

Review

The Electric State



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AI and Your Future Profession

Review

Details

Name	The Electric State
Release Year	2025
Watch Speed	1,5x

Day	13.10.2025
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Summary

The movie takes place in an alternative universe, in the 1990s. The beginning shows two siblings and explains more or less that the younger brother, Chris, is a child genius. Then there's a time jump to "after the war". Apparently, there's been a robot war, where the humans had to fight against the autonomous robots, after they all gained consciousness. The humans were able to win the war due to the invention "Neurocaster", which is a helmet you put on, that allows your mind to be at different places at the same time through human-like robots (drones), but also go to virtual places, almost like dreams. The robots were exiled and a treaty between the CEO of the Neurocaster company and the Robot president was created – no robots are allowed on human territory, no humans in the exile.

Neurocasters stay relevant in the post-war society and people use them in their everyday life. In one of the scenes, the school director says, that they are mandatory for students from the 8th or 9th grade.

The main character, the sister of the earlier shown siblings, is now living in a foster home, because the parents and her brother died during the war – but not due to robots, but in a car crash. She seems to be the only Neurocaster-sceptical person.

A robot shows up at her foster home and tries to tell her, that he is her brother. She doesn't believe him, because (of course) her brother died many years ago, but the robot seems to know things, that only her brother could know. Apparently, the doctor who told her, that her brother died is the only person who can tell her, where to find her brother and they somehow find a lead that could bring them to said doctor. The doctor is in the robot exile though.

The lead is a guy who almost died in the war but was saved by a robot, which led to both of them being rejected by the robot and human world. Friendship between humans and robots does not exist, except for them.

When the sister and her robot-brother get to the guys base, a police officer shows up, but only through the Neurocaster drone, so they're able to outsmart him. But during the fight the four of them end up breaking through a wall into the robot exile. They get to the base of the robot president, who is very unhappy about their presence, but decides to help them anyways. They get to the doctor (a few fights in between that) and he tells them, that he left a tiny connection between the brothers mind and the outside network BECAUSE all Neurocaster networks flow through his neural network (he' so smart).

Him mentally leaving the network drastically worsens the Neurocaster quality, so they realise the “bug” and start looking for him. CEO-drone and police-drone get to the exile, kill the doctor, many many of the robots and take the brother-robot. The treaty is broken.

Thankfully the doctor had a robot, that he programmed himself and gave him all his knowledge. Together with the remaining robots, the sister, guy, his robot friend and the robot president, they go to the Neurocaster headquarters to free the brother. The sister and the doctor-robot sneak inside while the rest attacks the building from the outside. When they get to him, they see that the brother is on constant life support and you can only communicate to him through joining his mind with a Neurocaster. The siblings talk in his head and the brother explains, that he feels so bad, now that he’s seen the outside world and all the damage that the Neurocaster company has done, because he feels it is his fault, since they work with his brain. The sister wants him to leave with her, but he explains: Neurocaster dies without him, but he dies without Neurocaster. He isn’t able to survive without the life support, but he also doesn’t want to serve the company anymore. She doesn’t want to lose him again, but he tells her, that there is no more to lose, but if they don’t decide soon, she will lose all her new friends.

During all that, the CEO has taken to drastic measures to destroy the attacking robots (and the one human guy), but the police-drone gets fed up and tells the robot president the location of the CEO. He said: “I finally met someone less human than a robot”.

Taking the brother off the machines leads to all the drone fighters shutting off, so they can’t fight in the robot attack anymore. One of the last hit robots is the friend of the human guy and because he appears to be dead, the guy is saying his last words to the robot, telling him how he loves him and they were best friends and so on. But the robot had a smaller version of himself inside of him, which remained unharmed. When he revealed that, he also made fun of the guy.

After it is revealed, that the company was running their networks through a minor’s brain, which they wrongfully announced as dead, to kidnap him, the international uproar is big and news coverage shaming the CEO is shown. Also, the sister gives a big interview talking about human connection and living with robots, etc. She says that the company was not only bad to robots, but also to the whole world. One of the main quotes is “real life is contact”.

(This is a really long summary, but it was also a long movie. Of course, there were a lot of plotlines that are irrelevant to the discussion, since it is still a feature film.)

Discussion

I think it is interesting to see how AI is portrayed in media and also how said media is then received by society.

The first thing I realised, was that the robot war started, because they didn't act according to the first requirement of the EU AI Act, the first regulation on artificial intelligence, which we talked about in AI and your profession. The requirement #1 Human Agency and Oversight says, that AI systems should support human decision-making, but should never be confused for humans. It is to be ensured, that the systems are overseen by either a Human-in-the-Loop (that can make changes or stop the AI at all times), a Human-on-the-Loop (that can make changes in the design process and stop the AI at all times) or a Human-in-Command (that can stop the system at all times).

The war started, because the robots simply refused to turn off, when the humans wanted them to. They gained consciousness and didn't want to listen to the humans anymore. They aimed for the same rights and respect.

I think it is reassuring to see, that there are real life measures to avoid the fictional problems happening in the movie.

Also, the whole atmosphere (music, colouring, props) of the movie were quite dystopian, showing what the world could end up as, if we don't act careful around autonomous systems. I think it is telling, that the main character and hero of the movie (the sister) is the outlier, who criticises the Neurocasters and robots and doesn't sublime to the mainstream tech hype.

The recreational usage of the Neurocasters highlights the device dependence, that I think we actually already experience today. Making Neurocasters mandatory for learning in school, telling the students that they'll fall behind, if they don't own one, could probably be looked at with the same thoughts as when iPad classes were first introduced (I don't know if that's a thing in the Netherlands). While the whole idea is very logical, that easier research, bigger range of resources, simplified group work are definitely benefits, using those technologies requires a constant supervision, which many schools or teachers are simply not able to do. A kid that will use their iPad (or Neurocaster) to its intended use, will for sure learn more and better than in usual lectures, but a child secretly playing games the whole day, would've profited of a device-less lecture much more.

In one scene, after the sister tries to alert her foster dad about the presence of the robot in the house, he tells her, that he's busy right now, because his frontal cortex is in Vegas with Cindy Crawford. Being able to create scenarios like that is vastly harmful to everyone, but especially women. I'd love to say that that's a dystopian fiction, but there are already more than enough websites specialising on AI porn and allowing users to create pornographic material with every person of their liking.

Also, the CEO of the Neurocaster company keeps trying to escape into a scenario, where his mother is a loving woman, obviously unpacking childhood trauma there. Allowing people to escape into realities like that can make them lose connection to the real life and turn them into outcasts in no time.

The school director did recommend Neurocaster trauma therapy to the sister though, after she found out, that her whole family died. Since the sister was so against Neurocasters, it isn't shown how that would work, but I imagine it to be similar to what the CEO is trying to do.

A similar thing but maybe not same thing is the friendship between the human guy and his robot friend. They were both wounded in the war, but when the robots wanted to finally kill the human, he begged the robot to protect him – and he did.

It is portrayed as a very sweet and heart-warming storyline in the movie, how they were rejected by both worlds and had to isolate to exist. They interact like two humans would, they tease each other like friends would, but they are rejected by the society. ALTAI requirement #1 is probably also applicable for that scenario.

There are already more than enough people receiving ChatGPT (and similar applications) as their friend, if not even partner. I like to think that these people would profit off mental health counselling anyway, but having an AI reinforcing your world views, must send most of them into an actual psychosis.

Stories from r/AIRelationships sound funny, but the societal ridicule these people experience will put them (in their head) into the exact same position as those best friends in the movie – they isolate themselves further from society, convinced that there's nothing wrong with their relationship.

What I think is probably most shocking is the recent advertising of friend.com, a company that build an AI to actually just play your friend. And while you can use the website, you can also purchase their necklace, which allows you to actually speak to your AI friend wherever you go. They advertised this greatly in New York subways, but I only heard of it, because people were vandalizing the posters, so let's hope it won't gain a foothold.

Conclusion

I think they exaggerated the potential risks of autonomous robots, while downplaying the risks of AI friendships. What I did like was the portrayal of such technologies in school.

I looked at the movies letterboxd rating to view other people's opinions and the movie is rated 2.1★ out of 5, which is fitting I'd say.

While I did watch the movie under the lens of AI references, I can imagine people watching it normally might just receive it as a bit boring. I also found out, that the budget was 320 million dollars, which they did not live up to.

The budget might has blindsided my opinion on the film concerning the AIP minor's objective, but the review I would like to end this with is:

