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Matrix born of millennium angst



Keanu Reeves: Up against it in The Matrix

By BBC News Online Entertainment Correspondent Tom Brook

The futuristic sci-fi thriller The Matrix starring Keanu Reeves is striking gold at the box office.

Eye-popping effects and a gripping plot undoubtedly make the movie great entertainment, but there is more to its thrills and chills than meets the eye.

Stop, look around and it becomes clear that The Matrix is just one of a whole new wave of films reflecting a growing cultural anxiety over computers, and their ability to create alternative realities.

The Matrix is set 300 years into the future when evil computers have enslaved mankind and created a false reality.

The star presence of Keanu Reeves and Laurence Fishburne, as well as impressive special effects, are proving to be an heady mix.

Real fears

There's little doubt that films with computer-



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generated realities are a favoured theme right now. Laurence Fishburne: The Internet is the original alternate reality. Fishburne says it is because most people find them easy to relate to.

"I think it is probably because the rest of the world is interested in alternate realities. The alternate reality in particular would be the Internet and the Worldwide Web. It is a place, you can go there but where is it?" he adds.

The film eXistenZ is in the same vein. It shows how computers connected to a spinal bioport transport users to an alternate world.

And, in the forthcoming The Thirteenth Floor, a software designer travels back to a parallel world in the 1930s to solve a murder mystery - only to find his own life is computer-generated.



The Thirteenth Floor: Just one a new wave of angst-ridden films

Gretchen Mol, who stars in The Thirteenth Floor, says these virtual reality films reflect anxieties about powerful computers taking over as the millennium approaches.

"The millennium throws up a lot of questions about who we are, what we are going to do and how far we are willing to go with this new technology.

"It brings up 'playing God' issues. There's cause and effect, you can't just play around with something for your own use and then toss it away. You have to take responsibility for things," she explains.

Only the start

Most of these virtual reality films seem to portray a dark view of the way computers will affect our lives.

Nonetheless, Keanu Reeves thinks that showing images that may or may not be real helps enlighten the audience.

"The objective of the film is to try to get people to question and not to take things only in the way presented by the face of power or religion or politics. One has to understand it oneself," he says.

Virtual reality has become a rich new vein for Hollywood to tap.

And, says Professor of Cinema Studies Toby Miller, other similar films can be expected in the future:

"In something like The Matrix we are seeing the notion of the human being actually becoming the machine and vice versa and I think the notion of being a 'wired person' is spreading across the world.



If nothing else, virtual reality films are visually spectacular

"It goes through all classes, genders and races - in a way that we wouldn't have expected three or four years ago. It will become so much part of our lives that Hollywood has to make it part of its life."

The problem with these films is that technology often takes the upper hand. Narrative becomes slave to special effects. Storylines become comprised and plots often difficult to follow.

But even if they do not always work in all departments, visually at least they are hard to beat.

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