

OT: A.I. (SPOILERS)

The Urth list — 3 messages, 2 voices, 26 Aug 2001

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/2810>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Adam Stephanides — 26 Aug 2001, 23:12

on 8/21/01 12:15 PM, James Jordan at jbjordan4 at home.com wrote:
Go for it. I'm interested. I found the Disney-Pinocchio twists interesting,
but I thought Bladerunner addressed the fundamental issue better.

I haven't seen Bladerunner, but I agree that, despite Haley Joel Osment's amazing performance on the knife-edge between machine and human, A.I. didn't have anything profound to say about what it means to be human, or whether robots can be "human." In fact, the film's treatment of robots in general is a serious weakness. To start with, there's the inconsistency in the portrayal of the robots. The supposedly advanced female robot at the start of the film is far more mechanical in behavior than the obsolete robots rounded up by the Flesh Fair, to say nothing of Gigolo Joe. And the whole "human hatred of robots" motif is a sf cliché which is poorly motivated here. Supposedly humans need to cull the robots back to stop them from taking over, but why would anybody build robots capable of taking over? For that matter, why would they build robots capable of living "unlicensed" in the wilderness? (And the robots in the film are basically too stupid to take over, anyway.)

Other serious flaws in the film are:

1. The middle section, up to David and Joe's arrival in Manhattan, is a series of flashy special-effect-laden set-pieces that make little narrative sense and completely disrupt the mood of the picture.
2. In general, there are a lot of things about the plot that make no sense.
3. David was just too stupid and too fixated on one idea for me to have much interest in his quest, especially since it is doomed to failure from the start. (Maybe this was Spielberg's intent, but I don't think so; and if so it was a mistake in judgement.)
4. Spielberg is very heavy-handed with his allusions at times, especially the Rouge City segment.

So why do I say it was excellent?

1. The first part of the picture, up to the point where David is abandoned, is brilliantly directed, and quite innovative for a Hollywood movie. For instance, non-naturalistic lighting is central to the film to an extent I don't recall in any other movie, Hollywood or no (though no doubt there are examples). After David is abandoned the picture deteriorates, as I said above, but the whole Manhattan sequence is brilliant, and while the rest of the picture isn't as sure-handed as the first part (and those alien-like robots just don't work for me) there's some very good stuff there, too.
2. Everybody raves about Osment's performance, but to my mind Frances O'Connor is even better. (I really don't understand why so many people find her character unsympathetic.)

3. I enjoyed Spielberg's audacity in undercutting the exploitation of myths and fairy tales upon which he's built his commercial success. The Pinocchio-based quest upon which the film has resolved, and which we've been encouraged to identify with, turns out to be stage-managed by Prof. Hobby as a test, not to judge David's moral worth as in the original story, but to determine his commercial value as a mass-marketed product.

4. As for the much-maligned "second ending" set two thousand years in the future, if you think about it it's not a sentimental cop-out, but a psychological tragedy. Forget for a moment that David is a robot, and consider him just as a child. In this light, he's a boy who is completely fixated on his mother, so that it is literally impossible for him to want anything else. In Freudian terms, he can never resolve his Oedipal conflict, despite the sex proffered in Rouge City. In the end he gets his one narcissistic "perfect day" with the recreated Monica, who now--literally--lives only for him, and that's it: his life is essentially over, because there is nothing else he can want or aspire to. If he hadn't been given this one day with "Monica," it would not be clear that his tragedy is not his inability to be reunited with Monica, but that whether he succeeds or fails, he has no other goals.

Incidentally, while several reviewers have assumed that Spielberg foisted this ending upon Kubrick's pure vision, articles on Kubrick's involvement available on the Web make clear that it was part of Kubrick's conception for the movie. Conversely, one "Kubrickian" moment, the scene where David sees all the replicas of himself, was Spielberg's decision to include, though Aldiss's idea. And I say this not as a Spielberg fan, because I'm not.

5. Though I don't think the film has anything profound to say about what makes one human, the ambiguity as to whether David is really human deep down or just a programmed machine is thought-provoking; and similarly with the questions of whether recreated Monica is really Monica or the advanced mechas' simulacrum to make David happy, and whether her statement of love for David expresses her real feelings or is just what David wants to hear.

6. To sum up, A.I. is a remarkably uncommercial "art" film masquerading as a feel-good blockbuster (and sometimes being taken in by its own con, to its detriment). No wonder it bombed.

--Adam

Alex David Groce — 27 Aug 2001, 12:43 · follows Adam Stephanides

Adam nicely summed up what was right and wrong with AI and said:

And the whole "human hatred of robots" motif is a sf cliché which is poorly motivated here. Supposedly humans need to cull the robots back to stop them from taking over, but why would anybody build robots capable of taking over? For that matter, why would they build robots capable of living "unlicensed" in the wilderness? (And the robots in the film are basically too stupid to take over, anyway.)

This is one point I have to disagree with; it doesn't make complete sense, but the Flesh Fairs seem much more plausible in the general context. Humanity is dying and birth rates are on decline. This is why Hobby think David will be such a great seller in the first place. The movie starts in a dying earth scenario, with hints that the ice in 2,000 years is not unexpected. Given that, no matter how stupid the robots are, it should be easy to resent and hate them given that they're likely to outlive the stagnant, increasingly

infertile mankind. Alidss has always had a talent for entropy and dying earth tales anyway.

The other flaws you note I complete agree with, although Blade Runner has its downs as well and gets a lot of (deserved) credit for creating a whole kind of cinematic future, rather than the actual story (which is, IMO, much less interesting than the one Dick told, although that one would be harder to film).

The most interesting scene in AI is when David attacks the first duplicate. Whatever he is, at that point it's clear that he's as capable of murder as a real child with that kind of strength.

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John 8:32

--

Alex David Groce (agroce+ at cs.cmu.edu)

Ph.D. Student, Carnegie Mellon University - Computer Science Department

8112 Wean Hall (412)-268-3066

<http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~agroce>

Adam Stephanides — 27 Aug 2001, 21:22 · follows Alex David Groce

on 8/27/01 11:43 AM, Alex David Groce at Alex_Groce at gs246.sp.cs.cmu.edu wrote:

And the whole "human hatred of robots" motif is a sf cliché which is poorly motivated here. Supposedly humans need to cull the robots back to stop them from taking over, but why would anybody build robots capable of taking over? For that matter, why would they build robots capable of living "unlicensed" in the wilderness? (And the robots in the film are basically too stupid to take over, anyway.)

This is one point I have to disagree with; it doesn't make complete sense, but the Flesh Fairs seem much more plausible in the general context. Humanity is _dying_ and birth rates are on decline.

This I don't recall. My recollection is that children were rare, not because humanity is becoming infertile but because the world is short on resources so childbearing is strictly licensed. (Though if the world is so short of resources, why do they dump all those robot parts which are perfectly capable of being recycled?)

This is why Hobby think David will be such a great seller in the first place. The movie starts in a dying earth scenario, with hints that the ice in 2,000 years is not unexpected.

I don't recall these hints either; examples?

Given that, no matter how stupid the robots are, it should be easy to resent and hate them given that they're likely to outlive the stagnant, increasingly infertile mankind.

But since the robots in the film are in fact basically portrayed as machines (Gigolo Joe is an exception), I don't see why people should resent them for "outliving" humanity, any more than I would resent the Hubble Space Telescope if I were told it would outlive humanity.

The most interesting scene in AI is when David attacks the first duplicate. Whatever he is, at that point it's clear that he's as capable of murder as a real child with that kind of strength.

This is a great scene, and a brutal reversal of expectations (maybe Henry wasn't so wrong to insist on getting rid of David!). But it's immediately followed by one of the many gaping plot holes: why does Prof. Hobby seem not the least bit perturbed that the prototype for the robot child he is about to mass-market has just made a homicidal (or robocidal) attack on another

robot child?

--Adam>