he first image on the screen is of a computer print-out. Nothing you can actually read or understand. Then there’s a conversation between a woman and a guy about Morpheus, followed by some men in dark glasses racing around after a very athletic young woman, who may or may not be the one we’ve just heard speaking. Whoever she is, she has superhuman powers which enable her to leap from rooftops, dive through space and deflect a car heading straight for her as she stands in a phone booth. One of the men in dark glasses, Agent Smith, talks to his buddy about their next target, whom he calls Neo.

Almost everything you need to know has been set up in this opening sequence. The omnipresence of computerized effects: the film can scarcely take a step without recourse to these, and of course computers themselves are central to the ‘plot’ (the word is used cautiously). Don’t expect to be able to read, let alone understand, everything that follows in the film. Morpheus, Trinity (the young woman) and Neo are three names of more than merely labelling significance, and the pursuing agents are dressed in anonymous-looking suits and shades: these encapsulate the kinds of opposition which will prove to be at the film’s core.

So, how seriously do you – ought you to – take The Matrix? (Andy & Larry Wachowski, 1999)
Not so much a film as ...

Whether we like or admire The Matrix, we have to acknowledge that it is more than ‘just another film’. The exploitation of the ‘Matrix’ franchise constitutes an industry. It has already spawned two sequels, released in the same year – The Matrix Reloaded and The Matrix Revolutions (Andy & Larry Wachowskksi, 2003) – video games and television programs. The latter include a ‘Making of...’ documentary (Josh Oreck, 1999), a spoof Sex and the Matrix (Joel Gallan, 2000), which brought The Matrix together with Sex and the City; and a further documentary speculating on the influence of the film trilogy, The Matrix Defence (Simon Egan, 2003). The video games have names like Enter the Matrix (2003) and The Matrix: The Path of Neo (2005).

These titles are enough to suggest that, as a result of skilful marketing, the ‘Matrix’ franchise has caught on. If you want further evidence of its being more than just a popular 1999 movie, a quick internet check will reveal 281 ‘external reviews’ for the first film in the trilogy, plus sixty-seven newsgroup reviews. Those are seriously cultish figures. As well, the film has undoubtedly won a lot of awards, most prestigiously four Oscars (Best Editing, Best Sound, Best Effects – Visual, Best Effects – Sound) and two BAFTAs (British Academy of Film and Television Awards), as well as many other lesser awards and nominations.

And while we are on statistics, the film’s commercial history is also pretty staggering. In its opening weekend in the US it took over US$27 million, and by September 1999, not quite six months after it had opened, it had taken over US$171 million in the USA alone, with another US$203 million in cinemas outside the US. Given that it is reputed to have cost a mere US$63 million to make, it has clearly been immensely profitable. Video and DVD rentals and sales have been proportionately immense. Now, huge ‘gosses’, as Variety calls them, are no guarantee of anything but popularity; nor are sequels nor cult status nor awards; but such extraordinary popularity is, of itself, important. It tells us something about what we are valuing at any given time; it means that this film is not making its appeal to highly selective art-house audiences but to the vast cinema-going public – whoever that refers to. Some suggest that the major audience for cinema is the 18–35-year-old demographic. Even if the audience for The Matrix is essentially made up of people in this range, they are numerous enough to be significant, and what they value is worth exploring with a view to understanding what there is about such a film that ensures this kind of success.

A semi-Australian film?

While on matters to do with production and reception, we should note that the film was almost entirely shot in Sydney, using the new Fox Studios and ranging wide over the city for locations. These latter don’t actually reveal any obvious landmarks, such as the Harbour Bridge or the Opera House, which would immediately identify the city world-wide. Instead, there is much eye-catching exploitation of the towers of big business which might have been found in any modern city, and presumably the point is not to identify a particular place but to imply the inhuman chill and corruption of any late twentieth-century metropolis. Elsewhere, the film’s action is located in Martin Place, in the subway and in various other undefined-looking streets and alleys.

The point here, though, is not to discuss the locations from the point of view of their contribution to the film’s mise-en-scène, but rather to raise the issue of what constitutes an Australian film. The Matrix is formally a US/Australian co-production, according to the reliable listings of the British journal Sight & Sound, though the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) absent-mindedly gives its ‘Country’ merely as ‘USA’, while also naming the Australian Village Roadshow as one of the production companies and listing the fourteen Australian locations and studios. And of course one of the key actors is the well-known and respected Australian Hugo Weaving, who plays Agent Smith, and one of Morpheus’s offsiders, an androgynous albino called Switch, is played by Australian actress Belinda McClory. No doubt, too, plenty of behind-the-camera personnel were Australian.

Does any of this, I wonder, affect our response to The Matrix? However much Australian input there may be in terms of location and studio facilities, and actors and other participants, and however good for the local industry such productions may be, is there any sense in which this input governs how we read the film? Or that it governs the sort of film it is? Of the companies listed as having a hand in its production, the most revealing is not Village Roadshow or even Warner Bros but Silver Pictures. Among the films which have no doubt made Silver prosperous over the last two decades are Die Hard (John McTiernan, 1988) and its sequel Die Harder (Renny Harlin, 1992), the
to mention the two Matrix sequels; its upcoming pro-
ductions include Dungeons & Dragons: Wrath of the
Dragon God (Gerry Lively, 2005) and the remake of the
1970s sci-fi favourite, Lo-
gan’s Run (2006). Production
companies of course branch
out from time to time, but the
general tendency of Silver
Pictures would not lead
one to expect, say, a gentle
tale about coming of age in
small-town Iowa. Silver, I am
suggesting, is much more
important a creative element
in the kind of film The Matrix
is than the fact that it was
made in Australia.

The kind of film it is ...

When we turn to a consid-
eration of the film genre to
which The Matrix belongs,
its proves to be hard to sum
this up in a single descrip-
tive word, in the way that
one might characterize Wolf
Creek as a ‘horror’ film. Perhaps the first descriptor
that The Matrix suggests is
‘sience fiction’. Certainly its
plot, as we quickly become
aware, depends on concepts
which debar it from being
labelled ‘realist’: it is centrally
concerned with the idea of
‘parallel’ worlds, how they
are controlled and how peo-
ple move between them. But
this is not a reflective sci-fi
movie like Stanley Kubrick’s
classic 2001: A Space Odys-
ssey (1968); it has more in
common with such films as
Blade Runner (Ridley Scott,
1982) and another US/Aus-
tralian co-production Dark
City (Alex Proyas, 1998),
because it combines sci-fi
with action-thriller generic
elements. At certain key
moments in The Matrix, the
action-thriller elements take
centre stage, their brilliant
choreographing of confronta-
tions and showdowns recall-
ing a newer genre: the Asian
kung-fu thrillers, or the fan-
tastic exploits of Ang Lee’s
Crouching Tiger, Hidden
Dragon (2000), one of the
first Asian films to achieve
widespread, mainstream
distribution in the West, or
the more recent Hero (2002),
Yimou Zhang’s martial arts
action-adventure.

So, The Matrix is a hybrid
product with its roots nour-
ished by several genres, and
with some stylistic indebted-
ness to film noir as well: in its
moody, atmospheric big-city
visuals, and thematically in
its narrative move of having
an equivocal woman per-
suading an innocent man out
of his usual territory. Above
all, though, it is sci-fi that it
most strongly evokes in its
bizarre computer-generated
imagery and in the complex
narrative, involving presenc-
es in two ‘worlds’. As well,
like a great deal of science
fiction, the film is concerned,
least superficially, with
moral and spiritual attitudes
to the worlds of the char-
acters. For instance, Neo
is greeted as The One, as
a messianic figure who will
save humanity from the Ma-
trix. The idea of saviours of
one kind or other (in William
Cameron Menzies 1936 sci-fi
classic, Things to Come,
pure science was posited as
the hope of mankind) is com-
mon to the genre.

We also expect that in the
worlds created by science-
fiction, we will recognize
connections to the world
we know in our everyday
lives. Without such links, we
should be in the realm of
pure fantasy. In The Matrix,
for example, the use of com-
puterized information and processes may far exceed anything we contemplate while sitting at our work stations, but it is rooted in a phenomenon that modern life has accustomed us to. Near the end of the film the extended chase sequence, there is a sudden shot of old people in a flat that Neo races through which suddenly shocks us with the reminder of ordinary lives being lived in ways we can recognize. The various street scenes and the use of telephone booths (though not the use to which they are put) are other visual anchors to the world we know, not so much for our comfort as for giving us a sense of how far removed the rest of the action is.

The plot thickens ...

Writing about a film such as The Matrix raises the question of how much one can reveal about the plot without giving too much away, without ruining suspense. Another related question is: How much of the plot is it possible to reveal? Apparently at an early stage in the film’s production history, The Matrix was regarded as ‘the script that nobody understands’. Subsequently, the screenplay acquired some excruciating special effects, prior to his digital double’s ranging wildly and widely through the Matrix’s simulation of the everyday world while the real world has fallen into a desert of the future. One of Morpheus’s crew members, Cypher (Joe Pantoliano), turns treacherous and betrays Morpheus to Agent Smith, and Neo and Trinity save him. There is a shoot-out between Neo and Smith in an underground railway station that recalls the Western genre’s characteristic plot resolution, and you may feel that the Wachowskis’ complicated concept and screenplay deserves and/or needs a less simplistic resolution. Though Neo and Smith leap about and fly effortlessly through the air, there is a sense of something old-fashioned about the idea of the future of the world being settled in this way.

But that’s not all. Smith does shoot Neo at point blank range. At this point and elsewhere, Trinity tells Neo’s cyber body that she loves him and love saves him (it’s tempting to murmur ‘gosh, how true’), so that his dead body rises and halts agents’ bullets. While Morpheus breathes: ‘He’s the One’, in a brilliant deployment of special effects Neo goes straight through Smith, then bullets are seen to be coursing through Smith’s body. Neo has repelled the Matrix invaders; he embraces Trinity and accepts his new role as saviour of the world.

But apart from plot ...

The above paragraphs are by no means a comprehensive summary of the film’s plot, but the mind shies away from spelling it all out in detail. As Morpheus says, you can’t ‘be told what the Matrix is’, and this line may be a very cunning let-out for the brothers Wachowski. Frankly, I’d say that if you think you know what’s going on at every moment, you’re probably not paying attention. The question is: How important is this? Is the ‘plot’ just a hook on which to hang a high-tech concept and some dazzling special effects?

It wouldn’t be the first film that became a cult favourite without its narrative conforming to the crystalline standards of classic Hollywood narrative cinema. Think of another film recently, the subject of an article in these pages: Howard Hawks’ The Big Sleep (1946), a cult film indeed, even if one of the murders is never clari-
our major interest is in the
ties named in the title, since
mere emblems of the quali-
as the new
or from having characters of
everything logically spelt out
is true, but whether the film
is at least worth consider-
ations to meaning beyond the
film which may have aspira-
tions to give palpable
shape to mankind’s vague
dreams and questings.

There is no guarantee that
the Washowskis were unduly
concerned with such mat-
ters – or that they weren’t.
The point is that they chose
those names for these
characters, and everything
in a film is there because
someone wanted it there,
so that a serious study of
the film requires us at least
to consider the possible
significance of such matters
as names, especially in a
film which may have aspira-
tions to meaning beyond the
minimum cerebral content
for an action movie. It has
been suggested in some of
the film’s reviews that the
action sequences, as brilli-
antly staged as CGIs can make them, help to
distract attention from holes
in the plot and from lack of
emotional involvement with
any of the characters. But it
is at least worth consid-
ering not merely whether this
is true, but whether the film
would benefit from having
everything logically spelt out
or from having characters of
rounded complexity.

If we’re watching a film such
as the new Pride and Preju-
dice (Joe Wright, 2005), we
may well feel cheated if Darcy
and Elizabeth are reduced to
mere emblems of the quali-
ties named in the title, since
our major interest is in the
way they react to each other
and the kinds of adjustments
they make in their attitudes
before the final reconcilia-
tion. With a film such as The
Matrix, it may be sufficient to
understand the emblemat-
ics functions of Neo, Morpheus
and co. – or to grasp why
the agents are called Smith,
Brown and Jones, three of the
commonest Anglo-Saxon
surnames. Not all narratives
call out for intricately devel-
oped characters and relations-
ships. Keanu Reeves, with
some reputation as an action
hero following the success of
Speed (Jan de Bont, 1994), is
a graceful figure as he hurl-
s himself through space, and
a pallid, wistful-looking mes-
liah-type in the more repose-
elful moments. Hugo Weaving
puts his skinny balefulness
at the service of Agent Smith
and perhaps that is all we
need. Would it increase our
involvement in the plot to
know about his home life?

I’m suggesting that this
is not the kind of film that
makes subtle demands on
actors and that it is not much
concerned with how we
feel about the characters as
‘people’. They are essen-
tially pawns in the Wachows-
ki’s game and the game involves
a battle between two con-
cepts of the world: the one
that is in danger of becoming
derelict and the one that the
Matrix seeks to control. We
are less likely to judge how
‘good’ The Matrix is by such
criteria as ‘Is it well-acted?’
or ‘Do we believe in/care
about the characters?’ than
by how gripped we are by its
action and by its central con-
cept. If Keanu Reeves is all
that stands between us and
gradual extinction, we don’t
need to know, say, if he’s a
devoted son and a caring
friend, but only if he can cut
it against the forces of evil.

Finally, I’d say it is our reac-
tion to the (then-)state-of-
the-art special effects and,
especially, how these are de-
ployed in the action sequen-

tes that will determine how we
respond to The Matrix, and
which most potently account
for its appeal to widespread,
youthful audiences. The
action episodes are spaced
throughout the film almost
in such a way as to recall
how the song-and-dance
numbers used to punctu-
ate film musicals. From the
opening sequence in which
Trinity outwits the Agents
(the cop who says, ‘I think we
can handle one little girl’ couldn’t
be more wrong), diving
across the abysses between
buildings and twisting her
body in mid-air as she does,
the audience is alerted to a
dazzling display of special
effects that will give a balletic
grace to chases and shoot-
outs. The next such episode
finds Smith in pursuit of Neo,
receiving Morpheus’s phoned
instructions for escape, but fi-
nally captured by Smith. Neo
insists (in a touch that recalls
interrogation sequences in
cop thrillers) on the right
to a phone call, to which Smith
replies: ‘What good is a
phone call if you’re unable to
speak?’ At this, Neo’s mouth
seems to disappear, to seal
up as a sign of his impotence.
And this is followed by the
stripping of Neo’s shirt and
the insertion of what seems
to be a very nasty-looking
mechanical spider into his
navel. The purpose of this
insertion is not wholly clear.

There is no need to go
through the film in this detail
to demonstrate how the
special effects give an extra
dimension to the film’s action
genre elements, the final
subway shoot-out obviously
being the prime example
of how the resources of
several genres are stunningly
choreographed and shot for
our maximum breath-reten-
tion. A serious study of the
film will require and reward
close examination of such
episodes, but not just for their
kinetic and visual accom-
plishment. As well, we need
to ponder how they advance
our grasp of the idea of two
unappetising worlds – the
1999 simulacrum control-
led by the Matrix and the
‘actual’ desert of a century
later – and the kinds of hope
or despair these evoke. In
the end, anyone taking the film
as more than just a show-off
occasion, a thing of mere sur-
faces, will want to wonder if it
actually means something.

Endnotes
1 See www.imdb.com for
these and other figures.
2 I recently argued this
point in ‘Croc(dle
Dundee or The Croc(k) of
Gold’, Screen Education,
Issue 40, 2005.
3 Sight & Sound, Vol. 9,
4 Quoted in ibid.
5 As defined and articu-
lated by David Bordwell,
Jane Staiger & Kristin
Thompson in The Clas-
sical Hollywood Cinema:
Film Style & Mode of
Production to 1960,
Routledge, London,
1986.
6 ‘Smoking Guns and
Smouldering Lips: The
Big Sleep’, Screen Edu-
cation, No. 39, 2005.
7 Brewer’s Dictionary of
Phrase and Fable [1870],
Clarendon Press, Oxford,
1964, p.786.