THIS WEEK'S CLASSIC MOVIE

by Madeline Pritchard

Cyberpunks: Ice-T, Keanu Reeves, Dina Meyer and Falconer Abraham

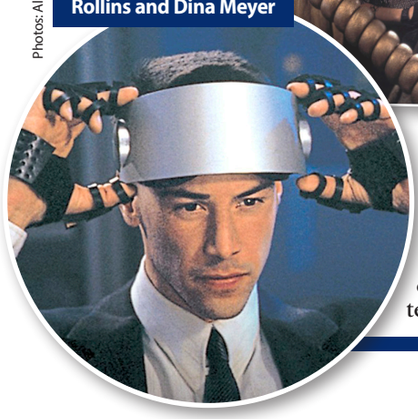
Lights camera action... 56

Four years before *The Matrix* brought cyberpunk into the mainstream, Keanu Reeves starred as another robotic near-future internet surfer who dives into cyberspace to save humanity: the hero and title character in an adaptation of Canadian author William Gibson's 1981 short story *Johnny Mnemonic*.

When they began pitching the film in 1989, Gibson and director Robert Longo – a pal of Gibson's and an artist by trade – asked for only $2m to make what they envisioned as a black-and-white movie in the vein of Jean-Luc Godard's arty *Alphaville*.

But the studios wouldn't bite, and the pair eventually realised that the project looked too cheap to be worth anyone's time. In requesting more money – in the end, the film cost $27m – they did get a green light, but what had been intended to be a lean, low-budget piece of hard sci-fi became something else entirely: a big studio movie with the prospect of summer success.

Johnny Mnemonic



Entering the matrix: Keanu Reeves with VR headset; right, Henry Rollins and Dina Meyer

Photos: Allstar

Reeves was cast in the lead, and his recent surprise hit *Speed* drove executives to meddle in this next project for the newly minted star. This included a final re-cut over which the makers had no control. Gibson compared it to attempting to turn *Blue Velvet* 'into a straight, irony-free thriller'.

Gibson's books, which were at least a decade ahead of the curve – he coined terms such as 'cyberspace' and 'the matrix' in his 1984 novel *Neuromancer* – had been rejected many times for cinematic adaptation.

And then, in the early 1990s, the internet took off, and Hollywood was forced to take notice. In 1995 – the same year Amazon.com went live – four other attempts to capitalise on the zeitgeist were released by major studios. *Hackers*, *Strange Days* and *Virtuosity* faced the same poor box-office returns as *Johnny Mnemonic*, and the only hit among them was *The Net*, which starred Reeves' *Speed* co-star Sandra Bullock. Three of these movies feature references to Gibson himself – the mainframe in *Hackers* is named after the writer, while characters in both *The Net* and *Strange Days* can be heard ordering a Gibson cocktail.

But, in spite of this recognition of Gibson's influence, these contemporary efforts feature quite standard Hollywood plots – they are essentially films noirs with some technology folded in. *Johnny Mnemonic*, on the other hand, has a schlocky air and artistic pretensions, with flashy special effects bolted onto a classic B-movie chassis. The CGI does look slick at times, but the set design and acting would both be more at home in a student theatre project. You could put this down to incompetence on the part of the makers. But it's clear from the screenplay's tongue-in-cheek self-seriousness that this is really a knowing satire.

In the *Matrix* series, the Wachowskis would perfect what Longo and Gibson started, from Reeves' more empathetic performance, through the elegantly realised Japanese manga influences and on to visualising the internet as its own world. But this earlier piece – imperfect as it is – deserves to be reappraised as a fascinating work in itself, almost a prescient parody of the more successful versions to follow.

And it's a reminder that Gibson's crystal ball has always been reliable. More than 25 years after the film's release and four decades after the story, *Johnny Mnemonic* (which is set in 2021) features a pandemic, a society totally reliant on the internet and people falling victim to mad conspiracy theorists. Admittedly, in the real world, Navy-trained dolphin hackers aren't yet a thing – as far as we know.

Monday ■ GREAT! movies ■ 11.15pm