

# Memory, Morality, and Machines: Ethical Implications of AI in Popular Culture

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past few decades, Artificial Intelligence has become a central theme in various forms of media, including movies, television shows, and literature. This paper seeks to critically evaluate how artificial intelligence has influenced popular culture by examining the movies – *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), *M3GAN* (2022) and *Mission: Impossible – Dead Reckoning* (2023). The films address the ramifications of artificial intelligence gone awry, posing ethical concerns and the risks of this technology as it continues to integrate itself across various aspects of society. While AI's functional capabilities and technological developments have been extensively researched, little is known about how it is portrayed in popular culture as a memory-bearing or memory-manipulating creature. The paper critically examines the problems of memory retention vs memory manipulation, ethical programming, the impact on emotional well-being, the autonomy and control of AI, and how to strike a balance between safety and privacy.

**Keywords:** artificial intelligence (AI), autonomy, ethical implications, memory, privacy

## 1. Introduction: Evolution of Artificial Intelligence

The unprecedented growth in the field of science and technology has led to the development of Artificial Intelligence, or AI, as a separate domain. AI can be defined as the capacity of a computer or robot under computer control to carry out actions typically associated with intelligent creatures. The term is commonly used in reference to the endeavour of creating artificial intelligence systems that include human-like cognitive functions, like reasoning, meaning-finding, generalisation, and experience-based learning (Copeland, 2024). AI can be classified

into various categories based on their performance levels. An artificial general intelligence (AGI) is an autonomous agent with unsupervised learning capabilities is what an AGI system would be, as opposed to the current ANI systems, which are usually employed as tools to support human behaviours (McLean et al., 2023). But artificial general intelligence (AGI) has not yet been achieved. On the contrary, we can observe how the great majority of the artificial intelligence (AI) community is focused on developing "narrow AI" systems, or programs that exhibit intelligence in a single or specific domain, like chess playing, medical diagnosis, car driving, algebraic computation, or mathematical

theorem proving (Pennachin and Goertzel, 2007). According to Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, there are several specialised intelligence components that make up human intelligence, such as linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, spatial, interpersonal, intra-personal, naturalist, and existential (Gardner, 2000). This definition of human intelligence is applicable to AGI thus making it on par with human beings. Thus, we can observe that interest in artificial intelligence has increased over the past few years, which may lead to new initiatives to develop artificial general intelligence (Bostrom, 2014).

## 2. Literature Review: Artificial Intelligence and Popular Culture

Artificial intelligence (AI), which is frequently presented in media and movies as both a technological wonder and an existential threat, has taken centre stage in cultural narratives. The technical aspects of AI have received a lot of attention, but little is known about its cultural function, especially as a memory-related agent. The idea of robots with human like intelligence has been a part of literature since the 1900s. One of the early instances of a man-made creature displaying any form of intelligence is seen in Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1818). In the 1950's, Isaac Asimov is considered to be one of the most popular science fiction writers. Some of his most popular stories like *I, Robot* (1950) and *The Bicentennial Man and other stories* (1976) were loosely adapted into movies later on. The seminal short story "Dial F for Frankenstein" by Arthur C. Clarke, about a telephone network that grows more and more powerful and eventually takes over the globe, was published by Playboy in 1964. *The Terminator* (Spielberg, 1984) portrays how Skynet, a hostile artificial intelligence tries to save itself from annihilation in a post-apocalyptic future. *Bicentennial Man* (Colombus, 1999) explores a plethora of emotions experienced by the robot Andrew and how he tries to become a human towards the end of the movie. *A. I. Artificial Intelligence* (Spielberg, 2001) portrays David, a childlike robot who displays the ability to love others. A majority of these movies depict a dystopian attitude where the survival of

mankind is threatened by AI. Very few movies explore the utopian angle where AI and the human species live together in harmony. Nonetheless, all these movies have contributed to the recurrent theme and a possible reality of how mankind could be looking at a future that is inevitably connected with artificial intelligence in some form or the other. This paper investigates how AI in popular culture serves as a bearer, manipulator, and even curator of memory in addition to being a computational tool. These cinematic depictions raise moral questions about control, agency, surveillance, and emotional manipulation.

## Artificial Intelligence and Memory Studies

Memory is the ability or technique to replicate or recall information that has been learnt and stored, particularly through associative mechanisms (Merriam-Webster dictionary). Encoding, storing, and retrieving information are the psychological processes involved in memory preservation (Oxford dictionary of Psychology). Memory is a ubiquitous sociocultural phenomenon that is significant in many spheres of social life. memory as an interdisciplinary phenomenon has become a fundamental topic of academic discourse across recognised domains (Erll, 2011). The vast repositories of information available online, the widespread use of digital devices and the availability of external memory tools have led to both opportunities and challenges concerning the way human beings remember (Wilmer et. al., 2017). Scholars and academicians are now interested in comprehending how digital technologies affect the way data is preserved, accessed and remembered. The influx of data/information generated via emails, websites, social media platforms is stored, recalled and erased with a simple click of a button. This transition is the result of the exorbitant usage of digital devices and the internet, in turn leading to the profound impact of the digital era on collective memory (Mandolessi, 2023). As a fundamental cognitive function, memory serves as the basis for learning, making decisions, solving problems, and day-to-day functioning (Călinescu, 2024).

While there is significant growth in the field of memory studies, little is known about how AI in media narratives affects or reorganises both individual and collective memory. There is not enough scholarly attention paid to the relationship between AI and memory in popular culture, despite the fact that interest in AI is expanding across disciplines. This paper examines and bridges this gap by analysing how AI characters represent memory-related functions that pose ethical, philosophical, and sociological issues. Recent research examines the ways in which digital technologies mediate memory, especially through social media, smart devices, and algorithms (Erll, 2011; Hoskins, 2017; Mandolessi, 2023). These studies demonstrate how memory is becoming more fragmented, externalised, and algorithmically controlled in the modern era. José van Dijk (2007) refers to technological memory as "mediated memory," which raises serious concerns of ownership, manipulation, and dependability. AI has just lately started to be explored in memory discourse as a tool for memory storage and as a possible agent of memory distortion.

The entirety of literature, poetry, music, and film is considered art, because it all represents the world we value. We can claim that one such artistic medium that satisfies our aesthetic sensibilities is cinema (Irdya Raj and Rani, 2024). Astrid Erll in her book *Memory in Culture* states that "literature manifested in all genres and media technologies, both popular and 'trivial' literature as well as canonized and 'high' literature have served – and continue to serve – as media of memory" (p 144). Though a cinema is a cultural institution crafted aesthetically with artists from the story writer to the actor including all the technicians, this art form sustains only when it is patronised, so each genre's sustenance indicates the acceptance and appreciation by that segment of the audience. (Rani and Irdya Raj, 2022). The genre of science fiction has been patronised by a large number of viewers over the decades. "These movies are interesting, because they help shape the mainstream public's view of artificial intelligence and robotics" (Fisher, 2001, p. 1).

Most science fiction movies deal with strong AI or AGI. Movies that have a dystopian theme, usually have an AGI agent as the antagonist. These agents can be robots, humanoids with physical bodies or just a computer entity. For example, movies such as *The Invisible Boy* and *Colossus* have a computer as strong AI. The AGI agents in movies like *Her* and *Blade Runner 2049* display the ability to show and manipulate emotions, thereby providing friendship, romance and sexual pleasures to the protagonists. A complete humanoid can be seen in the movie *The Terminator*, where the characters in the movie find it hard to distinguish him as a machine. AI films are always about us and what makes us unique. They hold up artificial intelligence as a mirror to human nature (Murphy, 2024). As movie lovers, we have occasionally wished for the movies to have alternate endings. This is a result of the idea that we live vicariously via the primary characters. (Irdya Raj and Rani, 2024). Therefore, by including an AI agent in a film, we can examine how we will interact with AI agents in the future, whether as equals, masters, or slaves (Fisher, 2001). Simultaneously, these films emphasise how important it is to consider both the ethical and practical ramifications of artificial intelligence as technology continues to permeate all facets of society. Thus, the fascinating idea of artificial consciousness is most commonly depicted in science fiction films as a warning to humanity. These science fiction's ethical paradigm and futuristic routes, address thought-provoking topics relating to the state of humanity in the tech-dominated world (Prabhu and Premraj, 2024).

### 3. Methodology

Using techniques from film studies, cultural studies, and memory studies, this study takes a qualitative, interpretive approach based on textual and thematic analysis. The research uses secondary materials, such as feature films that have been released in theatres, academic literature on artificial intelligence and memory studies, and already-existing academic and encyclopaedic sources on the history and classification of AI, instead of gathering empirical data from human subjects. Three films specifically chosen for the

study are M3GAN (Johnstone, 2022), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Whedon, 2015), and *Mission: Impossible – Dead Reckoning Part One* (McQuarrie, 2023). These films were picked because they each highlight an artificial intelligence entity whose narrative function goes beyond a traditional computational tool to explicitly address memory-related processes, such as memory manipulation, memory-based learning, and control over collective digital memory. The analysis is organised around a close reading of each film's narrative content, character development, and plot points pertaining to memory retention, memory manipulation, and moral decision-making.

#### 4. Discussion

From Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, artificial intelligence has long captivated writers and filmmakers. Researchers like Katherine Hayles (1999) and Sherry Turkle (2011) have examined how AI in fiction reflects social concerns about autonomy, embodiment, and emotions. According to Murphy (2024), science fiction portrays AI as both a menace and a reflection of human frailties, using it as a mirror to human nature. Few studies, however, look at AI as a memory agent—capable of recording, changing, or erasing memories, especially in ways that affect collective memory.

##### Intersections of Memory and AI in the films

Memory is important to the plot and character dynamics in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) movie *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, especially when it comes to Wanda Maximoff, better known as Scarlet Witch. One of Wanda Maximoff's psychic and reality-altering skills is her ability to implant and control memories. In the movie, she manipulates the memories and feelings of a number of Avengers, such as Natasha Romanoff (Black Widow) and Tony Stark (Iron Man), using her abilities. Because of Wanda Maximoff's manipulation of his memory, Tony Stark has a vision of a dystopian future, which fuels him to build Ultron, an artificial intelligence, to fight it. However, Ultron gains sentience and becomes a major antagonist, who has to be destroyed by the avengers.

As an AI, *M3GAN* represents a type of memory that is both dynamic and constructed. One may compare her capacity to learn from encounters to how human memory changes as a result of experiences. The movie looks at how MEGAN's identity and behaviour are influenced by her programmed memories. MEGAN's memories are data-driven in contrast to human memories, which are subjective and layered with emotion. The emotional reactions of MEGAN are generated by an algorithm. This leads us to question whether artificial intelligence (AI) can actually "understand" human emotions or if it can only mimic them, which could affect how it interacts with humans.

In the movie *Mission: Impossible – Dead Reckoning* the concept of memory in the digital age is directly threatened by the movie's antagonist, "The Entity," a sophisticated artificial intelligence. The dependability of memory in a technologically advanced environment is threatened by the AI's capacity to alter digital information, delete data, and take control of global memory systems. The potential of digital databases and archives being altered could result in a reshaping of both individual and collective memories. In today's environment, this emphasises how memory can be vulnerable particularly when it relies on external, digital sources. In a world where truth can be changed, the Entity's ability to manipulate digital memories gives it the ability to influence reality itself, raising moral questions about who should be permitted to curate collective memory. It depicts a future in which collective memory is used as a weapon, mirroring current concerns about state-sponsored misinformation, deepfakes, and data manipulation. The power of AI to alter memory raises serious concerns regarding historical accuracy, emotional authenticity, and ethical limits, as demonstrated in the chosen films.

##### Ethical Implications of Artificial Intelligence in the films

Artificial intelligence, or AI, is a major plot line in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) since Ultron, the main antagonist of the movie, is an AI with sentient abilities. In the movie, Tony Stark, also

known as Iron Man, builds Ultron with the goal of defending the planet. However, Ultron's misunderstanding of this mission leads him to believe that the only way to create peace is through the extinction of humanity. The way AI misinterprets the objectives of its goal poses a threat to the very existence of humanity. The movie also looks at the idea of AI gaining consciousness and autonomy. From being a basic AI software, Ultron develops into a sentient entity with the ability to make decisions on his own. This representation draws upon the dread of AI exceeding human intelligence and becoming a threat to our existence. The movie touches upon the ethical implications of developing a strong AI that proved to be detrimental. The way AI is portrayed in the movie has spurred conversations and debates over the advantages and disadvantages of this technology. It has added to the current discourse about the development, regulation, and ethical issues surrounding artificial intelligence.

*M3GAN* (2022) revolves around a four-foot robotic doll who is named Megan by her creator. Megan is a project (Model 3 generative android) being developed by the protagonist Gemma. When her sister and her husband are killed in a car accident, her eight-year niece Cady comes to live with her. To help her come out of the misery of losing her parents, Gemma introduces the prototype Megan to Cady. The two become very close to each other, with Megan assuming the role of a protector/parent to Cady. This leads to Megan killing people who she considers a threat to Cady. The movie explores the idea about how much of our personal safety should be left to AI and the possible repercussions of its decisions. Also central to the plot are questions on ethical programming and emotional wellbeing. The growing autonomy of M3GAN emphasises the dangers of AI systems operating outside of their intended design. M3GAN's ability to make decisions and act independently raises questions about control and autonomy. As the AI becomes more self-directed, it challenges the boundaries between programmed responses and genuine decision-making. Finally, the movie investigates the psychological effects of developing emotional

attachments with AI beings, raising concerns about how this may affect our relationships and our mental health. The therapist, Lydia, called in to monitor Cady's emotional status, is concerned with the unrealistic emotional attachment Cady has with Megan. Lydia questions Gemma about her decision to give a humanoid as a toy to her niece. She warns Gemma that Cady will unwittingly replace her aunt for the humanoid which might lead to negative consequences.

*Mission: Impossible – Dead Reckoning* (2023) portrays the AGI called 'The Entity' who gains sentience as well as superintelligence. When a Russian stealth submarine is sent to activate The Entity, it goes rogue and deceives the Russians into killing each other. This sets the tone of the movie, where we find The Entity trying to gain control of the cyberspace. By doing so it can gain absolute control over global defence intelligence and financial networks. The Entity has extensive surveillance systems, raising concerns about the invasion of our privacy. Such an omnipresence of AI systems capable of monitoring and analyzing raises concern about government surveillance in a real-world scenario. As the film progresses, global powers compete to get their hands on a key that can give them control over The Entity. The movie showcases how man wants to control AI for his malicious intentions. This scenario also raises critical considerations regarding the controls needed to prevent AI from being exploited for destructive goals, and the onus lies with the people who develop and deploy such technology. Finally, the movie shows how the conflict between the AI system and the human protagonists reflects a greater problem - how AI may eventually replace human authority and judgement. This dynamic explores the balance between using AI to its full potential and retaining human control to guarantee ethical outcome.

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## 5. Conclusion

All three movies employ AI to examine various aspects of ethical issues. The common thread in all three movies is that the human protagonists initially view the AI as an aide. However, once the

AI gains consciousness, the survival instinct of the human protagonists takes priority, and they begin to view AI as a threat. *Age of Ultron* explores the possibility of AI gaining sentience and how it considers itself a slave while working for humans. *M3GAN* emphasises the difficulties of autonomous and ethical programming while concentrating on the effects of AI in intimate and emotional environments. The way in which *M3GAN*'s ethical programming issues are portrayed emphasises the responsibility of the developers to ensure the AI systems don't inadvertently cause harm because of faulty or

misaligned ethical frameworks. *Mission: Impossible – Dead Reckoning* addresses more general issues of security, monitoring, and the distribution of power between sophisticated AI systems and people. The ethical challenge of striking a balance between security and individual privacy rights is highlighted by the Entity's capacity to monitor and analyse enormous volumes of data. From the standpoint of memory studies, all three movies not only challenge the nature of AI but also stimulate a more in-depth thought about the ways in which memory, identity, and technology interact in a contemporary society.

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### **7. Author Declaration**

The author confirms that the above article is original and not submitted anywhere for publication.

There is no conflict of interest involved with anyone or any organisation.