

Starting over

A.I. Artificial Intelligence, directed by Steven Spielberg

By David Walsh
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A.I. Artificial Intelligence is a science fiction work, directed and written by Steven Spielberg from an idea developed by the late filmmaker Stanley Kubrick. The short story that inspired the film, Brian Aldiss's "Super-Toys Last All Summer Long," originally appeared in 1969, only a year after the release of Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. More than a decade later Kubrick purchased the rights to Aldiss's story and over the next 20 years made sporadic attempts to turn it into a film.

According to Steven Spielberg, the two directors became friends in the late 1970s. Their relationship was principally confined to transatlantic telephone calls and fax messages (the US-born Kubrick resided in Britain). Spielberg explains, "I saw him maybe 12 times over two decades. But one day in the middle of a conversation, he said, 'You know, you really ought to direct 'A.I.' and I should produce it for you.' ... I was shocked. I said, 'Why would you want to do that, Stanley?' He just said, 'Well, you know, I think this movie is closer to your sensibility than mine.'" After Kubrick's death, Spielberg turned his attention to completing the project.

What has the combination of these sensibilities—belonging to two undeniably talented film directors—produced?

A work of art that is genuinely oriented toward critical human problems provides to that same extent the basis for its own consideration. We may conclude that a given work's treatment of such problems falls short, but in such a case it has at least offered up voluntarily, so to speak, the elements by which it might be analyzed.

Unhappily, one is obliged at the moment to discuss so many films in terms of what is entirely absent, receives scant attention or appears only in a partially-concealed form in the work. This is a symptom of intellectual decline. As a whole the privileged layer responsible for most studio films at present has shown no inclination to explore the great problems of our day, including, unsurprisingly, the vast social divide which forms the basis of its wealth and privileges. The individuals who make up this layer are generally satisfied with the status quo. Other questions—centrally, how to negotiate and master a social situation whose foundations are entirely taken for granted—concern them.

Steven Spielberg's new film graphically illustrates some of the current difficulties. *A.I.* begins at a point in the future by which time, a voice-over calmly informs us in the film's opening moments, the polar ice-cap has melted, numerous large cities have sunk beneath the sea, "millions" have starved to death due to strained resources and in certain areas childbearing is restricted. Robots, who consume little or nothing, play an increasingly prominent role.

And with this brief introduction, the film blithely proceeds. Let's pause for a moment over the facts the film's creators merely touch upon in passing, but take as their premise.

We are meant to imagine a world upon which global warming and a general ecological crisis have had a devastating impact, causing the deaths of millions of human beings. Since the film does not refer to them, presumably these events had no far-reaching political consequences.

Masses of people passively went to their graves apparently sharing the viewpoint of the filmmakers that such a catastrophe was a "natural" and inevitable phenomenon given a society addicted to over-consumption.

While striking this Malthusian and misanthropic note, implicitly indicting humanity for living beyond its means, the film's introduction raises no questions about the organization of social relations. (As with most science fiction, *A.I.*'s imagination extends only to the world of things or relations between people and things.) Indeed the first scene takes place at the headquarters of Cybertronics, a private firm that manufactures robots. A portion of the earth's surface has been submerged and a portion of the population has died from hunger, but the American high-tech corporation has escaped unscathed. Isn't this essentially the philistine's eye-view? The world without US capitalism?—unthinkable! Given this framework and starting-point, *A.I.* is limited in the direction it can and will take.

A scientist at Cybertronics reveals an ambitious project: to produce a robot capable of love. Can it be loved in return?—someone asks. The film is essentially the working out of this question. A robot possessed of an inner life, a young boy, David, is built and provisionally housed with a couple, Monica and Henry, whose son is in a coma. After initial feelings of repulsion, Monica begins to develop a relationship with her new "son." She enters the code that binds him to her forever. He calls her "Mommy" for the first time.

The miraculous recovery of Martin, the couple's biological child, however, complicates matters. The boy is jealous of David and unpleasant to him. In fact, the entire family is not especially likable. In any event, David's presence becomes a disruptive factor and Monica is eventually forced to abandon the robot child in a forest (the alternative is to return him to Cybertronics for demolition) as he cries and begs her not to leave him.

The remainder of the film consists of a prolonged effort by David to find a way of becoming "real" so he can return home and be loved by his "mother." After an escape from the Flesh Fair where robots are destroyed before screaming crowds, David and his new companion, Gigolo Joe, a sex-robot, travel to Rouge City, a center of legalized debauchery and disorder. Having been read Pinocchio (about a wooden puppet who becomes human) by his mother, David is determined to find the Blue Fairy from the story who will make him into a real boy. He relentlessly pursues his quest to be loved and to be "unique" across time and space.

There really is no let-up here.

The contradiction between the remarkable technical, more than technical, the all-round visual skills of American filmmaking, on the one hand, and the banality of its ideas, on the other, is becoming unsustainable.

The claim has been made that *A.I.* sheds light on what it is "to be human." It would be safer to say that the film sheds light on the conception held by Spielberg and Kubrick—and beyond them, by a certain contemporary social type—of what it is to be human.

Cutting through the mother-love, the sentimentality and the idle chatter about the essence of humanity being to “chase your dreams,” one comes to the realization that *A.I.*, all in all, takes a rather dim view of humanity and its prospects. In essence, human society has failed. Its technological evolution simply stripped the planet of its resources and set the stage for ecological and sociological disaster.

For their part the human specimens we encounter leave a generally unfavorable impression. The scientists at Cybertronics are complacent and paternalistic, and their operations vaguely sinister. David’s “family” is rather cold and selfish. The Flesh Fair crowd of anti-robot Luddites (is this aimed at the anti-globalization forces, for example?) panders to the backward, mindless crowd. The latter seems to correspond to the upper-middle-class snob’s view of common humanity as a “mob.” All in all, David seems better off away from human beings, including his idealized mother.

Misanthropy came naturally to Stanley Kubrick. Writing about *2001* more than 30 years ago, critic Andrew Sarris perceptively (and presciently)—if a little harshly—noted: “After the satiric alienation of *Dr. Strangelove*, Kubrick spent five years and ten million dollars on a science-fiction project so devoid of life and feeling as to render a computer called Hal the most sympathetic character in a jumbled scenario.”

There are obvious similarities between *2001* and *A.I.*, not the least of which is this bestowing of sympathetic characteristics on machines; indeed *A.I.* takes the process several steps farther. The two films envision a corrupt and fallen world whose salvation apparently lies in simply “starting over,” in the birth of a new race created out of some extra-terrestrial (divine?) metamorphosis of man into machine and machine into man. Writing of *A.I.*, David Edelstein in *Slate* comments, “I’d never before considered their [Kubrick and Spielberg’s] similarity—their shared longing for machines that will deliver humanity from unhappiness.” Both *2001* and *A.I.* end on the image of a child, an Adam, as progenitor presumably of this new, superior race. (It remains an unanswered question, of course, how essentially base creatures, humans, manage to bring into being computers and robots far nobler and more virtuous than themselves.)

It’s all rather muddled and distasteful, and noteworthy that Steven Spielberg goes along with it, even taking into account what would appear to be Kubrick’s more forceful personality. (Of course it will stick in the craws of uncritical Kubrick admirers that the latter even struck up an acquaintance with the far less fashionable Spielberg.) More than simply the most popular American film director of the past quarter-century, with his hand—as director or producer—in innumerable “blockbusters,” Spielberg is a rather prominent figure in Democratic Party circles, reportedly close to Bill Clinton. The gloominess and disorientation of this liberal or erstwhile liberal milieu, its sense that society cannot be “fixed,” is significant and perhaps a relatively recent development. One is almost too embarrassed to point to the absurdity of Spielberg, one of the most fabulously wealthy individuals in an industry brimming with fabulously wealthy individuals, chastising the world’s population for living beyond its means.

It might be argued that *A.I.* is merely a cautionary tale, its bleakness a reminder of what humanity *potentially* faces unless it takes stock and changes course. That’s all very well, except that Kubrick and Spielberg have placed the element of choice outside of the film’s narrative. That is to say, the drama is not located in the struggle, for example, between the farsighted and shortsighted in the period leading up to the great flood and the mass starvation—the inability of human beings to prevent these calamities is taken for granted. It is the starting point for the narrative, it is not part of the argument.

What proportion of *A.I.* is exclusively Spielberg’s contribution is impossible to determine. There is a good deal that has his “touch,” for

better or worse. It is a commonplace by now that his more personal films return consistently to the image of the lonely or abandoned child at the mercy of a rather inhospitable adult environment. Separated from any criticism of that environment, not given any world-historical dimension (as it might be in Kipling, for example), where does this theme lead? Not to the investigation of existing reality, to a protest against it, but to the building up of the reserves (material and otherwise) of the solitary boy, enabling him to withstand the world’s more or less arbitrary blows and perhaps carve out a place for himself. A successful career seems the finest revenge.

Furthermore, the implication that the source of human unhappiness lies in the separation of mother and child—a fixation in this film—is, to be blunt, ignorant and misleading. That separation, all things being equal, is an inevitable part of the growing up process. If the world into which the child enters is cold and unfeeling, or worse for many, this is not a psychological dilemma to be solved—how?—by clinging to the breast a little longer?—but a societal problem. Perhaps the filmmakers want to suggest that a child’s receiving inadequate love and attention explains a good deal of what is wrong with the world. This is one of those arguments that explains nothing. In the first place, it merely puts off answering the question. Children are supposedly generous emotionally, adults are ungenerous. But every adult was once a child. How do generous children become ungenerous parents? Second, such an argument can only be made by someone living in comfortable circumstances. Parental love abounds among the poverty-stricken, but it does not alleviate the social misery or the trauma that accompanies such misery.

Again, nearly everything in *A.I.*, consciously or not, is directed at diverting the spectator’s gaze from his or her everyday reality. One has to stop for a moment, take a deep breath, and remind oneself that mere malice is not at work here, but the perspective of an extremely privileged filmmaker, living in a world far removed from the realities of wide layers of the population.

Unfortunately, all of Spielberg’s weaknesses were accentuated when he adopted or at least took responsibility for Kubrick’s general dislike of humanity. If society has demonstrated its inability to solve the problem of human happiness, all the more reason for the gifted soul to concentrate on his own personal requirements. Who else will extend a hand? When all the emotional and visual pyrotechnics are set aside, *A.I.* resolves itself into a story about an individual who manages, against a backdrop of general devastation, to identify and cultivate his “uniqueness,” to make himself “real” while most others are losing (figuratively or literally) their reality. By the end, it is quite monstrous: let my individuality flower, though the world perish! The fact that the “individual” in question is a collection of circuits and wires only underscores the contempt the film demonstrates for humanity.

In *A.I.* “humanness” is identified strictly with the individual’s self-development or with his immediate biological relationships. Every cooperative human effort in the film is threatening or abusive. In reality, human beings exist in definite social relationships and carry out definite social activities and these make them essentially what they are. The filmmakers’ conceptions are weak, and more than that, betray a deep loss of confidence in humanity’s collective powers.

It never occurs to the film’s creators apparently that the process of making and distributing *A.I.* itself is a highly-evolved, complex social process, involving the labor (and a division of labor) of hundreds, if not thousands, of human beings. This element of modern life, social production, is entirely absent from Spielberg’s film. Cybertronics is a manufacturing firm, but the robot simply appears. No one is shown working in the film, except for a brief sequence of a computer repair team. This is not incidental. This reflects something about the life reality of the individuals involved and the increasing economic parasitism, more generally, of a substantial section of America’s elite. Wealth, so it seems,

appears (or has appeared) out of nowhere—the stock market, high-tech ingenuity, special effect wizardry. At the same time, no doubt, this process produces disquiet. Both tendencies are present in the film.

A.I. has intriguing and beguiling elements and moments. One marvels at some of the effects. Gigolo Joe (Jude Law) in particular is a remarkable technological-artistic creation. Spielberg and Kubrick exert a certain intensity. One feels that gifted, committed individuals are at work. But serious gifts require serious ends. Unhappily, one also feels, more powerfully, the waste of talent, the complacency, the social and historical blindness. Thirty years preparing *this*, a fairy-tale about a robot with a mother complex? No, it won't do.

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