

HOLLYWOOD CAN HACK IT

Movie makers are taking a byte out of pop culture

BY JEFF NIESEL

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REMEMBER THE COMPUTER NERDS from *Weird Science*? How about the scrawny yet brainy Matthew Broderick in *War Games*? In the not-so-distant past, computer users appeared on the silver screen as socially inept characters who found more excitement in the cyberworld than the social realm. But now that the Internet has entered the mainstream, Hollywood has refashioned the look of technology, too.

The latest seductive techie sleuths include Keanu Reeves in *Johnny Mnemonic*, Sandra Bullock in *The Net*, Fisher Stevens and Lorraine Bracco in *Hackers* and Denzel Washington in *Virtuosity*. Not exactly your typical nerds.

Take Bullock, for example. After playing Reeves' gutsy sidekick in *Speed*, she ran away with the MTV bucket of popcorn for Most Desirable Female.

In *The Net*, Miss Most Desirable plays a computer systems analyst who inadvertently accesses a classified program. It may be every computer hacker's dream to have someone like Bullock sitting on the other end of the computer terminal — but it's not what you'd call a slice of life.

Larger than life

"One reason movies about the Internet are so hot is that — despite the fact that practically everyone has heard about the Internet — relatively few people actually know very much about it," says Sam Choi, a graduate student at the U. of Pennsylvania.

"The less you know about something that you think is cool, the more it seems like magic," Choi says. "The monster is always scarier when you haven't yet seen it. Once you've seen it, it's pretty tame."

Each techie film offers its own high-tech monster, which is often a representation of technology

gone awry. And, as in most Hollywood fare, good guys tangle with bad guys to save humanity.

In *Hackers*, a group of young, in-line skating computer whizzes becomes involved in a conspiracy. In *Johnny Mnemonic*, Reeves must download several megabytes of info that have the potential to save people from a previously incurable disease. And in *Virtuosity*, Washington plays an ex-cop who battles Sid 6.7, a composite of serial killers who leaves the computer-generated world to become truly interactive.

The man behind Sid 6.7, director Brett Leonard, says that he tries to depict both the advantages and abuses of technology in *Virtuosity*. Leonard also directed *Lawnmower Man* — a film about virtual reality that was only nominally based on a Stephen King short story.

After the success of *Lawnmower Man*, Leonard read a number of scripts dealing with virtual reality and decided on the one by Eric Bernt because it didn't treat the concept as a gimmick.

"The mythology of technology is currently on everyone's mind," Leonard says. "We all sense it will change our lives, and it hasn't happened yet. There have been radical changes in the way the government works and the way the media work. The only thing we can do is tell stories about how technology might change our lives. I've created a cautionary tale with *Virtuosity*."

The final frontier?

The fascination with technology isn't new, says Michael Carroll, an associate professor at Highlands U. in New Mexico. As a pop culture scholar, Carroll says America has always been fascinated by technology — from the railroad expansion to television. Techie films not only represent a continuing infatuation with technology but also reflect the ideology of the frontier.

"When Kennedy created the last frontier with the space program, it took the place of spatial expansion that had come to a stop with Vietnam," Carroll says. "All the frontier ideology was transported into outer space."

When it became clear that outer space was not a dream in which everyone could participate, Carroll says, Americans shifted their frontier mentality to the Internet.

"I've found more than 300 articles published in American magazines which refer to cyberspace as a frontier," Carroll says. "Using the Internet as a frontier seems to work better than outer space because everyone can actually play this game."

Get reel

But with Most Desirable stars filling the roles of computer hackers, it's not just everyday people who are playing with technology on the silver screen. By creating high-tension conspiracies and using special effects, techie films present souped-up versions of computer culture that don't quite match reality.

Some find Hollywood's glamorization of the Internet culture rather far-fetched.

Silicon Snake Oil author Clifford Stoll, a computer whiz himself who gained fame by catching a ring of German spies operating on the Internet, has been online since the Internet was created.

Yet he thinks Hollywood's new techie films go too far to add excitement to what he calls a cold medium.

"The Internet is pretty much a waste of time," Stoll says. "It's astonishing that Hollywood has latched onto it."

That's easy for a veteran to say — what's left after uncovering espionage?

"Wherever you look on the Internet, there is no emotional interaction," Stoll says.

"The best you can come up with is virtual interaction. There is cybersex, cybersleaze and cybersluts, but there ain't no lusty, roll-in-the-hay sex. There's no one so much as holding hands or rubbing noses — let alone fornicating in the grass. You can only talk about it. You can't do it."

"What a cheat."

Impersonal or not, Hollywood's on the virtual bandwagon. Only time will tell if there's a pot of cybergold at the end of the celluloid.

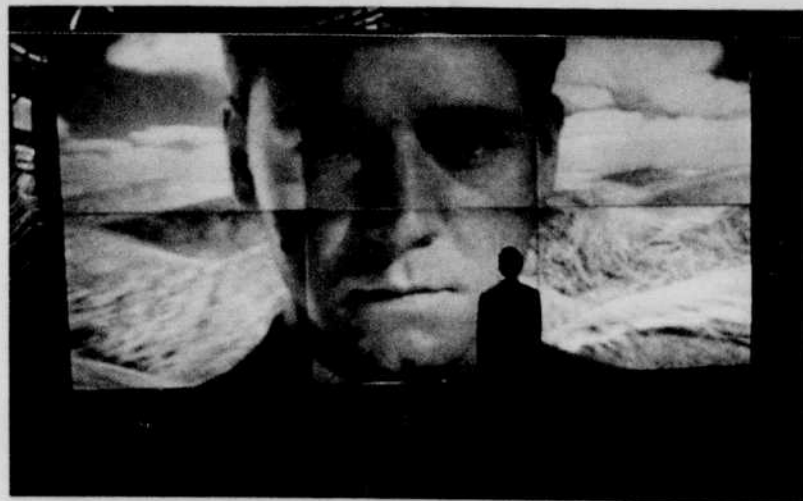
"The mythology of technology is currently on everyone's mind."

BRETT LEONARD,
DIRECTOR OF *VIRTUOSITY*

Jeff Niesel is a graduate student at U. of California, San Diego. He's a totally cool 'net-surfer dude — and the entertainment editor at the UCSD Guardian.



Sandra Bullock gets caught up in the 'net.



Virtually stimulating.