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ARTS & CULTURE | FILM | ESSAY

25 Years Later, We're All Trapped in 'The Matrix'

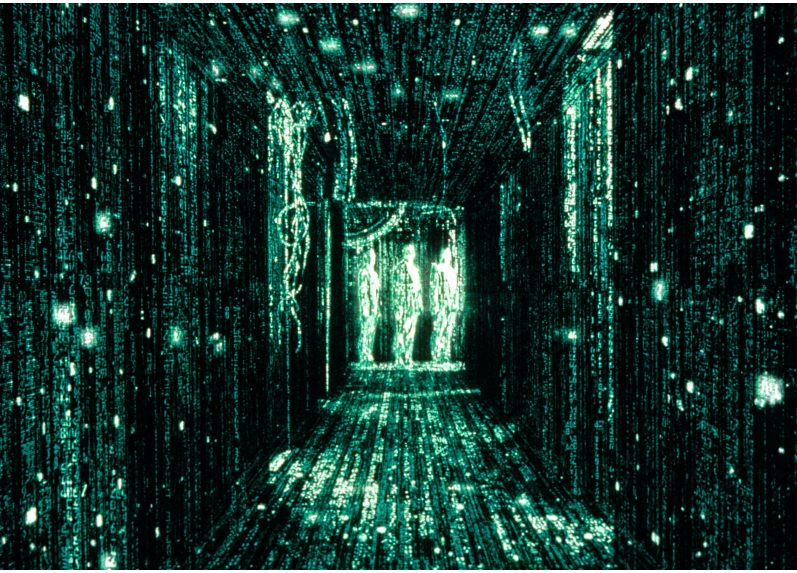
The 1999 sci-fi classic predicted a world like the one we now live in, where human beings are cut off from one another by technology. But it also reminded us that resistance is possible.

By Meir Soloveichik

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It is a cinematic scene familiar to millions: A man named Morpheus sits across from another man named Neo and informs him that his entire notion of reality is a lie. If Neo wishes to know the truth of human existence, Morpheus says, all he has to do is choose one of two pills. “You take the blue pill—the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill...and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

This scene is the turning point in “The Matrix,” the sci-fi classic that was released 25 years ago this month. Of course, Neo chooses the red pill and learns the terrible truth that the advent of artificial intelligence allowed machines to take over the Earth. He believes it is 1999, but in fact it is 2199, and all human beings are perpetually asleep in vats, exploited by their AI masters as a source of energy. The world they think they experience is actually a virtual reality known as “The Matrix.”



A scene of virtual reality from 'The Matrix,' released 25 years ago this month. PHOTO: WARNER BROS./EVERETT COLLECTION

Morpheus, played by Laurence Fishburne, has devoted himself to freeing individuals from the Matrix and leading them to a refuge called Zion. He believes that Neo, played by Keanu Reeves, is “the One” destined to liberate humanity.

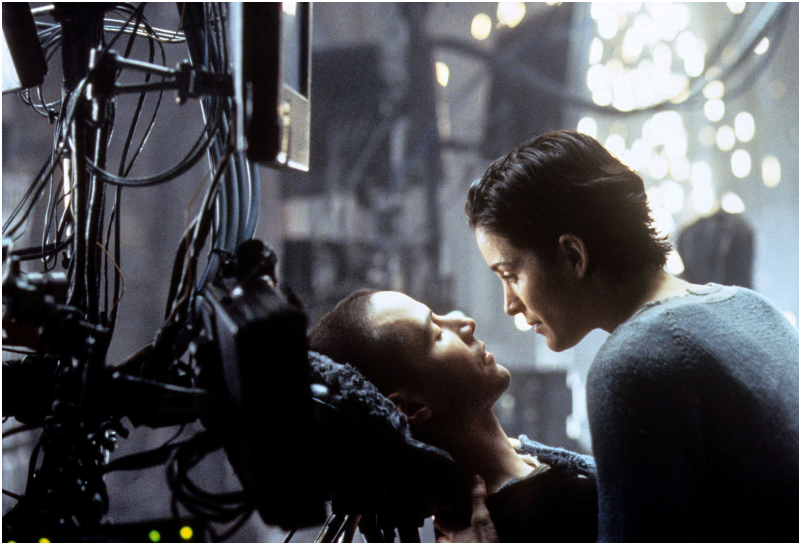
Directed by the sibling team the Wachowskis, “The Matrix” was a box office hit in 1999 and spawned two sequels in 2003 and another in 2021. It also became an important cultural influence. The term “red-pilled” is now widely used online to describe someone who has grown skeptical of the way political reality is usually depicted.

The power of the film lies in the way it adapts one of the oldest allegories in the history of philosophy. In Plato’s “Republic,” the Athenian philosopher Socrates describes prisoners who have spent their entire lives manacled in a cave. A fire behind them casts the shadows of objects on a wall in front of them, and because shadows are all they have ever seen, they assume that what appears before their eyes is reality.

One prisoner breaks free, however, and makes his way to the surface of the Earth, where he beholds the sun and the real world. Ultimately he returns to the cave, seeking to convince his fellows that reality is out there to be discovered. Plato argues that the philosopher is like this escaped prisoner. It is his job to free humanity from illusion and teach us what is truly real.

The allegory of the cave is one of the indelible images in the history of Western thought, a metaphor for the capacity of human beings to break free from falsehood. Morpheus and Neo have been widely recognized as Plato’s heirs, philosopher-kings for the digital age.

But Plato also warns that the prisoners in the cave will resist being freed and that they will hate the philosopher who tries to teach them unfamiliar truths: “If any one tried to loose another and lead him up to the light, let them only catch the offender, and they would put him to death.”



Keanu Reeves and Carrie-Anne Moss in 'The Matrix.' PHOTO: WARNER BROS./EVERETT COLLECTION

In “The Matrix,” this attitude is represented by Cypher, played by Joe Pantoliano, who has been set free from the Matrix but longs to return to it. For Cypher, the true world is too dreary and difficult; he has secretly asked the AI overlords to place him back in the vat, to allow him to enter the dream world again. “I choose the Matrix!” he defiantly exclaims, adding that if his digital experiences are more pleasurable than his current unplugged life, then “the Matrix can be more real than this world.”

To rewatch “The Matrix” is to be reminded of how primitive our technology was just 25 years ago. We see computers with bulky screens, cellphones with keypads and a once-ubiquitous feature of our society known as “pay phones,” central to the plot of the film.

But in a strange way, the film has become more relevant today than it was in 1999. With the rise of the smartphone and social media, genuine human interaction has dropped precipitously. Today many people, like Cypher, would rather spend their time in the imaginary realms offered by technology than engage in a genuine relationship with other human beings.

In the film, one of the representatives of the AI, the villainous Agent Smith, played by Hugo Weaving, tells Morpheus that the false reality of the Matrix is set in 1999 because that year was “the peak of your civilization. I say your civilization, because as soon as we started thinking for you it really became our civilization.”

Indeed, not long after “The Matrix” premiered, humanity hooked itself up to a matrix of its own. There is no denying that our lives have become better in many ways thanks to the internet and smartphones. But the epidemic of loneliness and depression that has swept society reveals that many of us are now walled off from one another in vats of our own making.

In his 2013 book “The Cave and the Light,” historian Arthur Herman notes that a real cave inspired Plato’s most famous metaphor. It served as the mouth of a Greek temple at Eleusis, where worshipers descended in darkness into an illuminated “inner sanctuary.” For the ancient Greeks this was a cultic ritual, but the allegory of the cave transforms it into a metaphor of human empowerment. “For Plato,” Herman reflects, “the answer to the cave’s uncertainties lies not with esoteric rituals or magic spells but within ourselves, thanks to our reason.”

For today’s dwellers in the digital cave, the path back into the light doesn’t involve taking a pill, as in “The Matrix,” or being rescued by a philosopher. We ourselves have the power to resist the extremes of the digital world, even as we remain linked to it. You can find hints of an unplugged “Zion” in the Sabbath tables of observant Jews, where electronic devices are forbidden, and in university seminars where laptops are banned so that students can engage with a text and each other.

Twenty-five years ago, “The Matrix” offered us a modern twist on Plato’s cave. Today we are once again asking what it will take to find our way out of the lonely darkness, into the brilliance of other human souls in the real world.

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Corrections & Amplifications

Eleusis is a city on the mainland of Greece. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said it is an island. (Corrected on March 26)

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