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Movie Review: 'Matrix Reloaded,' a postmodern parable

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(ABP) – Many film reviews will ask "What is 'The Matrix Reloaded' about?" Perhaps a better question is "What isn't 'The Matrix Reloaded' about?"

The kung-fu/sci-fi/philosophy-fusion flick will be an instant cult classic, just like its predecessor, "The Matrix." That much is virtually certain. But the film makes it hard to be certain about much else – especially its meaning.

Background: In the 1999 original, viewers learned that at some point in the 21st century, a civilization of machines defeated humankind in a series of wars, enslaving the race and harnessing humans' bodily energy to fuel the machines' electrical needs. (Why didn't they just use solar power?) The machines place the actual human bodies in a state of perpetual unconsciousness and stimulate their brains through the use of sophisticated computer programs to make the humans believe they are living in a society that resembles early 21st-century America. That virtual-reality world is the Matrix itself.

Meanwhile, a band of a few hundred thousand humans has survived the wars with their consciousness intact by retreating somehow to a settlement near the earth's core portentously named Zion.

Neo (the beautifully blank Keanu Reeves) is a young man who was freed from the Matrix by the crew of a subterranean ship captained by the philosophically overwrought Morpheus (played flawlessly by Laurence Fishburne). The ship, the Nebuchadnezzar, is peopled by a band of interdimensional freedom fighters including, most importantly, Trinity (the bodacious Carrie-Anne Moss). Neo and those around him come to believe that he is "The One" – a messianic figure whom ancient prophecies predict will defeat the machines once and for all.

By the beginning of "Reloaded," the machines have found out about Zion and intend to wipe its inhabitants from the face – or in this case, the center – of the earth. To accomplish this, the machines send an army of minions, search-and-destroy robots called Sentinels that look like an unfortunate coupling between Bob Marley and Mr. Roboto.

Neo, wondering if he is really The One, spends most of the film trying to find out whether he's really The One and how he is to end this war. He tries to consult the Oracle (the late Gloria Foster), who is the most cryptic character in a movie brimming with cryptology. Without giving too much away, let's say her answer leaves a little clarity to be desired.

Neo and his cohorts must continue to do battle with the nefarious Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving) throughout the picture as well. Since the first film, Agent Smith has somehow learned how to clone himself, as well as infiltrate the forces of Zion.

There are at least two levels on which to appreciate this film. The first – the level where most Matrix fans will land – is the adrenaline-driven rush of a masterful action movie. The 17-minute boffo freeway chase will quickly be labeled as "The Best Car Chase Scene Ever." "Reloaded" takes the all the special effects from the revolutionary first film to the next level. However, "Reloaded" does this with less originality than its 1999 predecessor, which made an indelible impact on action filmmaking with its evocative chrome-and-black-leather, martial-arts-fantasy world.

But the other level of appreciation – the one that will have amateur philosophers in the 15-to-35 demographic buzzing until the final movie in the trilogy is released in November – is the one that has captivated many Christians. True to postmodern form, the film leaves itself so wide open to interpretation that just about anyone can see his or her worldview in it. It is a receptacle for our every projection.

The original "Matrix" offered what seemed like straightforward Christian allegory – Neo as Christ figure, complete with a crucifixion and resurrection. But "Reloaded" is so ambiguous that even the book of Revelation seems like a clearer guide. Neo repeatedly questions his messianic status, and even whether the Oracle and her prophecies are true.

But a few clear lessons do emerge from the film's directors, the mysterious brothers Andy and Larry Wachowski. The ethnic diversity depicted in the film is remarkable and meaningful. The majority of the lead characters are people of color. Zion is so remarkably diverse it starts to look like the Kingdom of God must – especially in contrast with the overwhelming whiteness of the Matrix.

And clearly the Wachowskis want us to believe that in the "real world," outside the sterile Matrix, sensuality is good. Life in Zion is earthy, unbridled. The film's second most memorable scene is a "temple service" in Zion which turns into an ecstatic dance rave, with so many scantily clad and multiethnic inhabitants writhing about on the dirt floor that it might qualify as the most astounding party scene ever filmed.

But the movie raises far more questions than it resolves – and then cruelly ends things as it began, in the middle of a larger story arc. This, of course, ensures that movie-going hordes will return in November for the finale.

Moviegoers will leave "The Matrix Reloaded" knowing they took one heck of a trip – but they will have to wait to find out where they went.

- "The Matrix Reloaded" is rated R for several violent scenes, coarse language and a few depictions of sexuality.

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