

The Matrix and how it shapes human perception of Artificial Intelligence

Introduction

The Matrix (1999) is one of the most complicated and intricate explorations of the human mind and body. We are taken on a journey through the main character Neo, where he is exposed to a reality in which Artificial Intelligence (AI) has taken over. It interrogates freedom and control, whilst acting as a warning for potential dangers involving AI. *The Matrix* contributes to the public imagination of AI, challenges traditional notions of selfhood, and raises ethical questions about the development and use of intelligent systems.

Social Value

The film's core focus is on freedom. It makes people think about whether we actually have free will or not, and whether our dependence on technologies over time has made us more susceptible to harm in the future. As Kate Crawford argues, "Artificial intelligence is a registry of power" (Crawford, 2021, p. 8), meaning that these technologies don't just evolve, they reflect and reinforce existing systems of control, which can directly influence how free we truly are. It looks at Neo, the main character who has been "unplugged" allowing him to see that his whole life was in a simulation of something much bigger than him. Don Ihde explains that humans find themselves "using nonhuman things as mirrors to understand our humanity" (ATS3992 Week 2 Lecture, 2025). When Neo wakes up, this leaves the audience and himself questioning their freedom when it comes to technology.

The film depicts AI as something that grew powerful enough, and sentient enough to understand that they can use humans for their own gain. It makes viewers question how with time we are growing more and more ignorant of the potential dangers we are faced with in terms of AI. AI technology is far from becoming sentient, but for a movie made in 1999, its perception of what AI could be shows a contrast to how AI is being viewed in the present day. This fear seems blurry to the public eye, with newer technologies constantly being developed, with more and more people utilizing AI and intertwining it in our day to day lives. Kate Crawford shares the view that we are making blind progress, the movie adds to that and shows us how human nature undervalues and underestimates the power of technology.

The Matrix shows us that humanity ignorantly plays into creating bigger and grander forms of technology. Which is supposed to help people, and make processes easier, but these creations in the long run bring humanity into a state where we depend on technologies. This raises the question, when will humans be content with the developments of AI, and where should one draw the line?

Public Imagination of AI

The Matrix's depiction of what AI is, should be something viewed at its highest and most powerful form, in an almost cynical way. The film highlights more the dangers of what could be than what is, especially for AI development at its time. It does bring out a fear of the unknown however. It makes people wonder, especially those that don't have expertise in science and technological spaces, whether this is something that should be feared. Whether technologies shape humans' perceptions. This is not to say that the film makes you believe that in the future AI will use humans as crops to build different realities,

that is something that is a clear exaggeration made for cinematic effect. The film portrayal of sentient AI can be a huge exaggeration from what AI is being used for today, but it still makes you wonder.

Bainbridge states that humans are in more control of AI than they seem (Bainbridge, 1983). However, the film's exaggeration leans into this idea that we are creating machinery and technologies that can harness so much information all at once, that maybe we are being ignorant to the possibility that human traits could be instilled into these AI technologies. The danger with this being that it could potentially have a negative effect on humanity. Crawford shares this same fear, that AI systems inherit biased human traits and power structures. The film definitely makes people weary of what is real and what could be, and the line seems very clear, but the more you think about it, the more people begin to fear.

If we consider how AI is used today, as an assistant, as something that makes life easier, makes processes like coding something that people don't need to know, because the AI does the work for you. It could be said that *The Matrix* distorts people's view on AI because in the film, it is what has taken away people's freedom, when it was supposed to create more freedom in the first place. The film strongly upholds a negative viewpoint on AI, and this could lead to viewers being resistant to technologies. However, it also serves as a great cautionary message to the Artificial Intelligence community, engineers, software developers, AI developers etc. to entice them to create AI software with strict ethical codes and considerations.

Human Self-Understanding

A significant human trait expressed in the movie was ignorance. In the film Neo is given the option to take either a blue pill which would allow him to return to his regular life, or a red pill, that would take him down a rabbit hole. That scene proved to be key in showing us how it is so common to believe in what we are told, rather than seek further information. The movie depicted humanity in a way where our minds were our most powerful attribute, but made our bodies play the most important role in being human. This allowed us to view AI as something that could potentially match the mind of a human but shows us that it could never match the physical state of one. Neo's entire journey from being Thomas Anderson to eventually believing in his identity, his online persona "Neo". As Don Ihde explains, "the way that we understand ourselves as human beings is contingent on a society's technical-economic context" (ATS3992 Week 2 Lecture, 2025). Neo's sense of self is shaped by the simulated world he lives in, where the digital becomes more real than the physical. This is interesting because when we see that Neo is understanding that his consciousness grew more powerful than his own body, it makes viewers question the depths of their own self.

Ethical Implications

If we take into consideration the ethical implications of *The Matrix*, and its social responsibility when talking about AI, we'd find that at the time it was made it was more of a warning piece than something set to drive fear into people about AI technology. The movie created questions of reality and opened the realm of possibilities. It could be said that the extent to which the film portrayed AI as an enemy may have driven people into paranoia and distrust towards actual AI. However, that is not a bad thing, because it helps people think more critically on these topics.

Throughout the movie as a viewer you reflect a lot on your freedom as a person, and it makes you question how much free will you will have later on when AI technologies get to an even more advanced state. Kate Crawford goes into how it is important to demystify AI. This highlights the importance of understanding what AI is and encourages viewers to better understand how it works. Throughout the movie humanity is blamed for what AI had become, because of our ignorance. But what it also does is implement a more cautionary conversation on AI. This idea directly reflects Lisanne Bainbridge's argument where "the more advanced a control system is, so the more crucial may be the contribution of the human operator" (Bainbridge, 1983, p. 775). The film's ethical message isn't just about fear. It's about reminding us that no matter how powerful AI becomes, humans are still accountable for the systems they create and maintain. The emotional storytelling of the matrix depicts how the usage of film is a powerful weapon when warning people of what AI really is and what it has the potential to be.

Conclusion

The Matrix remains deeply relevant to today's conversations around AI, not because it accurately predicts the future of technology, but because it challenges us to reflect on the present. As Kate Crawford argues, AI is not neutral, it is a "registry of power," reflecting the values and inequalities of the systems that produce it. The film reflects this concept through its presentation of sentient AI, but also through its human characters, who embody our real-world fears, flaws, and ethical responsibilities. It reflects back our anxieties about freedom and identity. However, it also reminds us that even in advanced systems, human responsibility remains a core element. Ultimately, *The Matrix* is a warning and a prompt. It asks: What kind of world are we building with AI, and what kind of humans are we becoming in the process?

References:

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