

reviews

DVD

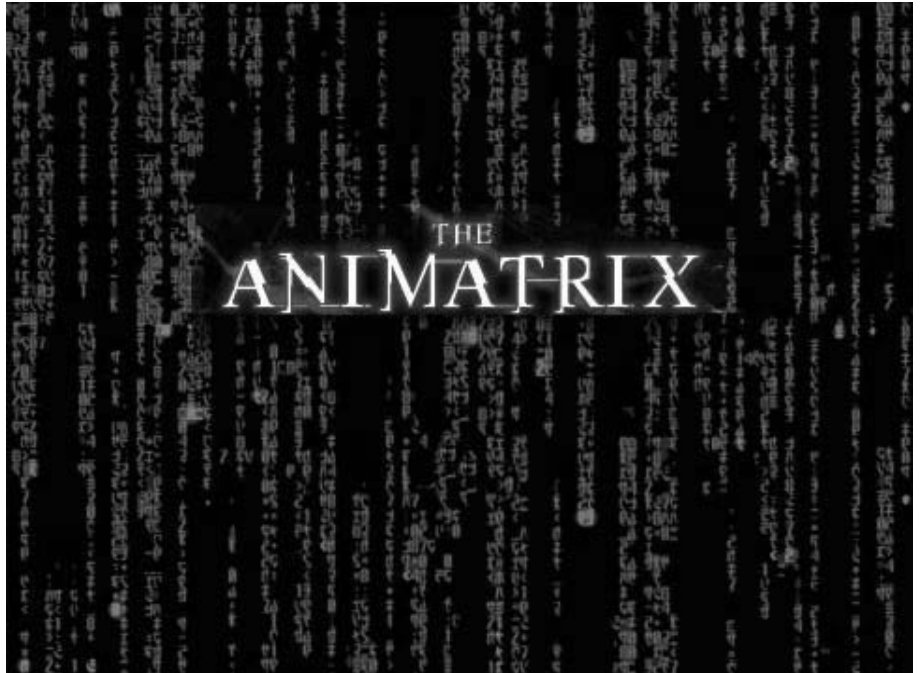
The Animatrix
Warner Bros./Various Artists,
2003

Review by Patrick Lichty

If you are one of the five percent of the First World that is not aware of the juggernaut 'The Matrix Reloaded' media campaign that parallels the very story put forth by the Brothers Wachowski, you are probably also not aware of the other associated Matrix media projects released concurrently with TMR. One of the projects more eagerly awaited by Matrix devotees is the 'Animatrix,' a series of nine shorts based in the Matrix universe created by noted Japanese Anime (animation) artists, such as X and Square. This only makes sense, as much of the narrative and visual style of 'The Matrix' is heavily influenced by anime and manga. Therefore, to see an anime-based treatment of Matrix stories would seem to be an interesting ritornello to the source of its inspiration.

But before entering into any review of a title like 'Animatrix,' I have to admit my deep interest in both Japanese Pop Culture and the entire Matrix phenomenon. In saying this, I'm hoping that my assessment is educated, but fair. Secondly, I viewed the DVD after seeing 'The Matrix Reloaded,' and -- since the release of this title predated the opening of the movie -- I might assume that my reaction to 'Animatrix' might have been somewhat different if I had seen it before the movie in that 'The Matrix Reloaded' offered a great deal more context for the nature of the Matrix itself.

However, there are pieces for which I had lower expectations than others; in the case of Square's 'The Final Flight of the Osiris' (which figures heavily in the beginning of Matrix Reloaded), my low expectations were met. Although it is a visually stunning 3D CGI representation of the world of 'The Matrix' done with a great deal of sensitivity to visual style, Osiris reflected similar problems Square had with 'Final Fantasy, The Spirits Within' -- namely, that the short was long on visuals, but short on plot beyond a fairly straightforward exposition of precursors to 'The Matrix Reloaded.' Although the plot was written by the Wachowskis themselves, I would have



Images courtesy Warner Bros.

Having been so familiar with the extant Matrix oeuvre, the criteria under which I watched these shorts was primarily whether the animations were simply extensions of the elements of the two movies, or if there were expansions into novel, uncharted territory that still fit well within the Matrix matrix. Secondly, I was also interested in seeing if the shorts took the manga-inspired visual language of the Wachowskis and likewise expanded on it as well. Given these parameters, the series succeeds for half the works on the first point, and for the second point, the Animatrix is a little less questionable as the artists producing the videos are some of the masters of the genre from which the Matrix creators drew.

liked to have see a few more twists to this particular segment that would be beautifully visualized by the team at Square.

Nonetheless, other segments expand on the Matrix universe wonderfully, among them 'Beyond' and 'Matriculated,' which are executed well, but also take elements only hinted at within the movies and explore them to a much greater extent. 'Beyond' describes a girl's encounter with a "haunted house" as she goes to find her cat. Within the house, she finds bizarre glitches in the laws of physics, holes in the roof where it rains, and unexplained rainbows. The afternoon turns into a site of magical play until the system administrators arrive to remove the playing youth and pave the area into a parking lot (perhaps a not too subtle analogy for places where children play in their youth). 'Matriculated' explores a concept completely unmentioned until this short: the idea of humans capturing machines and, through direct Matrix communication, converting them to the cause of the humans. Although the results are not

optimal for the humans, the fantastic Moebius-like milieu devised by the animators, as well as the unique glimpse into other human-machine interaction, make up for the somber overtone of the piece.

Two other pieces, 'World Record' and 'Kid's Story' offer unique insights into human perception and the Matrix. Both shorts offer unique perspectives on waking consciousness, in the movie's terms. In each case, it appears that the common denominator is some extreme experience, from pushing one's body too far beyond its physical capabilities to the survival of perceptual death (termed "self-substantiation"). The awakening of the protagonist in 'World Record' suggests that although he has attained knowledge of his environment, he lacks both the context and connections to retain that freedom. And, in 'Kid's Story,' we see Neo's new "friend" (as seen in the second movie), and how he actually awoke without assistance, perhaps an allusion to his being another "disciple" of sorts.



Images courtesy Warner Bros.

All in all, 'Animatrix' is typically well crafted, as are all of the Wachowski projects to date, and offers a wealth of DVD extras, including interviews and "Making of" footage. Multiple languages are offered, and although the soundtrack defaults to English, I would strongly recommend switching to Japanese with English subtitles to allow for the richer tonal quality of the original voice acting.

Perhaps my review of this particular title has been a bit stringent due to my interest in virtual culture and my original passion for the first movie, but the disc is well worth the price to gain further background on the Matrix universe, some marvelous expansion on the original themes, and some just plain enjoyable eye candy. Although my criticism of approximately half the DVD stems from wanting more surprises and intellectual challenges, none of the shorts completely fall flat; some are merely better than others. But if you get the chance, watch the DVD before seeing 'Matrix Reloaded,' as it will fill in some of the gaps in the movie, and add some interesting contextual information as the series of movies culminates in 'Matrix Revolutions' this winter. It's an excellent addition to a Matrix enthusiast's library, and for those more critically inclined, the DVD holds up well enough to provide suitable intellectual fodder until the next installment of the Matrix saga.