

ADAPTING A SHORT STORY INTO A FULL-LENGTH MOVIE: *A.I.*  
*ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE*

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*In this paper I aim at analysing how the film A.I. Artificial Intelligence (2001), directed by Steven Spielberg, offers a recreation of the short story "Supertoys Last All Summer Long", written by Brian W. Aldiss. The late director Stanley Kubrick began the process of adaptation of the story and worked on it for several years. When he died in 1999, Spielberg decided to finish the project. In the process of adapting a short story into a full-length movie, the addition of new elements to the original seems to be necessary. My intention is to prove that the added elements and the changes introduced to the original reveal the filters through which the story has been adapted.*

My aim in this paper is to analyse the recreation that Steven Spielberg's film *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001) makes of the short story "Supertoys Last All Summer Long", written by the British author Brian W. Aldiss. This science fiction narrative, first published in *Harper's Bazaar* in December 1969, tells the story of David, a five-year-old boy who never succeeds in pleasing her mother. He is not capable of communicating with her, and his only friend is the robot toy, Teddy. In the last revealing fragments of the story we learn that David, like Teddy, is a robot, a "supertoy" with artificial intelligence, which Henry Swinton, director of Synthank, a company devoted to manufacturing robots, has given his wife Monica as a present. The Swintons live in an overcrowded world where they must win what is called "parenthood lottery" as a prerequisite to conceive a child: "Pressure of population was such that reproduction had to be strict, controlled. Childbirth required government permission" (Aldiss 2001:10). When they finally win the lottery, David will be of no use to them anymore: "Is David malfunctioning?" To Henry's question, Monica gives a quick and cold answer: "His verbal communication-center is still giving trouble. I think he'll have to go back to the factory again" (Aldiss 2001:11).

The story offers a pessimistic vision of a future world where humans seem to have lost all traces of humanity; a world in which robots are created to fill their

empty and frustrated lives: “An overcrowded world is the ideal place in which to be lonely” (Aldiss 2001:2). The irony of these words by the narrator perfectly describes the life of Monica Swinton, who is portrayed as being alone and feeling lonely. Although having the company of David, she cannot communicate with him since the child is no more than a robot to her. However, in this world where even seasons are simulated, androids, such as David or Teddy, seem to be more real than human beings or, at least, seem to have more humane feelings.

As Aldiss explains in the foreword to his collection *Supertoys Last All Summer Long and Other Stories of Future Time*, this short story impressed the late film director Stanley Kubrick who “was keen to make it into a movie”, and persuaded the British writer to sell him the film rights (Aldiss 2001:vii). This was at the beginning of the 1980s and from that moment, Kubrick began the process of adaptation and worked on the story for several years. During the first stage of the process, he invited Aldiss to work with him on the screenplay. In the foreword to the collection, and in an interview published in the *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Aldiss gives interesting details about their collaboration through several years. He makes reference to a letter by Kubrick in which the director expressed his belief that “Supertoys” was “a fine beginning for a longer story” (Aldiss 2001:ix). Nevertheless, Aldiss doubted how his story, which he considered “just a vignette”, could become “a full-length movie” (Tibbetts 2004:251). Kubrick convinced him by saying that “it was easier to enlarge a short story than to shrink a novel into a film” (Aldiss 2001:xi). However, their collaboration reached a dead end.

One of the problems they met was how to visualize the child-robot: “A real boy could be cast as the android, certainly, but Kubrick, ever the perfectionist, suggested that a real android might be built” (Tibbetts 2004:252). Another point of discussion was Kubrick’s particular reading of the story. It seems he wanted to make his intention clear to Aldiss the very first day they began to work together, because he gave him an illustrated copy of the story of Pinocchio:

I could not or would not see the parallels between David, my five-year-old android, and the wooden creature that becomes human. It emerged that Stanley wished David to become human, and wished, also to have the Blue Fairy materialise. (Aldiss 2001:xi)

The writer did not like the idea: “Never consciously rewrite old fairy stories, I’d say” (Aldiss 2001:xi). In Aldiss’s words, Kubrick was “basically mistaken” because, “[o]bsessed with the big blockbuster SF movies of the time”, he seemed determined to take the short story’s “sorrowing domestic scene out into the galaxy”. However, Aldiss claims that

“Supertoys” speaks of a mystery within. David suffers because he does not know he is a machine. Here is the real drama; as Mary Shelley said of her Frankenstein, it speaks “to the mysterious fears of our nature”. (Aldiss 2001:xvii)

The writer proposes what could be a possible film based upon his story, a continuation focused on “metaphysical puzzles”:

The audience should be subjected to a tense and alarming drama of claustrophobia, to be left with the final questions, “Does it matter that David is a machine? Should it matter? And to what extent are we all machines?” (Aldiss 2001:xvii)

He believes that Kubrick was attracted by the simple story behind all those metaphysical questions, the story “of a boy who was never able to please his mother. A story of love rejected” (Aldiss 2001:xviii).

The relationship Kubrick-Aldiss reveals really interesting aspects of the process of adaptation. Kubrick’s vision of “Supertoys” is only one of the possible readings of the story. Although his interpretation probably departs from the author’s intention, what he planned to do was probably closer to McFarlane’s view of the process of adaptation: “Fidelity is obviously very desirable in marriage; but with film adaptations I suspect playing around is more effective” (McFarlane 2000:165).

When Kubrick died in 1999, Steven Spielberg decided to finish the project. In fact, Kubrick had thought of Spielberg as the director of the movie and, during several years, he had shared with him the development of the project. The same year of Kubrick’s death, Aldiss decided to write two new stories to continue David’s adventures: “Supertoys When Winter Comes” and “Supertoys in Other Seasons”. The years of collaboration with Kubrick probably made him consider the possibility of expanding David’s story, and although he did not succeed in making Kubrick share his vision of its development, he nevertheless decided to write the two sequels. Spielberg then took “all three of Aldiss’s ‘supertoy’ stories – including the Kubrickian notions of a ‘Pinocchio’ allegory – as the basis for *A.I.*” (Tibbetts 2004:252).

As the conversations between Kubrick and Aldiss have shown, in the process of adapting a short story into a feature film, the addition of new elements to the original seems to be necessary. My intention is to prove that the added elements and the changes introduced to the original reveal the filters or lenses through which the story has been recreated. The idea of adaptation as recreation has been claimed by authors such as Wiltshire, who presents film adaptations “as recreations”, “as coherent readings of the original books, which by their public, objective existence, can throw unique light on the nature of reading” (Wiltshire 2001:6-7). Focusing on the same idea, Silver (1997:58) suggests that adaptations “should be conceived as versions of the work: texts with the same status as any other text in the ongoing, historical construction of a composite, palimpsestic work”. Interesting approaches to the analysis of adaptation offer the possibility of moving beyond the traditional notion of fidelity to the original text and studying film adaptations as individual works of art which weave together several prior texts and several interpretations of the original. As Stam (2000:76) claims, we should give more attention to “dialogical responses”, that is, “to readings, critiques, interpretations, and rewritings of prior material”.

In this process of recreation, we should take into account not only factors related to the audiovisual codes, which influence the adaptation from a written text to an audiovisual one, but also other types of factors which play a role in the process – temporal, ideological, contextual factors and those related to the film industry (commercial demands, film genre, etc.). For instance, Berghahn (1996:74) points towards the necessity of studying other factors, such as the ideological or artistic stance that the filmmaker has adopted in his reading and reinterpretation of the original text.

Focusing on the film recreation of Aldiss's story, it is important to consider that, although the project was developed by Kubrick through years of work on "Supertoys" and even if the idea of Pinocchio is present in Kubrick's vision, Spielberg brought to the process of adaptation his artistic stance and his particular reading of the story. In fact, his use of the Pinocchio motif is influenced by his revision of fairy tales and by his previous filmography. Spielberg's words in relation to the character of Gigolo Joe – an addition to Aldiss's story – are quite revealing about the recreation process he undertook taking as a basis Kubrick's project:<sup>1</sup>

I was like an archaeologist [...] trying to find out what he [Stanley] intended. What story did he want? My job was to honor his story without forgetting about myself. I wanted also to be able to include my own sensibilities [...] Gigolo Joe was an invention of Stanley but he never really fleshed him out.

These words reveal the existence of different layers of recreation in the process of adapting Aldiss's "Supertoys": from the story to Kubrick's project; from Kubrick's project to Spielberg's movie.

The process of adaptation turns the short story into a full-length movie in which several changes and additions can be traced. At the beginning of the movie, we listen to a voice-over giving us the necessary background information about the future world we are going to enter. Some details of this description are present in Aldiss's story: overpopulation, legal sanctions for pregnancy, etc. The voice-over serves in this way as an introduction to the story. The following scene introduces Professor Hobby talking to a group of colleagues in a meeting about a new project his company is undertaking, the construction of "a Mecha of a qualitatively different order", "a robot who can love".<sup>2</sup> A woman colleague poses an important question which will permeate the whole understanding of the story: "Can a human love them back?" Hobby's answer is quite revealing: "God created Adam to love him". He is playing to be God, to be a creator.

Twenty months later we see Henry and Monica Swinton visiting his son in hospital. He is in a coma. This character is an addition to Aldiss's narrative, although in the second of his "Supertoys" stories, we infer that Monica has lost a son or the baby she was expecting after winning the lottery in the first story of

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1. Interview on the *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* DVD, Special Features, Warner Bros. and DreamWorks LLC, 2001.

2. "Mecha" is the word they use for robots to distinguish them from "Orgas" or humans.

the series (Aldiss 2001:13-14). Henry works in Professor Hobby's company, devoted to manufacturing robots – this can be contrasted with the original story where Henry was not a mere employee but the director of the company. Due to his personal history, he is chosen as the appropriate person to test David, the first child-robot the company has created and who will be capable of loving the person who imprints him. Although at the beginning Monica is not really happy with the child-robot and her behaviour towards him is very similar to the one shown in Aldiss's story, David's love towards "his Mommy" makes her change her mind, and she begins to enjoy his company and to love this special child. She even gives him a toy that belonged to her son: Teddy, the robot teddy bear who will become David's best friend and company, performing a similar role to that in the source story.

A turning point in the movie takes place when Martin, Monica and Henry's biological son, recovers and returns home from hospital. This will produce a big change in David's life with the Swintons. Martin treats him as another supertoy and, jealous of Monica's care for the child-robot, he is even cruel to David, persuading him to do strange things, like cutting a lock of Monica's hair while she is sleeping. Henry, who has always considered David as "creepy", tries to persuade Monica to take him back to the factory. But she has begun to love the child and will not be won over by her husband's idea.

In his cruelty towards David, Martin asks Monica to read for them the story of Pinocchio: "David's going to love it", he says. And the reading of the tale probably brings about the most important change of the movie with respect to the source story. Aldiss's narrative is going to be recreated through the filter of fairy tales, in particular through *The Adventures of Pinocchio* by Carlo Collodi. As previously mentioned, the Pinocchio motif was present in Kubrick's reading of the story from the very beginning. And his wish to have Spielberg as director of the project was probably motivated by this particular vision of the story. Spielberg's filmography offers several examples of movies infused with elements of fairy tales and children's stories, and the recreation of "Supertoys" as a fairy tale could be perfectly linked to his sensibility. The Pinocchio motif is introduced when Martin suggests that his mother should read for them the tale of the wooden child. David listens to his "Mommy" telling the story to her human son. From this moment, he will wish to find the "Blue Fairy" to make him a real human child, the same way she did with the wooden Pinocchio. Surprisingly, a very similar scene can be found in *E.T.*, when the Extra-Terrestrial listens to Elliott's mother telling the story of Peter Pan to her daughter.

This reveals how a revision of fairytale topics is present in Spielberg's films and how this influences his recreation of the story by Aldiss and of Kubrick's project, blending elements of science fiction with children's bedtime stories. The parallelism with Pinocchio, which is much more evident in the film than in the short story, reveals those aspects that the film changes or adds, the filters or lenses through which Spielberg, using Kubrick's ideas and notes as a basis, reads the story.

While David listens to Monica, we can feel his desire to become real. This wish will become the driving force of the movie when, after an accident in a garden party in which David pulls Martin towards the bottom of the swimming pool, Henry at last persuades Monica to take him back to the factory. When she arrives at David's bedroom to tell him they must go for a walk, she finds on his desk several drafts of letters expressing his love for her – a scene which is based upon a similar episode in Aldiss's story (Aldiss 2001:8-9). Incapable of leaving him in the factory where he will be probably destroyed, she instead abandons him in the woods with Teddy – who has become David's Jiminy Cricket. This is the beginning of David's search for the Blue Fairy to make him human. From now on, David's adventures begin. In the wood, he meets hundreds of mutilated Mechas looking for spare parts in a rubbish dump – this scene seems to be based on the third story by Aldiss, in which David is sent to "Throwaway Town" (Aldiss 2001:23-24). There he meets Gigolo Joe, a last generation love-maker Mecha. They are captured and sent to the "Flesh Fair", ironically called "Celebration of Life", where humans enjoy a macabre show in which Mechas are destroyed in dreadful ways. After running away from the Fair, David, Teddy and Gigolo Joe go to Rouge City, the city of sex and entertainment. Once there Joe takes David to Dr. Know, a kind of virtual encyclopedia, to ask him about the Blue Fairy.

Following Dr. Know's directions, they travel to "the lost city in the sea at the end of the world", which happens to be Manhattan, a Mecha restricted area, partly submerged under the waters. There they meet Professor Hobby, and we discover his was the voice behind Dr Know. He is David's creator, like Geppeto in Collodi's tale. And David's wish seems to be doomed to failure as he discovers that he is only one in a chain of hundreds of replicas, hundreds of robots manufactured by Hobby's company – the idea of the replicas seems to have been taken from Aldiss's third story (Aldiss 2001:33-34). The terrible discovery is followed by David's decision to throw himself from the top of the building. Surprisingly, under the water, he finds the Blue Fairy. In fact, what he has found is a representation of Collodi's tale in a submerged Coney Island. After Gigolo Joe is captured by the police, David and Teddy go again under the water in the amphibicopter they used to arrive in Manhattan and find the statue of the Blue Fairy. A big wheel falls over the amphibicopter and they get imprisoned, while we listen to David's prayer to the fairy: "Please, please, make me into a real boy".

Suddenly, the voice-over of the beginning of the movie is heard again. We discover it belongs to one of the robotic beings, advanced products of artificial intelligence, who have survived mankind, now extinct, and who find David after 2000 years of praying for his becoming real. Playing the part of the Blue Fairy, they will fulfil David's wish: he will be able to be with Monica again only for one day and will hear her saying: "I love you David". Finally, the story of love rejected which, as Aldiss said, seemed to have inspired Kubrick when he had the idea of adapting "Supertoys", becomes a story of love rewarded, and David's wish turns real.

To sum up, *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* is the result of a complex process of adaptation where different layers of recreation of the original text can be traced to reveal the filters through which Kubrick and Spielberg read the story.

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