

O.T. and A.I. (spoilers)

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 06 Oct 2001

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Tony Ellis — 06 Oct 2001, 17:05

Since it's rather quiet around here right now, I hope no one minds if I add my rather wordy two pence to the AI thread, the film having only just made it to these shores. You can always skip it. :-)

Super-Toys Last All Summer Long being one of my favourite Brian Aldiss short stories, I've been actively dreading this film for over a year now, ever since I first heard that Spielberg was filming it as Pinocchio with CGI. Although as Adam Stephanidies says, the blame for that originates with Kubrick.

I can't agree that the first part of the picture is brilliantly directed. A film about a robot boy who can love that opens with a lecture from an idealistic scientist to his students explaining that they're going to make a robot boy who can love. does not impress me much. Worse, what we get in these first few minutes is pretty much what we get for the next half hour: a lecture. I got the impression Spielberg was so worried that because this was a science fiction film people wouldn't treat it as Serious Art, he deliberately made this first part as po-faced and joyless as he could. Even the colours are muted, as if anything too bright might arouse the audience to dangerous levels of entertainment.

The middle section is a lot livelier, which is to say it's a completely different film, with a fine performance by Jude Law. I can't argue with the points made in this thread that the Rouge City sequence is heavy-handed and pastiche Bladerunner, but hell, at least it gave us something interesting to look at. Spielberg could have made the whole film more watchable, not to say suspenseful, simply by opening with this section, and gradually explaining how David came to be on the run in a series of flashbacks.

I agree that David smashing his duplicate self is a stand-out moment. Just a pity the director doesn't do anything with it. The scene where David finds all the other Davids, boxed and ready for dispatch, might have made more of an impact on me if I hadn't seen Buzz Lightyear, another toy in denial, do the same thing five years earlier in Disney's Toy Story.

If it had ended with David underwater this would still have been a halfway decent film. The 'second ending' as it is being called is cloyingly, mawkishly, tediously sentimental, and I think Adam is giving the director more credit than he deserves in seeing it as a psychological tragedy. Spielberg is not exactly famous for his bleak, unhappy endings.

If he had shown David waking up the next morning beside the cold, stiff corpse of his precious Mummy then maybe, yes. But Spielberg makes the film end with the fatherly, fairytale narrator assuring us that a) David's last moment with her lasted for ever as he had hoped, and that b) for the first time ever, David dreamed that night. Translation: a) love can transcend death, and b) Pinocchio became a real little boy in the end.

As for the dire psuedoscience wheeled on to justify this tearjerker ending. All I can say is that

people who found the end of The Amber Spyglass contrived (which would include me) are unlikely to find this one much of an improvement.

What -really- annoys me about this film: I understand that it flopped in the US. Here, my girlfriend and the friend we saw it with constituted one quarter of the audience. Spielberg made an intelligent SF film and he made it boring. Exactly how keen are the Hollywood money people going to be to make another intelligent SF film in the next, say, hundred years?

PS: Did anyone else notice the misquote? The chorus to Yeats' poem The Stolen Child is quoted - uncredited - several times, not just aloud but in print: first on a holographic display, then on the door of the cybernetics lab. But it should be "Come away, O human child!\To the waters -and- the wild," not "To the waters of the wild." Yes, yes, I know, I'm a nit-picking pedant, and it's not as if the mistake drastically changes the sense of the poem, but all the same.

Adam Stephanides — 07 Oct 2001, 11:01 · follows Tony Ellis

on 10/6/01 12:05 PM, Tony Ellis at LittleSense at necronomicon.co.uk wrote:
Although as Adam Stephanides

Stephanides

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When I said the first part was brilliantly directed, I had temporarily forgotten Dr. Hobby's lecture, which I agree is a clumsy device. "This is what the film is going to be about, so take notes."

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To my mind that would have been all wrong. The heart of the picture is David's relationship with Monica, and starting with David in Rogue City would just confuse this.

And I didn't like Jude Law's performance (though I'm in a small minority on this): much too vaudevillian for me. Kubrick had intended Gigolo Joe to be much more sinister and aggressive, which might have been an improvement. (He had also intended Rogue City's architecture to be much more blatant, which probably wouldn't.)

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I didn't like the narration at the end either (although it was Kubrick who wanted David to become a real boy). And I found the the scene where Teddy pulls out the lock of Monica's hair cringe-worthy on both viewings, although it does serve the narrative function of showing that "Monica" is not a construct produced by the mechas from David's memories (if she were, there would be no reason to first tell David they couldn't bring her back). But I still don't agree the ending is mawkish. I think Spielberg left it open for people to take it that way, which may have been a mistake, but it wasn't his intended meaning.

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Agreed; but again, it's not entirely Spielberg's fault. For whatever reason, Kubrick wanted David to be reunited with Monica for only one day, and Spielberg had to rationalize this somehow. I don't think there was any good way to do it.

As to the rest, we'll have to agree to disagree.

--Adam