

*A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*

By Tim Kreider

On the night Stanley Kubrick died, Steven Spielberg showed friends gathered at his house the last scene from *Paths of Glory* as an example of Kubrick's underappreciated emotional side—"his heart." In that scene, a tavern owner brings a captured German farm girl onstage, to the riotous hoots and whistles of a roomful of French soldiers. Nervously, she begins to sing them a lullaby, and gradually the men's catcalls die down, their raucous lechery giving way to nostalgia and homesickness, until, one by one, every man in the room begins to hum softly along to the tune they all remember, and even old veterans of the trenches are quietly weeping.

It is a moving scene, in a way that would become rare in Kubrick's later work. But by showing it by itself, Spielberg lifted it out of its context in the film. Those misty-eyed lugs are the same soldiers who, in the previous scene, stood dutifully in formation to watch another piece of impromptu theater, in which three of their comrades were ceremoniously tied to posts and shot. The scene also takes on additional resonance in the context of Kubrick's whole *oeuvre*. Compare it to the climax of his other great war movie, made at the other end of his career, *Full Metal Jacket*; war-weary young men are again unexpectedly faced with a beautiful girl, except this time she's a fifteen-year-old Viet Cong sniper who's shot three of their own. The men put a bullet in her head and march off singing another fondly recalled childhood song, the theme from the Mickey Mouse Club.

Kubrick fans, on learning that Steven Spielberg was taking over the *auteur's* unfinished project *A.I.*, may have felt a little like the friends and admirers of the late poet John Shade did on learning that his last, unfinished poem, *Pale Fire*, had fallen into the editorial hands of one Dr. Charles Kinbote. Spielberg loves tear-jerking scenes like that favorite in *Paths of Glory*, but he hasn't shown much

of the subtlety, restraint, and layered irony that make Kubrick's work so rich and open to interpretation. Until now, he has made two distinct types of films: movies for children (*Jaws*, *Close Encounters*, the Indiana Jones trilogy, *E.T.*, *Jurassic Park*) and movies for grownups (*The Color Purple*, *Schindler's List*, *Amistad*, *Saving Private Ryan*). His children's films are arguably among the greatest made since Walt Disney's; *E.T.* is, in its way, a perfect movie, on par with *Pinocchio*, *King Kong*, or *The Wizard of Oz*. Of course, these are all manipulative and sentimental films. But children expect to be manipulated; they almost demand it. They're still struggling to manage their emotions, learning what adults call appropriate emotional responses--which things are funny, or scary, or sad.

Since Spielberg and Lucas revolutionized the business of filmmaking in the Seventies, however, *every* Hollywood film has been a children's film. Which is what makes Spielberg's films for adults more problematic. They've been increasingly "serious" in recent years, taking on much weightier subjects and made with the technical virtuosity of a master. But they remain marred by the same ingratiating, manipulative techniques that make his films for children so effective. Spielberg can't resist tugging at the heartstrings—for example, giving the medic in *Saving Private Ryan* a touching speech about his mother so we'll be sure to be sad when he's killed. He tries to find an "up" ending in everything from slavery to the Holocaust. "The Holocaust is about six million people who get killed," Kubrick told Frederic Raphael. "*Schindler's List* was about six hundred who don't."<sup>i</sup>

Spielberg's weakness has always been in his efforts to supply some pat, verbal moral to the stunning visceral experiences he creates. Partly his mistake is in trying to supply one at all--as Kubrick said of *2001*, "the feel of the experience is the important thing, not the ability to verbalize or analyze it."<sup>ii</sup> It would be arrogant for any artist to try to tell us how we should "feel" about the Holocaust, or what we should've "learned" from the sacrifices of World War II. The only real "lessons" to be drawn from such experiences inevitably sound like simple-minded

truisms when put into words: "I could have done more," sobs Oskar Schindler; "I hope I earned what all of you have done for me," prays the elderly Ryan of his dead comrades-in-arms (speaking, presumably, for us all). Spielberg cannot resist trying to tell us what to think of his films, how to feel at the end--not to mention how we should interpret history. It's as if he trusts neither his medium to convey his message nor his audience to get it. Ultimately, he seems to agree with most critics that, if a director doesn't make us understand his films' intentions, and feel exactly the way he wants us to feel, he's failed to do his job; he has betrayed the sacred shill/mark contract. And his audience, conditioned by decades of pandering and manipulation, has come to expect (even demand) that Skinnerian payoff: slip a ten through the box-office window, cry and feel good. One viewer defended *A.I.* on an internet message board by saying, "It made you feel exactly what they wanted you to feel, when they wanted you to feel it."<sup>iii</sup> The same could be said of the imprinting process devised by the artificial intelligence experts at Cybertronics in the film—or of the Ludovico Treatment in *A Clockwork Orange*.

Except that viewer's misguided praise isn't quite true of this, Spielberg's latest film. If *A.I.* had made us feel what Spielberg wanted us to, surely it would've been more commercially successful, instead of alienating audiences and disappearing at the box office. And, more importantly, it's hard to say exactly what, if anything, he "wanted" us to feel watching this film. Consider the scene in which Spielberg's suburban nuclear family--Monica, Henry, and their artificial son David—sit down to dinner together. David, intently watching Henry and Monica eat, pantomimes eating from an empty fork and drinking from an empty glass. Seeing a strand of pasta dangling from Monica's lip, he abruptly bursts out laughing, much too loudly, frightening his adopted family. At first, like Henry and Monica, we're startled; then, relaxing, we tentatively start to laugh along with them in relief, but as David keeps laughing, his expression held too long, eyes almost panicked, mouth stretched open as if in a scream, the scene becomes grotesque, horrific. His laugh, like his eating and drinking, is empty, an effort at

imitation. David switches off the laugh as suddenly as he started, and his parents stare at each other and at him in bemused, unsettled silence. It's the boldest moment in the first segment of the film; for once Steven Spielberg doesn't tell us how to feel. He's also shown us, with a directorial flourish, how easily our emotions are coached, first making us jump, then making us laugh, and leaving us, like Henry and Monica, not knowing what to think. Like David, he implies, we're just imitating the expressions in front of us, laughing and crying at nothing, going through the motions.

Spielberg leads the audience by the hand through some of *A.I.* with the assurance of a master manipulator, giving us some laughs, some tension, some cathartic tears--and then, unexpectedly, leaves us alone in the very darkest part of the forest. He does finally give us a happy ending, but it's a false one, too happy to be believed, and belied by its bleak background. It's not clear whether he's failed in an effort to make us feel good about his "feel-good" movie, or, more bravely, refrained from trying to make us feel good, and for the first time let us walk out of the theater troubled and wondering. What makes *A.I.* Steven Spielberg's strangest, most interesting, and (though it may sound ironic to say it) most mature work is that, whether by accident or design, it's the first of his movies to be both a "children's" film, ingratiating and manipulative, and a film for adults—complex, ambiguous, brutal and cold. Or, to put it another way, both a Steven Spielberg film and a Stanley Kubrick film.

The story for children is the one the narrator tells: his gentle, cultured voice is that of a grownup telling a fairy-tale to children—calming anxieties, explaining away apparent ambiguities, glossing over gaps and contradictions in the story, and falling conspicuously silent at moments of cruelty and horror. The way he tells it, *A.I.* is *Pinocchio* all over again, a fable about a little boy who learns how to "chase down his dreams" and becomes fully human. But the story for adults, presented visually, is very different. It's a story about hopeless human attachments and our bottomless capacity for self-delusion. David's Oedipal

fixation remains utterly static throughout two thousand years, in spite of the fact that no human being, including his mother, ever shows him any reciprocal affection. The fact that his devotion is fixed, helpless, and arbitrary ultimately makes all his heroism empty, and the “happy” ending hollow. He searches and suffers and waits all those eons for a goal that's not of his own choosing; it's irrational, unconscious--what we might call hardwired. This is what makes him a tragic figure, and, in a way his manufacturers never intended, what makes him human.

This is a bleakly deterministic, distinctly Freudian view of the human condition, a continuation of the vision refined by Stanley Kubrick throughout his career. It's a vision of human beings wasting their lives blindly chasing after unconscious goals just as hopelessly fixed and childish as David's—most often the idealized image of a parent. Whether we accept this model of human behavior or not, *A.I.* convincingly creates its own closed and desolate worldview. Every character in the film seems as preprogrammed as David, obsessed with the image of a lost loved one, and tries to replace that person with a technological simulacrum: Dr. Hobby designed David as an exact duplicate of his own dead child, the original David; Monica used him as a substitute for her comatose son; and, completing the sad cycle two thousand years later, David comforts himself with a cloned copy of Monica.

It's also, finally, a film about human brutality, callousness, and greed. *A.I.* is one of the most the most unsentimental visions of mankind since—well, since Stanley Kubrick died. David, who will become “the living memory of the human race, the lasting proof of their genius” is exploited by his creators, mistrusted by his father, tormented and tricked by his brother, betrayed and abandoned by his mother, and hunted, caged and almost executed for the amusement of crowds. He has been designed as a disposable commodity by the same sort of corporate shortsightedness that's melted the world's polar ice caps and drowned hundreds

of millions of people. This isn't the same old story about a little boy who becomes human, but about the death of humanity itself.

The film opens on a meeting of the senior design and engineering staff of Cybertronics of New Jersey to discuss the next phase of robotics technology and marketing strategy. (The rain pouring down the windows, part of the global deluge brought on by the greenhouse effect, reminds us of industry's past technological triumphs.) The meeting is monopolized by a long lecture/ philosophical reflection on mecha technology and the nature of love by Dr. Hobby, head of Cybertronics.<sup>iv</sup> The real focus of the scene, however, is not Hobby's pedantic speech, but the startling demonstrations of cruelty and degradation to which he casually subjects his creations. To make a point, he stabs a female mecha's hand with a long straightpin, and she gasps in pain. His audience chuckles at his second try at stabbing her, when, in a quickly learned response, she jerks her hand away. Hobby then casually orders her to undress, and without evident affect she stands and begins to unbutton her blouse. One woman looks disturbed by Hobby's order, but, in some confusion, hesitantly applauds the demonstration anyway. Next, Hobby bids his assistant to expose herself even more shockingly; telling her to "open," he reaches a finger inside her mouth and touches a release on her palate that causes her lovely, poised face to slide apart in two pieces, revealing the machine beneath. A single tear drops from her eye, unnoticed as Hobby pontificates, and slides down the smooth metal of her skull. Hobby's effectively made his point about mechas' incapacity for real love, hurt, or shame, but he's inadvertently demonstrated the same thing about himself and his fellow humans. (One of the firm's designers is ribbed about his notoriety for test-screwing all of the company's products, and laughs it off with a mock-defensive joke: "Quality control is very important.") The entire demonstration is reminiscent of the grotesque piece of theater in *A Clockwork Orange* in which prison officials and politicians applaud as Alex is debased and bullied--forced to lick a man's shoe,

gagging at the sight of a woman's breasts. It is the audience, not the subject, whose emotional responses are tested. Like the Voight-Kampf test in *Blade Runner*, it's an empathy test.

As this politely sadistic meeting breaks up, the female mecha, her brain reinserted and her face seamlessly rejoined, carefully touches up the damage done to her makeup. The last thing we see as the scene fades to black is the flash of her compact mirror snapping shut. We then cut to Monica applying her makeup in her own compact mirror in her car. The match cut identifies them as doubles, reflections of each other. Monica will be exploited by Cybertronics just as callously as was Hobby's "assistant," for the sake of a demonstration. The visual association of humans with robots will continue through the film: when Monica's real son, Martin, is brought home from the hospital, he looks far less human than the lifelike David—slumped in his wheelchair, pale and limp, dangling with plastic tubes, an oxygen mask strapped over his nose and mouth, a cyborg unable to breathe without mechanical aid. And he proves just as robotic as David in his single-minded possessiveness of Monica and implacable jealousy. He and David are further doubled because they're both frozen and resurrected. In other words, this is not a film about robots, but about human beings, showing us that we are as rigid in our programming and as predictable in our responses as any machine.

Spielberg has often been accused of arrested development himself--of a preoccupation with fantasy father figures, lost children going home, broken families being reunited. This is the first film in which he critically examines those fixations. David's attachment to Monica is disturbingly ambiguous from the beginning. He follows her around the house as she cleans, appearing unexpectedly whenever she turns around, frightening her. He blocks her way in the hall when she tries to pass with the laundry cart, mirroring her movements, the same playful/menacing game that the lecherous "Mister" plays with his child sister-in-law in *The Color Purple*. Later he bursts in on her in the bathroom, catching her on the toilet reading *Freud's Women*. The heavy-handed joke only spells out the

already obvious tension in the sequence. (The moment is also a fond homage to Kubrick, who gave us an uncomfortable bathroom scene in each of his films.) David creeps up to his parents' bed and hovers uncertainly over his mother with a pair of scissors in his hand, planning to snip a lock of her hair, and accidentally grazes her eye with the blade--as creepily Oedipal a scene as Danny standing over his sleeping mother with a phallic knife, croaking "Redrum..." in *The Shining*.

But David's attachment to his "mother" doesn't become truly scary until she impulsively initiates the "imprinting" process. The imprinting is shot like a sacred moment, mother and child forming a tender pieta, backlit in a halo of that diffuse golden light that by now I'm afraid we have to call Spielbergian. But the visual glory of the scene belies its real import. Dr. Hobby spoke of creating a "love that will never end," a mecha that would be, in his chilling image, "caught in a freeze-frame" of perfect, synthetic, unwavering love. This is the moment that will doom David to a lifetime of unrequited love and suffering. "Does any of this hurt?" Monica asks David, echoing Dr. Hobby's question to his assistant, "How did that make you *feel*?" when he stabbed her. Later on, when David's having spinach suctioned out of his electronic innards at the Cybertronics "hospital," he brightly reassures Monica, "It's okay, Mommy—it doesn't hurt!" But it's the fact that he can't hurt that horrifies her, and she breaks out of his grasp and deserts him, leaving his hand held up in the air, empty and unfaltering. The heartbreaking image recurs when David, left at the bottom of the swimming pool, floats alone, his face blank, arms open and empty. This is the condition to which his "love" condemns him: eternal faith in a fickle, absent mother, his arms expectantly outstretched even after he's been abandoned. It is, in this film, the human condition.

Henry finally forces Monica to take their malfunctioning "son" back to Cybertronics to be destroyed. The forest where she abandons him--gnarled branches draped with moss, shafts of sunlight streaming through the mist--is, by no coincidence, the same patch of woods where the wicked Queen's huntsman

broke down and refused to kill Snow White. But Monica, like the huntsman, can't go through with her task and instead, in a craven act of "mercy" far crueler, tells David she has to leave him here. It is a wrenching scene—every child's deepest fear of abandonment made painfully literal. David desperately bargains with her, asking whether he'd be allowed to come home if he were to become real, like Pinocchio. "That's just a story!" she cries. "Stories are not real!" She shoves a handful of cash at him and flees back to her car. Sobbing, she says, "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the world!" David will never see her again.

The second section of the film shifts tone as abruptly and disconcertingly as David's laughter at dinner cut off—what Stanley Kubrick liked to call a "mode jerk." Well might Monica have warned David about the world; what he finds outside his insular, upscale home is a Malthusian nightmare--vulgar, savage, and terrifying. The denizens of this garish dystopia (not unlike the citizens of contemporary America) frantically distract themselves from incipient global catastrophe with violent spectacles and slickly-packaged sex. The first words we hear uttered in this section are: "I'm afraid."

It's a female client a little nervous about her first encounter with Gigolo Joe, a suave, polished mecha prostitute. "You are a goddess, Patricia," he soothes her. "You deserve better in your life. You deserve... me." She needs him to tell her who she is, just as Monica begged David to tell her who she was. (The confusion between mommy and goddess will only deepen as the film goes on.) Between appointments, we see Joe checking himself out in a mirror, just as Monica did--the palm of his hand actually lights up and becomes a compact. He even adjusts his appearance and demeanor to become a touch more rough-trade for his next client, sort of Marlon Brando-ish—more like her thuggish boyfriend. Joe is custom-designed, even more frankly than David, to serve as a reflection of his clients' desires. (Later we'll see an entire city literally built on human desire--Rouge City, an erotic fantasyland of neon-lit buildings shaped like gigantic cartoon pin-up girls

with bubble-dome breasts, arched backs, raised rumps and spread legs.) The appeal in Joe's case may be more crass, but it is no different; Dr. Hobby spoke loftily about "love," about metaphors and dreams, but that's all Gigolo Joe ever talks about, too. He's never crude or explicit—he's a romantic, a sweet-talking seducer who can play old torch songs on a tinny radio inside his head or dance like a Broadway chorus boy. He's the "adult" version of David, fulfilling mommy's *other* needs. But David's purpose is even more insidious and obscene than prostitution; David is a kind of vibrator for the soul.

The manufacturers of these machines aren't just serving universal needs like parenting or sex; they're exploiting grief and abuse. Joe's first client has a bruise on her cheek from a beating at the hands of a human lover. "Are these wounds of passion?" he asks. She looks down, embarrassed. His next client has been not just beaten but killed by her jealous boyfriend. At first Joe thinks she's weeping, but what he had thought was a tear on her face turns out to be blood. More "wounds of love." (Her boyfriend, wiping off his hands, whispers, "always remember--you killed me first," echoing Henry's first words to Monica when he brings home David: "Don't kill me. I love you. Don't kill me.") It's not "most women" who can be found in places like Rouge City, as Joe thinks, but the damaged ones, women who've been hurt and frightened by "real" men. Sex mechas exploit their clients' trauma and loneliness just as cunningly as Cybertronics' "David" was designed to take advantage of Monica's loss and maternal instincts. When we see a photograph of Dr. Hobby's dead son, we realize that David was made as a precise replica of him. For all his genius and high-minded talk, Hobby is driven by the same desperate, childish hope; all he really wants is to bring his little boy back to life. All these victims are trying to replace the people they loved with mechanical lookalikes—even the woman Joe finds dead had wanted him to resemble her murderer. They're searching pathetically for replacements for what they've lost, like the mechas we'll see looking for spare parts in the next scene.

David, lost in the woods, comes across a truck dumping off a load of dismembered mecha bodies like so much garbage. The music on the soundtrack, dark and writhing, imbues these cold glistening chunks and spilled tubes with grisly implication. They are as synecdochic of suffering as the heaps of stolen watches, jewelry, and gold fillings being sorted at the death camps in *Schindler's List*. Grotesquely disfigured mechas, parodies of the mutilated human form, creep warily out of the surrounding forest to pick over the heap of body parts. They've all been discarded or abandoned like David because they've outlived their usefulness. Watching them try to fit themselves with spare jaws, twitching hands, and mismatched eyeballs, we recall that soldier on the beach in *Saving Private Ryan* who, in shock, picks up his own severed arm and carries it off with him for safekeeping. These pitiful, maculated robots are only stand-ins for human beings, who are no less fragile and expendable. Hundreds of millions have already perished in the rising waters of this world, and from the look of things, life is only getting cheaper.

The ensuing scenes allude even more explicitly to the historical atrocities Spielberg has depicted before: slavery and the Holocaust. Mechas are hunted down and captured by humans with rifles that fire immobilizing "tags" and motorcycles fitted with glowing eyes and snarling jaws—near-future stand-ins for the shotguns and bloodhounds of the old South. (When the catchers' boss warns his crew to make absolutely certain that Gigolo Joe is a mecha because "We wouldn't want a repeat of the Trenton incident," the implication makes the real quarry of this hunt clear.) David and Gigolo Joe are carried off to a Flesh Fair—a cross between a county fair, heavy metal concert, and WWF match or monster truck rally. Distinctively low-rent American in idiom, the scene obviously refers to the vulgarity and violence of our own society, but the entertainments we see are derived from Medieval favorites—victims being fired from cannons, drawn and quartered, chopped in half (with a chainsaw instead of an axe), and drenched with boiling oil (in this case, corrosive acid). We see a black minstrel-show mecha,

desperately mugging and jiving like Jimmy Walker, Martin Lawrence, or Chris Rock (who actually voices the character) even as he's loaded into a cannon: "Hey, guys, can you kinda shoot me *over* the propeller thing? Yeah, I was considering going through it, but I've changed my mind." When he's blasted through the whining turbine and his flaming head, still grinning, lodges in the bars of David's cage, we cut immediately to black characters in the crowd rising to their feet to cheer his (their own) destruction. The most recent victims of prejudice and oppression have become the most enthusiastic new bigots. "History repeats itself," as one of the caged robots grimly explains.

What's most striking about this part of David's odyssey is that as he wanders, wide-eyed and guileless as Candide, through scenes of electronic carnage and depravity, he remains blithely indifferent to the horrors around him, his eyes fixed only on his fantasy figure of a mother, the Blue Fairy. Just as Teddy, being taken to the lost and found at the Flesh Fair, can only intone, "I need to find David. Can you take me to David? Do you know David?", earnest as the dying HAL, so David repeats his few articles of faith—"I'm David. Monica made me. Monica is my mommy."—as he's about to be destroyed. Before they set out on the last leg of their journey, Gigolo Joe tries to persuade David to give up his childish fantasy and face reality. Although Joe is naïve in his own way, he speaks the movie's hard truths. Of David's sainted mother he says: "She loves only what you do for her—as my customers love what it is I do for them." This is David's real chance to cut his strings and become real, to overcome his imprinting and turn back from his misdirected quest. "Goodbye, Joe," he says. His programming doesn't waver for an instant. Later, when Joe is hauled away by the police to be executed for the murder he didn't commit, David hardly even notices, so distracted is he by his glimpse of the Blue Fairy. It's hard to believe that Spielberg can be unselfconsciously holding up David's blind devotion as an admirable human ideal—what Dr. Hobby, congratulating him, calls "the ability to chase down our dreams." Against these dark backdrops of cruelty and degradation, it starts to

seem more like a scary parody of love, a monomaniacal obsession that renders him oblivious to the ugly realities around him.

At the end of his odyssey, at Cybertronics' headquarters in the ruins of Manhattan, David (like David Bowman before him in *2001*) finds a weirdly ordinary room occupied by his own double. Another "David" is sitting cross-legged in a chair, as chirpy and affectless as David was before his imprinting. Our hero reacts to his double in the same way that his own brother Martin reacted to him; with instant loathing. But unlike Martin, who tried to get rid of his own usurper with sneaky tricks and set-ups, David just smashes his rival's head in with a lamp. A delirious low-angle shot frames him against the circular overhead light, exulting over his dead doppelganger, shouting his own name--"I'm David! I'm David!"--and whirling the dented lamp above his head, like hairy Moon-Watcher screaming in triumph over his twitching rival and throwing his bone club in the air. Like both Moon-Watcher and his distant descendant, H.A.L. 9000, he finally demonstrates his humanity by committing murder.

Then David wanders into a room full of replicas of himself, racks of them hanging like suits, blank-faced and open-mouthed. He looks out through an eyeless mask of his own face (blindness, remember, is Oedipus' punishment for his incestuous sins) at what he'd thought was his own first memory: the angelic art deco statue that he remembered as a bird with outstretched wings. His image of God is a lie. Hobby, like that other man behind the curtain, is a very bad wizard, and as culpable as Victor Frankenstein for bringing into this world not just one but perhaps thousands of mass-produced children--we see a line of child-sized boxes labeled "David" and "Darlene"--all condemned to lives of helpless devotion to selfish, weak, mercurial human beings, and probably doomed to fates just as sad as David's--disposal, abandonment, destruction. It's important to understand here that David's life of thralldom, and his awful disillusionment, doesn't necessarily reflect some tragic, inevitable part of the human condition; his condition has been deliberately manufactured, programmed into him to make him a better product

(just as, in the real world, advertisers take cynical advantage of our feelings for family, playing on our sentiment and nostalgia and exploiting our anxieties and guilt, to sell us long distance services, minivans, or life insurance). Cybertronics has engineered all his anguish from the beginning, taking advantage of Monica's grief and choosing Henry for his "loyalty to the firm." The slogan for their new line of surrogate child mechas, "At last a love of your own," is the ultimate marketing strategy: selling love itself as a product.

We cut to David sitting blank-faced, devastated, one shoelace dangling, on a ledge hundreds of feet above the ocean. In spite of his shattering insights into his origins, he's still pitifully limited by his initial imprinting: like the dying medic in *Saving Private Ryan*, his last word is: "Mommy." He lets himself topple over the ledge to fall hundreds of feet down the face of Cybertronics' headquarters. David's been destroyed by the same amoral, shortsighted profit motive that's condemned the whole human race to burial at sea. He sinks through the water in his recurring posture of unrequited yearning: alone, adrift in amniotic darkness, looking blankly out at us, his arms open in an empty embrace. This is the image of David that lingers with us, not the cozy dream of contentment in which we'll leave him.

On the dark ocean bottom, at the end of all hope, David finally glimpses his dream. He descends in his amphibicopter into the murk of Monstro's lair at Coney Island, knocking the whale's looming plaster tail asunder as he passes. His spotlights illuminate a tableau of Gepetto creating Pinocchio that recalls David's own imprinting, the crouching figures similarly silhouetted against radiant, streaming backlight. Then he ascends a broad stairway like the steps leading to a temple altar, where at last he sees her, standing alone like the image of a goddess: the Blue Fairy, beautiful as Botticelli's Venus, streaming with seaweed. Her serene face, reflected in the cockpit's bubble canopy, merges with David's yearning one, an image of emotional fusion. When the ferris wheel, nudged by the 'copter's passage, slowly topples over, trapping them underneath, David is oblivious to

their plight—his only thought is relief that “the Blue Fairy’s all right”—but Teddy observes, “We are in a cage.” It’s a cage not only of rusting metal but of David’s own arrested desire. “Please, Blue Fairy,” he implores the plaster icon. “Please, please, make me into a *real live boy*. Please. Please, please, please, Blue Fairy, please. *Make me real.*” The camera draws back as his litany of imploration continues day and night through the dark centuries. It’s impossible to imagine, at this point, that Spielberg intends David’s literal-minded *idée fixe*, repeated like a stuck record for millennia, to be anything other than tragic and pitiful.

The allusion to the Freudian origins of religion here, by the way, is so explicit that if any Fundamentalists had been on the ball the film might’ve been picketed. Spielberg is showing us Christianity as a cult of mother-worship. David, the true believer, is grimly dogmatic, fanatical, and utterly literal-minded. The Blue Fairy is his eleven-year-old’s version of Our Lady of the Immaculate Heart. She’s painted in blue and white, like the plaster Madonnas that cast their benediction over so many lawns. The narrator even uses the word “praying” to refer to David’s pleas to the Blue Fairy, as rote and repetitive as the Hail Mary. He calls her “She who smiled softly forever, welcomed forever”—in other words, David’s dream mother, unlike the moody, unreliable, mortal Monica. The two women who are the object of his lifelong search, Monica and the Blue Fairy, are really one. David keeps his gaze fixed faithfully on his own Madonna day and night, obeying Monica’s instructions at his imprinting: “Look at me all the time.” And it’s more than a coincidence, in a film released in 2001 *anno Domini*, that he keeps his faithful vigil “for two thousand years.”

Some viewers have suggested that this image of David, alone forever on the bottom of the sea, in vain supplication to a cheap plaster statue in a kiddie park, would have been a better ending for the film—more pessimistic, more “Kubrickian.” But Kubrick understood the necessities of mythic structure too well to let his hero remain forever in the belly of the whale. (Even David Bowman, the hero of Kubrick’s most dauntingly unconventional narrative, finally comes

home.) David does escape his physical imprisonment and gets “home,” but the film’s final and most disturbing chapter gives us ending that is, beneath its fairy-tale gloss, far bleaker.

Another mode jerk: we emerge from an icy white mist, the blankness of extinction. Hushed, elegiac choruses sing as a futuristic craft flies over the barren plain of ice that now entombs the Earth. We descend into deep chasms cut into the frozen ocean, gliding through vast corridors as eerie and beautiful as an abandoned cathedral, where in the dim blue light we can see figures excavating the ruins of a human city. Our only heirs are the highly advanced robots who step out of this craft--sleek Giocamettis with nodes of energy flowing through the circuitry inside their glassy bodies. These are clearly robots designed and built by other robots, bearing only a vestigial resemblance to the vanished human figure. They look in wonder at a more exact copy, David. “This machine was trapped under the wreckage before the freezing,” one explains. “Therefore, these robots are originals. They knew *living people*.” Raucous, brawling humanity has finally exterminated itself. The Earth is a dead world.

Spielberg gives us two endings to the film, superimposed over one another but utterly dissonant in tone. In effect, he gets to have his cake and eat it, too—giving us the childish dream of reunion we long for while showing us that it’s a hopeless fantasy. And this accounts for the dramatic critical divide over the film; critics who saw only the happy ending hated it; those who understood the ending as deliberately hollow, and saw through it to the darkness beyond, called it brilliant. However brightly the children’s story may end for David, the grownups can’t help but notice, in the background, the death of the human race. Just as the saving of the six hundred couldn’t quite redeem the horror of the Holocaust in *Schindler’s List*, this “up” ending is so thin and meaningless that it can’t obscure the larger tragedy. Except this time that failing may be deliberate; Spielberg is

showing us how myopically we focus on our own trivial love stories while all around us, dimmed by the glow of our own happiness, the world is dying.

David does get what he wants, just as we get our happy ending, but neither of them is quite what they seem. David, reactivated, comes to in a facsimile of his old home, as uncannily familiar and alien as the Louis XIV suite David Bowman finds at the end of his odyssey. But the film stock is grainy, and the colors too harsh, like an old Super 8 home movie. This isn't really his home, but an artificial environment, threatening and strange. The robots who have constructed this habitat for him speak to him through an image of the Blue Fairy: "You are so important to us," they tell him. "You are unique in all the world." They're trying to tell him everything he's always longed to hear—that he *is* one of a kind, treasured now as a singular, irreplaceable artifact, that he is loved. These words are at last literally true, but, tragically, David can't hear them. He still wants only the same thing he's been programmed to want since his imprinting: the concrete image of his mother. He offers up the magic lock of her hair, trembling with rage and triumph. "Now you can bring her back," he tells them, in a voice like steel. "Can't you." The moment succeeds in inducing a shiver, but it is, nonetheless, a meaningless victory. What makes all of David's persistence and tenacity empty is that his goal is not freely chosen; it's been imposed arbitrarily from without, by cynical design. He can no more account for his fierce devotion to Monica than Gigolo Joe could for the fancy footwork with which he punctuated his singsong patter—"That's just what I do," he explained.

Finally, giving up in the face of his chilling determination, the robots decide to "give him what he wants." One of them tries to explain to David that what they're creating for him isn't real, and can't last; the genetic copy of his mother will only survive for one day. "Maybe... maybe she'll be special," says David, wishing out loud. "Maybe she'll stay." The robot gently tries to dissuade him of this idea, but, like any child or fundamentalist, David can invent an endless number of rationalizations for why what he wants must be true. "Maybe the one

day will be like the one day in the amphibicopter,” he tries. “Maybe it will last forever.” The robot recognizes how sadly stunted he is: “I thought this would be hard for your to understand,” he sighs. “You were created to be so young.” Finally, defeated by David’s stubborn literal-mindedness, he tells him to go to his mother, as a false dawn appears in the holographic “window.”

But notice that these sentient robots are no less deluded than David; they, too, have inherited humanity’s sense of incompleteness and misplaced yearning. The narrator confesses that he envies humans “their spirit.” “Human beings had created a million explanations of the meaning of existence, in art, in poetry, in mathematical formulas,” he says. “Certainly human beings must be the key to the meaning of existence.” His paean to the ineffable genius of humanity echoes kind of hollowly, since about all we’ve seen human beings do in this film is fuck and destroy robots, and each other. His idealized vision of humanity has as little to do with the vain, weak, sadistic mortals we’ve seen as David’s Blue-Fairy image of his mother does with Monica. Just as humans tried in vain to replace their own lost loved ones with mechanical copies, our robotic successors now strive, with their unimaginable technologies, to replace us. The film brings this futile effort full circle as David, who was himself created as a replica of a dead human child, is comforted with a cloned copy of his own long-lost human “mother.”

What they give David, inevitably, is a kindly lie, like the lies we tell our own children--that we’ll never leave them, that we will never die—or the lies we demand from our popular storytellers—that the hero will find his heart’s desire, that love will prevail. “All problems seemed to have disappeared from his mommy’s mind,” marvels the narrator, trying to pass off as a miraculous gift-horse a change that is in fact ominous and telling. This new Monica is utterly unlike the one we remember, who was ambivalent, conflicted and distant, alternately affectionate and freaked out by her fiercely clinging “son,” given to evasions and betrayal. In other words, it isn’t the real Monica. She’s a fantasy figure, custom-designed to answer David’s desires--no different from the robot

prostitutes who could fine-tune their looks and personalities to suit the tastes of their customers. But it doesn't matter to David, who can't distinguish image from reality. (Remember how Gigolo Joe had to explain that the animated Blue Fairy hologram "was an *example* of her.") "There was no Henry, no Martin," the narrator continues, "just the two of them." It's the ultimate Oedipal wish fulfillment, a dream date with Mommy without rivals or distractions. She's been reconstructed for him as a perfect reflection of his desire, just as he was for her.

Most tellingly of all, every episode in David and Monica's "perfect" day together-- the giggly game of hide-and-seek, the haircut, the birthday party--is a happy distortion of some ugly incident from their real life together. The only games of "hide-and-seek" they ever played were when Monica shut him up in the hall closet so he'd quit spooking her, and, later, when she deserted him in the woods. She never gave him a haircut in real life--although he, memorably, did once cut hers. And the only birthday party he ever attended was the disastrous one that ended with his expulsion from the family. What in real life was marred by Oedipal tension and trauma here becomes unambiguously innocent. It's David's defective fantasy of what a happy mother and son should be like. This is what he wanted—a fairy tale, not the messy, painful reality of human relationships. David's carefully censored, Disneyfied re-creation mimics the way in which our own selective memories—and our movies--falsify the past. He's rewriting his own history as dishonestly as *Amistad* or *Schindler's List* does ours, bathing everything in a blinding Spielbergian haze of nostalgia.

But the illusion is a tenuous one. "David had been told not to try to explain to Monica," says the narrator. "Otherwise she would become frightened and everything would be spoiled." "Spoiled," indeed; imagine Mommy's reaction if she were to understand that she's actually a clone of the person she thinks she is, a two-thousand year-old corpse resurrected for only twelve hours in a world empty of any other human beings. She finally succumbs to an everlasting sleep murmuring the words David has waited two millennia to hear: "I love you, David.

I do love you. I have always loved you.” The real Monica, of course, never spoke such words. The tenderest moment we saw the two of them share was at his imprinting: “Who am I, David?” she begged him. Gigolo Joe was right; she loved him only for what he did for her.

Thus the narrator gives the kids a happy ending to his fairy-tale, David contentedly drifting off to “the place where dreams are born”—presumably that magical realm of love and metaphor of which Dr. Hobby spoke. Even positive reviewers rolled their eyes over this ending, calling it typically sappy and sentimental. (The *Village Voice*, anxious as always not to be taken in, warned that some hip and cynical viewers might weep “tears of mirth.”<sup>v</sup>) But this closing image of David falling asleep in his Mother’s arms is neither mawkish nor ridiculous. It is utterly desolate. John Williams’ wordless lullaby is no more soothing than the one the French nanny mecha sang to David as they were borne away in a net. David is still as much a captive as he was then, or when he was buried under the ice; the only difference is that now he is content. David is trapped in his “one perfect moment,” the only moment of happiness possible for him. At his “birthday party” he admitted that he has no more wishes to make. He will lie beside the dead form of his mother for eternity, just as he sat imploring the Blue Fairy for two millennia, still and silent and utterly at peace. Dr. Hobby designed him to be “caught in a freeze-frame,” and so he is; Spielberg’s visual metaphor for love is being caged, frozen.

David has been given a comforting illusion, like the one Spielberg’s narrator offers us in this ending, if, like children, we choose to believe it. An illusion is all David has been chasing for twenty centuries: an idealized image of a mother who never existed, a fairy-tale angel like the Blue Fairy. His gaze fixed on this goal, he remains blind to his own cynical exploitation, to the death of his family and friends, even to the end of the world. Like a child, or a credulous audience, he is content with the mere image, with a story. But, as the real Monica tried to tell him long ago, “stories aren’t real.” In reality, he’s asleep in an artificial fantasy, alone

in an empty, icebound world. He's like Jack Torrance as we last see him in *The Shining*, grinning out at us from that photograph on the wall of The Overlook Hotel—happy and fulfilled, finally home, frozen forever in Hell. And we, watching this ending with tears in our eyes, are like those soldiers in the final scene of *Paths of Glory*, who finally break down crying not over the carnage they've seen or for their unjustly executed comrades, but over a schmaltzy lullaby, mourning the memory of their own lost mothers.

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<sup>i</sup> Raphael, Frederic. *Eyes Wide Open: A Memoir of Stanley Kubrick*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1999. [page number to come]

<sup>ii</sup> Agel, Jerome, editor. *The Making of Kubrick's 2001*. New York: The New American Library, 1970. p. 285.

<sup>iii</sup> NAU97, "Screenplay Message Board: Movie Talk: *A.I.*" [www.ezboard.com](http://www.ezboard.com). 2 August 2001.

<sup>iv</sup> Dr. Hobby's is only one of several voices of scientific authority that we should distrust in this film; the doctor at the cryogenic hospice, where Monica and Henry are visiting their comatose son, is garbed in his white lab coat (education-film icon of Science) but stands in front of a telltale mural of The Emperor Who Has No Clothes.

<sup>v</sup> Hoberman, J. "The Mommy Returns." *The Village Voice*, 25 June 2001.