

Search for love

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [Jul 18, 2001](#) issue

Many critics say that *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* is marred by a clash between the sensibilities of its two directors, the late Stanley Kubrick, who developed the concept, and Steven Spielberg, who completed the project. Whereas Kubrick produced cool, intellectual films, Spielberg has specialized in warmhearted pictures. But these critics are wrong. The film successfully meshes Kubrick's style of asking serious questions with Spielberg's unique style of evoking wonder and awe, as well as his ability to work with children, which is evident in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *E.T.* (1982). In *A.I.*, he directs Haley Joel Osment in a remarkable performance as 12-year-old David, the scientifically created boy.

*A.I.* asks the question Kubrick posed in *2001: A Space Odyssey*: What does it mean to live in a godless universe and not be satisfied with godlessness? *A.I.* is about a quest for personhood in that godless universe. The quest parallels the story of Pinocchio, which David's human mother reads to her children. That classic tale about a wooden puppet who wants to be human, and who searches for the Blue Fairy to grant him this desire, gives David the clue to how he will become human.

*A.I.* asks us to ponder how the need for love relates to our humanness. If we take the film literally, we will be trapped at the surface, wondering, as one critic does, why the bonding formula given to the mother was not also offered to the father. That's a good literal question, but to paraphrase a line from Spike Lee's film *Do the Right Thing*, if you want a story about two parents, make your own movie.

Other critics have complained that since David is obviously not human, why should we care about him anymore than we care about a toaster or a mechanical toy—or even a sophisticated computer like Hal, in *2001*, who had to be disassembled to save the space ship?

The reason is that David is different: he is programmed to give and receive love—which suggests that our humanness is derived from relationships, first with our creator, and then with those who love us.

David's mother feels justified in abandoning him because she thinks he is a physical threat to her real child. In a critical moment in the middle of the film, she decides to return him to the laboratory that created him—where, she knows, he will be destroyed. On the way she changes her mind and instead releases him into the forest, warning him not to run toward the laboratory. She leaves his robotic teddy bear with him as his companion, a hint that she is not entirely convinced that he is "just" a robot.

From David's perspective, of course, the mother's rejection is horrifying--it's the ultimate human rejection. It leaves him with only one alternative: he must do whatever it takes to earn her love. And if that means he must become human, than so be it. David sets off in search of the Blue Fairy who has the power to make him human. Of course, it is not "humanness" he seeks as much as it is his mother's love. The film suggests that they are the same thing. David's humanness depends on being loved by his mother.

Kubrick's films consistently reject the notion that we can know for certain that there is a God who is the source of the love we seek. He takes his viewers to the abyss and says: See, there is no God out there, so for God's sake love one another. In his own way, Kubrick was an artist of hope, whose films—including this unusual collaboration with Spielberg—demonstrate that only those with the courage to ask the hard questions have any right to expect the ultimate answers.