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The Sense of an Ending and the Imagination of the End: Apocalypse, Disaster and Messianic Time
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COLLOQUIA HUMANISTICA

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Mirroring Cultural Fear, Anxiety and Dystopia in American Cinematography: The Movie *A.I.* (2001)

Abstract

Through this essay, we aim to provide a sociological and cultural analysis of how the film *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, directed by Steven Spielberg, explores the subconscious and culturally specific Western fear of humanoid robots. While the background of the story tackles the problematics of the multilevel emotional relationship between robots and humans, the movie's dystopian and apocalyptic discourse feeds the Western public's increasing technophobia, by encompassing "fear" in its philosophical, social and cultural dimensions: "the loss of humanity," "the imminence of disaster," and "the apocalyptic and irreversible destruction of Earth."

Moreover, the film goes beyond the mere depiction of technophobia while subtly addressing some worldwide contemporary problems of high interest, such as pollution, starvation, overpopulation, or nature's destruction on a global scale. In this eschatological, hopeless and post-human scenario, the depiction of David as a robot child expressing his eternal love for his distant adoptive human parents metaphorically illustrates the continuous altering of traditional

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human kinship, robotization, and alienation of the human race, which is on the verge of being enslaved by the technological wrath. However, David makes an allegorical transition from symbolizing the fearful Otherness to bringing the redemption of humanity's vestige and marking the survival of the human species, albeit in a radically altered form: He becomes "the new human."

Keywords: A.I., apocalypse, cultural fear, dehumanization, eschatology, robot child.

The Film's Plot and Setting

The film *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, directed by Steven Spielberg based on Brian Aldiss' short story "Supertoys Last All Summer Long" and on a script initially conceived by Stanley Kubrick, unfolds a futuristic narrative developing in a not-too-distant future of an overcrowded world regulated by population control and legal sanctions for pregnancy. Drastic and chaotic climate changes have already taken place: Many coastal cities such as Manhattan have already been flooded because of the melting polar ice caps, as a direct effect of greenhouse gases. In this context, conveying the hopelessness of the human fate, humanity is struggling with fewer and fewer resources.

From here begins the story of David (Haley Joel Osment), an advanced-generation robot boy designed for the purpose of replacing Martin, the son of Monica (Frances O'Connor) and Henry Swinton (Sam Robards), a child who has fallen gravely ill and is cryogenically preserved until a cure for his condition is discovered. Therefore, the sole purpose of David's purchase is "as an equally elegiac replacement, as she mourns the probable death of her terminally ill son, Martin" (Dillon, 2006) and to fill an emotional gap in the life of these two grieving parents, longing for their ill son, who is in a comatose state with a very slim chance of complete recovery. However, not long after Martin's miraculous awakening, a rivalry between brothers is born: Alongside countless devious and mischievous tricks, Martin's cruelest act of malice and calculated sadism towards David was to ask his mother to read them *The Adventures of Pinocchio* by Carlo Collodi.

From the moment David listens to this story, he will desperately wish to find the "Blue Fairy," to ask her to make him a real boy, just as she did with the wooden Pinocchio. This narrative moment, in particular the magical transformation of Pinocchio into a real boy, becomes probably the most essential leitmotif of David's almost never-ending quest for maternal love – the robot child assumes that when he finds the Blue Fairy and convinces her to metamorphose him into a real child, he will undoubtedly be rewarded

with Monica's affection. She abandons him and Teddy – an intelligent toy bear discarded by a bored Martin – in the forest and tells him never to come back but to run away.

David begins his search for the Blue Fairy to make him human. Accompanied by Teddy, he finds hundreds of mutilated Mechas hiding in the forest, looking for spare parts in a dump. Here he also meets Gigolo Joe (Jude Law), a "lover Mecha" who is on the run after being framed for the murder of one of his former Orga clients. Scrap dealers capture David, Teddy, Gigolo Joe, and many other Mechas and bring them to the Flesh Fair: A Celebration of Life, but after escaping destruction by Orgas and running away from the fair, David, Teddy and Gigolo Joe head to Rouge City, the city of sex and entertainment, where Joe takes David to Dr. Know, a kind of virtual encyclopedia, to ask about the Blue Fairy. David ardently continues his search for the Blue Fairy, and finds his way to "the lost city in the sea at the end of the world," a Manhattan mostly submerged under water.

During his meeting with Professor Hobby, David has an existential crisis of despair, as he discovers he is only one unit from a long chain of hundreds of replicas, hundreds of robot children manufactured by Hobby's company. He thought he was unique, but finding out that his creator manufactured hundreds of his kind, modeled after his dead son, throws him into a state of shock and leads him to throw himself from the top of the building in angst-ridden resignation. Surprisingly, at the bottom of the ocean he finds the Blue Fairy statue, and after remaining imprisoned underwater, he will pray ardently and devoutly in front of the statue, representing a metaphoric icon for the Virgin Mary, until his batteries run out.

Fast forward 2,000 years, and we witness humanity's extinction. David wakes up surrounded by spindly and harmless robotic beings, very similar to the image of translucently metallic aliens in popular culture. For these highly advanced robots, David will represent the last trace of humankind, and they will play the role of the Blue Fairy by granting him his wish: one day to experience maternal love. When their day ends, Monica goes to sleep forever, but David's devotion will finally be rewarded, and he will hear her saying: "I love you, David." This is the final epic moment when David lies down and dies with his mom in pure bliss and happiness, as he feels and acknowledges his human nature because he has loved and been loved as well.

"The Uncanny Valley" as a Metaphor of Cultural Fear in the Movie *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001)

The present-day human faces an era imprinted by ongoing, frozen or arising political conflicts, accelerated globalization, alarming environmental deterioration, and carcinogenic transformation of natural resources, while continuously struggling to maintain their identity and human values (Torres, 2002). Within this general global context, the emergence and rapid development of the robotic industry has influenced global, national and regional film narratives as well. As a general note, the presence of robots and androids in the American film industry is frequently interpreted as tracking a vast range of cultural, religious, political, economic, historical and genetically deep-rooted fears and anxieties of contemporary Western society (Schofield & LeRoy, 2019; Szollosy, 2015).

As stated previously, one can notice an "ambivalence of feelings towards robots [which] is not only to be found in literary and cinematographical fiction, but also pervades the present-day philosophical debates on the ethics of robotics, and in particular in the debate on war robots" (Di Nucci & Santoni de Sio, 2013). Usually, American robot movies tend to reconstruct fear and anxiety within a social and cultural framework by prioritizing the occidental perception of robots as being a potential threat to humans and their prosperous future (Geraci, 2007). As Isabella Hermann also pointed out, films such as the one directed by Steven Spielberg, depicting the challenges of "omnipotent AI systems exercising total control over humans" reflect our intrinsic "fear of impotence and helplessness of the individual in the face of superordinate structures" (Hermann, 2021).

This longstanding and undying Western attitude of rejection or at least anxiety, which has been accurately reflected in Western/American movies in particular, can be explained through Masahiro Mori's theory "bukimi no tani," translated as "the uncanny valley" or more literally "the valley of eeriness," published in 1970 in the journal *Energy*. In his two-page essay, Mori's central idea was that "the more social robots (as opposed to industrial robots) are designed to appear 100 per cent humanlike, the more they will appear less human, strange, unlikeable and in some cases horrific, resulting from some technological glitch in either their appearance or movement, thus causing a fearful sense of the 'uncanny,' in the way a corpse, or worse yet, a zombie causes a sense of uncanny strangeness or emotional recoiling" (Borody, 2013).

In this regard, the movie *A.I.* (2001) accurately fits the cultural and social framework described above, by playing the role of a lens on the beliefs,

ideas, cultural understandings, and the subtle tensions that singularize American society. On one hand, 20th-century technology frightens us with dehumanization and the imminence of extinction, but on the other, it fascinates us with "salvation" and the promise of a happy and facile life (Hoffman & Kurzenberger, 2008; Mokyr et al., 2015).

Moving on to our analysis, the film under discussion displays a particular conglomeration of narrative strategies that mediate American national traumas, anxieties, fears on multiple allegorical and semantic levels (Naremore, 2005). The narration with an aura of fairy tale and myth (Heffernan, 2018) depicts a dark and nihilistic world, a futuristic dystopia in which the human species has destroyed itself through global warming. Nevertheless, this self-destruction is perceived not as a sudden extermination or as being due to a transcendental event, but as a gradual process of continuous planetary alterations to which the rapacity of humans has indubitably made a direct contribution.

Dystopic Space and Time of Fear

The opening narration plunges the audience into a dark, cold future, and it reveals a highly pessimistic and dystopian atmosphere by describing the work of nature in response to humanity's nefarious exploitation:

> Those were the years after the ice caps had melted because of the greenhouse gases, and the oceans had risen to drown so many cities along all the shorelines of the world. Amsterdam. Venice. New York. Forever lost. Millions of people were displaced, climate became chaotic. Hundreds of millions of people starved in poorer countries. Elsewhere, a high degree of prosperity survived when most governments in the developed world introduced legal sanctions to strictly license pregnancies, which was why robots, who were never hungry and who did not consume resources beyond those of their first manufacture, were so essential an economic link in the chain mail of society. (Spielberg, 2001, 00:01:12–00:02:01)

As Marina Fedosik also notices, the viewer can recognize here the popular narrative theme of humanity's apocalypse, given that "the film therefore does not allow for the revision of the symbolic order but associates its destruction with the end of humanity – a post-oedipal apocalypse" that "leaves the world to cyborgs" (Fedosik, 2018; Haraway, 1991). Furthermore, this narrative approach connects to what the literary theorist Peter Brooks characterizes in *Reading for the Plot* as an inherent human need for "an explanatory narrative that seeks its authority in a return to origins and the tracing of a coherent story forward

from origin to present" (Brooks, 1985). Thus, "only the end can finally determine meaning" (Brooks, 1985).

Within this critical context, the opening image of the film narrative turns into a metaphor for the defeat of humanity in its "war of domination" over Mother Nature. Therefore, the apocalyptic narrative trope (Achouche, 2022) is encrypted from the first lines, to highlight what is probably America's worst fear and vulnerability.

Therefore, the particular temporal and spatial setting connects the perpetual American cinematographic obsession with apocalyptic imminence (Hamonic, 2017) and the punishment of humanity. These main topics should be interpreted within the social, political and historical background of the last two decades (2000–2020), which have been marked by intense social fears (Kuška, 2011), chronic and contagious anxieties, simultaneously with the peaking rise of technology in everyday life. "Characterized by disjointed narratives, a dark view of the human condition, images of chaos and random violence, death of the hero, emphasis on technique over content, and dystopic views of the future," the movie can easily fit the criteria of postmodern cinema (Boggs & Pollard, 2001). Considering these aspects, the world as it is depicted here, populated by aggressive Mechas, does nothing but confirm the typical Western technophobia and is more likely to be interpreted as "a consequence of the revision to human reproductive and affective practices" (Fedosik, 2018).

One should also notice that the locus of this global climatic catastrophe is none other than Western modernity, a direct consequence of perpetuating the Western or, more specifically, the American alarmist rhetoric of the apocalyptical tale in popular culture (Foust & O'Shannon Murphy, 2009). Furthermore, the dynamic mix of post-apocalyptic narratives that are deeply rooted in American culture, otherwise supported by the Judeo-Christian and Evangelical Christian traditions of eschatological belief, represents another element that contributed significantly to this placement (Hummel, 2020). For instance, "in the Old Testament the major eschatological narrative is Noah's Ark in the Book of Genesis" (Harris, 2016); similarly, "the Book of Revelation is, in fact, a post-apocalyptic text, which depicts in immense detail the world that emerges after the apocalypse; including the holy city of New Jerusalem, where there is no sun and no moon, but simply God's light (Revelation 21:10–22:6)" (Harris, 2016).

This never-ending apocalyptical obsession reveals a pathological narcissism that conceals our wish for immortality as individuals and as a race, given that apocalypticism has always been ingrained into the archetypal psyche of any

human society or civilization up to the present day (Perrulli, 2005). It becomes easy to connect this narcissistic obsession and quest for immortality with the omnipresent fear of death (Perrulli, 2005). In other words,

> the idea of death is a universally repressed fear that lies at the root of so much of what we create, define, imagine, hypothesize, believe and dream. The fear of death is always present to us in its manifestations, which have been influenced by the forces of narcissism, heroism, and repression – all of which have creatively shifted throughout culture and history. (Perrulli, 2005)

Given all these considerations, the movie in question is set in this particular Western spatial and temporal context abounding in general anxiety and fear of the masses, while addressing several widely recognized culturally specific American public fears (Gergan et al., 2018), and probably the best-known one is the terror induced by the possibility of an apocalypse leading to the extermination of humanity. Nevertheless, all these fears are emotionally and culturally driven, and their rationality is controversial, as they are more likely to represent a cultural, psychological and social multilayered response to the American public agenda (Cowan, 2011; Hörnfeldt, 2018; Myers, 2001).

Therefore, the vividly painted first scenes reveal a deep-rooted and very well-hidden anxiety about present-day Western society as a whole, environmental protection, individual freedom and safety, government control, social collapse, destruction of the nuclear family, mistrust of authority structures, viral outbreak, terrorism, and humans' increasing disconnectedness from their inner self and from spirituality on a general level (Cowan, 2011). What challenges the idea that it is possible for a "better" human society to be reborn out of the ashes is this image of global catastrophe, describing humanity as devoid of love, empathy, respect, and loyalty to people and relationships. Therefore, it is implicitly presented as not being worth saving anymore.

Culturalizing the Fear in the Human-Robot Relation

The movie, with its explicit philosophical richness, represents a subtle yet complex semantic negotiation of the power dynamics between humans and robots. As a science fiction film, the cinematographic production represents an accurate match to the characterization provided by the editor Steven M. Sanders in *The Philosophy of Science Fiction Film* (2008), according to whom science fiction films "provide a medium through which questions

about personal identity, moral agency, artificial consciousness and other categories of experience can be addressed" (Sanders, 2008). The viewer steps into the midst of a society where the greedy human dictatorship prevails and people have already lost every trace of humanity, mercy, or kindness, and the only reason to create robots is to help with physical labors or, at the most, to cure the depressive voidness in humans' lives.

As Bill Nichols states, "every [science fiction] film is a documentary. These films give tangible expression to our wishes and dreams, our nightmares and dreads. They make the stuff of imagination concrete – visible and audible. They give a sense of what we wish, or fear, reality itself might become" (Nichols, 2017). Similarly, the fear experienced by the human characters becomes real, tangible, and concrete, while it connects to the following narrative patterns. First, aggressive robotization as it is depicted in the film reveals humans' attempt to assume the divine role of the creator, a behavior prone to be severely punished in the proximate future, as the opening scene has shown. Second, the portrayal of human nature displays another fearful and very pessimistic premonition about how humans' personality will evolve in the proximate future.

From this point on, two major religious themes appear in the film narrative: "humans playing God" and "humans created in the image of God" (Thomas 124). The first one "suggests that a clear demarcation exists between the roles of God and humans and that there are areas of life where God rules, where God is in charge, and where humans ought not to enter" and "evokes an omnipotent God who is the Creator of all and who commands all" (Shannon, 1998). The second religious theme approaches the human as "the created co-creator" (Hefner, 1989), meaning that humans "become participants with God in the continuous evolving of both nature and history," and "share a joint responsibility" towards the divine creation.

While most of the human characters in the movie are hateful, self-absorbed, egotistical, and even cruel or sadistic towards robots, the androids display a much higher amount of empathy and kindness than their human partners are capable of showing (Loren, 2008), up until the point that viewers might even sympathize with the androids suffering from human cruelty. As a curious fact, the human characters feel anxiety and a degree of fear towards the robots, while human viewers undoubtedly feel merciful. We might draw the conclusion that what one should fear is not robots, but human characters who become soulless and mechanical.

Thus, the robots are presented as struggling to create a new social foundation that gives birth to a radically different society built on a set

of values that considers Humanity and Mercy to mean kindness, respect, devotion, mutual sympathy, support, and equality. Metaphorically speaking, these robots, especially David, become a mimetic counterpart to the ideal human being, and in this situation the viewer has no other option but simultaneously to feel fear and allure in the presence of these robots capable of love and sacrifice.

In the context of the burgeoning industry of robotics and artificial intelligence, the robot characters could be interpreted as iconic symbols depicting consumerism and capitalism, produced at the intersection of drastic environmental change and accelerated globalization (Higbie, 2012). Through their existence, they expose and warn about the aggravation of extreme disparities between the socially perceived class division of the rich and the poor, and master and slave, or – in this case – Mecha and Orga, which represent the deliberate binaries of good and evil.

Therefore, with its underlying human greediness, callousness, and degradation, the film tackles the concept of human fear from multiple perspectives, and it is more likely to be a story about human beings and the decadence of the human race than one about robots and their impact on our lives and social condition. From this perspective, the narrative is conveyed as a philosophical exploration of what it means to be "human" in the real sense of the word and to respond to universal human values.

The Mechas mark the mortality and ephemeral substance of the human race, more specifically, our *fear of aging*, *disease* and, above all, the *fear of death*, given that this is a "primary human impulse." American society has evolved being taught to "attach fearful meanings to death and death-related situations" (Leming & Dickinson, 2011), and this fear of death can be connected with the prevailing individuality, as Phillip Slater stated. Moreover, "people in industrial and post-industrial societies lose the connectedness based on community provided in other societies. Thus, the fear of death may be the price paid for living in a society whose ideology rests on the type experienced in the United States" (Leming & Dickinson, 2011).

Another significant type of fear that is ingrained into the viewer's consciousness, and thus corresponds to the film's scenario, is *the public mistrust of authority structures and corporations*. The theme of the corporation that abuses the public's trust is by far not new, and it is highly suggestive for the viewer's world. The next type of fear is that of *race and otherness*. For the human characters, the robot represents "the other," but the viewer tends to feel a more significant emotional distance from the human figures than from the robots (Szollosy, 2015). Despite the advantages of technological progress,

Americans in particular still feel wary of this advancement of science, which makes them consider the option that one day this progress will start to take over their lives completely. From this perspective, the film's message draws an alarm signal over people's proximate alienation and the aggravating disconnection from human interaction (Mokyr et al., 2015).

Finally, one should note that the film explores the fear of the collapse of society and its structures of order, social and moral values, competition between humans and robots, and as a whole, humanity's civilization heritage. For instance, David himself becomes symbolic of the rapidly changing social sphere wherein the traditional family faces a conflictual and problematic evolution without precedent: The adoption of a child robot is an event that forces the viewer to contemplate it, without offering any simple solution. Within this context, the Mecha becomes a powerful cinematic allegory, as it encompasses a wide range of social, historical and political meanings such as slavery, racism, turbulent racial tensions, exploited labor, authority versus independence, human rights versus robot rights, capitalism and consumerism. Moreover, there is an overarching theme of Western-specific robophobia and lack of control, associated with *the fear of losing control of human society* in favor of robots or being reduced to nothing, with no civil rights or social status (Sandberg, n.d.). The robots' portrayal accurately reflects the human struggle in operating with a proper distinction between Insider/Outsider and the fear of letting in and exploring the unknown.

From this perspective, we conclude that this film reflects particularly Americans' anxiety towards the human-robot relationship, attachment, and companionship, and invites viewers to reflection by questioning the extent to which the robots of the future will be capable of providing similarly human love, kinship, and intimacy to humans. Hence, the robot characters become containers for our fears about all our dark and animalistic impulses, such as those involving domination, control, violence, conquest, or desire for immortality. Nevertheless, the fear inflicted by the android-human character relationship, simultaneously with the continuous power and dialogue negotiation of both sides, probably represents the most consistent proof of how xenophobia, racism, and technophobia intertwine in the film's scenario.

The film narrative alludes to the idea that some robots, such as these Mechas, might present excellent qualities to be considered as viable alternatives to humans, thus making us consider outweighing the advantages and the potential risks associated with this significant social, cultural

and biological conversion of human relationships as configured in this alternative dystopic universe. Although the script distances itself to some extent from the obsessive leitmotif of the maleficent robot or cyborg that exterminates humanity, the final narrative sequences embody America's worst fear, which is *the invasion from within*, meaning that the robots created by humans survived their creators and took control over what was once the peak of human civilization. Therefore, it is suggested that the much applauded technological evolution of today will one day become the tomb of humanity, which has fallen prey to the tempting promise of a comfortable life surrounded by slave robots.

On one hand, most of the robots in the movie transcend the limitations imposed on them by their human creators and detach themselves from the stereotypical image of androids highly mediatized by American popular culture: In other words, they surpass their initial condition of being automatic and homogenous machines, stripped of emotions, passion, identity, uniqueness, spirit and, above all, soul (Fedosik, 2018). On the other hand, the image of human characters who lack dignity, morality, and spirituality, having an insatiable appetite for power and control, consumed by primal impulses, is one projected to inspire fear and anxiety in the viewer (Bernstein, n.d.).

David: Android or Post-Human?

From the beginning, the main character was envisioned as the first child Mecha: "a perfect child caught in a freeze-frame; always loving, never ill, never changing," but we should ask ourselves if, by the end of the movie, he becomes something more than a disposable, replaceable commodity. "David is 11 years old. He weighs 60 pounds. He is 4 feet, 6 inches tall. He has brown hair. His love is real. But he is not" (*A.I. Artificial Intelligence* tagline). The dichotomic placement of David as an android child or a potential post-human within this alternative futuristic universe where humanity has already perished, should be interpreted in light of several significant theories that will help the present analysis in connecting this character's identity with the concept of (Western) "cultural fear." From the perspective of theological theories, David's creation represents the quintessence of the human defying and redefining the divine while assuming the creator's role (Foerst, 2009). In the 20th-century context, where technology becomes the new religion and the border between the progress of Artificial Intelligence and the divine is blurred, the much-promised technological Eden remains surrounded

by the fear of dehumanization and extinction, which never stray far from the mind (Tsuria, 2021).

Furthermore, David's emergence and development as the central character also addresses Cartesian philosophy, and more specific concepts such as the mind-body issue, personal identity, and the struggles one feels, just like American cyborg movies of the 1990s. In her study "Descartes Goes to Hollywood: Mind, Body and Gender in Contemporary Cyborg Cinema," Samantha Holland points out that "the cyborg film is particularly interesting when considering the relationship between the Cartesian (Cartesian-influenced) dualisms of traditional philosophy and those dualisms of gender that, arguably, underlie and inform such a conceptual division" (Holland, 1995).

Finally, other theorists that have tackled the link between art, science, and philosophy, and question the human identity in a post-contemporary era, are Deborah Knight and George McKnight, in their chapter "What Is It to Be Human? *Blade Runner* and *Dark City*." *Blade Runner*, just like *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, studies the problematics and quintessence of human identity, and in both movies humanity becomes the ultimate goal, as a symptom of technological advancements and the public's increasing awareness and anxiety towards artificial intelligence (Knight & McKnight, 2008). From this standpoint, one could easily read David, with his kindness and other excellent human-like qualities, as being an ambassador of post-humanity, carrying on the cultural, social and historical legacy of the already extinct human race.

David's status within his human family reasserts his post-human condition by the exhibition of all the ideal human traits. In this space and time of palpable violence, where having blood relations is frequently considered a condition sine qua non for earning a family's love, David's adoption by a human family was prone to fail from the beginning. Despite his inherent android nature, the android child paradoxically displays a pure, naïve, uncorrupted and millennial loving devotion towards his absent, frivolous, selfish and weak adoptive mother, who failed ever to show him any sign of affection (Bernstein, n.d.). The same devotion grafts both invincibility and acute vulnerability onto his personality and destiny.

Through his unfailing love, David as an artificial creation challenges and, one might say, even shames human conceptions of mutual love and raises questions about humans' level of consciousness. The faithful adoration of this robot child remains unfailing throughout more than 2,000 years, and what adds a tragic dimension to his portrait is his fidelity that remains

untamed by the passage of time, in contradiction with humans' superficiality. David's odyssey into the world of Mechas and humans that both reject him, uncovers a universe in which the border between machines and humans is both vast and profoundly thin, and displays in a very subtle manner humans' *fear of the unknown*.

The evolvement of his character reimagines the Pinocchio narrative: Despite being a creation of the Mecha Corporation, made of wires, transistors, circuits, and covered with human-like skin, his only dream is to become "a real boy," because in this way he will earn the love of Monica, his human mother (Heffernan, 2018). Therefore, for him the love of his adoptive mother represents a sufficient condition to validate his existence in this universe exploring the emotional conflict induced by establishing adoptive relationships between a robot and a human (Fedosik, 2018).

David's relationship with his human brother, Martin, reveals another significant dimension of his status within his human family and how this robot child embodies "the culturalized fear of the other and the Western-specific robophobia." Unlike him, Martin, his so-called brother, personifies the stereotypical image of "the brat" and fails to show Monica the same kind of devotion as David does (Dillon, 2006). Despite his superficiality and sadism, he is the one that Monica will choose. Is it maybe because he is "real" and David is not? In this context, a significant aspect to ponder is what can be considered real and what cannot. According to the human characters' perception, David is not "real." A relevant example is Monica's repetitive statements such as the following: "Good. I mean, Henry, did you see his face? He's, he's so real. But he's not..." Thus, the android child is condemned to a life of helpless devotion to his selfish, weak, mercurial human mother Monica, and doomed to a tragic end of disposal, abandonment, and destruction (Achouche, 2022). During his initiatory journey, David has no doubts whatsoever that he will be able to find the Blue Fairy, who will turn him into a "real boy."

In a bittersweet ending, whereas science succeeds in curing Martin, his stepbrother, "the substitute artificial child" will outlive them all, making the film constructed on "several temporal disjunctions – of past and present, of gain and loss" which cannot be "harmoniously reconciled" (Dillon, 2006). Although David was initially a complex Mecha whose status was considered inferior to that of a human being and whose identity was reducible to physical and chemical characteristics, by the end of his spiritual and adventurous journey, he achieves the identity of the ideal human being, through his pure love and unfailing devotion (Manninen & Manninen,

2016). Therefore, David's transformation imposes a philosophical debate on the issue of consciousness, the mind-body relation, and the concept of human identity. From this perspective, the film's narrative line suggests that a highly sophisticated robot can achieve human identity as well: David is the one who becomes a genuine human person, through faith and love.

From here on, we can connect David's persona to the theories of transhumanism, more specifically the "non-human person" and criteria for "personhood" (Locke, 2013). According to John Locke's theory of personal identity, the concept of a person suggests that consciousness should be seen as the key to personhood, not to humanness. Thus, one's awareness of one's own emotions, thoughts, and physical body is quintessential in rooting one's identity in time. As a summary:

1. A person cannot be a substance, because we never experience the substance; the underlying substance is irrelevant.
2. Consciousness is the experience which creates personal identity.
3. A "man" is a creature (whose identity consists, like a tree, of its life), but a "person" is a particular type of consciousness.
4. A person has the properties of being conscious, self-aware and rational.
5. Consciousness covers current mental states, awareness of our own bodies, and awareness of the past.
6. "Person" is a forensic term, involving praise and blame, and a capacity to obey laws. (Locke, 2013)

Taking this theoretical perspective into consideration, another challenging and difficult question arises: Is David a person, a human, or maybe a posthuman? Professor Hobby designed David as an exact duplicate of his dead child, who was the original David. Despite being used by Monica as no more than a substitute for her comatose son, David has loved her blindly and unconditionally, and his only fear is that of not being loved by Monica. This appeals to the *fear of cloning* and, mostly, being replaced, given that the context of cloning in American cinematography alternates between horror and ambivalence, and sometimes hope (O'Riordan, 2008). Even before the release of *A.I.*, "human cloning has been traditionally embedded in film through a set of images and stories dealing with horror, abjection, monstrosity and the uncanny" (O'Riordan, 2008). Although David is not a human clone in the proper meaning of the word, he becomes a "visual signifier for cloning," as the twin of Professor Hobby's late son (O'Riordan, 2008).

The Flesh Fair narrative scene stands out by the way it outlines the human-robot dichotomy, simultaneously incorporating the utmost hate and also fear towards the world of Mechas. At this event, which ironically

promotes itself as "a celebration of life," David witnesses the sadistic destruction of other Mechas for the mere amusement of humans, as a cruel and technophobic demonstration of humans' overwhelming victory over robots, which are nevertheless considered to be a denigration of human dignity, and waits for his turn. Therefore, their destruction becomes nothing else but "the demolition of artificiality."

The pivotal scene of the Flesh Fair becomes a vortex of extreme violence and supremacist brutality, as it alludes explicitly to historical atrocities now incorporated into humans' ancestral memory: slavery and the lynching of slaves, Soviet labor camps and gulags, the Holocaust and the persecution of Jews, or the secular abuses of the Inquisition (Heffernan, 2018). The lynching mass of people, who ironically are white, consider Mecha, and David as well, a form of denigrating human dignity, and in their vision, destroying robots becomes a demolition of artificiality, based on the so-called superiority of the human race. This spectacle of lynching has the performative dimension of a supremacist ritual, where the humans have the chance to bond and to assert the prerogative of their species' superiority, while the androids become icons of abjection and targets of hate. Humans' lust for violence is antithetic with David's innocence and the defenseless state of the machines that have to obey unconditionally. David succeeds in winning the crowd's mercy by begging them to believe that he is "real."

This robot child was exploited by his creators for global fame and recognition, mistrusted and ignored by his adoptive father, never loved and abandoned by his foster mother, frequently tormented and bullied by his brother and his friends, continuously hunted and almost destroyed by humans. Ironically, the past, present, and future are inextricably linked to David, who becomes an ambiguous representative of humanity, the living memory of the human race and everlasting proof of their genial yet at the same time malefic creativity. David's so-called happy ending represents nothing else than a disguise for the tragic extinction of the human race, which exposes the meaningless and thinness of scientific progress and cultural and social evolution.

After completing the destructive cycle 2,000 years later, with the help of alien lookalike robots, David comforts himself with a cloned copy of Monica, in an awake-for-one-day-only resurrection. The robots surrounding David before his final day are now designed and built by other artificial intelligence forms; thus, they bear minimal resemblance to the long-gone, vanished human figures. Their last lines hint at the occurrence of an apocalyptic Armageddon and reveal the dark and nihilistic fate of humanity,

which has finally exterminated itself, leaving the Earth a dead world. They continue by telling him: "You are so important to us. You are unique in all the world." These are the words David has longed to hear from the moment the Imprinting Protocol code-sequence of love was activated: that he is unique, irreplaceable; thus, he deserves to be loved (Achouche, 2022). But the robot created for David on that particular day was not real, as one of them tried to explain to him. It was merely a genetic copy of his mother. However, David, with his fierce devotion, continues to hope. This one-day reward becomes sufficient for David, who happily dies near the clone of his adoptive human mother, Monica. More likely, this is nothing else but a pseudo-happy and sentimental ending for a character obsessed with the image of a lost loved one, now settling for a soon-to-expire technological simulacrum of his lost mother (Achouche, 2022; Gordon, 2008).

What even highly advanced robots could not create, despite their technological progress, was the *essence of life*. What they gave David, despite their good intentions, was a kind and white lie; in other words, a comforting illusion. Ironically, these sentient robots envy humans for "their spirit" and look upon this lost race as "the key to the meaning of existence," as the film's narrator relates: "Human beings had created a million explanations of the meaning of existence, in art, in poetry, in mathematical formulas. […] Certainly human beings must be the key to the meaning of existence" (Spielberg, 2001, 02:08:23–02:08:35). Their idealized vision of humanity's unique and unbeatable genius represents a blunt and shocking antithesis to David's experience with the vanity and selfish nature of the humans he has met. The final scene represents an act of tragedy and one of liberation in pure bliss, a metaphor of cathartic redemption for both the protagonist and the viewer simultaneously. Overlapping the happy fairy tale of David with the tragic mythical self-destruction of humans suggests how often the viewer tends to myopically and obsessively focus on a trivial oedipal love story while the world around is dying without any chance of salvation.

Conclusions

Although the movie in question portrays the typical Western cultural fear of one's mortality and the irrevocable extermination of the human race, it also invites the audience to question, debate, and understand the concepts of "personhood," "creation," "reality," "love and other values"

in humanist terms, as a dialogue about the relationship between the organic and the mechanical, versus the "inorganic" and the "spiritual."

On a side note, the film acknowledges David as the catalyst of the storyline, but not the source of the tragedy. Thus, what draws attention to the film is not the existence of David, the robot child, but the situations he creates in this environment of impending chaos and total collapse of human society and way of life. It becomes nearly impossible for the viewer not to place themself into that scenario and to corroborate their fears through this American cinematic production.

The movie's spatial and temporal placement becomes very easy to associate with the audience's surroundings, which are fraught with economic, political and social turmoil, marked by a vast number of disasters that lead to profound and complex social emotions. Hence, the concept of "cultural fear" per se can explain the increasing presence of robots in contemporary popular culture, which represents nothing more than an intricate response given by American mainstream culture, reflecting the current climate marked by millennial fears and modern social anxieties.

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Reflectând frica de natură culturală, anxietatea și distopia în cinematografia americană: filmul A.I. (2001)

În acest eseu vom încerca să inițiem o analiză culturală și sociologică a modului în care filmul "A.I. Inteligență Artificială" de Steven Spielberg exploră frica de natură culturală și subconștientă, tipic vestică, față de roboții umanoizi. La nivel principial, narațiunea face referire la problematica relației emoționale și multifațetate dintre oameni și roboți, iar discursul apocaliptic și distopic al filmului hrănește tehnofobia publicului occidental, reflectând și cuprinzând frica în dimensiunile sale culturale, sociale și filozofice: "pierderea umanității", "iminența dezastrului" și "distrugerea ireversibilă și apocaliptică a Pământului".

Mai mult, filmul depășește limitele descriptive ale tehnofobiei, adresând subtil și alte probleme contemporane de interes global precum poluarea, foametea, suprapopularea sau distrugerea naturii pe o scală planetară. În acest scenariu escatologic și lipsit de speranță, prezența și descrierea lui David asemeni unui copil robot care își exprimă dragostea imuabilă față de părinții săi umani, adoptivi, dar distanți, ilustrează metaforic alterarea perpetuă a relațiilor familiale tradiționale, așadar robotizarea și alienarea acestei rase umane pe punctul de a se converti în sclavul mirajului tehnologic. Cu toate acestea, David parcurge o tranziție alegorică de la a reprezenta simbolul Celuilalt, de care ne este frică, la a fi Cel care aduce izbăvirea omenirii și marchează, într-o formă nonconformistă, supraviețuirea speciei umane: el devine "noul om".

Cuvinte cheie: A.I., apocalipsă, frică de natură culturală, dezumanizare, escatologie, copil robot.

Strach kulturowy. Lęk i dystopia w kinematografii amerykańskiej. Film *A.I.* (2001)

W niniejszym eseju podejmuję próbę analizy kulturowej i socjologicznej sposobu w jaki film *A.I. Sztuczna inteligencja* Stevena Spielberga wykorzystuje temat typowego dla Zachodu, kulturowego i podświadomego strachu przed robotami o ludzkich kształtach. Narracja filmowa zasadniczo odwołuje się do kwestii wielowymiarowych relacji emocjonalnych pomiędzy

ludzkimi robotami, zaś proponowany apokaliptyczny i dystopijny dyskurs podsyca technofobię zachodniej widowni, ukazując strach w jego wymiarze kulturowym, społecznym i filozoficznym: „zatracenie człowieczeństwa", „nieuchronność katastrofy" i „nieuniknione zniszczenie Ziemi o charakterze apokalipsy".

Co więcej, film wykracza poza granice opisowe technofobii, nawiązując umiejętnie do globalnych problemów współczesnego świata, takich jak: zanieczyszczenie środowiska, klęski głodu, przeludnienie czy degradacja przyrody w skali planetarnej. W tym eschatologicznym i pozbawionym nadziei scenariuszu postać Davida sportretowanego jako dziecko-robot, które niezmiennie deklaruje swoją miłość do ludzkich – adopcyjnych i wstrzemięźliwych – rodziców, jest metaforyczną ilustracją postępującego rozkładu więzi rodzinnych, robotyzacji i alienacji rasy ludzkiej, będącej o krok od tego, by stała się niewolnikiem technologicznego złudzenia. Mimo tych wszystkich zagrożeń David przeżywa alegoryczną przemianę: z symboliczego, budzącego strach Obcego zamienia się w kogoś niosącego ratunek ludzkości i zapewniającego, na sposób nonkonformistyczny, przetrwanie gatunku ludzkiego – staje się „nowym człowiekiem".

Słowa kluczowe: A.I., apokalipsa, strach kulturowy, dehumanizacja, eschatologia, dziecko robot.

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