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The Films That Presaged Our AI Future

A new Criterion Channel film collection spanning five decades examines the pressing existential questions surrounding artificial intelligence today.



A film still from Ian Cheng's *Life After BOB: The Chalice Study* (2021)

Sci-fi and cyberpunk lovers should gear up for July 1, when a collection of films exploring the use of artificial intelligence over the last 50 years will debut on the streaming service Criterion Channel. With release years from 1974 to 2021, the 16 live-action and animated films in the collection peel back the layers of paranoia, mystification, and idealized futures that

surround the integration of AI into both daily life and imagined superhuman universes.

These features are especially relevant as open-source AI programs quickly emerge across dozens of industries, often with limited regulations. From generative image tools like DALL-E 2 and Midjourney to the newly released text-generator ChatGPT, AI has become widely useful or at least entertaining to those with access. The concept of AI human augmentation is becoming more and more tangible as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recently approved Elon Musk's Neuralink brain implant for human trials (despite earlier trials having killed approximately 1,500 animals as of last December). Through humor, horror, and special effects, the films in Criterion's selection explore the existential benefits and ramifications of these very concepts before their physical realizations.

One of the earliest films included is director John Carpenter's feature debut *Dark Star* (1974), a low-budget sci-fi comedy following a team of blundering astronauts who use artificially intelligent bombs to destroy "rogue planets" as the human race colonizes outer space. Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) and Ian Cheng's *Life After BOB: The Chalice Study* (2021) are among the animated selections that delve into AI enhancements to the human body. *Ghost in the Shell*, an anime adaptation of the 1989 cyberpunk manga series by Masamune Shirow, questions the meaning of humanity in a world where people can integrate cybernetic augmentations into their bodies by connecting their brains to the internet or even replacing their brains and bodies completely to become cyborgs. *Ghost in the Shell* also considers the vulnerabilities of such technology via a powerful villain who can hack and control those with artificial cyberbrains

In *Life After BOB: The Chalice Study*, Cheng, an artist and simulation designer, uses the cinematic properties of the game development software Unity to tell us the story of Chalice, a 10-year-old whose scientist father implants an experimental AI program called “BOB” (Bag of Beliefs) in her nervous system. As BOB takes the reins of Chalice’s life, she retreats to the backseat and wonders existentially about what is left in the world for humans.