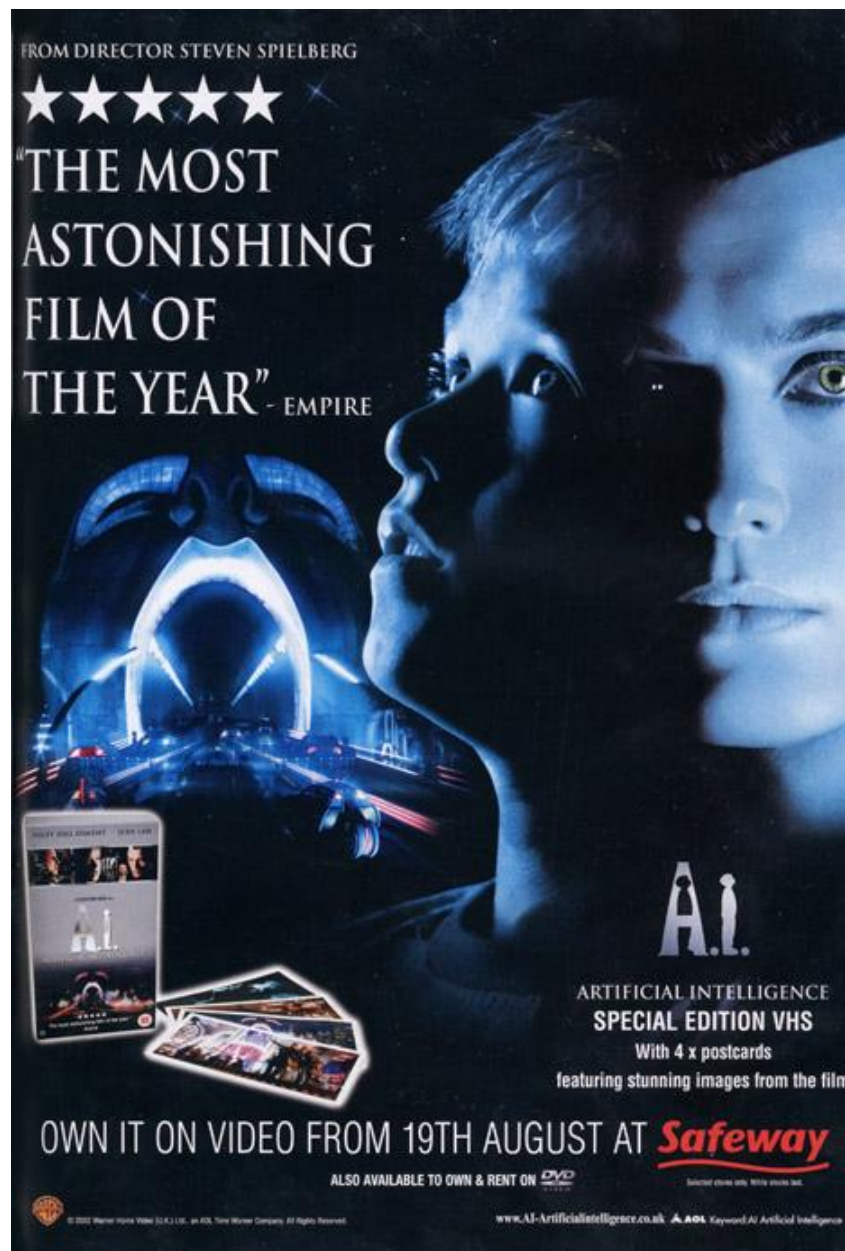


A.I. Artificial Intelligence

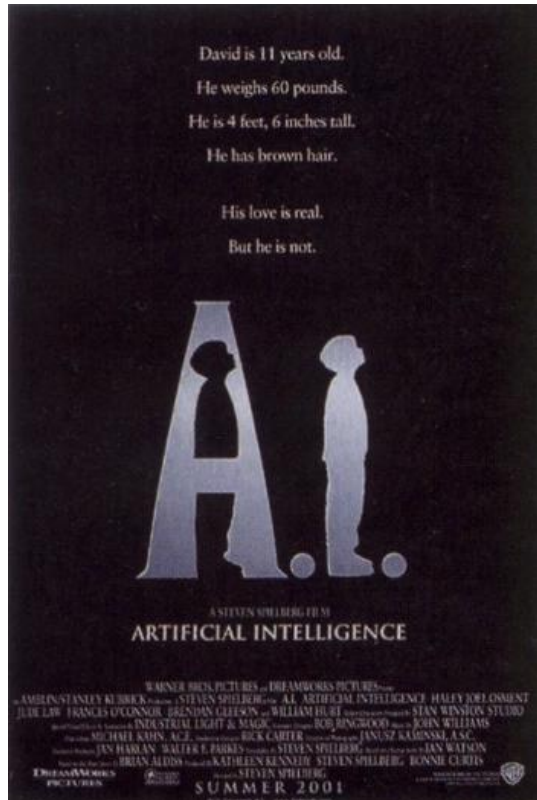
US : 2001 : dir. Steven Spielberg : Warner Bros / DreamWorks : 146 min
 prod: : scr: : dir.ph.:
[Haley Joel Osment](#)
 Jude Law; Frances O'Connor; William Hurt; Brendan Gleeson

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω 8 € M ☼	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Your starter for ten: – What do these two have in common? An android gigolo made to gratify sexually frustrated women, and an android boy made to, ahm, no that's too easy.
 Source: indeterminate

“ David is 11 years old.
He weighs 60 pounds,
He is 4 feet, 6 inches tall,
He has brown hair.
His love is real,
But he is not. ”



Ingeniously simple – the poster for “A.I.” (despite its wordy, pompous caption) conveys the boy android theme with splendid economy Source: Empire

Barbican Screen Guide review:

“Steven Spielberg takes up Stanley Kubrick’s longstanding project based on the short story by Brian Aldiss *“Supertoys Last All Summer Long”*. Jude Law, Frances O’Connor, Haley Joel Osment, William Hurt and Brendan Gleeson star in the story set in a post-apocalyptic future, in which the polar ice-caps have melted, flooding most of the earth’s land mass. In a society largely dependent on computers and robots, an 11 year old robot boy, designed to serve as a surrogate son, yearns to become human. A moving, latterday Pinocchio tale with stunning visuals and a soaring score by John Williams.”

Metro – 21/09/01 – review “Over-fleshy fairytale”:

“There are several films in **“A.I. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE”** – a sci-fi experiment, a homage to Stanley Kubrick (whose project this originally was), a Freudian nightmare, a sinister fairytale – but, weirdly for a Steven Spielberg film, none of them is very entertaining.

The grieving Swintons, whose young son is in a coma, are chosen as parents for a new kind of Mecha (robot): one that can love. Cute David (Haley Joel Osment) gives new mom Monica (Frances O’Connor) the creeps, unsurprisingly, but she recovers pretty fast – until her real son pulls through. Soon David, a small bright robot with an unhealthy mother fixation, is adrift in a fierce world, only escaping a Flesh Fair with the help of a “lover Mecha”, Gigolo Joe (Jude Law, excellent as always but seemingly acting in a completely different, probably better, film).

Flesh Fairs have nothing to do with Joe’s line of work: they’re gladiatorial affairs where humans rip redundant Mechas to pieces with the anger of the supplanted; David would probably have understood their thirst for vengeance only too well if his predicament weren’t a little too pressing for time-wasting empathy.

Although David and Joe escape and continue David’s quest for the blue fairy who will turn him into a real boy (he’s misunderstood *“Pinocchio”*, the poor tyke), we never do, because this whole film is itself a Flesh Fair. David is prodded, taunted, chased and nearly pulverised; he’s made to resemble a human by a Professor Hobby (William Hurt) who seems astonished when his creation exhibits classic signs of humanity: trauma, obsession and ego. Osment is eerily good but he’s lost in a nightmare, the creation of a man – whether Hobby or Spielberg – who should have known better.” – Nina Caplan

Empire – February 2001 – preview:

“For the uninitiated...

Evening Standard – 27/06/01 – news item:

“Steven Spielberg has a word in the ear of Haley Joel Osment, 13-year old star of his latest film, **"A.I."**, at its New York premiere. Osment plays a robot with the capacity for

love in the movie, originally a Stanley Kubrick project which Spielberg took over after his death. British actor Jude Law also stars in the film, which opens in Britain in September. Law, 28, said **"A.I."** was a tribute to Kubrick. "It was challenging but it was being led by an extraordinary man. It has a lot of what Stanley Kubrick was about. It felt a lot of the time like we were looking back over his career." ”

Feverish rumours that Kubrick and Spielberg – polar opposites in fundamental respects – were collaborating on a film about Anal Intercourse prove to have been ill founded. But as more clues to the plot emerged, surprise gave way to other misgivings. Spielberg is at his most mundane when handling childhood themes which lend themselves to sentimentalism.

"E.T. THE EXTRATERRESTRIAL" worked because he understood the mental environment of a boyhood in contemporary small-town America. Its mawkish episodes were defrayed by keeping adults in the background throughout, making it essentially a boy-and-his-dog movie with an SF twist. But **"HOOK"** was an unmitigated disaster because he completely failed to grasp the core meaning of *"Peter Pan"*, or the importance of its Edwardian setting and context. His segment (the worst) of **"TWILIGHT ZONE: THE MOVIE"** was emetic, cloying and acutely embarrassing to watch. *"Pinocchio"* is a tale that he, of all film-makers, should let well alone, and it comes as no surprise that Brian Aldiss withdrew his collaboration from the project when he caught wind of which way Spielberg was leaning.

The central problem about **"A.I."** is that it has too much which is artificial and too little which is intelligent. Based on a short story, it plays exactly like a 20-minute instalment from **"The Twilight Zone"** unfeasibly extended to two and a half hours. Excessive length was one of Kubrick's foibles. Excessive sentimentality is Spielberg's. This marriage between their two prodigious talents has brought out the weaknesses of both and none of their strengths. The key characters are poorly delineated (a Kubrick failing), the postulated future world is a feeble twist on 20th century America (a Spielberg flaw). To the extent of the twin towers looming majestically above a post-ice age Manhattan skyline some three thousand years hence.

The central theme of Aldiss' story (*"Supertoys Last All Summer Long"*) prompts many interesting questions – as did **"BLADE RUNNER"**, from the Philip K. Dick novel *"Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?"* – but very few of them are explored in this film. The most intriguing subtexts are those which Spielberg most definitely didn't intend, but sing from his film loud and clear. In place of a provocative analysis of the "real" versus the "synthetic", we are treated to a laboured and literalistic extenuation of Pinocchio's quest to be a real boy – in order that his mommy (who of course was **not** a mommy, but a daddy) will love him.

Let us cut to the chase and recognise that **"A.I."**, whatever else it might be, is pornography, both in conception and execution. But it is New Age pornography, explicitly crafted to gratify women. There's a good deal of this on our television screens and in our video stores, and it raises no eyebrows at all, because the appetites it feeds are not male sexual ones (bad ones) but female emotional ones (good ones). In all other respects the analogy is exact, replete with orgiastic dwelling on the points of maximum emotion, and the equivalent of "come shots".

Prototype "mecha-child" David (Haley Joel Osment) is delivered hot from the factory to a couple whose own son lies in a deep coma, beyond medical help. They are given a series of code-words to recite to the android only once they've decided to adopt him, since this will imprint his emotional attachment to them irretrievably. Distraught mom Monica is initially

apprehensive of the child device, but not for very long, and without consulting her husband she recites the code words to David, imprinting him on herself alone. Spielberg would argue that she is the one in the greater emotional distress. One could just as reasonably argue that it is an act of gratuitous selfishness. David utters the magic word “mommy” to her (not that a real boy that age would do so, even in America) and we have our first emotional come-shot.

All would be well but – alas! – the flesh and blood son now recovers miraculously from his coma, goes into sibling rivalry mode, and before David understands quite what is happening he has been unceremoniously dumped by his loving mother, who knows he'll now be melted down for scrap if caught. She has (ab)used him for her own emotional gratification, and now casts him aside for another victim. David, outcast, is captured with an assortment of other runaway robots, and whisked away to a Christian fundamentalist gathering in disguise – the “Flesh Fair” – to be destroyed in as spectacularly painful a method as human wit can devise. When he pleads for his own life he succeeds in escaping, together with Joe, an artificial gigolo.

It does not require too much thought to recognise that David himself is a boy whore, just as much as Joe. Both are essentially male dolls manufactured to service the appetites of women, and with no other purpose. It is deeply ironic that Spielberg throws these two together, because he certainly wouldn't accept the equation between them. David for him is no more than a lost child searching for a way back to his loving “mommy”, but the equation remains – David is simply a child-sized gigolo custom-made to service one client, and ultimately, this being a Spielberg movie, he is permitted to succeed in his quest, however remotely.

There is some toying in the early section of the film with the conundrum of the artificial human being (the Replicant) but it is all very superficial. David gets into a spinach-eating contest at table with his unlooked-for brother, and has to be whisked back to the factory to have his innards cleaned. He doesn't sleep, but “can lie still” for eight hours. And he will inevitably out-survive his human “parent” by centuries. The deeper questions, about the subtle differences with which an artificial being might perceive his surroundings and his own existence, are brushed aside with some peculiarities of robotic gait, and David bursting into a manic “laugh” to break the ice with his new parents. Even the film “**D.A.R.Y.L.**”, shallow though that was, found time for some amusing lessons from a flesh-and-blood boy to the robotic one on how to handle grown-ups. David is taunted by other boys because he can't pee. It seems fair to ask, when his fresh-from-a-coma brother is so earnestly begging for a good spanking, why David's designers didn't program a more authentically boyish personality into their *piece de résistance*. David is more doll-like than boy-like, a ten-year old baby. Just what “mommys” want, it seems.

The mid-section of “**A.I.**” becomes a protracted search for the “blue fairy” who can convert him to a model which can pee and eat spinach. It sags lamentably, no more interesting ideas being in play. The final section, which I shan't divulge in detail for those yet to see the film, jars both in tone and visual style from the preceding two hours. Presumably a short paragraph at the end of Aldiss' story, here it dots every “i” and crosses every “t” of the Pinocchio theme.

Is there anything new to the film's core idea? What, after all, was the lynchpin character of TV's “**Star Trek: The Next Generation**”, but Data, an android desperately wishing to make the grade as a human being? In the pilot episode of that series, Captain Picard explicitly hails him (one should strictly say “it”) as “Pinocchio”, lest the audience should have missed the analogy. Reaching further back, in 1985 we had “**D.A.R.Y.L.**” (Data Analysing Robot Youth Lifeform, if you please), starring Barret Oliver as a 10-year old android stranded in a human family, suffering from amnesia and unaware he/it is a piece of military hardware. In 1972 “**ZERO POPULATION GROWTH**” portrayed a dystopian near future where parenthood carried the death penalty, and parental yearnings were assuaged by supplying the populace with (rather more primitive) android babies and children. More broadly one could say the “**ROBOCOP**” films also tinkered ineptly with the theme, as did “**TERMINATOR 2: JUDGMENT DAY**”. The central posit of “**A.I.**” must have struck many audiences as one they have seen pawed over many times before. And Spielberg has cropped the idea of emotion

complexes in artificial beings down to the soppiest one of “love”, an abstract the Americans talk about very often but understand no better than anyone else.

If this were a parable on adoption, or (as I suspect Spielberg intended) on the insecurity of children whose parents remarry, there is certainly scope for the biting observation we came to expect of Kubrick, but this is no “**CLOCKWORK ORANGE**” with a rejected son who is innocent of blame. This is no “**BLADE RUNNER**” with a ten-year old Harrison Ford finding an itch he can’t scratch. Haley Joel Osment makes a valiant fist of it, but there is, to my palate at any rate, something distinctly creepy about a boy his age toting a talking teddy bear around and interested in nothing but winning the love of the “mommy” who so callously dumped him.

Spielberg attempts even to shield her from criticism by making the husband (on whom David was not permitted to imprint) the one who pressures her into rejecting the android. But this is no more than what all pornography does – absolving the lustful of their lusts, making the object of their appetites gagging to be ridden once again. Haley is certainly gagging for it.

Science fiction fans would have trampled one another underfoot to see a new Kubrick masterpiece to stand beside “**2001 A SPACE ODYSSEY**”. Sadly, even as an SF blockbuster it strangely disappoints. Spielberg does not successfully identify androids as a new persecuted underclass, setpieces such as the Flesh Fair look at once overdone and under-budgeted, and, as with much post-apocalyptic science fiction, there’s a staggering poverty of creative thinking about how such a world might look, dress, speak and relate to one another. Why would all the seductive music gigolo Joe plays by a crick of his neck be fifty years old even from our date? If the film did not carry a (largely redundant) prologue in the android designer class, one could be forgiven for assuming it starts in the 1990s. This is designer cowardice. They obviously feel mainstream audiences will be put off by alien speech patterns and implied new social codes, radically different living styles, family structures and so forth. David’s “mom and dad” sashay out to dinner in tuxedo and evening gown. The kids lope around a pool in beach shorts. It just won’t do at all. Has anyone there even *heard* of the seventeenth century?

In Kubrick’s hands one would have expected more acidic observations on “family values” and the consumerist society. Spielberg seems incapable of rancour. Even “**SCHINDLER’S LIST**” and “**SAVING PRIVATE RYAN**” were oddly devoid of bile (compared, say, to “**PATHS OF GLORY**” or “**FULL METAL JACKET**”). Yet Kubrick had no interest in children whatsoever, and even less empathy with them than his celebrated lack of empathy with actors in general. It seems incongruous that he would have identified this story as one that would yield fruitfully to his hand.

Make no mistake, I am fond of Spielberg’s work in general – his talent as a commercial director speaks for itself – but when his judgement is clouded by sentiment he can go off the rails alarmingly. The critics on BBC 2’s “**Newsnight Review**” (no fans of his, I suspect) roundly lambasted the film as exhibiting the worst traits of both directors – like a child of Einstein and Marilyn Monroe having the looks of the former and the brains of the latter. One added that at two and a half hours the film is too long by two hours. Having seen “**A.I.**” some months later, I can only concur heartily with both conclusions.

Haley Joel Osment, widely praised for his performances in “**THE SIXTH SENSE**” and “**PAY IT FORWARD**”, was on a roll. It will be interesting to hear what critics made of his personal contribution to this one.

See subject index under **EPIC JOURNEYS**, [ORPHANS / ADOPTION](#) and [SCIENCE FICTION](#).