

Here's Why 'The Matrix' Is More Relevant Than Ever: Class of 1999

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FULL TEXT

One scene reflects the themes —A.I., fake news, transgender lives and Gen X—that make the film a classic.

Neo, the hero of “The Matrix,” is sure he lives in 1999. He has a green-hued cathode-ray-tube computer screen and a dot-matrix printer. His city has working phone booths.

But he’s wrong: He lives in the future (2199, to be exact). Neo’s world is a simulation—a fake-out version of the late 20th century, created by 21st-century artificial intelligences to enslave humanity.

When we first saw Neo, though, it really was 1999. The idea of A.I. feeding on human brains and bodies seemed like a thought experiment. But the movie’s warnings about A.I. —and everything else—have sharpened over time, which explains why it’s been harnessed by all kinds of people in the years since: philosophers, pastors, techno-boosters and techno-doomers, the alt-right. Judged solely on cultural relevance, “The Matrix” might be the most consequential release of 1999.

The genius of the movie —what makes it incredibly rewatchable 25 years later—is that the writer-directors Lilly and Lana Wachowski didn’t try to control the meaning. Instead, they seeded symbolism throughout.

Look with me at how one introductory scene manages to draw together many thematic threads, explaining why in today’s world of pervasive internet, A.I., fake news and extremism, “The Matrix” feels more relevant than ever.

Neo is instructed by some shadowy presence seemingly in his computer to “follow the white rabbit.” That’s a reference to Lewis Carroll’s “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland,” one of the movie’s structuring literary allusions.

A chapter titled “Down the Rabbit Hole” coined the phrase that is now used to describe becoming so obsessed with something that you start to lose your grip on reality. We all know what that’s like, thanks to the internet. One particular rabbit hole “The Matrix” has pushed people into is a philosophical inquiry known as the simulation hypothesis, which asks whether we’re actually living in a simulation. If so, what does that mean for our lives? The 2021 documentary “A Glitch in the Matrix” even centers on a man who came to believe that “The Matrix” literally depicts reality, and it drove him to murder.

But even if you’re not in a simulation, your reality might start to seem unreal. A deeply Gen X-coded theme in “The Matrix” has to do with recognizing and eschewing soulless corporations and brainless systems. Neo’s day job in a cubicle farm visually echoes that human farm on which, he eventually discovers, the A.I.s feed. (“The Matrix” came out a month after the release of “Office Space,” which satirizes corporate malaise.)

Now, 25 years later, the Gen X dictum against selling out has been transmuted into a world in which influencers constantly exhort you to be your own boss at a time when it’s harder than ever to make a living. That’s scary for those whose jobs can be replaced by A.I., which is trained on the products of human creativity—frequently without the creators’ consent. The human farms of “The Matrix” were chillingly prophetic.

There’s more “Alice” to consider here. Carroll created a fictional world in which every character and scenario mirrored something in his Victorian-era reality. In the end, Wonderland is absurdist. Yet the reality that Alice lives in, with its imperious leaders and convoluted systems, is just as absurd.

That’s where “The Matrix” is headed from this moment. Whatever we think we know about the world around us is actually blinding us to the truer, deeper reality; we’re in thrall to an opiate.

Neo is a hacker by night who sells contraband on minidiscs from his apartment, including to a group of cyberpunk

partyers. Neo keeps his discs and his profits in a hollowed-out copy of “Simulacra and Simulation,” the philosopher Jean Baudrillard’s 1981 treatise, a foundational text for “The Matrix.” Much has been made about the links between the movie and Baudrillard’s ideas about how simulations and hyperreality colonize “the real” in a postmodern age, to the point that nothing is real anymore.

Baudrillard actually didn’t like “The Matrix.” He felt it misrepresented his ideas about simulation overtaking reality, flattening and misunderstanding the argument.

But let’s go down the rabbit hole further: “Simulacra and Simulation” is open to the essay “On Nihilism.” In it, Baudrillard suggests it does no good to point out “the truth” from within a system that denies or suppresses reality. In those circumstances, your only tool to combat oppression is violence. You can only fight nihilism with nihilism. This is where the Wachowskis differ. Based on all four “Matrix” movies—including the last one, a swoony romance—their biggest inquiry is about nihilism vs. humanism. It’s about how we live amid systems that seek to deny and suppress who we are, and their answer, ultimately, is love.

Both Wachowskis have since come out as transgender women. A significant subset of fans now sees “The Matrix” as a metaphor for the experience of transgender people, an interpretation bolstered in the movie by statements about Neo’s very existence inside a literal binary system. In 2016, Lilly Wachowski said that “while the ideas of identity and transformation are critical components in our work, the bedrock that all ideas rest upon is love.”

Neo’s buyer also jokes that Neo is his “own personal Jesus Christ,” a moment that sets up the many biblical allusions in the film—the city of Zion (a biblical name for Jerusalem as well as the idea of the city of God), Cypher’s Judas-like betrayal, a very important character named Trinity. At the time, this was catnip to youth group leaders looking for a way to make religion cool.

And “The Matrix” as religious allegory has stuck. The last 25 years have seen books published with titles like “Escaping the Matrix: Setting Your Mind Free to Experience Real Life in Christ,” “The Gospel Reloaded” and “Christ—The Original Matrix.” If you’re looking for it, it’s definitely there.

But still more themes present themselves. The moment before we’re even introduced to Neo, we see his computer screen, on which news headlines are loading and scrolling, though nobody’s touching the keyboard.

In 1999, the term “fake news” wasn’t pervasive, nor was it saddled with the same kind of baggage. But the question of “official” truths and who controls them had come to pervade pop culture at the time; when “The Matrix” premiered, for instance, “The X-Files” was at the peak of its popularity. In 1999, the open internet still held the promise of promoting more truth, not less. As we’ve learned since, if truth can be distributed on the internet, so can conspiracy theories—or outright falsehoods.

And when we get a glimpse of Neo’s desk, we see another phenomenological allusion with a long tail into today. The word “cave” comes to mind. (The philosophical notion of Plato’s cave hangs thickly over this movie.) It’s littered with computers and tech gadgets: monitors, an ergonomic keyboard, that printer. There’s also an Apple Newton, a tablet-style device with handwriting recognition that was a predecessor of our always-connected iPads and iPhones.

Neo is constantly wired into the internet. Back in 1999, most of us still thought of the internet as a place you visited, not a gooey nebulous entity to which you were always connected. “The Matrix” gave us a hero who knew what it was to always be on, and the sense of unreality that could come with a life lived in a virtual space.

It will be a while still before we meet Morpheus and discover all the truths about the Matrix, the machines and Neo’s role in all of this. That moment arrives with an image that’s become so famous it’s a meme: two pills reflected in Morpheus’s glasses, one red, one blue. The idea of being “redpilled”—that is, choosing to face reality, rather than succumb to the lure of the comfortable simulation—has become a meme on social media platforms, often associated with right-wing causes that have a heavy online presence, like the alt-right, men’s rights activists and conspiracy theorists.

In fact, though, it’s to reject one narrative and adopt another. The red-pilled person is just accepting a new matrix. All of these metaphors swim around inside “The Matrix,” and the one you see depends, ironically enough, upon which system you’re most interested in dismantling. Twenty-five years later, metaphors about capitalism and gender binaries and technological cages and artificial intelligence have only become more relevant, not less.

That “The Matrix” keeps giving us more ways to read it reminds us of what an accomplishment it was. But it’s also a glimpse into how great art never has one fixed meaning, and because of that, it’s always a little dangerous.

[Video: Watch on YouTube.]

Videos and images via Warner Bros.

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