THE STORY OF <u>AI</u>

Professor Hobby (William Hurt), addressing a group of scientists, speaks in the beginning of the film of the mechas' perception of life, their emotions, and their capabilities. Demonstrating his cyborg creation's response to physical stimuli, he pricks the hand of a mecha named Shelia. Although Shelia reacts to the pain, it doesn't seem to bother her emotionally. When Hobby asks her to disrobe, Shelia does so with no hesitation; the professor stops her at her blouse and touches her in a way that reveals the robotics inside her humanlike skin. Hobby declares that for his next challenge, he will attempt to create a mecha that can love. One of his colleagues, however, asks the important questions: would this child be able to truly love or would it just be a simulation, and even if the mecha could love, would its owners love it back?

With the entrance of David (Haley Joel Osment), the mecha built to love, Spielberg, while telling the story of how the mecha's guardians relate to him, also challenges the audience in their reactions to David. At first, David is a pleasant enough mecha; while not causing any major problems, his robotic yet kid-like demeanor is a tad creepy. To illustrate, David constantly follows his "mother" around the house, stands perfectly still, and stares at her in wonder, as if he is waiting for her to something special. Eventually, Monica grows tired of David following her around, so she shoves him in the linen closet and locks him in there. After a while, she opens the door and David looks at her, not having moved a muscle. While a normal child would have been angry and resentful at the situation, David acts as if nothing has happened, asking Monica, "Is it a game?" to which Monica calmly replies, "Yes. Hide and Seek." Nervously patting David on the shoulder, Monica says "Found you," then shoves David into his bedroom, momentarily relieved to be rid of the perplexing automaton for a little while. In the next scene, David walks in on Monica while she is using the bathroom. Amid Monica's exclamations of horror, David

calmly responds with "Found you," complete with placid grin. Obeying Monica's cries to "Close the goddamn door," David quietly shuts the door. Nonchalantly, David acts like he did nothing wrong and is not even a little upset about Monica yelling at him. Even though David tries to interact with Monica, it is obvious that something is lacking.

The prescient Baudrillard appears to predict the scene and relationship between Monica and David. Of simulation, Baudrillard states, "it is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself" (4). For David's "parents" who have a comatose son named Martin, David is not meant as a replacement for their kid but something to fill the emptiness in their lives. Neither is David meant as a joke nor as a parody; he is an invention created with serious intentions, although David's early antics are amusing. The family knows David is not real, yet makes an attempt to include him into their lives, to adjust the best they can. Ultimately, the family substitutes "signs of the real" (David) for the real son (Martin) they have lost.

However, once the mother, Monica (Frances O'Connor), recites the Imprinting Protocol, David becomes more than a mecha; he becomes her "child," or as much of a son as a simulation can possibly be. Bruce Grenville, in the preface to his book The Uncanny: Experiments in Cyborg Culture, discusses how human beings respond to cyborgs: "An individual's threshold for acknowledgement of the uncanny cyborg body varies wildly and shifts according to context. For some, it occurs only in the realm of science fiction or a dream; for others, it is a fact of their day to day existence" (9). Before Monica activated the Imprinting Protocol, David was a novelty, a mecha that aroused her curiosity, disturbed her a little bit, and sometimes amused her, much like a new toy or a perplexing idea she couldn't easily understand. Even though David was meant as

a simulation to fill the void left by Martin's absence, it would have been beyond Monica's grasp to actually love David in the same way one would love a human son.

David's role in Monica's life can be best addressed by Baudrillard who, in <u>The System of Objects</u>, discusses "the belief that for every need there is a possible mechanical answer, that every practical (and even psychological) problem may be foreseen, forestalled, resolved in advance by means of a technical object that is rational and adapted—perfectly adapted" (116). It is this "need" Baudrillard speaks of that has lead to many technological advances serving to benefit humanity, such as advances in health, home maintenance, etc. Yet, some may say that Baudrillard's words carry a portent of doom; all of this technology perhaps will come at a high cost for humanity. Baudrillard could be commenting on the increasingly spoiled nature of humanity, the way we are becoming more and more reliant on new technology and our eagerness for inventions doing things only imaginable in the not-too-distant past.

Spielberg does not inform the audience of the year <u>AI</u> is supposed to take place, but the society shown on screen does not seem to take place too far into the future. The humans do not act any differently from the people of today and yet their advanced technology allows them to live differently. Today, parents who are forced to deal with losing a child have many options, including therapy and adoption. Yes, Henry and Monica, it could be said, "adopt" David but their relationship is hardly the same that parents have with "real" children. After all, Henry tells Monica that she does not have to be committed to David, that if she is not happy, David can be taken back to Cryogenics. Ultimately, they live in a world where something as sacred as adopting a child can be turned into a simulation, a borderline parody of the real thing. One could draw comparisons to the invention of the microwave, a simulation of actual cooking, or the television, a simulation of live entertainment. As humans become more and more dependent on

technology, they become less and less able to cope when these technological advances fail. If, as this film suggests, technology is poised to completely take over the world and render humanity obsolete, then it can be argued that the seeds of that event have already been planted.

The Imprinting Protocol that binds Monica to David emotionally into a simulated mother/child relationship is a series of seven non-related words: Cirrus, Socrates, particle, decibel, hurricane, dolphin, and tulip. Although the words themselves may not matter, the use of them does. Part of maintaining a loving relationship is communication. As long as David is stuck in basic mecha mode, his communication skills remain limited. When Monica says the words, she gives them purpose and a certain warmth, like a parent telling her child a bedtime story. As a result, David opens up; he becomes less mechanical. Placing her hand gently on David's neck, Monica repeats their names ("Monica…David…") in hushed tones. When David asks her "What were those words for, Mommy?" his voice, his smile is less robotic, more child-like. Leaning over, David hugs Monica and says "I love you, Mommy." To further accentuate the special nature of this moment, Spielberg bathes the room in bright lights.

Monica, responding to David's love, grows fond of him, almost as she would a human child. Their relationship is tested, however, when the real son, Martin (Jake Thomas), comes out of his coma. Martin sees David for what he is, a mecha that he can boss around and treat like a high-tech toy. It doesn't take long for a sibling rivalry to develop between the two (even though David has no hatred towards Martin, his love of Monica naturally contributes to his feelings of jealousy). When Martin goads David into a spinach-eating contest, David's desire to win proves damaging. Since David is not supposed to eat, his electronic innards get clogged with spinach and his face sags. This comic scene is a perfect demonstration of David's humanity and his artificial nature existing simultaneously: David shows a childish nature in wanting to outdo

Martin and yet he mimics Martins actions like a robot would do. The fact that David made the choice at all is interesting. As for Martin, surely he knew David would be damaged by eating the spinach. Is Martin, on an unconscious level, trying to "kill" David, to be rid of his competitor? The question may go too far in implicating Martin, but his later actions do subtly cause the exile of his competitor.

In Martin's cruelest act of malice against David, he persuades Monica to read him and David Pinocchio, saying "David's going to love it" in a gleefully sadistic way. It is Pinocchio that provides the theme for the rest of the film, as David yearns to find a way to become a real boy so Monica will "really love" him. David's quest begins when Monica abandons him in the woods after mistakenly believing, through Henry's coercion, that David poses a threat to the family (hiding behind Martin to get away from kids who prick him to see his reaction, David unintentionally drags Martin into the pool, nearly drowning him). Although Monica's actions sound cold and heartless, she is clearly torn between her emotions and her reasoning, and she considers abandonment a better fate than the other option, taking David back to Cryogenics, where he will be destroyed. Indeed, the scene where Monica leaves David and he begs her not to is the most emotional and upsetting scene in the film, demonstrating that even though David is a mecha, his owner (and the audience) can still be emotionally engaged in his welfare. Yet because David is essentially artificial, he is not considered part of the family. Much like any machine that doesn't work or is too dangerous, David is thrown out, but, of course, machines, unlike David, do not beg their owners not to leave them.

Accompanied by fellow mecha Teddy (a teddy bear handed down from Martin because it was too old), David is captured along with other throwaway mechas, many of them decaying, and taken to the Flesh Fair, a show that resembles a cross between a pro-wrestling fight, a heavy-

metal concert, and a public hanging. In the Flesh Fair, old and useless mechas are destroyed in creative and disturbing ways, from being split in half to getting doused in acid. The Flesh Fair boss, Lord Johnson-Johnson (Brendan Glesson) considers artificiality a "sin" and an affront to humanity. Because David looks and acts like a real boy, the audience rebels against the Flesh Fair, mobbing the stage, thus enabling David to escape along with fellow mecha Gigolo Joe (Jude Law). Joe, like David, is programmed for love, but Joe is a "lovermecha," meaning his love is meant for adults only.

At this point, David's main goal is to find the Blue Fairy, the character in Pinocchio responsible for making Pinocchio's dream of becoming a real boy come true. Because David has the believing innocence of a child, he thinks the same thing can happen to him. Eventually, they end up in Manhattan (partially submerged in water due to the melting of the ice caps), where David meets his creator, Professor Hobby, who shows David mass copies of himself, "the boy built to love." Unable to deal with the fact that he isn't as special and unique as he once thought (another human trait), David leaps to his supposed death, but Joe rescues him in a helicopter they had earlier used to escape from the authorities. When Joe is captured by the police, David and Teddy sink the helicopter in the freezing waters and park in front of the Blue Fairy, which is really a statue from a Coney Island Pinocchio-themed amusement park. There, David pleads with her to make him a real boy, over and over again and does not stop until the coming of the next Ice Age. To digress for a moment, we might ask if David was nothing but a machine programmed by humans, would the humans have programmed him to attempt suicide or to pray forever? Spielberg suggests David's thoughtless creators did not consider fully the different futures available to him.

Frozen for two thousand years, David and Teddy are thawed out by a new race of mechas that look like the extraterrestrials depicted in Spielberg's own Close Encounters of the Third Kind. As one of the last remaining remnants of human civilization and intelligence, David is a prized artifact and the subject of constant examination. David, unfazed after being frozen for two millenniums, still has his one-track mind set on being a real boy and winning his mother's love. With a lock of Monica's hair saved by Teddy, the mechas are able to resurrect her, but only for one day. The end of the film shows David and "Monica" spending the entire day together, in an almost exact replica of her house, just them and Teddy, no Martin or Henry to get in the way. At the end, Monica goes to sleep forever, with David by her side, happy that his wish came true, even shedding a tear. Jonathan Rosenbaum, in his article "The Best of Both Worlds: AI: Artificial Intelligence," states that the ending is "the film's most sentimental moment, yet it's questionable whether it involves any real people at all" (220). Rosenbaum's claim gets at the heart of the mystifying puzzle in AI: what's real and what's just simulation?

A Closer Exploration of AI

The central question of AI is can David, a mecha, possess the ability to truly love someone, or is he just responding to controls implemented in his system? David has emotional responses (sadness, anger, desire) typical of all humans, and even though the film audience is able to identify with his struggles and dreams, there is always the knowledge that this apparent child is an artificial creation, designed to love. But the Imprinting words make David act human, even if his attempts at simulating laughter result in an off-putting, robotic sound, which nevertheless amuses Monica and Henry. Also, David neither eats nor sleeps, but he mimics

these actions. David has a place set for him at the table, complete with plate and utensils, and has a bed and pajamas, even though he just lies there quietly.

Haraway, in "The Cyborg Manifesto," states that machines "could not achieve man's dream, only mock it" (293). Professor Hobby would strongly disagree with that statement in regards to his creation. Modeled on his late son, David was constructed by Hobby to love and to desire the love of his owner. When David is confronted with his copies, boxed up and ready for purchasing, he doubts his uniqueness. Dr. Hobby tells David that although he may be a mecha, the fact that he so desperately wanted the Blue Fairy to make him real shows that David has the human tendency to wish for the impossible and go to any lengths necessary to make his dreams come true. The tagline used to promote AI was "His love is real, but he is not." Although David is not a real human, does that mean his love is fake, another simulation, or could Hobby have been successful?

David's companion, Teddy, is obviously a robotic toy, despite Teddy's strong resentment of that classification (when Monica introduces him to David as a toy, Teddy growls "I am not a toy"). Teddy's speaking voice is the gruff monotone of an older-sounding man and he has few facial expressions. He does, however, have protective instincts towards David (when David eats the spinach, Teddy calmly and sternly warns him "You will break") and he is loyal to his mecha friend, sticking by David from the Flesh Fair to being frozen with him underwater.

Gigolo Joe is different from David in that although he looks human, he is more clearly simulated. Joe has a slightly plastic look about him, as if he just came off the shelf or he gets polished every day. He can change his hair color at will and cock his neck to play various romantic songs depending on his clientele. Joe also frequently does a little jig and sings "Gigolo Joe, what do you know?" Asked by David why he does this, Joe says that it is "just what I do."

Designed as a lover mecha, sex is his reason for existing. When David tells Joe he is looking for the Blue Fairy, Joe, oblivious to whom David is talking about, replies that he "knows everything there is to know about women," and takes him to Rogue City, a sex-oriented place where the buildings have names such as "Throb" and "Tails." While Joe means well and likes David, it is clear he sees David as another mecha and not as a young child who should not be exposed to such decadence. Hardened by existence in the big city, Joe is pessimistic regarding David's plans for the Blue Fairy:

> [Monica] 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, a cat, or a canary. You were designed and built specific, like the rest of us….They made us too smart, too quick, and too many. We are suffering for the mistakes they made because when the end comes, all that will be left is us.

Despite his pessimism, Joe helps David in his search, showing empathy and gratitude, for it was David that saved Joe from the Flesh Fair. Although Joe was built for carnal love, he shows compassion for David, implying that he is able to perform beyond his planned abilities (as Joe tells David, "they built us too smart, too fast"). Having run away in the first place due to being set up for the murder of a client, Joe is captured by the police as he sends David to the bottom of the sea in order for David to achieve his dream. Joe's cryptic last words, "I am. I was," are a testimonial of his inadvertent humanity, that he is somebody and soon will be someone that once existed; the mecha had a sense of humanity despite being an artificial construction. Once Joe became more than just a lover mecha, however, he became obsolete to those who saw him as just a simulation.

Mechas that can no longer function in society and are of no use to anybody are hunted down and destroyed at the Flesh Fair. The robots destroyed are so worn out and old that they fall apart and their mechanical insides are on display for all to see. It is when they cannot embody perfect simulation that their weaknesses are exposed and they must be exterminated. Until David is brought on stage, the crowd at the Flesh Fair wholeheartedly enjoys this spectacle. John Durkin, in his article "Man and Machine: I Wonder If We Can Co-Exist," sees the anger the humans have towards the mechas in this scene: "We resent [machines] when their physical superiority cost us our jobs and fear them when their intellectual potential threatens our vision of humanity…But the humans at the Flesh Fair appear to be closer to the beast when they express the base emotions of destructive jealousy" (Durkin 386-87). It is mechas who express humanity, and humans who must learn from artificial intelligence.

David is such a perfect simulation of a human child that Johnson-Johnson is disgusted and singles him out to the crowd, derisively calling him a "tinker toy" and a "living doll." Johnson-Johnson sees mechas like David as an "insult to human dignity" and a plot to "phase out God's children." When David and Joe are threatened with the acid, David squeals "Don't burn me!" A woman questions the show, "Mechas don't plead for their lives," leading Johnson-Johnson to reply that "whatever performance this sim puts on, remember we are only demolishing artificiality," and ends with a biblical quote altered with a clever pun: "Let he who is without 'sim' cast the first stone." At this point the crowd mobs the stage and the Flesh Fair comes to an end.

David's situation in the Flesh Fair is reminiscent of Baudrillard's "fake hold-up" example in Simulations. Based on his theory that "illusion is no longer possible because the real is no longer possible," Baudrillard ponders "whether the repressive apparatus would not react more

violently to a simulated hold-up than to a real one? For the latter only upsets the order of things, the right of property, whereas the other interferes with the very principle of reality" (38). The "repressive apparatus" Baudrillard is referring to is the law. In <u>AI</u>, Lord Johnson-Johnson is the law figure. As far as we know, Lord Johnson-Johnson and his fair are "real"; that is they appear to be human and not mechas.[3] For the Flesh Fair to function normally, androids are the target of destruction and yet when David is slated for termination, the audience rebels because they think he was a real boy. It didn't matter to the crowd that David was a mecha: they see the image of a small boy in danger of being killed. In Baudrillard's "fake hold-up" example, the "thief" uses fake weapons and takes a hostage who is the least likely to try to be a hero or do anything stupid. However, the "thief" demands an actual ransom and acts like a real bank robber. As Baudrillard puts it, the robber's goal is to "stay close to the 'truth,' so as to test the reaction of the apparatus to a perfect simulation" (39). What makes the experience work is the complete unawareness of those not in on the idea that the whole event is meant to be a "fake" robbery; therefore, those involved would react as anyone would in a real robbery situation; "the web of artificial signs will be inextricably mixed up with real elements." In the Flesh Fair, real people enjoy seeing mechas destroyed. Since David looks too real for most people to assume he is a mecha, the humans react like they would at the possibility of a child about to face his death. Like the fake bank robber in Baudrillard's example, David "unwittingly" found himself "in the real, one of whose functions is precisely to devour every attempt at simulation, to reduce everything to some reality" (39). Lord Johnson-Johnson knew David wasn't a real boy and sought to destroy him, but the crowd did not know that, and saved him as a result.

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[3] It is a testament to the dominant theme of the film that it can be possible to question whether or not Lord Johnson-Johnson is a mecha, one who hates being artificial and takes his self-loathing out on old mechas, although Spielberg gives no clues to lead the audience in that direction.

Lord Johnson-Johnson's fears of David and the gravity of his existence also tie into Bruce Grenville's position of the cyborg as uncanny. According to Grenville,

> the cyborg is uncanny not because it is unfamiliar or alien, but rather because it is all too familiar. It is the doubled—doubled by the machine that is so common, so familiar, so ubiquitous, and so essential that it threatens to consume us, to destroy our links to nature and history, and quite literally, especially in times of war, to destroy the body itself and to replace it with its uncanny double. (20-21)

It is this fear Joe speaks of to David: the idea that humans have created something so much like themselves that they may have sown the seeds for their eventual obsolescence. What disgusts the Flesh Fair audience is not only that David, who they thought was real, was slated for destruction, but also that any of them could have possibly met the same fate. If mechas appear, act, and feel more human than the mechanical Gigolo Joe and Teddy do, the possibility for a rogue android-hater destroying an actual human being becomes greater. While such similarities may pave the way for a greater understanding between human and machine, the idea of androids getting equal footing with flesh and blood might not be appealing to humans. If boundaries between reality and the appearance of reality are blurred or vanquished altogether, the results may very well be chaotic.

J.P. Telotte, when discussing the use of robots in science fiction films in <u>Replications: A Robotic History of the Science Fiction Film</u>, speaks of the dangers brought on by the technology, making similar points to Grenville's ideas of the "uncanny": "For that newly recognized ability to duplicate anything, including the human body, brought with it the specter not just of an infinite creativity but its flipside as well: our potential disappearance as we become simply something more to be fashioned—perhaps infinitely re-fashioned—and as we more and more

lose sight of reality itself" (19). It's as if the humans are excited and grateful about the mechas and what they can do to make life better and easier, but they are also keeping in their minds that at any time, the androids may not need them and will eventually acquire free will. Eventually, the androids may decide that an existence catering to the needs of humans is not a life worth living. Such a realization is one that numerous oppressed peoples have made over the centuries.

Complicating the Cyborg: Gender and Race

Neither Spielberg nor I am the first to observe the connection between women and mechas. In "The Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway claims, "to be feminized means to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited" (304). Indeed, David is an embodiment of Haraway's critique of "cyborg feminist" theory, as his sole reason for existence, to love, puts him in a vulnerable state. It is this love that no one in the family is quite sure what to make of, and David's being cast aside is the result. No one is more off guard than when he or she loves someone unconditionally, especially when the object of one's affections is unable or unwilling to return the love in a reciprocal manner. As a mecha built for human use, David is an object of exploitation, especially by Martin, who senses David's feelings for Monica and uses them as a means to make David do what he wants him to do (in one instance, Martin convinces David to cut off a lock of Monica's hair while she sleeps). While Henry doesn't have much to do with David, he is the one who brought him home, notably not consulting Monica first. Although Henry does tell Monica that she doesn't have to accept David, the action is still manipulative of David's position and of Monica's motherly instincts and grief.

Further elucidating the connection between femininity and artificial intelligence, Haraway comments on how the exploitation of women connects to the dilemma of mechas in her

discussion of the role sexual objectification plays in women's lives. Haraway states that "a woman is not simply alienated from her *product*, but in a deep sense does not exist as a subject, or even potential subject, since she owes her existence as a woman to sexual appropriation" (299). Likewise, David's love is only effective if the object of his love is there to receive it. Without her presence, David is like the proverbial tree that falls in the woods when no one is around to hear it. In this regard, even Monica can be said to exploit David, since she is the most important person in the world to David.

With the appearance of a black comedian mecha, voiced by Chris Rock, Spielberg acknowledges the complexity of race and racism in relation to the future and to simulation as well. Even though this mecha has Rock's distinctive voice and is, like Rock, a black comedian, the mecha doesn't quite resemble him exactly. It looks more like the racist caricature of a black "shuck-and-jive" character from the early twentieth century, something that certainly would have seemed outdated even when new. Perhaps Spielberg intended this brief cameo as a joke, some comic relief in a scary scene. The voice is recognizable and the mecha looks enough like Rock, but not enough like him to startle the audience and detract from the film, especially when the mecha is blown up, its face splattered on the cell bars, grinning from ear to ear.

Spielberg's choice of Rock for a cameo draws attention to the fact that Rock's brief appearance is one of the few notable appearances of an African-American in this futuristic setting. Although race is not a major topic of this film, Rock's appearance allows for a discussion of Spielberg's motives. In past films such as The Color Purple (1985) and Amistad (1997), Spielberg chronicled the black experience in a respectful manner, so when the mecha caricature is destroyed, it could be a condemnation on Spielberg's part of the futuristic society that would still, after all this time, create something with such offensive overtones.

However, in the Flesh Fair, characteristics like race and gender are not important. If you are a mecha and you are no longer of use to anybody, you will be destroyed, no exceptions. Ultimately, Spielberg uses the Rock mecha as a reminder to the audience of what happens in a society where people judge by appearances and condemn that which is not like them. For centuries, African-Americans have been placed in the role of the "other," the minority against which the majority, white people, compare themselves. It stands to reason, in this society of the future, that the mechas are the new "other," a better "other" in the humans' eyes because mechas, unlike African-Americans, will likely not demand equal treatment, voting rights, or even respect.

In short, not only are the mechas the new "other," they are also the new "slaves," and best of all, they can be replaced without humans having to worry about a nagging conscience. What, then, would this mean for black mechas? Is their situation made that much worse? Because the Rock mecha is the only black mecha in the film, it is hard to determine their status compared to white mechas. It would not be surprising if the mechas that people chose to use in their homes would likely be the same skin color as them, putting into question the idea of black people owning mechas; wouldn't it be racist *not* to manufacture black mechas? Spielberg suggests the world's future citizens have hardly resolved the complexities and troubles of race. Indeed, mechas are merely the latest manifestation of humanity's consistent tendency to elevate themselves by oppressing the other." Regarding the "other," Balsamo states that "cyborgs alert us to the ways culture and discourse depend upon notions of the 'other' that are arbitrary and binary, and also shifting and unstable" (Balsamo 153).

Janice Hocker Rushing and Thomas A. Frentz, in their book Projecting the Shadow: The Cyborg Hero in American Film, also remark on the difficult role of the "other" that the cyborg plays and the seemingly selfish attitudes of the humans in the relationship:

But to create a cyborg with consciousness and expect it to perform according to our intentions is a cruel paradox. Moreover, to fashion a creature for us to love, as a more perfect reflection of what we would like to be, is just an advanced form of the Pygmalion project…it is to love the projection of our own ego in a doomed striving for "perfect completion." (211)

Frentz and Rushing's remarks get at one of the main reasons why humans would want artificial versions of themselves, the idea of wanting to be dominant in the human-mecha relationship, to have something on which to project our highest aspirations; like Pygmalion, a sculptor who strives to create the perfect woman, Professor Hobby models David after his own son and tries to shape David according to his own ideal vision of humanity. Monica is also implicated in this scenario. The idea of having someone in her life that is solely devoted to loving her is intoxicating to Monica. Since it is Monica who administered the Imprinting Protocol, she may feel like the life-giver as much as if she had actually given birth to David. When Monica makes the decision to abandon David in the woods, her sadness and deep regret for the action are obvious, but one has to ask what she misses more, the loss of her "son" or the loss of someone who wanted nothing more than to love her; in other words, does Monica miss the android or the android's love for her? Perhaps David represents something Monica lacks in her own self, a childlike faith in the bond between mother and child. Jonathan Rosenbaum implies that Monica is deluding herself in her relationship with David, and that her "deception [is] based on primal emotional needs and repressed realities." According to Rosenbaum, Spielberg uses Hobby and Monica's situations to imply that mechas "[point] to such lacks, absences, and failures in the people who make them" (221). In this future society, employing mechas to project feelings of loss and futility seems to be a form of therapy for those humans

wealthy, privileged, and thoughtless enough to do so. If such technological progress has the potential to frighten many people, Donna Haraway, as her "Cyborg Manifesto" makes clear, is not among them. Yet dealing with questions of reality and the appearance of reality in AI does not result in easy answers, even for the mechas themselves.

What's Really Real?

In "Supertoys Last All Summer Long," Brian Aldiss' short story upon which AI is based, David and Teddy have a conversation about reality: "David was staring out the window. 'Teddy, you know what I was thinking? How do you tell what are real things from what aren't real things?' The bear shuffled his alternatives. 'Real things are good'" (4). If Teddy is correct in his assertion, then what does that make unreal things? Bad? Unworthy? Here's a deeper question: What is it that makes something real as opposed to unreal? Is David any less real because he is an android made of mechanical parts and manufactured on an assembly line? What makes humans more real or think that they are any better because they are made of flesh? Sure, when David professes his love for Monica, it is essentially a programmed function created by Professor Hobby, but what explains *our* responses to love? A man has loving feelings for a woman; did he choose to have those feelings for the woman or did the feelings inside of him choose the woman as the target? And who or what controls our impulses and responses? Is it the actions of our brains, but where does the responsibility for the creation of the mechanisms lie? God? Science? Ourselves? Surely reality is not as clear cut in the futuristic society of AI as it seems. If Telotte and Grenville's visions of an eventual cyborg takeover of humanity prove accurate, then ultimately humanity will be looked at as unreal while the androids, who will be the majority, will consider themselves the standard of reality.

David's question gets to the essence of what it means to live in a world where those boundaries are no longer as obvious as they once were. Of course, reality is in the eye of the beholder and is what you make it to be. Teddy reassures David of this when David asks if "You and I are real…aren't we?" Teddy gives a simple response: "The bear's eyes regarded the boy unflinchingly. 'You and I are real, David.' It specialized in comfort" (5). When Aldiss writes "specialized in comfort," there is a subtle irony in that statement, as if Teddy is telling David what he wants to hear, not necessarily the truth. If Teddy is lying to assuage David, then the bear is implying that he and the mecha child are no good. Does Teddy really think that creatures like him are truly inferior? And, if so, is this an opinion set by his manufacturers to keep him under control, to not have too much confidence in himself?

Conversely, if Teddy were telling the truth, what does that say about his opinions of humans? Does Teddy think humans are artificially made and androids are natural? In the last exchange in the story, David asks a challenging question: "Teddy—I suppose Mummy and Daddy are real, aren't they?" To which Teddy replies "You ask such silly questions, David. Nobody knows what 'real' really means" (11). Thus, Teddy is essentially telling David not to worry about the question so much and not to waste time trying to figure out reality vs. non-reality. According to Teddy, it all comes down to if you believe you are real, then you are real. If David chooses to believe Mom and Dad are unreal, then they are unreal to him until someone proves to him otherwise. Despite Teddy's cryptic statements, his words to David are an attempt to convince the mecha child to believe in his own integrity.

Teddy's dismissal of the importance of who is real and who is not are in line with many of Baudrillard's opinions expressed in Simulations. Baudrillard takes the conversation between the mechas one step further by claiming that the real doesn't even exist. Stating that "whereas

representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation

envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum," Baudrillard lists four phases

of representation of reality, starting with its outward appearance and resulting in elimination of

reality:

- It is the reflection of a basic reality

- It masks and perverts a basic reality

- It marks the *absence* of a basic reality

- It bears no resemblance to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure

  simulacrum (11)

To examine how Baudrillard's theory works in <u>AI</u>, let's again turn to David. Built to

resemble a small boy, David <u>reflects</u> the reality of a son, to serve as a temporary replacement in

Monica and Henry's life. Although David looks like a real boy, he behaves in an abnormal

fashion; even the normal things any boy would do are done by David in an off (<u>perverted</u>)

manner. He pretends to eat for there is nothing there on his plate. He goes to bed even though

he does not sleep. Even though David's presence appears to fill the <u>absence</u> left by Martin, he

does not provide a permanent substitute. Therefore, David may appear to be a son to Monica

and Henry, but in reality, he is just the image of a child. When Monica begins to have feelings

for David, he begins to seem real to her. Monica appears to be reacting to David almost as if he

were an actual human (although, presumably, she wouldn't abandon a human being).

However, Baudrillard later goes on to say in <u>Simulations</u> that "it is always a false

problem to want to restore the truth beneath the simulacrum" (48), apparently asserting that no

one really wants the truth, that people, when it comes down to it, prefer the simulation, the

artifice. Is this true? While it can't be said that Monica prefers David to Martin, it can certainly

be said that the audience prefers David. After all, David is the sympathetic protagonist and Martin, instead of being the lovable youngster recovering from near death, comes off as mean and petty, although his motives are understandable (jealousy, resentment of an artificial child taking over his role as son, and having to share Monica).

It is not an uncommon occurrence for people to prefer the surface, the artificial. The Replicants in Ridley Scott's <u>Blade Runner</u> (1982) are easier to relate to and more empathetic than the humans (the idea that Deckard, the blade runner hunting down renegade Replicants, many be a Replicant himself makes him more fascinating). To refer to one of <u>AI</u>'s influences, Pinocchio is remembered more for being a lovable puppet on strings that wanted to be real than when he became an actual boy. An explanation of this mindset might be that once someone is confronted with reality, then there is nowhere else left to go. With artifice, though, the person can spend countless amounts of time pondering what is beneath the surface and avoid any ultimate confrontation, any possibility that his conclusions may be wrong.

Nowhere in <u>AI</u> is this more evident than at the end of the film, where David, after an arduous ordeal and thousands of years spent frozen, finally gets his wish to be with Monica and for her to love him. A major question anyone watching this film has to ask him or herself is if this ending is real or yet another simulacrum of some sort? First of all, we can't assume that this is a dream of David's, that he is still frozen, because the film does not tell us if mechas can actually dream. Without this information, we may have to take the event as an actual occurrence. The androids that thaw out David claim that a lock of Monica's hair can reincarnate her, but not for more than a day. Yet, is the Monica that David hangs out with at the end of the film really Monica or just a clever simulation devised by the mechas in order to comfort David?

Would David even care if this Monica were real as long as he had her and as long as she seemed real to him?

The ending of <u>AI</u> is intriguing because, in a certain way, it reverses the relationship between Monica and David. In the beginning, Monica is the "real" housewife presented with an artificial "son." By the end, however, David has become "real" to the audience; even though he is artificial, it is hard to see him that way when the desires he has are so human. Yet, Monica, who has been absent from the film for quite some time, reappears, but through the advanced technology of the mechas, thus calling her reality into question. While it is believable for us to see David still functioning after two thousand years, it is a little odd seeing Monica up and about after all that time, as if her existence was the impossible one.

Ultimately, it is up to the viewer to determine whether Monica is real or not. Yet, what Baudrillard is saying is true also: <u>AI</u> presents the viewer with simulations that, for the most part, are so lifelike and seamless that it can be easy to forget that they are mechas. <u>AI</u> asks the viewers what their conceptions of reality are and how they perceive David. They can see David as real and empathize with his struggle. They can refuse to be taken in by the appearance and judge David as a mecha that can not be capable of love nor of being loved, and therefore fail to see the point of taking pity on a machine. A third perception is that it is possible to be sympathetic towards things fundamentally different than human beings.

After all, <u>AI</u> posits that there are mechas who are capable of having emotions; by that logic, it is pointless to criticize David for being a fake boy when his emotions and feelings are so real. Even though Rushing and Frentz, in <u>Projecting the Shadow</u>, do not discuss <u>AI</u>, their insights into artificial beings greatly contribute to the understanding of the film:

Especially in the early stages of its existence, the artificial being is imperfect, likely to exhibit emotional "flaws," as well as a curiously familiar sense of primitive spirituality—a willingness to worship his maker. The artificial being is at first an innocent cast adrift in an uncaring world, demanding only that its maker take responsibility for it, to give it a place in society. (71)

Although David is a good mecha who follows orders and never causes trouble, it could be said that his biggest flaw is his overwhelming attachment to Monica, whom David sees as "Mommy"; therefore, to David, Monica is his maker (technically, Professor Hobby is David's maker, but David does not see him in that role). The audience would not be able to relate to anybody, not even a real person let alone an android, who was perfect and did everything correctly. A lead character with those qualities would be quite boring. By contrast, David is not perfect. Like any child, David isn't above certain acts, like his spinach-eating confrontation with Martin. It is this obsessiveness that comes into play when David risks his life, as well as Teddy's, in order to find a woman who has abandoned him. If Professor Hobby wanted to create a soulless, perfect mecha, it would have been very easy to do so. The challenge comes in creating artificial life with emotions any human can relate to, further blending the boundaries between humans and machine.

Haraway takes a less sentimental view of the cyborg. According to her, "the cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence" (292). One can see some of Haraway's points in regards to David; one of the major ironies of his existence is his undying love and affection for Monica, which likely outweighs the love Martin has for her (indeed, we never see Martin showing the kind of affection towards Monica that David does). Likewise, David's existence, such a close

marriage of the human appearance and the robotic, shows a deep intimacy in regards to the boundaries between reality and artifice. Nevertheless, it bears noting that if Haraway is correct in her ideas, then the cyborg, at least in David's case, is not aware that it serves as an ambassador of perversion, irony, and the like.

Here is where Spielberg challenges Haraway. Perhaps it's because David appears as a young boy, but I do not believe David is "completely without innocence." All David wants to do is be reunited with his mother and be loved by her. David is unaware of the reasons why Monica had to abandon him nor is he even really aware of what exactly he is; for all David knows, he is just like the rest of his family. Also, notice two of Haraway's characteristics: "oppositional, utopian." Since this word-pairing appears oxymoronic, it would seem that the definition of the cyborg is full of contradictions. The cyborg is oppositional in the fact that the human and the mechanical are meshed together, forced to find a way to co-exist, and the "utopian" part comes into play when all cyborgs, whether they are mostly human or mostly mechanical, unite as one group. Although David is essentially a mecha, his outward appearance and emotions are the human contributions that make him a cyborg, innocent or not.

Grenville, in his preface to The Uncanny, gives his take on what the cyborg is:

> The cyborg is a cipher—an enigmatic figure that is human but is not human, that is a machine but is not a machine. The cyborg exists at the intersection of science, technology and culture…An individual's threshold for acknowledgement of the uncanny cyborg body varies wildly and shifts according to context. For some, it occurs only in the realm of sci-fi or a dream; for others, it is a fact of their day-to-day existence. (9)

It is this seemingly hard-to-pin down nature of the cyborg that gives so many people a feeling of unease, exemplified in AI during the Flesh Fair scene. It is easy to clarify a human as human or a machine as a machine, but what if the creature standing before you can be classified as both? To classify this mecha, this cyborg, will require something along the lines of a new species.

In Cyborg Citizen: Politics in the Posthuman Age, Chris Gables Gray touches on the human fear of relinquishing our authority and power to some manifestation of artificial intelligence: "From our beginnings, it seems, we humans have feared the possibility of some intelligent *other*….Some of these imagined creatures have been humanoid, many not. Some were friendly, but most seemed unsympathetic. Such fantasies have never really waned" (2). In connection with Gray's comments, Spielberg doesn't feature any cyborgs in major roles that come off as antagonistic. Much like David, they seem friendly; perhaps they can afford to be so genial because they know what humans do not, that the mortals' time on earth is dwindling, or perhaps their friendliness is involuntary; would humans be so oblivious as to create androids with a sense of anger or desire to escape a life of servitude?

Invasion of the Multiple Davids

In The System of Objects, Baudrillard again anticipates AI by envisioning robots that bear an uncanny resemblance to humans:

> A robot that mimicked man to the point where its gestures had a truly human fluidity would create anxiety. What the robot must be is the symbol of a world at once entirely functionalized and entirely personalized, and hence reassuring at all

levels; a world which can reincarnate the abstracted power of man just as far as is

conceivable short of its being utterly engulfed by identification. (120)

If the mechas of <u>AI</u> are not robots, neither are they humans. Because it is not difficult to

distinguish the mechas from the humans (with the exception of David), the mechas are not

threatening. What Baudrillard is getting at once again is the dissolution of boundaries between

the real and artifice. Suppose that David did not resemble a little boy. What if David resembled

the typical sci-fi robot as seen in countless B-movies? Instead of human skin, David's surface

would be steel, wires and cords. Would Monica feel differently towards him? Remember that

Monica regarded David as an artificial being before the Imprinting Protocol. Although she

reacted to him much as she would have a robot, it was David's human-like appearance and

persona, combined with the robotics, that perplexed and got her attention the most. It was the

Imprinting Protocol that made David see Monica as Mommy and allowed his human side to take

over. If David did not look human, would the Imprinting Protocol have any real meaning? What

would be the point of David having human feelings if he didn't even look human? Baudrillard

gets to the point when he says humans prefer the simulation to the reality it represents.

Actually, it would be preferable if mechas looked better than humans: David is clean,

adorable, not a blemish on him, the ideal boy. Gigolo Joe proves another striking example; he

resembles a human but comes off as a slicker package. After all, if someone seeks the solace of

a lover mecha, then she (or he) is not in the market for something that looks like a humdrum

human. She (or he) wants the fantasy; the idea of having sex with a cyborg that looks and acts

human would be a tad too creepy.

But, paradoxically, it is the human form of the mechas that provides reassurance to the

humans in <u>AI</u>, as well as to the androids themselves, for it gives mechas a sense of belonging and

a connection to society. In the Flesh Fair, the old, decaying mechas that are about to be destroyed keep begging for another chance, eternally optimistic that they can still be of use to somebody. For example, the nanny mecha, with most of her robotic insides showing, sees David as another opportunity to fulfill her preordained life's work. Even as acid is poured over her body, she still smiles.

Baudrillard continues his discussion of the appearance of the android by analyzing why the robot is such an enduring icon for the human unconsciousness:

> If, for the unconscious, the robot is the perfect object…this is not simply because it is a simulacrum of man as a functionally efficient being; rather it is because, though the robot is indeed such a simulacrum, it is not so perfect in this regard as to be man's double, and because, for all its humanness, it always remains quite visibly an object, and hence a *slave.* (System of Objects 120)

Baudrillard's assertion casts a pall over the whole Monica/David relationship; was David nothing more than a slave? It is fairly obvious that Martin saw him in those terms, ordering David to do things and encouraging his friends to prick David's skin to see if he would yell out in pain. Ultimately, it is David's unwavering love and desire for Monica that leads his life and forms his every decision; but even though David appears to determine his own fate, he is only following the instructions imprinted in his brain by Professor Hobby. If Hobby wired David to love nothing but, let's say, weaving baskets, then that is all David would do, not necessarily of his own volition; whether David thought it was or not is beside the point. And Monica chooses to recite the Imprinting Protocol—she is responsible for David's actions. The humans in AI get to enjoy and take for granted the realistic appearance of the mechas, and they don't have to worry about the androids being equal to them.

That said, the only mechas that carry any real sense of ominous foreboding are the pre-packaged David clones in Professor Hobby's lair, which give David, as well as the audience, the creeps. As Baudrillard phrases it in <u>Simulations</u>, "counterfeit and reproduction imply always an anguish, a disquieting foreignness…reproduction is diabolical in its very essence; it makes something fundamental vacillate" (153). While the presence of the mechas in <u>AI</u> causes some disconcertment among the humans, no moment is as unsettling as the scene where David is confronted with multiple versions of himself, all encased in packaging like toys ready to be gobbled up by eager consumers. This spooky scene is reminiscent of a revelatory moment in the computer animated <u>Toy Story</u> (1995), where the futuristic galaxy fighter toy Buzz Lightyear sees countless multiples of himself on the toy shelves. Faced with the shocking reality of the situation, Buzz realizes that he is not the spaceman he thought he was but instead is just a child's plaything. Likewise, David, when the truth is revealed to him, comes to realize he is not quite a special as he once thought he was. However, David has now been given extra incentive to find Monica, for all of these Davids serve as competition. Since each one is exactly the same, it stands to reason they would all want the same thing. Granted, the Davids will become attached to whomever activates their Imprinting Protocols, but David does not know this; it would be completely understandable for him to expect that all those Davids would want his mommy. In this scene, Spielberg demonstrates that it is not only humans that are capable of being disturbed by signs of replication; mechas, by every design mechanical, are ideal for assembly-line births. David's loss of innocence in this scene is not dwelled on too long; it doesn't have to be: the inherent implications are troubling enough.

Putting a nasty spin on the double, Baudrillard states that "there is already sorcery at work in the mirror. But how much more so when this image can be detached from the mirror

and be transported, stocked, reproduced at will" (153). Notably, it is in this scene with the multiple Davids where David's mecha status stands out the most, the revelation that David is a commodity that can be churned out like an assembly-line car, bought with all the excitement of someone purchasing a new state-of-the-art stereo. Yes, there are more obvious moments when the audience actually sees David's mechanical insides and where his attempts at child-like behavior comes off robotic in nature, but none get to the essence of what it must be like to be considered little more than a mass-produced product for the sake of human gratification like the sight of all of those Davids.

Baudrillard offers some insight into the scene by claiming "what society seeks through production, and over-production, is the restoration of the real which escapes it" (44). Professor Hobby may feel bringing his son back to life in the form of a mecha will somehow restore the son, but what he has instead is a mecha that vaguely looks like his son and acts like an idealized version of him, the son of Hobby's dreams, reshaped and molded in the conscious and unconscious of his memories. No matter how many copies of David exist, none will ever be exact enough to fill the hole in Hobby's life vacated by his son. Why, then, are there so many Davids? Do they serve any purpose?

First of all, the main purpose of David was for him to be a functioning mecha capable of love, not just saying "I love you," but actually feeling the love. It isn't necessarily important to anyone, with the possible exception of Professor Hobby, that this mecha look like David. The sight of multiple Davids symbolizes the power Hobby is orchestrating. Hobby is bringing something unique into the world, an invention that satisfies a need and fills a hole in the lives of people who want a child to love, even if that child is a mecha. It is this type of control Baudrillard speaks of when he states "power, too, for some time now produces nothing but signs

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of its resemblance. And at the same time, another figure of power comes into play: that of a collective demand for *signs* of power" (45).

Suppose "David," when released to the general public, became a big hit, something people would fight over on the day after Thanksgiving in a struggle to get the last available copy. Visualize the scenario of thousands, maybe millions, of couples, of families across the country with a "David" as a member of the family. An outsider would likely find the scenario highly disturbing and yet to insiders, "David" would be an essential status symbol, something people would be used to seeing all over the neighborhoods and cities. Would this power, however, necessarily extend to David? On the one hand, David's uniqueness, his essence, would have a hard time withstanding the presence of untold numbers of Davids. Baudrillard, on the other hand, may offer an alternative interpretation: "The very definition of the real becomes: *that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction*" (146). Does this mean that Baudrillard would agree that David, who can be reproduced, is real?

Baudrillard uses Andy Warhol's famous copies of Marilyn Monroe's iconic face as an example of how the image is interpreted through repetition. The image itself is not as important as the fact that the image is repeated constantly. In short, the duplication is the art (Warhol's similar multiplication of Campbell's soup cans and Mickey Mouse is proof). But, paradoxically, Monroe also becomes less valuable when repeated numerous times. When David sees all those copies of himself, it's as if he has the same feeling: how can I be worth anything, how can I be special when hundreds of mechas look just like me? Part of the answer is in David's reaction; he runs away from the signs, from the copies. As long as David is the only one like him, he believes that he will not be destroyed by repetition.