of perspective towards self-techniques and promises of self-efficacy. Consequently, the video depoliticizes (formerly politically leftist) motifs of the critique of power, ideology and alienation by emphasizing the immutability of the relationship of exploitation between the powerful and the enslaved masses and moving them out of the sphere of the (for example Marxist) critique of capitalism and towards conspiracy theory fantasies of inferiority. Only aggressive individual consciousness, planning and assertiveness within the system enables the emancipation of the individual from it through wealth. ‘The Matrix Don’t Want You to Know This” makes an offer for the functional channeling of indignation about economic inequality and lack of prospects in the direction of self-technologies and promises of self-efficacy. Underneath the ostensible ideological critique, it is of course itself a highly ideology-saturated video that ties in with current neo-masculinist lifestyle-guide-cultures, promising more knowledge and strategic advantages (as the title already testifies). Alan Finlayson in addition to that diagnosed a boom in ideological entrepreneurs who—like Tate—argue along the lines of the ‘red pill’ as a result of the recent crises of neoliberal policies. The appeal of the supposedly enlightenment they offer is that it liberates from the false consciousness of egalitarianism and provides insight into the

real world, which is characterized by (natural) inequality and power struggle—so the recurring narrative. This reality would be illegitimately obscured by feminism, as well as by other political currents that assume the fundamental equality of all people (cf. Finlayson 2021, p.180). The neo-reactionary online video culture produces numerous remixes which popularize this argument and—as a result of the triumph of the short video form and its implementation beyond TikTok, including on YouTube or Instagram—circulate across platforms.[20]

Conclusion: A Right-Wing Critique of Alienation?

Not only is *The Matrix* sometimes part of conspiracy theories,[21] the film also and in particular provides a powerful popular allegory (as a modern *cave allegory*[22]), which is used to communicate affects and feelings, to make them plausible in the context of conspiracy-theoretical awakening experiences. With *The Matrix*, the epiphany, i.e., the metaphorically coded 'awakening' from a context of delusion, becomes an incisive bodily-emotional experience intersubjectively understandable and communicatively connectable (cf. Schink 2020, p.42). As part of autoreflexive narratives typical of social media, it is modulated along personal development and equally part of group identities and online subcultures. The latter create common cultural reference points and a sense of ideological community and shared knowledge, which in turn enables differentiation. Manosphere educational videos characterize themselves in a performative way as 'red pill,' as access to enlightenment in a mass of 'blue pill' content. In an online culture that is reference-based and inclined towards remix, the film is also (pragmatically) a resource for the production of online content that cannot be limited to fandom in a narrower sense, as *The Matrix* itself as a movie is rarely the object, but rather a means of communication for the Manosphere. This circumstance calls for further methodological explorations in the sense of a systematic investigation of neoreactionary film culture.

Finally, to broaden the view (beyond *The Matrix*): It has been described many times that parts of an international neo-reactionary movement are based on left-wing forms of protest, theories and strategies. I have already referred to the concepts of metapolitics and hegemony, which have been prominently discussed in this context (cf. Maly 2024), and I would like to add the concept of *alienation* (*Entfremdung*) as a possible explanatory approach against the backdrop of right-wing and neo-masculinist online film culture. The starting point for this is the observation that several of the conspicuously frequently referenced films in the Manosphere exhibit comparable configurations in this regard. This raises the

20 One telling example of this is "Redpill vs Bluepill – Explained in 60 seconds" (https://www.youtube.com/shorts/Hm7R293J55k) (Jul. 25, 2022).

21 In one of the interviews conducted by Schink, it is mentioned that the expiration date on the ID card of the protagonist Neo in *The Matrix* is September 11, 2001 (cf. Schink 2020, p.64).

22 Socrates teaches his student Glaucon in the seventh book of Plato's *Republic* (*The State*) about the questions of how people should be educated and formed in an ideal state, and whether and in what way humans can recognize the truth. To illustrate this, Plato formulates his famous allegory and describes a group of people who have been imprisoned in an underground cave since birth. They are shackled in such a way that they can only see the wall in front of them. Behind them burns a fire, and between the fire and the prisoners runs a wall. Along this wall, people move and carry objects that cast shadows on the wall. The prisoners see only these shadows and consider them the only reality. When one of the prisoners is freed and leaves the cave, he is initially blinded by the brightness of the light. Gradually, he adjusts to it and recognizes the true world outside the cave. He understands that the shadows in the cave were merely reflections of real things. When he returns to free the others, they do not believe him and consider his accounts absurd.

question of what the popular films circulating in the Manosphere share, or rather in what way which meanings are (re)constructed in their online exegesis.

I assume that one factor is the narration of male figures who emancipate themselves from alienated life contexts. They popularize a (Marxist-influenced) diagnosis of alienation, i.e. they negotiate an originally intact or assumed intact relationship—such as that of man to nature, man to man or to himself—which (according to the actual left-wing theoretical tradition) has been abolished, disrupted or destroyed by the necessity of wage labor in capitalism. The philosopher Rahel Jaeggi (2016) puts the concept in a nutshell, explaining that two dimensions can be identified in the deficit in the relationship to oneself and the world that Marx referred to as alienation: First, the inability to identify meaningfully with what one does and with those with whom one does it; second, the inability to exercise control over what one does, i.e., to be the subject of one's actions individually or collectively in what one does. Alienated, one does not own what one has produced oneself, is thus exploited and dispossessed, one does not control and determine what one does, is thus powerless and unfree; and one cannot realize oneself in one's activities, is thus exposed to meaningless, impoverished and instrumental conditions (cf. Jaeggi 2016, p.33 and p.35).

With the transformation of Thomas Anderson into Neo, *The Matrix* shows an escape from precisely these alienated life circumstances, as I have argued. In *Fight Club*, the configuration is even clearer and laid out as pathological.[23] The nameless protagonist creates the hyper-masculine Dionysian alter ego Tyler Durden in a pronounced dissociation and founds a secret underground fighting circle for men suffering from feelings of alienation due to late-modern working and living conditions (cf. Craine/Aitken, p.293). Before that, he worked as a recall coordinator for a car manufacturer, suffered from a lack of sleep, his own conformism and consumerism ("I had become a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct") and experienced every day of his life (as a man) as a pointless repetitive ordeal, which will (temporarily) change with the 'Fight Club.' In a third cult film of the Manosphere to be mentioned here, the film adaptation of Bret Easton Ellis' novel *American Psycho* (1991), the main character Patrick Bateman embodies the conformist yuppie culture of the 1980s, which unfolds along the lines of materialism, narcissism and lack of empathy and in his character becomes a hyperbolic caricature—a sociopath who murders women and homeless people. The example of *American Psycho* shows most clearly that the reference to films within the Manosphere is sometimes also to be understood as a post-ironic one, which—for example in 'literally me' memes—also refers ironically to figures such as Bateman and conveys social-chauvinist political positions through them (regardless of whether the film exhibits and criticizes them).

What is considered the original state within the Manosphere, from which (in modernity or post-modernity[24]) one has become alienated, is a more or less radically conceived 'state of nature.' Contemporary culture is not primarily reconstructed and criticized by neomasculinists as a late capitalist one, but rather as one that has deviated from a just state of nature, distorting the relationship between the genders and, in particular, men's relationship with themselves. This lack of criticism of capitalism in favor of a right-wing cultural criticism becomes particularly understandable when one views the Manos-

23 For the reception and modulation of Fight Club in audiovisual forms of expression in the Manosphere, see exemplarily: "After Dark – Fight Club | REJECT WEAKNESS, EMBRACE MASCULINITY," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBT4_Cx5ihs (Jul. 21, 2022).

24 Both terms circulate conspicuously in the Manosphere in the context of negative demarcation, for example as the programmatic phrase "reject modernity."

phere not as extremist splinter groups but product of neoliberal culture, as I do—following Price (2021) as well as Jack Bratich and Sarah Banet-Weiser (2019). In light of the dissemination and normalization of neomasculinity, which can sometimes be far-right, further research into its media dimension and its communication strategies rooted in popular culture is absolutely essential.

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