MT VOID 03/22/24 -- Vol. 42, No. 38, Whole Number 2320



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THE MATRIX (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

[The 25th anniversary of THE MATRIX is March 31. Here is Mark's review from 1999.]

Capsule: What a mixed bag! This is a film with great ideas, beautiful visuals, terrific martial arts, and concepts that tie reality in knots. It also has incredibly thin characters and long sections where the plot does not advance beyond who is kicking, shooting, or blowing up whom. The storytelling is totally muddled. But for the characters and the plot this would be a great film. Rating: 6 (0 to 10), high +1 (-4 to +4). Note: Every effort was made to keep this review spoiler-free.

THE MATRIX is a tough film to review for many different reasons. In the first place, what can one say about the basic concept without revealing too much? The entire premise of the film is something of a surprise. I will say that it is fair to say that things are not as they seem at the beginning of the film, but saying anything more than that about the premise could conceivably damage the viewer's enjoyment of the film. In this story the actuality is really very different from being what it seems to be. Philip K. Dick would have been right at home in THE MATRIX with his frequent stories of reality being turned inside out. I believe there was an episode of the newer series of THE TWILIGHT ZONE on this concept, but this is its first treatment in detail in a feature-length film.

Neo, the main character (played by Keanu Reaves), has this gut feeling that there is something different that is going on beyond with everybody seems to know. It is something *very* different. Neo wakes up one morning with a phone call from the mysterious Trinity (Carrie Anne-Moss) Trinity seems to be something like a hacker with what frequently look like magical powers--powers like an ability jump amazing distances. Trinity takes her orders from someone even more elusive and mysterious, the nearly omniscient super-hacker Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne). The government is trying to track down the hackers Trinity and Morpheus, and sends to recruit Neo some agents who look a lot like the title characters in MEN IN BLACK. Neo is given the choice of helping to capture Morpheus or of being enslaved by strange forces. Soon it is not clear to Neo what is real and what is in his dreams. But when he throws in his lot with Morpheus and Trinity, things become even stranger. And then they become a lot stranger still.

THE MATRIX is written and directed by Lana and Lilly Wachowski who previously demonstrated that they could write and direct a nice compact and tightly plotted thriller with BOUND. There is, sadly, little that is compact or tightly plotted about THE MATRIX. This is a film just chock full of martial arts fights, shootouts, and bomb explosions. But the Wachowskis spend very little screen time fleshing out their main characters or getting us to care too much what happens to them. We know they stand between the world and some really nasty fate. Presumably if they lose, the people in the audience lose also. But that is not the same thing as making us really care if these people live or die. Keanu Reeves sees to be is a sort of stupor through much of the film. That is not unrealistic considering the circumstances but it certainly kills his empathy value. The characters get themselves in and out of danger without ever creating dramatic tension.

Somehow in BOUND the Wachowskis did a much better job of getting the audience to identify with their primary characters. Unfortunately, the two were far more concerned about the look of the film than about making the audience empathize with Trinity or Neo or even Morpheus. This film shows the main characters getting lots of fights, but never giving us any reason to care who wins and who loses those fights.

The exquisite look of the film, frequently variations in visual themes of blacks and reds, is created by cinematographer Bill Pope, who previously filmed DARKMAN, ARMY OF DARKNESS, CLUELESS, and BOUND. Perhaps part of Pope's inspiration was the noir-ish world of DARK CITY. His photography nicely shows off the stunts and martial arts work of Hong Kong director Wu-ping Yuen, here just a stunt coordinator and a martial arts instructor. But all too often Yuen seems to be soaking up screen time. It seems a pity that this film has such an audacious concept and ends up with so many fights that could have been taken from any simple police procedural plot. It is a little insulting to the audience to present some of the more interesting ideas and then to treat them on such a superficial level, almost as if the script did not realize how good its own ideas were. THE MATRIX could have done so much more to engage the intellect and not simply a gut reaction.

When there was so much potential for an intelligent story here the Wachowskis have opted to spend most of their screen time on mindless action. This is a good martial arts film and action film in a world already overflowing with martial arts and action films. It should please the vast bulk of the audience who want to see it Friday night, have a good time, and have forgotten about it by Saturday morning. Those who would want an intelligent and thoughtful piece of science fiction will be more tantalized and frustrated than gratified. I rate THE MATRIX a high +1 on the -4 to +4 scale and a 6 on the 0 to 10 scale. [-mrl]

Starship Launch (comments by Gregory Frederick):

This third Starship launch had more progress in this launch attempt but it ultimately did not complete the mission. There was stage separation but the booster did not land vertically (engines did not re-ignite) and the Starship got into near orbit but eventually was lost. Details listed in link:

https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/14/world/starship-launch-spacex-scn

See also:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JX1LTw48ymQ

This failed but the test has gotten farther then any previous test launch. [-gf]

Manly Wade Wellman and Avram Davidson (comments by Michael Dirda):

No, Michael Dirda has not sent a submission to the MT VOID, but he has written a column titled "The Two Best American Fantasy Writers You' ve Probably Never Heard Of: A New Look at the Works of Manly Wade Wellman and Avram Davidson".

Paywall-free link: https://wapo.st/49Zctf2

This Week's Reading (book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

STRANGERS ON A BRIDGE: THE CASE OF COLONEL ABEL AND FRANCIS GARY POWERS by James B. Donovan (Scribner, ISBN 978-1-5011-1878-4)was "the subject of the major motion picture BRIDGE OF SPIES', according to the cover of the 2015 edition. Note it does not say it was the basis of the film, and there is a reason for that.

But to explain why, I need to talk about the structure of the film. There is an almost-explicit three-act structure to it. The first act is Abel's capture, trial and appeals (with Donovan as his lawyer) in the United States. The second act is Powers's flight, capture, and trial in the U.S.S.R. The third act is Donovan's negotiations to swap Abel for Powers (and Frederic Pryor, an American student studying the East German economy when he was arrested, and takes place in Berlin (East and West).

The book, however, was written by Donovan almost immediately after the exchange. Indeed, he wrote that after February 10, 1963, he never heard from Powers again, and then had to add a footnote that in December 1963, while reading the galley proofs, he received a twelve-pound smoked ham Powers had promised him at that last meeting.

But ham or no ham, Donovan could only write what he was witness to or was able to discover from public information. So while Donovan could cover the story of Abel in detail, the story of Powers was covered very briefly, and that of Pryor hardly at all. The U-2 flights are not mentioned until page 348 of 427 pages of text. A discussion of the negotiations for an exchange starts on page 352, and Donovan doesn't get to Berlin until page 379.

And needless to say, he did not know that Abel was actually born William August Fisher and was born and raised in the north of England, since this was not revealed until after Abel's death in 1971.

The book is certainly of historical value (Donovan naturally had copious notes and transcripts of the trial, as well as a daily diary he kept of the negotiations), For someone more interested in the negotiations (that would be me), though, it was a bit disappointing. It does give a sense of what is accurate and what is not. So far as I can tell, Donovan never saw someone shot trying to scale the Wall, never had his coat stolen, and never gave a moving speech to a young Soviet assistant. But the Soviets/East Germans did try to pass off two operatives as Abel's family, and Drewes did confuse the names of Abel's wife and daughter (as well as other details).

My disappointment was basically due to my skewed expectations. Now that you know what to expect, you can decide for yourself whether that is what you want. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

The fundamental cause of trouble in the world today is that the stupid are cocksure while the intelligent are full of doubt.

--Bertrand Russell

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