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Artificial Intelligence in Film: A Review of Cybercinema

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Cybercinema (http://www2.english.uiuc.edu/cybercinema/) is an interesting, useful Web site devoted to the history of computers and artificial intelligence in film. Cybercinema is written, created, and maintained by Matthew Hurt, with graphics and artwork by Melanie Creel. The site is sponsored by the Department of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

At the core of the Cybercinema site are five sets of short (1-3 page) thematic essays on computers and "Intelligence," "Fear," "God," "Love," and "Self," as depicted in various classic (and not-so-classic) films. The essays, twenty-three in all, are hyperlinked, allowing the viewer to move from one essay to another or to jump to an annotated chronological listing of the films discussed. All of the essays are intelligent and informative. They are illustrated with numerous images from the films as well as with several audio files, including HAL's (in)famous line from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), "I'm sorry, Dave, I'm afraid I can't do that."

My favorites among the essays are "On the Couch: Artificial Intelligence and Psychoanalysis," which focuses on the 1950s classic *Forbidden Planet,* and "A Byte Off the Old Block: Computers and Family Relations," which focuses on another 1950s film, *The Invisible Boy*. These essays, like many of the others, explore how portrayals of computers in film reflect popular concerns about human relationships—and human frailties—in a technological age. Gender plays a powerful role in such depictions, as the essays note, and if any one theme can be said to unite all the films discussed, it is the dangers of male hubris. This male hubris takes many forms, though in all instances involves an attempt to rise above merely human relationships by severing emotional ties, and by perfecting

the rational control of nature. Both of these forces are epitomized in struggles to create 'life' without female involvement. Interestingly, while many of the films are sexist—sometimes appallingly so—action by men to shuck human relationships and assert independence from women *always* turn out badly.

I have used Cybercinema to help prepare lectures on computers in film and found it very helpful. However, several well-known early films involving robots or computers, such as *Metropolis* (1927), *Desk Set* (1957), and *Failsafe* (1964) are not covered, nor are films released since the site went up in 1997, such as *The Matrix* (1999). I have had mixed success in assigning Web sites to students as "readings," but this site is better suited to such assignments than most, especially if one asks students to extend an essay's analysis to a new film. The site's organization is clear and the navigation easy, though the site search function no longer works. All in all, Cybercinema is an excellent resource for those looking for an introduction to the history of computers and artificial intelligence in film.