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Wednesday, 04 July 2001 18:00

A.I.: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

After all the months of secrecy, of waiting, of wondering, we can finally analyze Steven Spielberg's *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*. And "analyze" is the appropriate term, because this is a movie for your brain rather than your heart. Those of us who were leery about how the sensibilities of warm, huggy Spielberg would gel with those of icy, cynical Stanley Kubrick (who initiated the project) might be in for a shock; for much of the film, Spielberg mimics the famously clinical, detached Kubrickian style flawlessly. In fact, he's almost *too* good at it; when actual *emotion* is called for, the movie falters. *A.I.* is never less than riveting, stunningly well-designed, and technically miraculous. But I'm still not sure that it's a success.

Basically, *A.I.* is a futuristic *Pinocchio*, a fact the movie willingly acknowledges. Set in the distant future, a Gepetto-like scientist (William Hurt) realizes the next step in the "evolution" of robotic creation is to create an artificial person with the ability to love, and be loved by, humans. So he creates David (Haley Joel Osment), who looks like an 11-year-old boy but who is programmed to feel unconditional love. He's taken in by Monica and Henry (Frances O'Connor and Sam Robards), whose own child (Jake Thomas) is being cryogenitically frozen while his parents await the cure for his debilitating disease. David's relationship with his new "parents" begins awkwardly but ends up rosy, until the couple's child awakens, hell-bent on getting David out of the picture. Soon, Monica is dumping poor David in the woods, where he's forced to fend for himself against bounty hunters, and where his only goal is to find the Blue Fairy (whom he learned about when Monica read *Pinocchio* to him), who, David hopes, will make him a real boy so Monica will return his love.

Up until this point, the movie, despite the sterile, vaguely creepy visuals, had been filled with Spielbergian whimsy and tension, and a few too-obviously-staged scenes of David's unerring politeness freaking humans out. But afterwards, with David on the run, *A.I.* turns into a full-fledged Kubrickian orgy of excess, and it becomes infinitely more interesting. David is captured and brought to a "Flesh Fair," where robots are systematically tortured and destroyed by shrieking, hysterical humans – the staging suggests a particularly gruesome WWF match.

Among the robots meant for public "execution" is Gigolo Joe (Jude Law), who suggests Malcolm McDowell in Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* if Alex's blood had been replaced with wiring, and if he replaced his violent impulses with seductive ones. David and Joe soon form a union and head off together in search of the Blue Fairy, which takes them from a blazing green-light district to Manhattan, which is now – after the melting of the polar ice caps – underwater.

There are moments throughout *A.I.* that are astonishing. The look of the film is extraordinary (Spielberg's longtime cinematographer, Janusz Kaminski, might be the best collaborator the director has ever had), and there are images you might never forget: a lonely group of robots rifling through a junk heap, trying on different jaws and limbs; a robot falling from a skyscraper, his trajectory seen as a tear on Gigolo Joe's face; David's slow walk as he realizes that he's but one in a long series of Davids. And with that incredible actor Haley Joel Osment in the role, David never comes off as a namby-pamby pain; Osment's understanding of the subtleties of acting is nothing short of genius. (He has been described as the Mozart of acting, a true prodigy, and it's a claim that's almost impossible to deny.)

Unfortunately, the storytelling contains a major flaw that all the technical virtuosity in the world can't disguise: We're never sure how to take the character of David's mother. David's pure, unadulterated adoration of Monica is touching and a little scary, but what, exactly, are her feelings toward him? We get the requisite scenes of Monica initially fearing this creature, then being annoyed by him, then learning to accept his presence, and eventually enjoying his company, but actual *love* is never in evidence. Plot-wise, this makes sense – the whole film, after all, centers on David wanting to find a way to *make* his mother love him – but there's the strong implication that Monica doesn't *deserve* David's love, that she's a terrible mother, and we're not sure how to feel about David's quest. Frances O'Connor plays her scenes as a shrill neurotic, and Martin is a hateful monster – Monica doesn't seem to have raised him particularly well – so when she lets David loose in the woods, the scene is more pathetic than harrowing. We're affected by David's tearful protestations of being left alone – how could we not be? – but we're also a little grateful that he's rid of her, and definitely relieved that he's away from the indifferent Henry. (The sequence would work if it were made clear that Monica *prefers* the robot to her natural-born child, and she has to get rid of David to keep those horrific feelings at bay.) As is, David's quest for perfect mother-love is sweet but maddeningly ambiguous, and not, I think, in a way intended. Many audience members might find themselves wishing that David would just get over her and hang with Gigolo Joe instead; Jude Law's breathtakingly physical turn is the closest *A.I.* comes to feelings of exhilaration.

This lack of an emotional angle hurts the film in other ways, too. The story's last half hour, which I won't reveal, is *dependent* on our emotional attachment to David, but it remains as neutral, as Kubrickian, as everything that preceded it. (It doesn't help matters that the film seems ready to end two or three times before it actually does; like many a Kubrick enterprise, it starts to feel *really long* .) *A.I.* 's metaphysics also get a little forced and draggy in this section, and despite his generally terrific work, Spielberg can't quite shake off his need for the easy laugh in certain scenes that don't call for them; Robin Williams and Chris Rock deliver voice-over performances, and they're so incongruous to *A.I.* that, briefly, the movie stops dead in its tracks.

By all means, see *A.I.* ; it's often masterfully directed, and it's filled with brilliant touches and, in Osment and Law, two sensational performances. There are better movies out there (like *Moulin Rouge* and John Singleton's marvelous *Baby Boy* , which space doesn't allow me to review this week – stay tuned ...), but none with the power to provoke such passionate arguments; you'll probably find yourself thinking about it for weeks. Numerous flaws and all, *A.I.* is an important work, easily 2001's most fascinating cinematic endeavor. Whether you'll *like* it or not is a different story.