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*Love Machines: Spielberg/Kubrick, Artificial Intelligence
and Other Oxymorons of Science Fiction Cinema**

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In Bruno Schulz's extraordinary little book, *The street of crocodiles*, the author's father (who believes that tailors' dummies should be treated as people) warns his children:

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Matter never makes jokes; it is always full of the tragically serious. Who dares to think that you can play with matter, that you can shape it for a joke, that the joke will not be built in, will not eat into it like fate, like destiny? Can you imagine the pain, the dull imprisoned suffering, hewn into the matter of that dummy which does not know why it must be what it is, why it must remain in that forcibly imposed form which is no more than a parody? Do you understand the power of form, of expression, of pretense, the arbitrary tyranny imposed on a helpless block, and ruling it like its own, tyrannical, despotic soul? (Schulz 1977: 64)

In what follows, I want to explore both the “joke” and the “tragic seriousness” of two culturally significant “dummies” jointly tailored by two major American filmmakers in the recent science fiction film, *A.I.: Artificial intelligence* (2001). The filmmakers are, of course, Stanley Kubrick who worked on pre-production of the film for many years before he died in 1999 and Steven Spielberg who ultimately wrote the final screenplay and directed it. The culturally significant “dummies” are, in this instance, two very smart male robots: both “artificial intelligences” whose “forcibly imposed form” is human, and both programmed as what I shall here call – as a joke and in tragic seriousness – “love machines”. However, like the two filmmakers’ respective cinematic *oeuvres* and attitudes, these love machines couldn’t be more contradictory in both their form and function. And yet, like the filmmakers, their seeming binary opposition comes into complementary conjunction and confusion in *A.I.* – and has something important (and sad) to tell us about the contemporary technological (and male) American imagination and its irreconcilable and irresolute visions of what seems an impossible and inhuman future; that is, that imagination’s overarching present *nostalgia* for a humanity that has been both hollowed-out and abandoned, and a future that can only be conceived as always already past.

Jay P. Telotte, in his *Replications: A robotic history of the science fiction film*, argues that “the image of human artifice, figured in the great array of robots, androids, and artificial beings found throughout the history of the science fiction film, is the single most important one in the genre” (1995: 5). Using the terms I’ve borrowed above, Telotte views the robot, in particular, as “a trope or mechanism for revealing a human nature that has been largely drained of identity, an *abandoned* body” (1995: 150 ff.), a literal image of the “anatomized, *hollowed-out*, modern self [...] that underscores [the] degree to which we all seem to have become mechanized, programmed beings, bodies detached from spirit” (1995: 165 ff.). However, if we are to be imaginative as well as literal, we might also realize that the trope of the abandoned robotic body is not necessarily synonymous with the hollowed-out or empty robotic body – and, indeed, each may generate specific narratives of our imaginary relations with technology that are contradictory, if also complementary, in their convergence. Such is the case with the narratives generated by the two central robotic protagonists in *A.I.*, a highly anticipated science fiction film that was, for most viewers (both critics and public), a major disappointment – criticized not only, and at once, for being both too cold and too sentimental but criticized also for its inability to integrate what one critic has called “Kubrickian irony and Spielbergian ick” (Burr 2002), and for being narratively irresolute and seemingly unable to end. And yet all this is precisely what makes *A. I.* so interesting for the film points to two quite different and contradictory cultural visions of our displaced technological existence – both of which converge with ambivalent force to hollow out, abandon, berate, and mourn an always already failed and lost human race.

These contradictory visions (which are, in fact, complementary in their end) are embodied and literalized in the film’s two robotic protagonists – the one an “empty body” that is anatomized as literally and always hard: Gigolo Joe, a dream

lover of a tireless adult sex machine who enjoys his work until he is framed and hunted for the murder of one of his clients; the other, an “abandoned body”: David, a mechanical love child who is literally deserted and left in the forest by his human “Mommy”, and who seeks thereafter (with Pinocchio as his model) to become the “real boy” he thinks she will love. Joe and David – two quite different “love machines” – converge in the woods to begin a journey that will eventually lead not only to what the narrative calls “the end of the world” but also to the end of humanity itself.

Gigolo Joe: “The empty body”

Although David is the film’s primary protagonist, let me begin first with Gigolo Joe, the “dummy” who is tailored as an amusing (if also ultimately unnerving) “parody” or “joke” on technophilic masculinity, and who, thus, is the more stereotypical and simple robotic figure. Joe is a “love mecha” who services lonely “orga” (or human) women, provides his own mood music (including a 1930s version of *I only have eyes for you*), and tells his first-time customers: “Once you’ve had a lover robot, you’ll never want a real man again”. Joe is a sex machine and knows it; agile, sharp, and self-reflexive, he is a cynic disguised as a romantic and, throughout the film, has no desire to be “really human”. Indeed, aware of the special nature and function of “mecha” sexual power, he spells it out to a group of thrill-seeking teenage boys from whom he’s trying to hitch a car ride to Rouge City (a bordello-like Disneyland constructed solely for adult fun): “There are girls your age [in Rouge City] who are just like me. We are the guiltless pleasures of lonely human being. You’re not going to get us pregnant or have us to supper with mommy and daddy. We work under you, we work on you, and we work for you. Man made us better at what we do than was ever humanly possible”. Born not of woman but

of “man” and a company called Cybertronics of New Jersey, Gigolo Joe, as one critic has put it, is “revved-up [...] with glittering hysteria and a sheen by turns clammy and sexy [...]”. Joe knows with inhuman sureness that he is programmed for a cold, vertiginous, Mommy-less world of violent Kubrickian sensation” (Schwartzbaum 2001: 110). Joe is, indeed, a Kubrickian figure – a robotic extension of amoral and juiced-up Alex in *A clockwork orange* (1971), perfectly fit for the society that made him, deserves him, and fears him. Thus, it is illuminating that, as initially conceived by Kubrick, Gigolo Joe was “much more aggressive [and] sinister” (Daly 2000: 26) than he is in the completed film, which softens his edginess and suggests, according to Spielberg, that “he’s not a hardcore gigolo [but] a romantic” (Daly 2000: 28 ff.) – in other words, to use a phrase that is particularly strange in relation to an exchange economy sex-worker, that Joe is really a hooker with “a heart of gold”.

Kubrick, of course, has long been interested in contemporary industrial and postindustrial society’s perverse displacements of Eros onto technology and technique – what cultural critic Mark Dery calls our “mechano-eroticism” (1992: 43). We can see this displacement (barely disguised) as a recurrent theme throughout Kubrick’s work – not only in *Dr. Strangelove or: how I learned to stop worrying and love the Bomb* (1964), *2001: A space odyssey* (1968) and *A clockwork orange* but also as surely in the orgiastic and mechanical repetitions of his last film, *Eyes wide shut* (1999). This “mechano-eroticism”, however, finds its most literal – and culturally stereotypical – figuration in *A.I.’s* Gigolo Joe. As Dery observes,

In recent years, the subrational appetites of the collective unconscious have given rise to a vast proliferation of mechano-erotic imagery [...]. Man-machine miscegenation – robo-copulation, by any other name – may seem a seductive alternative to the vile body, locus of a postmodern power

struggle involving AIDS, abortion rights, fetal tissue, genetic engineering, and nanotechnology (1992: 43).

And, I would also add, contemporary gender relations. Thus, in the imagination of male technophilia, as Dery put it: "The only thing better than making love *like* a machine [...] is making love *with* a machine" (1992: 43). Or so, at first, it would seem.

Certainly, although Spielberg de-emphasizes and romanticizes sex as much as he can, Gigolo Joe literalizes and fulfills the human male wish for a "hard body" always able to "get it up", to satisfy every female sexual need and desire (including, here, the desire for romance) without wearing out. In the male technophilic imagination, this is to make love *like* a machine, to have robotic power but, to have it *transparently* – that is, as one's own male self but enhanced. And, there is also a brief focus in *A.I.* on the companion male fantasy of making love *with* a machine – with a youthful, beautiful, pliant, and hollowed-out female body that doesn't need romance or protestations of love, that won't get headaches or pregnant or want to get married and that will, as Joe tells those teenage boys, literally "work under you, [...] work on you, and [...] work for you". Indeed, at the film's beginning, Professor Hobby of Cybertronics demonstrates the simplicity and lack of emotional messiness that inheres in a female "mecha" who looks like a human woman but loves like a machine. Emphasizing her consciousness as preeminently material and literal, Professor Hobby asks her "What is love?", and she responds, before being stopped in her litany of "sensuality simulations": "Love is first widening my eyes a little bit and quickening my breathing a little and warming my skin". This is, indeed, the robotic figure that Telotte sees as an image of the contemporary "anatomized, hollowed-out, modern self – an image that underscores [the] degree to which we all seem to have become mechanized, programmed beings, bodies detached from spirit" (1995: 165). Thus, as Geoffrey

O'Brien observes: "Love, for *A.I.*'s purposes, is an involuntary emotional imprinting as cold as any other form of software programming" (2001).

Unlike Spielberg who, in his narratives, again and again pursues the resolution of damaged family romances "through" technology and its magical special "affects", Kubrick is much more interested in our displacement of human agency, care, and desire "onto" technology and its consequential special "effects". In Kubrick's ironic cinematic visions, the robotic, the technological, and repetitively technical threaten to supersede the originality and spontaneity of the very human beings who brought them into existence. Indeed, the ironic Kubrick has always been a mordant jokester bent on pointing out human hubris and folly. Unlike Spielberg who believes in fairy tales and wish fulfillment (and tries desperately – and unsuccessfully – to achieve it in *A.I.*, which is as much fairy tale as it is science fiction), the more Swiftian and Grimm Kubrick knows that wish fulfillment in fairy tales often grants desire exactly (and literally) what it asks for – and this often with dire consequences that are not only ironic but also poetically just. That is, unlike Spielberg, Kubrick knows about the return of the repressed, knows that wish fulfillment often comes back to bite you in the ass. That is, Kubrick knows that "matter never makes jokes", that it is "tragically serious", and that if it is played with and shaped for a joke, "the joke will [...] be built in, will [...] eat into it like fate, like destiny".

Such is the case with the realization of the male technophilic fantasy of "love mechas" or sex machines in *A.I.* The repressed returns, the joke is built into the very parodic matter that is the humanly-formed Gigolo Joe, and wish fulfillment has its ironic consequences for both robot and man. The "arbitrary tyranny imposed on [this] helpless block", the tragic seriousness of the joke that is Joe's fate, is that, for all his sexual prowess, he

will forever stand as a hollowed-out parody of the men who dreamed him, a robotic figure that Telotte describes as a kind of exteriorized, “public body” fashioned in the “image of a generally empty human nature – and what is equally noteworthy, a generally *masculine* empty nature – that reflects the sort of controls that [...] determine our lives” (1995: 151). Thus, hollowed-out, at the moment of his capture and impending destruction, all Joe can say to David is “I am... I was”. But, along with the hollowed-out parody, there is also the tragic seriousness of the joke played by matter on the human men who constructed Joe in their idealized and wish-fulfilling image. The joke is that, as Joe says of “love mechas”: “Man made us better at what we do than was ever humanly possible”. And thus, wish fulfillment comes back to literally give technophilic man exactly what he asked for and exactly what he deserves. Hence the Kubrickian irony that informs the reassuring words Gigolo Joe speaks to a first-time female client: “Once you’ve had a lover robot, you’ll never want a real man again”. This is, indeed, not where techno-dreams begin but where they end – and it prognosticates, in *A.I.*, not only the death of male hubris but also of humanity.

David: “The abandoned body”

A.I.’s central figure (and the one in which we are tempted to invest our feelings) is David, a soft, prepubescent boy-child “mecha”, also programmed to love but, in this instance, singularly, adoringly, insistently, unconditionally, and forever – his object of desire the human woman that his one-time-only, irreversibly indelible, imprinting identifies as “Mommy”. It is this singular, adoring, insistent, unconditional, enduring – and “infantilized” – robotic love (realized yet again according to male technophilic fantasy) that – as Schulz puts it – is the “form”, “expression”, and “pretense” of “the arbitrary tyranny im-

posed on [...] that helpless block" that is David and "that rules it like its own tyrannical, despotic soul". Professor Hobby describes David as the "perfect child caught in a freeze frame, always loving, never ill, never changing" – neither in his purpose nor his desire. And this is the tragically serious joke built into David and that eats into him "like fate, like destiny" – shaping *A.I.*'s overall narrative trajectory and its multiple and impossible endings.

If Gigolo Joe is essentially a Kubrickian figure (softened, if not completely domesticated, by Spielberg), then David is essentially a Spielbergian figure (if made insistent, despairing, and a little creepy, by Kubrick). David's form, expression, and pretense is, as Geoffrey O'Brien notes, is not only "the embodiment of the golden child who has haunted the American imagination in these latter decades: the inner child, the abandoned child, the illuminated child", but also that "Spielberg certainly grasps the implications of that fetish, since he has done more than his share to reinforce the myth of childhood as a privileged sphere of imaginative freedom, moral courage, [and] uncorrupted emotion" (O'Brien 2001). This particular fetish of the American imagination, however, seems particularly male – emerging, perhaps, as both a self-critical response to the first-wave feminist critique of a hard-bodied and power-mad patriarchy and a phenomenologically-lived response to a newly-perceived and fearful sense of patriarchy's present impotence and powerlessness. David is literally a "born again" – yet motherless – boy-child, at once both pure and new and cleansed of patriarchal imprinting and helpless, soft, and thus (in relation to patriarchy) inevitably abandoned and lost. (Several times during the film, in moments of robotic terror, David cries out "Keep me safe, keep me safe".) Thus, it is no small, if subdued, fact that, in relation to David, *A.I.* not only displaces David's infantilized and feminized desire and terror at abandonment onto "Mom-

my", but also that it continually elides (while still significantly figuring) David's two nominal "fathers", Henry and Professor Hobby – both of whom, in different ways, have abandoned or lost their human sons. For David, "Daddy" – and other human males – are simply not in this picture.

Thus, in the film's final and truly ambiguous ending, when – thousands of years after his journey began and human beings no longer exist – David is found literally frozen in his desire by future artificial intelligences and told that is the only "enduring memory of the human race", this fact is indeed chilling. For in David's enduring memory, the world remembered is completely man-less. Reunited for a single perfect day with an illusory resurrection of his now-loving "Mommy" (details taken from his robot-child's memory), David lives a *faux* fairy-tale *mise en scène* in which the narrator – in voice-over – tells us that there was no Henry, there was no Martin (David's rival human "brother"), "there was only David". Thus, it is only in fantasy – here a robot-fantasy ironically programmed (and filmed) by adult human males – that David can momentarily (and falsely) realize his programmed identity, but this is a realization that neither David nor the film can sustain, a realization that can only be forever suspended.

In her wonderful book *On longing*, an exploration of what she calls the "social disease of nostalgia" (Stewart 1984: 17), literary critic Susan Stewart writes what might well serve as a gloss on the impossible dilemma that faces both Spielberg, the adult human male filmmaker, and David, the male robot-child character at the end of *A.I.*:

In the play of identity and difference out of which the subject "appears" at any given point, the relation between childhood and the present, a relation which is and is not a repetition, constitutes an imaginary an either end: for the child, the mother as object of desire; for the adult, the image

of the past, the dual relation before it was lost [...]. And out of this adult desire springs the demand for an object – not an object of use value, but a pure object, an object which will not be taken up in the changing sphere of lived reality but rather will remain complete at a distance. In this way, it resembles childhood, which will not change (1984: 125 ff.).

Thus when the crazed father in *Street of crocodiles* asks: “Can you imagine the pain, the dull imprisoned suffering, hewn into the matter of that dummy which does not know why it must be what it is”, it is clear that he understands a great deal more about the consequences of nostalgic replication than does either of David’s more rational “fathers”. And thus David – as does the film – can never become more (or less) than “a machine for unfulfilled longing” (O’Brien 2001). Indeed, he spends the entire film attempting to refuse his robotic existence and fate and disavowing his status as, indeed, a replication that possesses no originality. Not only is he a robotic simulacrum of Professor Hobby’s dead son, but he is also a prototype who, toward A.I.’s, end, is revealed as merely the first among equals in rows and rows of waiting-to-be animated Davids. Yet David keeps insisting – first to Joe and then to the animate robotic twin he finds sitting in Professor Hobby’s office and tries to destroy – “I’m the only one... I’m special. I’m unique. I’m David”. Indeed, when Stewart writes that “nostalgia is the repetition that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetition and denies the repetition’s capacity to form identity” (1984: 23), she might well be speaking of David’s – and A.I.’s – ultimate dilemma as “a machine for unfulfilled longing”. The film can never be narratively satisfied and thus “ends” three times and yet not at all: first with David’s attempted suicide “after realizing he is merely the prototype for an endless line of mass-produced replicas” (O’Brien 2001); then with his frozen suspension for two thousand years under the ocean, his gaze locked with an amusement park Blue

Fairy; and finally with his embrace of undecidable sleep and/or death, with the possible dream of narrative's beginning – and/or its possible end.

And so there is little narrative satisfaction in David's finally achieving, as the narrator puts it, "the everlasting moment he had been waiting for" – the moment when "Mommy", now recreated in the shape of his own desire, tells him as she drifts off to a sleepy death, "I love you, David. I do love you. I have always loved you". As critic David Denby writes, what we have in the end is "a ponderous death-of-the-world fantasy, which leaves us with nothing but an Oedipal robot – hardly a redemption. [...] That Kubrick gave up on the human race will not come as a surprise, but Spielberg is a different story" (2001: 87). Thus, the strange contradiction and complementarity when David's "Mommy" falls asleep to die and David, lying down beside her, dies to fall asleep – the narrator reversing the trajectory of human time and existence with the film's final words: "So David went to sleep too and, for the first time, he went to that place where dreams are born". But that place, we should remember, rounded with a sleep, is where, perchance, all dreams also end. As Stewart points out: "The direction of force in the desiring narrative is always a future-past, a deferment of experience in the direction of origin and thus *eschaton*, the point where narrative begins/ends" (1984: x). Whether we interpret it as sleep or death, the future-past, at the end of *A.I.*, David, who despairingly refuses to accept what he really is and whose desperate desire to be otherwise can never be satisfied, is allowed "the only small miracle permitted him: [...] blissful unconsciousness" (O'Brien 2001).

The tragically serious joke built into David and that eats into his "mecha" existence and informs his (and the film's) fate is not only that, unlike Gigolo Joe, he refuses his parodic existential status as a love machine. It is also that again – as with Joe-

-there are unforeseen, uncalculated, and cruel consequences to being a love machine. That is, loving “like” a machine (that is, with horrifying, insistent, and unchanging mechanical adoration), David’s identity is completely dependent upon being loved in return by the object of his programmed desire – yet, because he “is” a machine, this is an impossibility. As Joe tells David of his human “Mommy”: “She loves what you do for her as my customers love what it is I do for them. But she does not love you, David. She cannot love you. You are neither flesh nor blood. You are not a dog or a cat or a canary. You were designed and built specific like the rest us”. Yet while David has been programmed with the capacity to love, he is not programmed “to understand why his adoptive human mother fails to love him back” (O’Brien 2001). Thus, both Spielbergian pathos and Kubrickian irony converge in the tragic joke that informs David and makes of the robot – and *A.I.* itself – not only a nostalgic “machine for longing” but also an ironically impossible object.

Requiem for the “authentic body”

Deconstructing the machinery of longing, Stewart tells us (as if she were writing directly about David, as well as about *A.I.*’s final and impossible *mise en scène*):

The prevailing motif of nostalgia is that erasure of the gap between nature and culture, and hence a return to the utopia of biology and symbol united within the walled city of the maternal. The nostalgic’s utopia is prelapsarian, a genesis where lived and mediated experience are one, where authenticity and transcendence are both present and everywhere (1984: 23).

Yet this utopian vision is ultimately melancholic; that is, as Stewart suggests, it “turns toward a *future-past*, a past which has only ideological reality” (1984: 23). And while David would

rather sleep forever than to acknowledge that this past has only ideological reality, Kubrick, Spielberg, and the film do not so blissfully escape the melancholy that comes with knowledge. *A.I.*, its entire narrative located in a future-past by an off-screen narrator, is thus filled with tears – with weeping that is, at once, both intimate and oceanic. Indeed, at the film's beginning, we are told that global warming has caused the oceans to inundate the earth's coastal cities – including New York (Manhattan referred to, later in the film, as “the end of the world where the lions weep”). Melancholia pervades *A.I.* and tears are everywhere and yet displaced – and often frozen. It is thus particularly ironic that, at the beginning of the film, when Monica (later to become David's “Mommy”) pays a visit to her son Martin, cryogenically frozen until a cure is found for his illness, she is told by the doctor: “Mourning is not appropriate. Martin is still pending”. Yet mourning work in the present for the future-past, for a lost humanity (inscribed as male), seems to be the film's over-arching narrative project and achievement. (One of the film's most lingering images is David floating as if drowned, motionless and alone at the bottom of a backyard swimming pool.)

Mid-way through *A.I.*, inspired by *Pinocchio*, David goes in search of the Blue Fairy who will supposedly make him a real boy. Gigolo Joe suggests they go to Rouge City so they can quiz Dr. Know (a holographic data-base reminiscent of the Wizard of Oz but fashioned to look like a cartoon Einstein who is supposed to know everything). Glossing Blue Fairy and its possibilities (which include both a plant and the Blue Fairy Escort Service), Dr. Know tells them that “In the world of orga, blue is the color of melancholy”. Blue is also the color of water and of weeping, a sepulchral color, the color of cold and ice. It is the film's visual dominant – even in David's bedroom, even in Rouge City, and especially underwater in the ocean where Da-

vid finally finds the amusement park Blue Fairy and prays to her without effect forever: "until the oceans froze" and he, like the Fairy, becomes a "blue ghost in ice".

Stewart writes: "Nostalgia is a sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience. Rather, it remains *behind* and *before* that experience [...]" (1984: 23). Thus it is narratively poetic when, combining two contradictory categories of Dr. Know's data-base (the one "Flat Fact", the other "Fairy Tale"), David and Joe are let in on the "real" secret of the Blue Fairy's location. Yet it is telling that this revelation is first introduced with a poem whose address is both powerfully moving and deeply inauthentic because it is meant for the present (and human) spectators of *A.I.* and not for the artificial intelligences that read its mournful words. Inscribed also over the entrance to Professor Hobby's office located at the end of the world, it reads:

Come away O human child
To the waters and the wild
With a fairy hand in hand
For the world's more full of weeping
Than you can understand.

There is, in the end, a mordant irony informing *A.I.*'s nostalgic and prelapsarian yearning. The joke built into the film – and it is tragically serious – is that "it remains 'behind' and 'before'" contemporary experience, behind and before its own present technophilic male fantasies of the "hollowed-out" and the "abandoned" body.

Thus, the "behind" and "before" that is *A.I.*'s future-past says something significant about what is perceived as a future-impossible present. Stewart writes:

As experience is increasingly mediated and abstracted, the lived relation of the body to the phenomenological world is replaced by a nostalgic myth of contact and presence. "Authentic" experience becomes both elusive and allusive as it is placed beyond the horizon of present lived experience, the beyond in which the antique, the pastoral, the exotic, and other fictive domains are articulated. In this process of distancing, the memory of the body is replaced by the memory of the object (Stewart 1984: 133).

Thus, *A.I.*'s nostalgia and melancholia. As O'Brien aptly describes it, the film is "an ideogram of grief, disguised as a Hall-mark card" (2001). Suspended between a Kubrickian critique of technological man and his Spielbergian redemption, viewed by those of us in the present, *A.I.* merges and confuses its contradictions to become a work of both science fiction and fairy tale that is achingly ironic.

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