

# Three Decades of



ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

## The Hand of Kubrick Remains Evident Despite Spielberg's Rewrite

By Joe Fordham

The facts were hard to come by. November, 1993 saw a Warner Bros. press release announcing the official start of development of Stanley Kubrick's A.I., the late film-maker's long-proposed return to science fiction. In December, 1995, another official statement indicated production on A.I. would follow the completion of EYES WIDE SHUT. News of Kubrick's death March 7, 1999, left the Internet abuzz with hearsay and conjecture, but on Wednesday, March 15, 2000, Warner Bros. released a statement to *Variety* and *Hollywood Reporter* announcing that Steven Spielberg would direct and write A.I., with production beginning July 10.

It's now well-known that Kubrick's A.I. is based at least in part on the Brian Aldiss

short story *Super-Toys Last All Summer Long*. With over 30 novels to his name and at least 16 short story collections and 18 non-fiction and editorial credits, prolific novelist and science-fiction author Aldiss made a name for himself with such diverse titles as *Barefoot in the Head* and *Frankenstein Unbound*. Aldiss's exuberant talent came to Kubrick's attention with his 1973 history of science fiction, *Billion Year Spree*, in which the director was nominated as one of the 20th century's greatest authors in the genre, courtesy STRANGELOVE, 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY and CLOCKWORK ORANGE.

Aldiss recounted in the *London Daily Telegraph* that his first meeting with Kubrick was, "a great and jolly lunch... in, perhaps, 1974," during which he endorsed Philip K. Dick's 1964 *Martian Time Slip* as

possible source material for a new science fiction film. Kubrick instead elected to pursue *Super-Toys*, an obscure Aldiss short story first published in 1969.

Running at only 2,000 words, *Super-Toys* was a tender mood piece told from the point of view of a young boy, David Swinton. Puzzled over his mother's irreconcilable sadness, David confides his concerns to his talking robot bear. This intercuts with his cold, efficient father returning home from work at robot manufacturer, Synthank. David decides somehow he is to blame for his parents' unhappiness, and elects to run away with his robot toy. Boy and bear get as far as the back gate when David's father returns. We then learn that the parents have finally been approved to conceive a real, flesh-and-blood child, as their sad little robot, David, looks on through the window.

From the beginning of their association, Aldiss queried Kubrick's choice of *Super-Toys*. Kubrick argued that 2001 had grown from a similarly tiny seed, Arthur C. Clarke's 1951 *The Sentinel*. "You couldn't argue with that," was Aldiss's reply.

Despite these early qualms, Aldiss signed a contract to join forces with Kubrick, although the legal stipulations stated Aldiss would receive his £2m compensation for a screenplay based on *Super-Toys* only if that screenplay remained solely credited to him. The first A.I. scenarios included Kubrick's alleged fascination with the Blue Fairy from *Pinocchio*. "I hated the idea," Aldiss stated bluntly. "I would write scripts in which the Blue Fairy would be nuked. That didn't go down well." The success of Spielberg's E.T. in 1982 also elicited a response from Kubrick that left Aldiss cold. "He was obsessed with E.T.,"



FOREVER NEVERLAND: Spielberg toned down the more hard-core vision Kubrick sought for A.I.'s Rouge City.

said Aldiss. "E.T. is all very well, but I didn't think that it was the kind of film that Stanley Kubrick should have been making."

Aldiss's £2m prize became a distant hope. He was exhausted, feeling that he had generated enough material to fill three novels. The writer eventually inadvertently triggered his own dismissal by taking a two-week vacation during a hiatus in the A.I. writing schedule. Kubrick felt their contract had been breached. It was an inelegant parting, although the two men continued to exchange Christmas cards up until 1997.

The next A.I. scenarist was the late Bob Shaw. A science-fiction novelist born in Northern Ireland in 1931, who died in 1999 at his home in England, Shaw found Kubrick equally demanding. Aldiss recalled receiving plaintive late night calls shortly after relinquishing the A.I. reins to his successor, with Shaw pleading, "He doesn't like anything. I've run out of ideas, what can I do?"

Enter Ian Watson, another English science-fiction author whose speculative fiction explored the nature of language, most notably in *The Embedding*. The writer claimed to introduce another angle to A.I. in the form of a robot gigolo. But in a March, 1999 issue of the *New Yorker*, Watson painted yet another picture of Kubrick as a reclusive and passionate eccentric with a concern for bees and a love of cats. Little else is known, except that they parted on good terms.

Poet and novelist Sara Maitland stands alone as the only non-genre writer associated with A.I. In an article in the *London Independent*, Maitland surmised that she was chosen by Kubrick to supply the A.I. screenplay with a missing human element. "The project had become enormous, unwieldy, unfocused," she observed. "Kubrick needed some through-line of fairy tale, of story beneath plot. He was creating a new myth... I write about the underbelly of human emotions in the framework of myth and fairy story."

It had been Aldiss's contention that Kubrick chose *Super-Toys* to explore the relationship between the discontented mother and her robot child, reflecting the filmmaker's own anxieties. By the time Maitland was brought in, the *Pinocchio* fascination still held, but she could sense another theme emerging. "He wanted to effect a cultural change," Maitland claimed. "If robots are made by us and act like us, why are they not our children?" According to Maitland, *BLADE RUNNER* had fascinated and annoyed Kubrick with its portrayal of sophisticated machines doomed out-of-hand for their technical prowess. "He believed computers will become truly intelligent—including emotionally—and are potentially a more environmentally-adaptable form of human being," Maitland stated. "They are our future. The film was intended to make us love them." Maitland's contributions to

A.I. were set aside when *EYES WIDE SHUT* began to claim Kubrick's imagination—a project which itself had been 20 years in gestation.

Visual effects artists at San Raphael's Industrial Light and Magic were long-rumored to be linked to A.I. after their ground-breaking *JURASSIC PARK* digital creations reportedly caught Kubrick's eye. ILM spokesperson Ellen Pasternack acknowledged that visual effects supervisor Dennis Muren visited Kubrick several times in England to read the A.I. screenplay and discuss tech-

**CYBER-DESEXUALIZED:** Author Ian Watson has taken credit for A.I.'s robot gigolos, although the film presents a less raunchy, more benign vision of the party-bots.

niques. In an interview with *People Magazine* in June, 1999, Muren recounted his first visit to Kubrick's home in St. Albans, England, accompanied by ILM visual effects producer Ned Gorman, the evening of Thanksgiving Day, 1993.

Describing Kubrick as "a jolly, energetic man who chatted breezily about everything from the latest laserdisc release of *DR. STRANGELOVE* to [the visual effects] of *JURASSIC PARK*," Muren stated, "He'd jump up and say, 'Oh, I gotta show you this!' and he'd come back with a photo he had of the big front-projection system that had been built for 2001. Then he started telling us about some gear he had, including a couple of 70mm cameras that he'd bought for *BARRY LYNDON*. He said he didn't know if he was going to shoot A.I. with them or not." Reflecting on the hardware scattered around Kubrick's home, Gorman also recalled, "I got the impression that Stanley immediately obtained whatever new technology was available, but as soon as it was displaced, it literally got heaved in the corner for the next thing."

After a screening of ILM's latest work, Kubrick proceeded to question his guests intensely until the early hours of the morning. Exhausted but elated, Muren and Gorman returned to ILM, and engaged the services of ILM art director TyRuben Ellingson, who began to conceptualize visions of an Aldiss android boy.

"Kubrick had this idea that this kid should look too perfect to be real," said Ellingson, who went on to describe his attempts to attribute subtle synthetic nuances to an otherwise natural-looking boyish countenance.



"The robot boy's head was designed to have strange proportions, the eyes farther apart than those of a human being, giving the boy an alien look." Ellingson's Photoshop renderings provoked discussions of blending CG and animatronics, and of blending a real performer with a digitally manipulated head. Muren remained in touch with Kubrick throughout production of *EYES WIDE SHUT*, up until a few weeks before the director's death.

In true Kubrick style, the director also phoned the head of Mitsubishi to investigate commission of, "an android that looks like a five-year-old boy." It is known that the director commissioned British music video director Chris Cunningham to spend a year and a half building animatronics in Kubrick's home. Cunningham's fascination for robots dated back to his days as an animatronic designer, when—under his given name Chris Halls—he constructed formidable mechanized ironware for numerous productions, including *JUDGE DREDD*. "I was basically designing robots on my own [for Kubrick], and he'd pop in and we'd work together," Cunningham revealed in an article in the British *New Musical Express*. "He was a really lovely bloke. The press totally got the wrong idea." All Cunningham designs rest with the Kubrick estate.

Spielberg has admitted that the world will never see Stanley Kubrick's A.I., but his intentions are clear in this tribute to the master. To quote the last spoken words in 2001, Kubrick's unrealized dream project will remain, like Kubrick himself, an impenetrable enigma, "its origin and purpose still a total mystery."

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