



RESURGENCE

Artistic Inconsistency

James Harleman

"A.I.—Artificial Intelligence"

Starring Haley Joel Osment, Jude Law, Frances O'Connor, Sam Robards and William Hurt

Directed by Steven Spielberg

2 hrs. 25 min.

Released June 29, 2001

Rated PG-13

"His love is real. But he is not."

This stilted ad slogan, which ought to have been divided by a comma and not a period, (who starts a sentence with a conjunction, really?) was a sign of things to come. Phenomenal acting and breathtaking visuals simply can't rescue this film from an overly melodramatic tone, the clashing styles of its two creators, and a supremely humanist bent.

Conceived by the late (great?) Stanley Kubrick—based on a very short story by Brian Aldiss—"A.I." is the story of a mechanical boy who has been programmed to love, and his subsequent struggles to be loved in return, and to transcend his robotic limitations. Set in a future where global warming has melted the earth's ice caps (*that's* original), and much of the planet is underwater, robot simulacra do most of the routine labor. Professor Hobby (Hurt) creates David—the first of his kind—and places him with a mother and father whose son is cryogenically frozen with an incurable illness. Situations make keeping David impossible, however, and David—having been imprinted on his mother and irreversibly programmed—is to be returned and destroyed. His "mother", Monica (O'Connor) releases him in the woods instead, with his robotic teddy bear, warning the boy to avoid humans and stick to his own kind. In response, David embarks on a lengthy quest to earn back his mother's love, by becoming a real boy... encountering his creator and working through issues of spirituality, belief, hope, and dreams.

On his way, David encounters and travels with a male prostitute mecha named "Gigolo Joe", who pontificates quite poetically about how robots do it better—no pain, no emotional scars, all giving and no selfish interest—which, in our age of internet porn and other mechanized means by which to fulfill our self-involved lusts, is a chilling expose of things to come. Joe assists David as they search the world for "The Blue Fairy", (from the classic story of Pinocchio, read by Monica and believed by the mecha child), the instrument by which David believes—like the wooden puppet—he can become real. They encounter the horrifying flesh fair, where robots are destroyed for sport and in the name of "human purity"; this scene preaches heavily and compromises the film's subtlety. They also visit "Rouge City", a town devoted to sensuality and sex; buildings are shaped like women's legs, and the doorway is... well, you get the idea. Parents, understand this is not a children's film. Although the visual angles are not that obvious, two and two equal four. This movie is PG-13 for a reason.

This is where the experience breaks down; the film rocks back and forth between Spielbergian schmaltz and Kubrickian depravity in disconcerting proportion. The more

standardized approach of Spielberg conflicts with the ambiguity of Kubrick, ruining subtle scenes with bursts of bluntness. One viewer likened the film to "Spielberg channeling Kubrick", but—if so—the reception fades in and out. Another flaw is that the film runs too long; its desire to deliver a message is all over the map. There is a scene in which a character falls—literally and figuratively—and one assumes that credits will roll; unfortunately, the film continues for another 30 minutes.

Moreover, the humanistic angle provides a mixed message that is ultimately meaningless. Without spoiling too much, David seeks happiness and fulfillment and ultimately meets his creator. At one point in the film, the "Creator" (Hobby) gives the boy the means by which to find him. We discover that the boy never could have found his maker without the Creator's help, (sound familiar?). We also discover that the Professor has fashioned his mecha into the image of his son. Professor Hobby's plans, however, are not what David wants. The *creation rejects the creator*, and seeks another spiritual guide—one he ends up praying to for a long time. As they are literally trapped under some wreckage, and the robot boy continues to pray to the divine, the talking Teddy Bear notes that "we're in a cage"—a comment so poignant to be simple observation—implying that prayer for divine assistance and seeking answers outside one's self are a "trap". Twice the point is driven home that God—or gods of any kind, for that matter—are not the answer. If we had a creator, he will not help us, only exploit us... and a belief in spiritual or miraculous intervention is fruitless. This point is made unerringly clear.

I have to be vague here, or prematurely detonate the bombshell ending (which, by the way, is so ambiguous that people are mistaking just what occurs). Suffice it to say that the only semblance of happiness derived by our young protagonist in this film comes from the intervention of evolution and science, coupled by the work of David's own hands. Through this he achieves a moment of happiness... but even this is fleeting and temporal. It ultimately passes. According to A.I. (which is not a story about mecha, but about mankind's collective yearning for love) this is the best one can hope for... nothing lasting, eternal, or perfect... just a selfish, temporarily fulfilling delusion. I feel sorry for those seemingly comforted or emotionally uplifted by the true emptiness of this film.

There are several inspired visions of the future (the bridge to Rouge City is amazing, and many of the film's interior locations are beautiful) and the cinematography is smooth, contrasting lush, rich home colors with bleak visions of the world outside. Haley Joel Osment performs his role as an artificial boy to the point of eeriness, perhaps more chilling than his role in "The Sixth Sense". Jude Law, however, deserves a best-supporting Oscar for his role as Joe; though his character is the view of sex askew—the fully automated Cary Grant, every woman's romance-novel fantasy—he plays a mechanoid programmed to believe his selling pitch with a convincing relish, sensual but not crass. The gruff-voiced Teddy—which undoubtedly will be in toy stores everywhere next week—actually works without being annoying; truth to tell, he's the scene stealing actor in the film. These three, however, cannot save the flaws of clashing visionaries and ambling, aimless messages. Worst of all, completely unnecessary narration at several key points in the film is just downright insulting, more damaging than the superfluous vocal additions made to "Blade Runner" (a science fiction film by Ridley Scott which, by the way, dealt with similar issues in a much more satisfying fashion).

I have an idea for your summer film viewing. Watch the first two hours of "A.I.", and then switch theatres to catch the last third of "Pearl Harbor". You really won't be missing anything, and both films will seem much more satisfying.