

Semiotic Analysis of the Anthropomorphism of David in Spielberg's 'A.I. Artificial Intelligence'

OPENING SCENE

The film begins with a discussion of a new AI product, in a large boardroom at futuristic technology company – cybertronics. Initially, robots are portrayed as economic entities. This introduces a paradigmatic syntagm, emphasising efficiency and resource utility. This reduction of anthropomorphism aligns with current societal views of AI as practical tools rather than sentient beings. However, the concept of mimicry introduces a thematic shift. Whilst still being discussed under capitalistic greed oriented contexts, robots are described as a 'perfect simulation' with an ability to respond akin to human. This introduces a syntopic relationship within Metz's 'grande syntagmatique,' capturing a singular moment where the line between the authentic and the simulated becomes blurred, and as such the rest of the film follows suit.

The presence of board men in a corporate environment introduces a diatopic syntagm, illustrating the reduction of human essence within the corporate world. The juxtaposition of these reduced human figures prompts reflections on humanity's own diminishing connection to its core values, and alludes to negative human characteristics such as greed and ignorance.

The revelation of a robot capable of love marks a pivotal point in the opening scene. This synchronic/syntopic representation captures a singular moment when David's ability to love is introduced, setting the stage for his unique anthropomorphic journey.

Symbols, like calling David a 'toy,' tap into cultural associations, highlighting inherent anthropomorphic qualities paired with a lack of autonomy. The anthropomorphism of toys only exists as an extension of the person playing with them.

To end this scene, the film cleverly introduces a biblical allusion: 'God created Adam to love him'. This intertextual relation anchors the narrative in cultural and religious contexts, inviting viewers to reflect on the parallels between the divine creation of humans and the artificial creation of beings capable of love, and furthermore in 2001 when this was released – people were more religious. As such, this should have been a particularly hard hitting line, that prompts introspection and foreshadows things going wrong. The scientists here are literally playing God.

INTRODUCTION OF DAVID

As David, who's shadow is presented in an alien-like form, steps forward into the house, his image becomes increasingly human – we begin to see him better and he looks just like a boy. He is draped in all white, the choice of colour serves as a signifier, simultaneously suggesting purity, technical precision and a blank canvas. The deliberate resemblance of his entry to that of Martin, albeit in all-white attire, draws a syntopic parallel, challenging the conventional notions of novelty and the 'other.'

The naming of David, a very common name, adds a layer of familiarity. This juxtaposition of the commonplace and the artificial sparks a semiotic interplay, blurring the boundaries between the expected and the uncanny.

Reflections, a recurring visual motif, become a powerful semiotic device. David's face repeatedly appears in reflections, emphasizing the barrier that him being AI gives him with the human world he is immersed in, he is designed to mimic human experience – but can never

actually have it. This technique aligns with Metz's 'grande syntagmatique,' introducing a hermeneutic code that invites interpretation.

This introduces a power dynamic, as David's experience will be marked by the human experience, which is something he can not access. This is elaborated upon with his requests for permission, and obedience in the mediocre: e.g. request for permission to sleep and David's eerie ability to watch and follow.

Family dinner serves as a poignant symbol of mimicry. David's learning through observation and replication, devoid of genuine understanding, underscores the blurred boundaries between AI and human behavior. Here, we see a visual syntax of white-clad AI and black-clad humans, embedding a symbolic dichotomy, reinforcing the tension between the artificial and the organic. However, after the mimicry of laughter – Monica decides to keep David.

IMPRINTING PROTOCOL

The imprinting instructions are delivered as if he were a toy, furthering this symbol. David, with his shiny and smooth skin, embodies a visual signifier of artificiality.

The activation words become a semiotic code, prompting a notable change in David's demeanor. The subsequent question, "What were those words for, Mommy?" coupled with a warm hug, introduces a tactile dimension. Physical touch becomes a love language, an intimate act of connection that challenges the conventional understanding of AI's emotional capacity.

As language evolves, Monica's warmth and maternal affection anthropomorphize David further. Phrases like "He made my bed" and "He's trying so hard" attribute human qualities of effort and intentionality to the artificial being. Simultaneously, a contrasting dynamic emerges with Henry, who expresses a growing discomfort with David. The juxtaposition of Monica referring to David as a child or a gift, while Henry dismisses him as a mere toy, emphasizes the subjective nature of anthropomorphism. Henry's attribution of creepiness to David reflects a reverse anthropomorphism, as he projects human qualities onto the AI, he becomes more uneasy.

The declaration of love and the intimate act of resting his head on Monica's knee reaffirm physical touch as a powerful love language, blurring the lines between programmed behavior and genuine emotion.

MARTINS RETURN

A subtle shift occurs: David, once a paragon of obedience, begins to exhibit humor and foolishness in a strikingly human manner. This departure from strict compliance introduces a layer of complexity, showcasing the intersection of programmed behavior and emergent, human-like qualities.

The visual composition of the characters stepping back into the room becomes a semiotic tableau. Monica, clad in white, and Martin, in a wheelchair, are presented feet first, mirroring the earlier visual motif used with David. This intentional framing serves as a visual signifier, reinforcing the notion that David, despite being artificial, shares commonalities with the human family members.

The thematic interplay between Martin and David deepens as they dress similarly, a manifestation of David inheriting Martin's clothes. This deliberate choice in wardrobe symbolizes a visual merging of the artificial with the human, blurring the lines between the two.

In a change with Martin, David expresses a complete lack of understanding regarding his own nature and origin. This absence of self-awareness and self-admittance becomes a powerful semiotic element, furthering David's portrayal as a convincingly human-like entity. The film strategically navigates the delicate balance of imbuing David with anthropomorphic qualities while withholding certain aspects that would explicitly categorize him as artificial.

David's susceptibility to provocation reveals a nuanced dimension to his anthropomorphic design. His capacity to experience negative emotions shows he has access to both positive and negative human qualities. This inclusion of flaws challenges the conventional narrative of AI as flawless entities.

DAVIDS DOWNFALL

During the repair session following the incident at dinner in "A.I. Artificial Intelligence," a poignant moment unfolds as Monica holds David's hand as though he were a real boy. Despite David reassuring her that it doesn't hurt, she continues to grasp his hand, transcending any factual aspect of the repair. The nurturing touch goes beyond the mechanical need for repair.

In this evolving dynamic, Martin's jealousy becomes palpable. David, influenced by negative human traits, succumbs to provocation and is manipulated into cutting a lock of Monica's hair. The repercussions unfold as Henry shakes David as a form of punishment. The absence of physical harm doesn't diminish the emotional impact, David understands emotional impact and Henry is attributing specifically human punishments to David, due to his anthropomorphic nature.

Monica and Henry's contrasting anthropomorphic perspectives further highlight the film's exploration of human-AI relationships. Monica defends David's actions, stating, "He's practically human... boys will be boys," using anthropomorphism to excuse his behavior. Conversely, Henry villainizes David, asserting, "Not how he looked holding the knife," even though David was holding scissors. The attribution of human heroism or villainy onto AI emphasizes how anthropomorphism is dependent on individual perceptions of humanity itself.

In broader contexts, such as natural environments, Documentaries like those narrated by David Attenborough, anthropomorphizing animals aligns the audience with certain animals regardless of actions on screen. When penguins (for example) are anthropomorphized, viewers align with the predator, while the anthropomorphism of baby turtles positions the audience on the side of prey. This dynamic demonstrates how anthropomorphism can shape our perspectives, eliciting empathy or detachment based on the particular projected human attributes onto non-human entities.

When frightened, David seeks refuge behind someone he deems safe, in this case, Martin, repeating the words, "Please keep me safe." The choice of the word "safe" raises intriguing questions—whether it is a programmed response to avoid harm or an emerging emotional response.

In David's letters, a fusion of programming and learned behaviours emerges. Mimicking Martin, David expresses hatred for Teddy, possibly absorbing more negative human qualities.

INTRODUCTION OF JOE

In contrast, the introduction of Joe, a sex robot, serves as a stark juxtaposition. Joe's mimicry is confined to the realm of sexual assistance, reflecting his programming and training data. Unlike

David, Joe appears devoid of personal desires, functioning solely as a reflection of learned behaviours.

Subtle reminders of Joe's non-human qualities, such as an operating number, emphasize his robotic identity. His ability to change appearance at will, with slick back hair and shinier skin, accentuates his mechanical attributes, intentionally reducing his anthropomorphism. This deliberate visual contrast with David prompts viewers to reevaluate their expectations and standards for AI characters based on their level of human likeness.

Joe's reaction to a dead body further underscores the film's thematic exploration. Viewers don't impose the same protagonist or antagonist standards on Joe as they do on David. His mechanical nature, coupled with a less anthropomorphic appearance, mitigates expectations. Joe's primary concern about the trouble he might be in when confronted with a dead body is interpreted as a coded response to avoid danger, shedding light on the limitations and pre-programmed behaviors of AI entities.

MOON HOT AIR BALLOON

The humans tasked with capturing the robots embody a striking visual paradox. Dressed in attire more evocative of robotics than the very beings they pursue, their futuristic and steampunk aesthetic sets them apart as antagonists, the purveyors of negative human qualities. Greed emerges as a dominant motivation, fueled by the envy of robots' potential for eternal survival and the aspiration for a "truly human future." This avarice is underscored by a disturbing cruelty—the deliberate failure to deactivate the robots' pain receptors before their execution, a callous act that amplifies their antagonistic role. Similarly to when Henry shook David, humans are putting human punishments onto AI because of their increasingly anthropomorphic qualities.

The ending – david's dream

The exploration of David's evolving humanity in "A.I. Artificial Intelligence" reaches its height in moments of intense emotional engagement. Holding eye contact, he exudes fear, his gaze searching within the eyes of others. This ability, as articulated by the Cybertronics representative, signifies a breakthrough, a departure from the traditional boundaries that separated AI from humans. Intriguingly, no one explicitly taught David how to dream and desire, yet his observational learning from Monica and Henry's longing for their son may have contributed to his acquisition of these complex human traits.

When faced with an existential threat, David's response adds another layer to his anthropomorphic nature. Uttering, "My brain is falling out," he uses distinctly human vocabulary, even in self-reference.

As the narrative unfolds towards its conclusion, David's tears become a poignant symbol of his emotional depth. Tears of both sadness and happiness, highlight the spectrum of emotions he has acquired. The enigmatic futuristic species on Earth, express a desire for David's happiness, a distinctly human sentiment. This moment encapsulates the complex interplay between projecting human desires onto AI and David's new status as the closest semblance of humanity remaining.

In conclusion, the film raises key questions on how increasing anthropomorphism of AI results in AI acting as a reflection of humanity itself, due to the learning process of AI stemming from human immersion and behaviour. Furthermore, this intersects with the treatment of AI by

humans being dependent on how they feel towards humanity and other people. This can be both positive and negative. Which in turn, has a compounding affect on the future development of AI and trajectory that individual machines will have in their development and learning, as seen with David's acquisition of hope and desire.