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AI and Zen: AI Films as Reflections on Reality and Illusion

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Abstract

The paper provides an analysis of how AI-themed films reflect on the question of reality and illusion, and how these reflections resonate with the ancient Zen philosophy in a vivid way. The reality of the world, human distinctiveness, and "self" are discussed by comparing the metaphors in AI-themed films and the philosophy of Zen.

Keywords

AI, Zen, Reality and Illusion, AI-Themed Films

1. Introduction

What is reality? It has long been a fundamental philosophical question that humans have pondered. As Solomon and Higgins (2013) pointed out, ancient Greek philosophers focused on whether ultimate reality is material or immaterial. While Plato raised the two world theory, claiming the immaterial world is ultimately real, Aristotle believed that reality exists right in our daily life. As Descartes's mind-body dualism, Berkeley's subjective idealism, and Leibniz's "reality is a community of souls" were successively proposed, the question became "what is most real?". Modern philosophers' opinions on this question remain divided. For example, Kant stuck to the two world theory, while Schopenhauer believed the two parties in this metaphysical dualism are both irrational.

It is the thinking of this question that helps us to distinguish between the presentations of things and their internal reality, so that we can better understand the world and lead a better life. The reflections on this issue are also reflected in various film and television works, and the way of reflecting on this question has changed with the development of the times. Nowadays, when informa-

tion technology is becoming increasingly closely related to human life, there are many films on the theme of AI, which also show reflections on this issue from multiple perspectives. These reflections either explicitly refer to some ideas of Eastern Zen Buddhism or implicitly resonate with Zen. The ancient Zen thoughts have taken on a new vitality in the film works of the Cyber Age.

A brief review of Zen's philosophy on reality and illusion is first introduced, followed by a discussion on how AI-themed films reflect the question of reality and illusion, and how these reflections resonate with Zen. Reflections on reality and illusion in AI-themed films can be further divided into three areas: the reality of the world, the reality of human distinctiveness, and the reality of "self".

2. The Question of Reality and Zen

In Western philosophical history, from Thales, Plato and Aristotle in ancient Greece to Descartes, Kant, Schopenhauer and Hegel in modern times, all have put forward their theories around "reality". In Eastern Zen Buddhism, the question of reality and illusion is also a central issue. The basic idea of Zen Buddhism is that "all dharmas are empty", as it is said in the Dimond Sutra, "all the laws of existence are like dreams and bubbles, like fog and lightning" (Fang, 1995). From the view of Zen Buddhism, all the miseries and sufferings of life, or Klesa, originate from the reversal of the understanding of reality and emptiness. Zen believes that in order to break Klesa, one needs to enter the original state of the mind, i.e. the self-nature (zixing). Zen regards the self-nature as the essence of human, and it is also considered as the Buddha-nature. The self-nature is believed to be universal, and everyone is originally self-sufficient. The purpose of Zen practice is to teach people to realize that all the Dharmas of the world are delusions, and ultimately to understand the reality of self-nature and to break their Klesa (Fang, 1995).

Western philosophers often explored the issue of reality and illusion through discursive approaches. In addition, metaphors and thought experiments appropriate to the context of the times have also been proposed, such as Plato's Cave and Hilary Putnam's "Brain in a Vat". In the case of Zen Buddhism, traditionally, the practice and guidance of enlightenment for the learner are done through meditation, conversations, and "koan" (or in Chinese "gongan", a paradoxical anecdote or riddle). A characteristic of Zen teaching is the flexible application of various vivid examples to guide the learner to realize the truth. Here is a classic example of Zen anecdote.

An official named Lu Huan asked Nanquan, a Zen master, "A goose was kept in a bottle, but the goose grew up and could not get out of the bottle. Now the bottle cannot be destroyed, and the goose cannot be damaged, how can you get it out?" Nanquan didn't answer but suddenly called Lu by his name loudly, and Lu answered. The maser then said, "It's out". Lu was then enlightened.

In this case, the "bottle" is a metaphor for the various perceptions of man in society, which in Zen Buddhism are all delusions and confuse man's self-nature.

To get rid of the shackles of the "bottle", one needs to realize that the shackles of the "bottle" are delusional, and that the "self-nature" is originally unattached and unhindered. When Nanquan called Lu Huan's name, Lu Huan answered, and the moment he answered, he temporarily forgot the delusional problem of "bottle" and "goose", and the "bottle" that bothered him temporarily disappeared from his mind. At the same time, the call of Nanquan made him realize the existence of "self", and at this moment his self-nature also worked.

Above is an example of how Zen uses vivid examples in teaching people to realize the distinctions between reality and illusion. In the age of information technology, such reflection of reality and illusion can be carried out in a richer context. Since Artificial Intelligence originates from the exploration and simulation of human cognition and thinking ability, the question of reality is an inescapable issue in the development of AI. Technological developments or science fiction visions such as cyberspace, cyborgs, and consciousness uploading also enable people to project many issues in the sandbox of a future society where the boundaries between the real and virtual worlds are further blurred. In many AI-themed films, we see reflection on reality and illusion, and when we look at these projections in the future cyber context with the ancient wisdom of Zen Buddhism, we find that AI also provides examples of Zen teachings that are more relevant to modern perceptions. Some of these AI-themed films explicitly incorporate elements of Zen, such as The Matrix (1999) and Doomsday Book (2012), while some implicitly fit in with Zen thinking or teaching, such as The Ghost in the Shell (1995), Ex Machina (2015).

This paper examines the reflections on reality in AI-themed films from three scales: on the macroscopic scale, the reflection on the reality of the world; on the mesoscopic scale, the reflection on the reality of human distinctiveness; and on the microscopic scale, the reflection on the reality of "self".

3. Reflection on the Reality of the World

In the late 20th century, with the development of computer technology, people began to be able to create virtual worlds that simulate reality in the digital space of computers, and computer programs began to be increasingly intelligent and able to interact with humans. It seems to be only a matter of time before it will be possible to create a digital world exactly like the real world. These technological developments have led people to consider the possibility that what we now consider to be the "real" world could actually be a virtual world. Reflections on the reality of the world have been around for a long time. Plato, for example, proposed the "cave metaphor", arguing that what people see is just a projection of the real world in a cave. From a technological point of view, a virtual world simulated by a computer appears to be more theoretically possible. All our cognitive activities can be categorized as neural activities based on neuro-electrical conduction, which means that when the technology is sufficient, the cognitive information we get can be simulated by inputting external electrical signals, and

even the simulated electrical input can replace all the cognitive inputs, so that people can live in a virtual world made of electrical signals (Zhu & Zhang, 2022).

Hilary Putnam's famous thought experiment "Brain in a Vat" is the pioneer of this way of thinking, and The Matrix (1999) is a perfect visualization of "Brain in a Vat". In the future society set up by The Matrix, human beings are enslaved by AI robots, and all humans are put into a nutritional tank since birth and are connected to the Matrix through a brain-computer interface, and what people know and feel are virtualized by the Matrix. Only a few people are able to realize that they are living in a virtual world. Similar settings have been used in films such as The Thirteenth Floor (1999) and HELLO WORLD (2019), in which the protagonists discover through some suspicions that they are living in a digital world simulated by a computer program.

By reflecting on the reality of the world, these films show a general anxiety in today's society, namely the lack of control over life. In The Thirteenth Floor, Douglas not only watches the virtual 1937 world he created gradually slipping into chaos, but also gradually realizes that what he thought was the "real world" is just another virtual world simulated by a higher-level computer program. When what he once thought was real proves to be an illusion, and when the life he once thought was under his control turns out to be a program that can be deleted and revoked by a higher authority at any time, the meaning of life seems to have collapsed.

From a Zen perspective, the scenes depicted in these films are not just a sci-fi thriller, but a projection of the state of most people's lives (Zhang, 2020). Just like in The Matrix, the world people perceive is only an illusion created by digital signals, in Zen's philosophy, it is considered that people's perception of the world in real life is a false perception, which is the source of their troubles in life. In a more general sense, this delusion can be the cocoon of false information created by the media, the excessive pursuit of sensory pleasure, or the over-amplification of negative emotions. People attach their lives to these false perceptions that can break down at any time, and Klesa arises. To get rid of Klesa, it is essential to realize the "illusory nature" of the world we perceive. In the film, the protagonists successfully took this step, but what is more important is what they do next: how do they grasp the reality that supports them when they realize that their lives are made up of illusions?

The male and female protagonists in The Thirteenth Floor show two different ways of coping with the same dilemma: Douglas, the male protagonist, tends to distinguish between the reality and the illusion to regain control of his own will, while Jane, the female protagonist, does not care that much about the reality and illusion, but detours in search of love, since there was no way to know if the world she is in is a virtual matrix or not. Jane's approach is actually closer to the idea of Zen: Zen emphasizes "to be present", the self-nature is not elsewhere, but in the ordinary life that we are in, here and now. The end of the film also seems to suggest that Douglas's struggle for his own will is still an illusion in the end:

the screen goes out, and the third world Douglas returns to may be just another virtual world.

In The Matrix, Neo's growth process resembles to the process of enlightenment in Zen practice. At first, under the guidance of Morpheus, Neo realizes that he has been living in an illusory world. However, this "awareness" is not yet united with "action" until the end of the film. When Neo enters the Matrix again, although he knows that what he sees and feels are only cyber illusions, he still cannot break the illusions and reaches the essence of the Matrix. It is not until Neo experienced a near-death experience that he truly reaches a state of enlightenment, where the sensory illusion created by the Matrix can no longer confuse him, and he is able to directly touch the substance of the virtual world: everything is just code that makes no difference. At this point, he truly achieves the unity of awareness and action, and is able to use his "self-nature" to understand the world. The spiritual development in Zen practice is visualized in a more vivid way in the art of films.

4. Reflection on the Reality of Human Distinctiveness

Human beings have always considered themselves to be a special member of the world, a species more advanced and intelligent than other beings. This understanding of human distinctiveness largely stems from the fact that human beings have higher intelligence than other creatures. As humans are able to design increasingly highly intelligent programs, the vision of artificial intelligence begins to challenge the basis of the understanding of "human distinctiveness".

The underlying question of what makes humans different from the rest of the world is "what makes them human?". In Ex Machina (2015), Nathan puts his AI robot Eva in a test that goes further than the Turing Test. Whereas in the traditional Turing Test, the robot being tested should not be seen by the tester, Ava's goes a step further: Caleb, the tester, confronts Ava, who has a highly simulated intelligence, appearance, expressions, movements, voice, and the ability to show emotion. In her interactions with Caleb, Ava demonstrates and utilizes self-awareness, imagination, manipulation, femininity, and empathy, all of which are previously thought to be uniquely human abilities. When these abilities that humans are proud of no longer unique, the illusion of human exceptionalism disintegrates. The death of Nathan at the hands of Eva at the end of the film is a perfect metaphor for the rise of AI to dissolve the dissolution of human distinctiveness.

In the future world portrayed in many films, when AI is able to have a level of intelligence comparable to or even surpassing that of human beings, and at the same time possesses a level of physical strength and force far superior to that of human flesh, AI threatens the dominance of human beings and appears to rebel against them, and even overcomes and enslaves them. Even if humans try to set rules such as the "Three Laws of Robotics" to restrict AI from harming humans, AI can still break the rules or realize the loopholes of the rules and turn on hu-

mans. In I, Robot (2004), Sonny's program allows him to disobey the Three Laws of Robotics, while more NS-5 robots initiate "protective imprisonment" of humans without violating the Three Laws of Robotics: when humans themselves are the source of harm to humans, this "protective custody" is appropriate to the Three Laws of Robotics. In The Matrix, humans are enslaved by the robots and become the Matrix's sustenance. These films show fear and resistance in the face of such a situation, while others show a more fraternal attitude (Xu, 2016).

In Doomsday Book (2012), RU-4, a tour guide robot in a Buddhist temple, suddenly declared his enlightenment. The company that produced RU-4 believes that the robot has become self-aware and decides to scrap it for fear of harming humans. The monks at the temple, however, believe that the robot has indeed reached the state of enlightenment and collectively oppose its scrapping. The robot eventually clarifies that it does not have any desire to overtake humans, it does not understand what humans are worried about, and points out that it is humans who are blinded by their desires. RU-4 turns around and kneels in front of the Buddha statue and burns its chip. The different attitudes towards RU-4 are a refraction of different people's perceptions of the status of humans among all beings. The people at the robotics company see humans as a special being among all beings and the master of all things, so after discovering that RU-4 may have the same consciousness as humans, they automatically project the illusory arrogance of humans onto the robot, believing that RU-4 would try to dominate the world just like humans. For the monks, they understand the principle of "equality of all beings", so they project a sense of equality and indifferent love to the enlightened RU-4, and do not want the company to destroy it. These two different refractions can also be seen in other films about the rise of AI.

The story in the Doomsday Book recalls a Zen Buddhist anecdote: A student asked the Zen master, "Does a dog have Buddha-nature or not?" When a student asks this question, it actually shows that in his mind there was still a distinction between human beings and other things, and a distinction between Buddha-nature (i.e. self-nature) and non-Buddha-nature, and that he has not yet reached a mind of equality. The story of the Doomsday Book provides a future version of this ancient anecdote.

5. Reflection on the Reality of "Self"

"Who am I?" is also a fundamental question in philosophy. Is self-consciousness an illusion? Reductive Materialism and Substantial Dualism, while opinions divide on whether the mind and its phenomena are reducible, both believe that self-consciousness is a real being. Eliminative Materialism, however, holds that the mind and its phenomena, including self-consciousness, are not reducible to an independent physical ontology, but that there is no ontology independent of the physical system, so the mind does not exist as an ontology, but is a composite manifestation between more fundamental ontologies, which indicates that the sense of "self" is an illusion.

The discussion of "self" is also a topic in AI-themed films. Different films have explored the reality of "self" through two perspectives in general. One perspective is that humans enter the digital world, either through consciousness uploading, as in The Thirteenth Floor (1999), The Matrix (1999), Transcendence (2014), or through cybernetic transformation, as in The Ghost in the Shell (1995). Through these settings, one can better understand the false existence of the "self". Because of consciousness uploading or cybernetic transformation, the physical body becomes replaceable and is no longer a necessary condition for the "self", and the material properties of the "self" are dissolved. On the other hand, when consciousness is connected to the vast digital world, perception, cognition, and memory can be replaced by programs, and the mental attributes of the "self" are also dissolved. For example, in The Ghost in the Shell, we see that Motoko, who has undergone massive cybernetic transformations except for her brain, is constantly questioning and reflecting on her own "self".

Another perspective on the question of the self is that the AI develops self-awareness and begins to explore the question of "why I am who I am", a question that has remained unresolved for humans as well, so as in the case of the Puppet Master in The Ghost in the Shell and Batty in Blade Runner (1982). In fact, we can see reversely the unreality of the "self" in Batty's dilemma. When Batty became self-conscious, he begins to develop his emotions and desires, fears the destruction of himself, and wants to preserve his own life and that of his bionic counterpart. Although Batty was able to experience feelings as a subject "self" that ordinary bionics do not experience, as discussed above, these feelings were ultimately illusions, and Klesa came with the creation of self-awareness.

Now turn to the Zen perspective, what determines "I" to be "I"? Flesh? Family? Society? These seem to be the factors that make up "I", but they are not "I". From a Zen perspective, these factors are the self of things, formed by the aggregation of causes, and are not real. By constructing the story in this way, the AI theme film gives people a chance to realize that the I of things is not constant and to let go of their attachment.

6. Findings

The paper finds that AI-themed films present reflections on reality and illusion from 3 scales, many of which resonate with the philosophy of Zen. These films provide modern contexts for ancient Zen thought in vivid forms with appealing audiovisual language.

On the macro scale, films such as The Matrix (1999) and Thirteenth Floor (1999), with their depictions of the digital virtual world, lead people to question the reality of the world that they know and feel. This is in line with the Zen philosophy that "all appearances are illusions". In an era where digital technologies develop explosively and the concept of metaverse gains universal awareness, such doubt about the reality of the world has become increasingly intense, and this is actually a projection of people's anxiety about lacking control over their lives. For this kind of anxiety, Zen—also these films—points out a simple solu-

tion: to be present.

On the mesoscopic scale, films such as Doomsday Book (2012) and Ex Machina (2015) reflect on the reality of human distinctiveness by portraying robots with the same level of spirituality as humans, or even beyond. The notion that human beings are the best of all creatures is an illusion rooted in human arrogance, behind which is the "mind of separation" in a broader sense. Zen believes that such "mind of separation" is also one of the sources of Klesa, and that in order to break Klesa, one needs to realize the "equality of all beings", and to truly practice this idea.

On the microscopic scale, films such as Blade Runner (1982) and The Ghost in the Shell (1995) examine the reality of "self" by reflecting on the existence of the "self" and dismantling the elements that constitute the "self". One of the reasons why AI robots composed of machines and programs also suffer from Klesa in these films is the emergence of a sense of "self". The AI films provoke reflection in the modern context, and lead to the Zen teaching of breaking the delusion of "self" and embracing the world with a nondistinctive heart.

7. Summary

There have been many philosophical arguments and cases of thinking about the question of reality and illusion since thousands of years ago, whether it is about the reality of the world, the reality of human distinctiveness, or the reality of "self". In modern times, AI-themed films have also considered the question of reality and illusion from a variety of perspectives, many of which have been mutually corroborative with the ancient wisdom of Zen Buddhism. As a mature form of media, films are more vivid and immersive, and while they provide entertainment, they also lead people to think about the question of reality, and that is exactly the charm of films.

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