

AN AI ODYSSEY

IVOR POWELL HAS BEEN A PIONEER IN BOTH DEPICTING AI AND UTILIZING IT JUDICIOUSLY TO CREATE SCREEN MAGIC.

WRITTEN BY LISA Y. GARIBAY

The questions driving artificial intelligence (AI) contributed to the longest strikes in Hollywood history. Depictions of AI in film and TV have ranged from docile domestics to cold, disembodied killers. Some of the most seminal portrayals that have resonated throughout decades appeared in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Alien* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982).

Ivor Powell worked in various production roles on all three films, helping to bring to life (so to speak) the disembodied, calculating computer HAL 9000 in *2001*; *Alien*'s duplicitous android Ash; and *Blade Runner*'s genetically engineered replicants.

The producer's fascination with AI began in childhood when his mother took him to see *The Day the Earth Stood Still* in 1951. "I just thought it was real," recalls Powell. "I found the Gort character—the artificial intelligence, so to speak—quite terrifying." A few years later, the more benevolent character of Robby the Robot in *Forbidden Planet* opened Powell up to a completely different side of AI.

It was Powell's aunt, noted film critic Dilys Powell, who gave her nephew a way into the film business by connecting him to Roger Caras and Victor Lyndon, both of whom worked with Stanley Kubrick. In 1965, Powell—who up to then had been working with West End Theatre and the BBC—was offered a spot on the crew of *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

"Kubrick was my hero from *Spartacus*," says Powell. "The fact that he was doing a sci-fi movie was



Ivor Powell with Caleb Landry-Jones on location for *Finch* (2021).
Below: Powell with *Finch* robot characters Jeff and Dewey.



a double whammy for me. I would have done anything on it." Powell's duties on set spanned working for the publicity team to standing in as a first AD to appearing in the film as one of the hibernating astronauts on board the *Discovery One* spacecraft. While working with the art department, Powell was mentored by the film's VFX supervisor, Douglas Trumbull. (Years later, the two would again work together on *Blade Runner*.)

While HAL 9000 possessed a soothing voice, was capable of two-way communication, and even sang and read lips, the computer wasn't anthropomorphic. "It was simply a machine that had basically been programmed to do its job," says Powell.

The danger of this form of AI is not its defiance, but its compliance. "It was a very brave, novel way of using AI, and I think it endures today because it is a cold example of AI in its remorseless superiority," he adds. "If it's been given a directive, that's what it will do, no matter what gets in its way, including us."

A decade later, Powell was associate producer on *Alien*, helping to bring new AI characters to the screen under the direction of Ridley Scott. The two had previously worked on Scott's *The Duellists*, a period film set worlds away from the groundbreaking, extraterrestrial thriller. The futuristic look and feel of *Alien* were rooted in classic filmmaking techniques—matte paintings, scaled models and effects done in camera. The type of helpful AI that could have generated flash-

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF GIANTS

er effects was still out of reach.

"We were on the cusp of a new age, but it hadn't quite happened yet," Powell recalls, adding that Scott desperately feared his antagonist in *Alien* might come across as nothing more than a man in a rubber suit. But due to technological and financial limitations, Powell says, "Unfortunately, our man in a rubber suit was a man in a rubber suit, hanging on wires and rigs."

Star Wars had recently stormed the cinemas, generating pressure to capitalize on the likes of C-3PO and R2D2. But no friendly robots were aboard the spaceship *Nostromo*. Instead, actor Ian Holm portrayed something that appeared human but was actually the synthetic protector of an underhanded mission. The film's team used a combination of plastic tubing, wires, milk and pasta for Ash's robotic innards after it has been destroyed for attempting to murder his crewmates.

Alien's other AI character is Mother, the ship's mainframe. Its complexity is portrayed by walls of blinking lights, a whoosh mimicking human respiration, and jargon on a monochrome screen. Mother is even more primitive than HAL 9000, but like HAL, Mother is programmed to execute at the expense of the human crew.

By the time *Blade Runner* rolled around a few years later, CGI had made massive strides, but Scott and the design team relied most on practical effects to create a dystopia in which humans are caught in a moral mess of their own making. This type of AI is not predicated upon literal computing or mechanics. It is biologically engineered for a specific task and programmed with an expiration date to prevent it from developing full consciousness.

"But sci-fi can be so cold without the empathy that you get from real, developed human characters," says Powell. The makers of *Blade Runner* committed to a human story; replicants bleed and suffer and die. "And as each Nexus model became more sophisticated, they became more human than human, with artificial memories to complete the picture."

In addition to a heated debate between Scott, star Harrison Ford, and the screenwriters about whether the film's protag-



Top: Ivor Powell on location in White Sands National Park for *Finch*. Above: Dilys Powell, Ivor Powell, Heather Sears and Aldo Ray on the set of *The Siege of Pinchgut* (1959). Below: Ivor Powell, director Ridley Scott and producer David Giler on the set of *Alien* (1979).



onist himself was a replicant—or whether that even mattered—the filming of *Blade Runner* was beset by production problems. Powell was hired as an associate producer, segued to overseeing second unit shooting, helped producer Michael Deeley in the scramble for new financing when the original backers pulled out, and acted as a sort of gatekeeper for Scott



Ivor Powell (right) on the set of *Blade Runner*.

so the director could focus his energy behind the camera.

Despite the aesthetic feats that helped make *Blade Runner* a revered classic, Powell only recently came to appreciate it. “I’d had enough time to be detached from it and forget about all the anguish of making it—because it was difficult,” he says.

“But it’s clicked. I really do feel the emotion and think, ‘My god.’ And it doesn’t age.”

A taste of this is depicted in *The Dreamer* (2001), a futuristic drama Powell cowrote and produced with director Miguel Sapochnik. It was influenced by the 1961 short film *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*, which depicts the visions flashing through the mind of a prisoner being hanged for treason during America’s Civil War. “It’s always in the back of one’s mind. The fragments of one’s life that make up who we are,” says Powell.

In Powell and Sapochnik’s adaptation, clones have been created to, again, do man’s dirty work. Genetic engineering has scrubbed these beings of human emotion, and they are terminated when their purpose has been served. But when facing death, they may be more human than we think. The film is sparing in its use of effects, and the machinery depicted on screen does not look different from what we use today.

In 2021, Powell and Sapochnik again explored the fuzzy line between humanity and artificial intelligence. Despite its post-apocalyptic setting, *Finch* (directed by Sapochnik and cowritten by Powell and Craig Luck) uses AI to preserve one of the strongest bonds between sentient life-forms: a man and his dog.

A massive solar flare has obliterated parts of Earth’s ozone layer, rendering areas of the planet uninhabitable for most life-forms. Human engineer Finch Weinberg (played by Tom Hanks) survived the initial cataclysm, but knows his health is failing. During the short time he has left, Finch works to build Jeff—a throwback to clunky, metal robots of yore—and program him to do what it takes to care for

Goodyear, the canine companion who has given Finch a reason to live. How human does Jeff need to be to carry out this mission?

The story addresses a question Powell has been kicking around for much of his career. “When AI reaches a certain point of consciousness, how is that consciousness going to feel? Is it going to want compan-

ionship? Is it going to be able to survive without that?”

Practical effects in the form of a complex robot were brought to life by the performance of actor Caleb Landry Jones. The heartbeat of *Finch* is a genuine connection between characters, human or otherwise. VFX supervisor Scott Stokdyk describes the process of creating Jeff as “an evolution of artificial intelligence,” somewhere between traditional puppeteering and CGI animation.

As Powell develops more projects exploring AI, he is determined to keep the process as human as possible.

“I would hate to have to rely on AI putting the words together for me to write a script, certainly at this current moment in time. There’s nothing like a human mind, with all its frailties. And I emphasize the frailties, making mistakes as you’re working on a script. I think the fact that we’re flawed is one of the key ingredients. If you suddenly have perfection, perfection can be boring.”

But Powell, like many others, worries about how AI will affect livelihoods. How many of the human artists behind film, TV, and new media will be out of a job? There’s no question that AI benefits the creation of film and TV. CGI can bring worlds to life. ChatGPT can aggregate research to inform a pitch. Image generators can create affordable concept art to help carry a film from fundraising through production.

It’s people, more than processes, whom Powell thinks back to when he assesses what made *2001*, *Alien* and *Blade Runner* resonate so powerfully. “Without them, we’d be absolutely nowhere.” He waxes about the brilliant concept designers and storyboard artists, including the legendary Syd Mead, and crews on every set on both sides of the Atlantic who were “bloody amazing.”

“The drama is much stronger if you see AI as a dark force, the antagonist,” Powell continues. “But I like to see the good side of it, including its contribution to filmmaking.” ■