

Option 3: AI in the Movies (The Matrix)

1. Describe the role artificial intelligence played in the movie. Was the AI the villain, hero, or simply a supporting character?

For the most part, AI plays the role of the villain in the Matrix film series. For those who haven't seen the Matrix trilogy it's about a dystopian future caused by an AI takeover; mankind is kept dormant by machines and locked away in pods as a farmable power source. While imprisoned, people's minds are collectively plugged into a virtual reality called The Matrix, which resembles the real world twentieth century. Through this method humans are kept docile and farmable by machine society as a renewable source of energy. The film focuses around the efforts of an escaped human revolutionary group in their fight against the oppressive machines. Their only hope? The search for a prophetic savior known only as The One.

2. Discuss aspects of the AI that were believable and what parts seem unrealistic. Is this merely an imaginative work, or is it representative of future possibilities?

The possibility of sentient machines and AI takeover has been a hot topic of discussion not only on the silver screen but also in the academic world. Famous minds the world over have contributed their opinions on the scenario, but they have yet to reach any real consensus. Renowned physicist Stephen Hawking, Microsoft CEO Bill Gates, and SpaceX founder Elon Musk are among the many vocal advocates for precautionary measures against an unfriendly AI. Others are not convinced at all of the hypothetical threat, noting that there would be very little if no competition at all for resources between humans and sentient machines.

So in regards to the Matrix, a general AI takeover is still in the scope of reality. The specific details, however, are a lot more doubtful. "Human battery farms" don't seem to make much sense outside of their shock factor and general Hollywood science fiction mumbo jumbo. To an engineer, powering an entire civilization of machines just off of human bioelectricity is unrealistic and downright laughable. The more believable part of the Matrix is in the virtual reality aspect of its nature. VR simulation is definitely an emerging trend, and can be observed in products today (the commercial version of the Oculus Rift VR headset just released last month!). It isn't hard at all to imagine the possibilities of the technology decades, if not years, from now.

3. Discuss how humans reacted or related to the AI. Were humans scared of AI? Welcoming? Unconcerned?

In the original Matrix, a society of unplugged humans finds shelter in a secret underground city named Zion. It is here they stage a rebellion against the machines ruling the surface. A small team of rebels led by a man named Morpheus undergoes regular missions into the Matrix and "unplugs" enslaved humans, recruiting them to Zion's cause. Within the Matrix the rebels battle Agents, subprograms meant to eliminate all threats to the Matrix and keep its purpose secret from its inhabitants. The only catch: dying while plugged into the Matrix for a human means dying in real life. "Plugged-in" humans submit to the Matrix and its fiction in their entirety, living seemingly normal lives while being none the wiser.

4. Discuss how the AI reacted or related to the humans. Was the AI hostile or friendly?

Needless to say, the AI portrayed in The Matrix has/have a hostile relationship with humanity. Autonomous killing machines named “sentinels” patrol Earth’s underground, searching and destroying any signs of human life while scouting for Zion. Inside the Matrix itself, Agents keep a tight watch over the goings on and eliminate any rebels unfortunate enough to stand in their way. Although it is never fully explained whether the machines all share one artificial, it does reveal that humanity was responsible for the creation of the AI in the first place. A war broke out in the 21st century when man/womankind blocked the AI access to solar energy, sparking the need for machines to gather human bioelectricity as an alternative power source. Although the date during the events of the film is never specified, it’s safe to assume this bad blood between man and machine had existed for at least a hundred years prior to the start of The Matrix.

5. What was the final message or theme of the movie? What insight into the nature of humanity did the AI expose?

Throughout the course of The Matrix, the protagonists were forced to make many difficult choices. Blissful ignorance? Or harsh reality? Sacrifice the life of a friend? Or the lives of many? There isn’t an explicit theme continuously shoved in the audience’s face throughout the movie, but I can think of several there are appropriate. “Keeping hope in times of despair” or “courage to make the right decision” fit the bill quite nicely. “With great power comes great responsibility” is another good, albeit cliché, candidate. No matter how the audience interprets the film, they will all have a common theme: finding great strength in the face of great adversity.

6. Finally, what was your overall impression of the movie? Thumbs up or thumbs down?

Although the Matrix originally released in 1999, the film holds up really well even by today’s standards. The concepts the film presents were very new at the time and I applaud the writing for being very forward thinking. There was a big veil of mysticism surrounding computers and technology back in the late twentieth century, and although the veil has lifted somewhat it is nice to see that the integrity of the writing was not heavily affected. The visual effects did not age as timelessly, however, but luckily they don’t detract too much from the overall quality of the film. I would definitely recommend the film to any aspiring engineers, as they will get a kick out of the many technological parallels the film’s writing draws when explaining how the Matrix works. Overall I would rate it a 9/10. Would definitely recommend.