

A textual and contextual analysis of Steven Spielberg's 'A.I. Artificial Intelligence'

By

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*“Je pense, donc je suis”*

*(Descartes, R. 1637)*

Cinema presents us with a pathway to envisage a myriad of pasts, presents and futures. Some are based on fact, whilst others are shaped from fanciful, hopeful, or calculated fiction. Science Fiction often attempts to deliver us to technologically feasible futurescapes, whether they be Earth bound or in faraway galaxies. Their premises sometimes surround exaggerated projections of our present day and the technologies that grow within such a time. Thus, robots have consistently appeared in film over the years, from the Machine-Man in 'Metropolis' (1927) to Robby the Robot in 'Forbidden Planet' (1956) to possibly the most famous 'non-human' double act of all time, R2-D2 and C3-PO in 'Star Wars' (1977). Thereafter, there has been a plethora of robot/ android/ humanoid characters on both the big and small screen. Examples include: Ash ('Alien'/ 1979), Replicants ('Blade Runner'/ 1982), Terminator ('The Terminator'/ 1984), Johnny 5 ('Short Circuit'/ 1986), Sentinels ('The Matrix'/ 1999), Spider Robots ('Minority Report'/ 2002), WALL.E ('WALL.E'/ 2008), Surrogates ('Surrogates'/ 2009) and Atom ('Real Steel'/ 2011), Ava ('Ex Machina'/ 2015), Replicants ('Blade Runner 2049'/ 2017), and Mother ('I Am Mother'/ 2019). Two of the standout examples on the small screen are Data ('Star Trek: The Next Generation/

1987 - 1994) and the Hosts ('Westworld'/ 2016 - ongoing). The list is far from exhausted and is without a doubt set to be added to in the coming years. Such is this desire to design and play with all shapes and sizes of robots on screen, that it demonstrates the ongoing human obsession with creating a fully functioning replica of itself. Which, if the transhumanist perspective is to be considered, will see the dawning of a time when:

'the line between machines and living beings will blur and eventually vanish, making us part of a bionic ecology' (Munteanu 2007).

Which leads us nicely to the filmic subject of this essay – Steven Spielberg's 'A.I. Artificial Intelligence' – to some people, a flawed masterpiece about a robot boy who wants to become a human boy, in order to be loved.

'A.I. Artificial Intelligence' is set in the 22<sup>nd</sup> Century, in a time when the Earth has succumbed to global warming and is being strangled by the pressures of over population and rapidly depleting natural resources. People have to win a lottery of sorts in order to be able to have children, and robots, or Mecha, as they are referred to in the film, have become commonplace. At this time robotics have advanced considerably and the highest order of the aforementioned Mecha are near perfect human replicas, only separated from perfection by a lack of self-consciousness and therefore an ability to truly feel and experience emotion.

That is, until, at the very beginning of the film, Professor Hobby, the head of Cybertronics, presents his theory toward designing a robot (humanoid) that can feel, and therefore love.

At this juncture Hobby is questioned by one of his colleagues:

FEMALE TEAM MEMBER

But you haven't answered my question. If a robot could genuinely love a person, what responsibility does that person hold toward that Mecha in return?

It's a moral question, isn't it?

To which he responds:

HOBBY

The oldest one of all. But in the beginning, didn't God create Adam to love him?

Instantly, the ethical and moral reasoning surrounding the film's subject matter are brought to the fore. In addition to which, Professor Hobby arrogantly implies that he will be playing God. This exchange of words, I feel, opens our eyes to the fact that the ensuing film is not merely going to be a visual spectacle and is going to present darker undertones than are usually present in a Spielberg project.

Professor Hobby subsequently delivers the film's protagonist in the form David, a prototype robo-boy. David is presented to Henry and Monica Swinton who are seen as perfect candidates to test his being, as their own son is in a state of suspended animation whilst a cure is sought for the disease he suffers from. Initially weary of David, Monica soon warms to him, imprinting the requisite protocol on him, thus having him irreversibly love her.

Little time passes before the Swinton's son, Martin, is cured and therefore returns home. His envy of David and ensuing contrived cruel behaviour eventually sees the family decide to send David to his destruction at Cybertronics.

The fact that David's love is irreversible and that he can't be reprogrammed, and instead has to be destroyed if his human family decide they no longer want him, is questionable from a technological perspective, in that, surely it would be possible to reprogramme the robot. Nevertheless, it is horrifically enlightening when viewed in conjunction with the reactionary devices akin to human nature in mind. That is, discarding things, often without forethought, is an irresponsible behavioural condition that predominates amongst humans. We want, we get. We no longer want, we dispose of. This can apply to living things and emotions in much the same way that we attach such to garbage disposal. Through our actions we are almost as mechanical and heartless as robots.

However, Monica, entrusted with the act of delivering David for destruction, can't bring herself to do it and instead abandons him in a forest with Teddy, a super-toy who was given to him earlier, and who comes to represent a paternal figure in David's life. In fact, Teddy could be seen to be more real than anything or anyone else in the film.

It is from this point that David's story really begins as he searches for the Blue Fairy, whom he heard of from the story of Pinocchio and who he thinks can turn him into a real human boy and therefore have his mother, Monica, truly love him.

It is also no surprise that the many parallels to Carlo Collodi's 'Adventures of Pinocchio' come to the fore from here onwards, including visual references, such as the dark forest, the moon and at the end, the sea, or emotional charged ones, such as, David wanting to become a real boy.

From the forest, David's journey sees him captured and taken to the Flesh Fair, where Orgas (humans), destroy Mechas for their own circus-like satisfaction. Here, David meets and escapes with Gigolo Joe, a male Mecha prostitute who has been framed for murder. Both continue onwards together in search of the Blue Fairy – an explicit reference to Collodi's story.

They go to Rouge City, a neon lit gregarious place, that is a futuristic hybrid of Las Vegas and the Pigalle district of Paris, where Joe suggests they visit Dr. Know, an

Einsteinesque projection, who, if anyone, would be able to tell them where to go.

From a visual perspective, 'A.I.' draws many similarities to 'Blade Runner' at this point.

From Rouge City, Dr. Know points them to Manhattan, a predominantly submerged cityscape, which they eventually get to in an amphibicopter, a submersible helicopter (without rotors) type craft, which they hijack in Rouge City from the police, who are still chasing Joe.

The Manhattan visuals are truly splendid, as they are again at the end, some 2000 years later. The latter ones almost conjuring an image of the future that approaches something Salvador Dali might have designed.

In Manhattan, the amphibicopter lands on top of the Rockefeller Centre, where Cybertronics operates. Here David consciously meets his maker, Professor Hobby, for the first time.

In learning that he is not unique and was simply a test, David, saddened and disheartened, commits suicide, dropping from the building and into the depths of the ocean.

At this point we also learn that Professor Hobby's obsession toward developing a

robo-boy that could love, was born out of him creating a substitute for his own dead child, whom David was modelled on. In fact, Hoberman (2001 in Morris 2007: 302) makes an interesting point that is quite pertinent at this juncture:

'Implied narcissism raises awkward issues in relation to Hobby replicating his dead son and Monica adopting, then abandoning, David. Do children exist, like servile robots, merely to satisfy parents?'

This piece of insight might be troublesome, though perhaps only because of the ambiguous truth that exists within it and what it pertains to.

That is, why do we really have children?

To evolve? Evolution is far too complex a scientific portal to give as a reason for conceiving a child;

To maintain the longevity of our families? Perhaps;

To prolong our own childhood? Perhaps;

By accident? Sometimes;

Because others are and we feel we should? Perhaps;

Or, because having children is routinely a part of life? Yes, but why then do we seek to advance robotic technology toward designing human-like machines, and why do we research cloning and genetic engineering?

Our whole existence is piped with moral and ethical contradictions. Spielberg and

'A.I.' approach them in a masterful manner. Therefore, a daring director might have ended the film at this point. Spielberg being daring in his own way, chose not to.

Joe, using the amphibicopter, saves David before he himself is captured by the police and dragged away. His final words being:

JOE

Good-bye David.

I am...I was!

This is clearly a play on Descartes' 'I Think, Therefore I am' (1637), concerning his philosophical reasoning that thought is proof of existence and the mind's freedom from mechanistic laws. Joe is a machine, yet he thinks.

David and Teddy, now alone in the amphibicopter, dive to the bottom of the sea to find the Blue Fairy whom David saw before he was saved. What David actually saw were the remnants of a Coney Island Pinocchio fairground attraction, again highlighting a weighted emphasis on Pinocchio.

David and Teddy find the Blue Fairy and become trapped by a fallen Wonder Wheel whilst facing her. David gazes toward her and begins to endlessly repeat his wish, for her to turn him into a real boy.



Again, from many people's perspective, the film should have ended here.

Rosenblum (2001) suggests:

'Were it I who directed, the film would have ended at the close of act two, with the haunted, hopeful horror of eternal prayer.'

Unlike many who explicitly criticized the film for not ending here and therefore chastised the entire narrative, Rosenblum (2001) goes on to say:

'But Spielberg takes us for another round – a final act that jerks and jars, and very rarely works at all, but takes us finally to a place where tears can flow. It is an ending less comforting, and less facile, than it may at first appear.'

With David and Teddy now held in eternal prayer, Spielberg brings on an ice age and delivers us to the same geographical location some two thousand years in the future.

David and Teddy are discovered by Super Mechas, referred to as 'specialists' in Spielberg's shooting script, who appear almost alien-like in form, though are clearly descendants of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Century Mechas.

They quickly realise that David and Teddy are unique, in that they come from a time when humans lived. Irony has it that David is now one of a kind (and not the first of a kind), only not by becoming 'real' in as much as his wishes are concerned, but

instead thanks to the ill fate of a reckless human race.

After being revived where they were found, David approaches the still frozen Blue Fairy. As he touches her, she shatters. His quest for faith seemingly crumbles with her. In fact, given David's earlier question to Joe, in Rouge City, when passing by 'Our Lady of the Immaculate Heart', as to whether she was the Blue Fairy, there is much to be said as regards David's blind faith being akin to man's religion and worship of God.

Nevertheless, using David's memories the Super Mechas are able to reconstruct the Swinton home and inform him via a projected image of the Blue Fairy that he can't be made into a real boy, and that they can't bring back Monica because they have no physical example of her DNA. Thus, apparently ending his quest, until Teddy intervenes, handing David a lock of Monica's hair that David had cut earlier in the film.

The Super Mechas agree to David's wish to bring her back, but tell him that it can only be for a day and can never again be repeated.

And so, Spielberg ushers us towards his end, where David spends one last day with Monica who tells him that she loves him and always has done. An ending which is more poignant than it is given credit for, as the Super Mecha narrator provides

closure to David's final scene emphasises:

#### NARRATOR

That was the everlasting moment he had been waiting for. And the moment had passed, for Monica was sound asleep - more than merely asleep. Should he shake her she would never rouse. So, David went to sleep too. And for the first time in his life, he went to that place where dreams are born.

Quite brilliant. David has in effect now got his wish to be 'real', even if it is in the most absurd non-human circumstances, summarized perfectly by Gordon (2008: 239):

'The added poignancy of this final little stage play is that there are no human beings in it. David is a robot and Monica is a clone, a simulacrum which will fade in a day'.

Given that all of it has been created by the Super Mechas, who watch on as if they are viewing a stage play themselves, it is truly quite a paradox. As David now enters an eternal sleep, in order to remain 'real', 'the paradox is that our greatest flaw is also our greatest gift. Believing in the imaginary may trap us in the irrational, but it is also the basis of art and makes us human.' (Gordon 2008: 239)

And there ends 'A.I. Artificial Intelligence', leaving behind a mythical origin fairy-tale for the Super Mechas.

Though A.I. was written, directed and produced by Steven Spielberg it was actually first developed by the late Stanley Kubrick. In fact, the story was something Kubrick delved in and out of for nearly thirty years, right up to the point of his death in 1999. It first came to his attention in the form of Brian Aldiss' short story 'Super-Toys Last All Summer Long' that was published in 1969, just a year after the release of Kubrick's own '2001: A Space Odyssey', which also centred around the notion of artificial intelligence. Nevertheless, Kubrick never got to the point of filming the project. He had many drawings commissioned and worked on developing the story with Aldiss, before giving the task of writing a screenplay to Ian Watson, another science fiction writer. Yet amongst the most significant hurdles Kubrick encountered was the implausibility of working with a child actor given his meticulously slow working style. Though he did look at designing and actually building a robo-boy, such was wrapped in unsurmountable difficulties.

The project seemed to be floundering on the rocks until he offered it to his long-time friend, Steven Spielberg, in 1994. He did this based on what he had seen Spielberg do with 'Jurassic Park' (1993). Nevertheless, Spielberg declined, in part to pursue other projects but also because he believed Kubrick should remain director.

“I didn't want Stanley to be robbed. ...I felt like I was taking something away from him. I was sort of a safety net, and if I took the net away, he would do it himself”  
(qtd. in Abramowitz 2001 in Friedman 2006: 47)

Thus, for a time the project was once again put on the back burner, as Kubrick worked on another project, 'Eyes Wide Shut'. Perhaps, the destiny of 'A.I.' was always in Spielberg's hands, since following Kubrick's death, his wife and her brother approached Spielberg, wanting him to finish the project. He duly accepted and developed a screenplay from Ian Watson's treatment.

Nevertheless, even when he took on the project Spielberg told Rachel Abramowitz, he fought hard to cast off his anxiety of influence and make the picture his own, even though at first, "Stanley was sitting on the seat behind me, saying, 'No, don't do that!' I felt like I was being coached by a ghost! I finally just had to kind of be disrespectful to the extent that I needed to be able to write this, not from Stanley's heart, but from mine...I can't know what Stanley knew. I can't be who Stanley was, and I'll never be who Stanley might have been."

'Although inspired and tinted by Kubrick, A.I. is – as it says it is – a Steven Spielberg film.' (Friedman 2006: 48-49)

The film premiered in the Venice Film Festival in 2001 before going on general release in June of the same year. Again, perhaps it was destiny that 'A.I.' opened in such a year, given the title of Kubrick's only other science fiction film, '2001: A Space Odyssey'. In fact, one could also offer suggestion to 'A.I.' being an odyssey in kind, given how long it took to reach the screen.

Though its reception wasn't overtly bad, it wasn't brilliant either. Given the two gladiatorial filmmakers associated with its conception, perhaps expectation was always going to exceed its reality.

Countless were subtly critical:

'Many saw A.I. as a schizoid blending of two seemingly diametrically opposed sensibilities: Kubrick, who was often considered cold, cerebral, pessimistic director, uninterested in pleasing audiences; and Spielberg, who is considered a warm, un-intellectual, optimistic director who loves to please.' (Gordon 2008: 229-230)

Others were brazenly clear about what they thought:

'I left the theatre with a rather sick feeling in my stomach. After a few minutes had passed, however, my mind cleared, and I was able to adopt a more rational assessment of the film. The last ten or fifteen minutes of the movie are simply unforgivably, unendurably bad.' (Goertzel 2001: 1)

Some criticism did seem to allude toward hints of praise:

'Spielberg has the warmest of directorial styles; Kubrick's is amongst the coolest.

One aims to seduce the audience; the other wanted to bend moviegoers to see it his

way, or to hell with them. The resulting fugue is like a piece composed for brass but played on woodwinds, a Death Valley map on which Spielberg has placed seeds, hoping they will somehow blossom ...' (Corliss 2001)

Personally, I see 'A.I. Artificial Intelligence' as a masterpiece in direction, style, story and subject matter. In fact, the last reference given above, points to how I and perhaps others see the film today. That is, 'Spielberg has placed seeds, hoping they will somehow blossom...' (Corliss 2001)

They have blossomed.

On watching the film when it first came out, I remember struggling a little with it. Spielberg, 'E.T.', growing up in the 80s - I was preparing for a return to the magic that existed in movies when I was a child. On that level, at that point, 'A.I.' didn't deliver. Now, nearly ten years later, with global warming an ever-increasing threat; over-population paramount; and technology rapidly advancing exponentially, with humans continually obsessed with creating engineered, whether genetically or robotically, replicas of themselves, 'A.I.' continues to grow into its filmic self. Ironically, it could be said that 'A.I.' has itself evolved.

What of David's role today? Will we ever want robot children? Given the constant change in the family dynamic, surrounding both social and economic factors,

perhaps. Many now work beyond the advised age of conception; the adoption process is long and arduous; healthcare systems are stuttering; and society's fractured social infrastructure is becoming less and less child friendly.

In retrospect, 'A.I.' was conceived ahead of its time and to watch it again during such a tumultuous and fractured year as 2020, is perhaps quite apt.

Finally, as regards the subject of artificial intelligence, Ridley Scott's 'Blade Runner' and Kubrick's own '2001: A Space Odyssey' still continue to set the benchmark.

'Blade Runner' particularly, in my opinion, is one of the most enduring films of any kind. It even manages to floor the linguistic philosophy of Chomsky who established that 'language too is an innate faculty of the human species. Language becomes the essence that defines what it is to be human.' (Nath 2010: 31)

Which it does during Roy Batty's final monologue:

BATTY

I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire  
off the shoulder of Orion. I watched c-beams glitter in the dark  
near the Tannhäuser Gate. All these moments will be lost in time.  
Like tears in rain. Time to die.



Eloquent, surreal and profoundly saddening words from a dying 'robot'.

Spielberg's 'A.I.' can exchange punches with either of these films and will probably garner even more sustenance as time goes by and futures become. Perhaps, the very line spoken to David that is noted below, could be said to be true of this film and Spielberg himself:

SPECIALIST (NARRATOR)

David, you are the enduring memory of the human race, the most lasting proof of their genius.

To conclude, 'A.I.' might transpire to become a lesson to us all as regards safeguarding and respecting what we have and thus prolonging the time of mankind, therefore rendering it contrary to the Super Mecha fairy-tale that it is. Unless, that is, we lose sight of our own human consciousness as what were once daily routines and aspects of social interaction are pushed into the cyber world. We will have no need to move, talk or feel as ourselves become and evolve solely on digital platforms. The human condition will deconstruct itself and we will need to worry more about us becoming the machine before the machine becomes us, at which point the only surviving essence of mankind might be the ghosts in the machine.

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