

A.T. THE ARTIFICIAL- TERRESTRIAL

Steven Spielberg could have directed the first Harry Potter movie in 1999, and he actually might have...if Stanley Kubrick hadn't died. Here's the story of an odd friendship and the odd—and some say classic—movie that came out of it.

INITIAL MEETING

After Stanley Kubrick read “Supertoys Last All Summer Long” in the late 1970s, he decided that the short story about a robot boy yearning for his human mother’s love would be the basis of his next movie. He hired Brian Aldiss, the author of the story, to start working on a screenplay and then started developing the project, but it didn’t get very far. The technology required to make a convincing robot boy—as well as several other robots in various states of disrepair—just wasn’t there yet.

Then, in 1982, Kubrick saw Steven Spielberg’s blockbuster *E.T. The Extra-terrestrial*, about a boy who befriends a lost alien. Inspired, Kubrick decided to call his movie *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*. He was taken by Spielberg’s ability to make a high-tech sci-fi film grounded in emotion and realism—so taken that, in 1985, he called Spielberg and asked him to direct the movie. Spielberg was, as he later described it, “in shock.” Flattered that one of his heroes would offer him the job, he was actually intimidated by Kubrick, who was 18 years his senior. Spielberg said no, telling Kubrick, “This is a great story for you.” The *E.T.* director, who has been described as “a regular guy with the brain of a genius,” famously never refers to himself as an artist. “Stanley Kubrick,” he always insisted, “is an artist.”

If it seems odd that these two filmmakers admired each other, it is. “A huge gap separated their styles and sensibilities,” noted *The A.V. Club*. “There’s Kubrick’s philosophical *2001: A Space Odyssey* on one hand and Spielberg’s emotional *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* on the other. Were one forced to choose between them, it would be a choice between a detached analyst of the human condition and a humanist.” Or, as Kubrick’s brother-in-law and executive producer, Jan Harlan, put it, “They are both great writers but they have different handwriting.”

LONG-DISTANCE RELATIONSHIP

One of the main reasons Spielberg got into filmmaking in the first place was because he was so mesmerized by Kubrick’s 1964 political satire, *Dr. Strangelove: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. It wasn’t until 1979, when Spielberg himself was a successful director, having already made *Jaws* and *Close Encounters*, that



The Ethiopian calendar is seven years behind the rest of the world’s, and consists of 12 months of 30 days, plus one made up of five days.

he summoned up the courage to call Kubrick and tell him he was a fan. Spielberg was delighted to learn the feeling was mutual. Although the two directors rarely saw each other in person (Kubrick was quite the recluse, preferring to stay sequestered on his English estate when he wasn't working on closed movie sets), they wrote letters back and forth and spent long hours on the phone talking about all things filmmaking. Well, one of them did. "I'd tell Stanley everything I was doing," Spielberg later told the *L.A. Times*, "and Stanley would never tell me anything he was doing. Stanley was a benevolent inquisitor. He'd absolutely pump you dry of any knowledge you might have that he might find compelling." Including Spielberg's directing techniques: "Gee," Kubrick once asked Spielberg, "how did you get that kid to cry that way? Did you have to threaten to kill his dog?" Like an apprentice wanting his mentor's approval, Spielberg sent Kubrick a cut of every film he made before it was released, hoping for some constructive criticism. He usually just got accolades. And as much as Spielberg was tempted to direct *A.I.*, he didn't think their styles would combine into anything successful.

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STOPS AND STARTS

Kubrick's *A.I.* troubles went beyond Spielberg's refusal to direct: the screenplay wasn't coming together either. Brian Aldiss, who wrote the source material, thought the movie should be dark like *Dr. Strangelove*; Kubrick wanted it to be more like a "futuristic Pinocchio" in which the robot boy wanted to become a real boy. Aldiss wasn't buying it. (Kubrick had similar creative differences with Stephen King while making *The Shining*.) Unable to come to an agreement, Kubrick fired Aldiss in 1989. Then he hired a few other writers who had similar issues, but he did manage to get a 90-page treatment from English sci-fi author Ian Watson. It wasn't complete, but it was enough to start shooting with...if they'd had something to shoot. Unfortunately, the visual effects technology of the early 1990s still wasn't advanced enough to make a convincing robot. That's right—Kubrick wanted the star of *A.I.* to be not an actor but a remote-controlled robotic boy. (A running joke was that it took the notorious perfectionist so long to make his movies that a real boy would age too much during filming.)

More than ten years after coming up with the idea, Kubrick's movie wasn't any closer to getting made. And it was mostly Steven Spielberg's fault.

INTERTWINED ODYSSEYS

Spielberg had a profound impact on Kubrick's career:

- Kubrick didn't know what to do with "Supertoys" until *E.T.* inspired him to call it *A.I.*

Animal that sleeps the least: giraffes. They get only about two hours each day.

- Kubrick was preparing to make a Holocaust film, *Aryan Papers*, but abandoned the project after he saw Spielberg's 1993 film *Schindler's List*. (Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* had come out a year after Oliver Stone's similar take on the Vietnam War, *Platoon*, and Kubrick didn't want to be seen as a Johnny-come-lately yet again.)
- Kubrick started to work on a screenplay for a World War II movie...until he learned Spielberg was doing *Saving Private Ryan*.

But it was Spielberg's CGI-dinosaur extravaganza, *Jurassic Park*, that had the most impact on the *A.I.* project. After seeing it, Kubrick was blown away, and even more convinced that *A.I.* had to be directed by Steven Spielberg. So he invited the younger director to his estate in England, where Kubrick delivered his best pitch yet: "The title card will read great! It'll say, 'A Stanley Kubrick production of a Steven Spielberg film.' Don't you think people will come to see that?" Spielberg's answer was still no, and he later explained, "I thought this was one of the most commercial stories that Stanley had ever developed for him to direct, and I didn't want Stanley to be robbed. Stanley wanted a hit! But he wasn't willing to compromise his art for one." And neither was Spielberg.

ILL EFFECTS

Now on a Pinocchio-like quest himself to make *A.I.* into a real movie, Kubrick hired the visual effects team from *Jurassic Park*, including Oscar winner Dennis Muren, who helped bring the metallic Terminator to life in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. But even Muren couldn't bring Kubrick's robot boy to life. As executive producer Jan Harlan recalled, "We tried to construct a little boy with a movable rubber face to see whether we could make it look appealing. But it was a total failure, it looked awful." So Kubrick decided to go with a young actor, and tested Joseph Mazzello, who played the little brother in *Jurassic Park*. The project was finally starting to come together, but Kubrick *still* didn't want to direct it.

He called Spielberg in 1995 and asked him once more to helm *A.I.*, but Spielberg had (conveniently) already started working on *Saving Private Ryan*. So Kubrick moved on to another film he'd been trying to make since the 1970s called *Eyes Wide Shut* (it took him so long because he couldn't think of an ending). *Eyes Wide Shut*, Kubrick's first film in 12 years, was released in 1999, and with that hurdle finally behind him, Hollywood was buzzing with the prospect of Stanley Kubrick once and for all making *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*.

And then he died.

WHEN STEVEN MET HARRY

Kubrick's sudden death from a heart attack at age 70 sent shock waves throughout show business, and it appeared as if his long-gestating tale about a robot boy would



Worth the wait? Demodex are mites that live on your face. They don't have anuses, and don't evacuate their bowels until they die.

never get made. At the same time, fresh off the success of *Saving Private Ryan*, Spielberg was looking for his next project when Warner Bros. hired him to helm *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. But Spielberg was reluctant from the start (although his own children were thrilled with the idea). He knew it would be a huge film—thanks to the unparalleled popularity of J. K. Rowling's books—regardless of who directed it. "It would be like shooting ducks in a barrel," he said. And Spielberg did spend a few months developing *Potter*, but he actually thought it would work better as an animated film starring Haley Joel Osment as the voice of Harry. Warner Bros. execs disagreed; they wanted a live-action film, which slowed Spielberg's involvement with the project.

Then in late 1999, Christiane Kubrick (Stanley Kubrick's widow) called Spielberg and said that it was her husband's lifelong dream to see *A.I.* become a reality, and the only way that would happen is if Steven Spielberg directed it. Otherwise, the movie would be shelved for good.

Spielberg finally said yes.

WORKING IN THE SHADOWS

Despite all the work Kubrick had put into developing *A.I.* over 20-plus years, when Spielberg finally took over, there wasn't a lot to work with, just some storyboards, a few CGI tests, and an incomplete screenplay. Spielberg hadn't written a screenplay alone since 1978's *Close Encounters*, usually preferring to collaborate on his stories, but this project was different. He had to do it alone. "I was like an archeologist," he recalled, "picking up the pieces of a civilization, putting Stanley's picture back together again." Every moment that he worked on that film, "I felt like I was being coached by a ghost."

After Spielberg finished Ian Watson's screenplay, filming on *A.I.* began in August 2000. Spielberg was so intent on following in the reclusive director's footsteps that he kept a closed set just like Kubrick did. Spielberg rarely worked with storyboards (still images that lay out scenes in advance of shooting), but in this case, he used the storyboards that Kubrick had commissioned from acclaimed sci-fi artist Chris "Fangorn" Baker. (The giant "open-mouth tunnels" on the bridge to Rouge City come straight from Baker's imagination.) One thing that Spielberg didn't do that Kubrick did: work very slowly (or torment his actors...but that's another story).

After filming wrapped a few months later, Spielberg worked on *A.I.*'s postproduction while also working on *Minority Report*, which was admittedly taxing. But he had the biggest names in the visual effects world—Dennis Muren and Stan Winston—on hand to finally bring Kubrick's vision to the big screen.

STEVELY KUBERG

After several months of building excitement—and curiosity—*A.I. Artificial Intelligence* opened on June 29, 2001. The critical reviews were mostly positive, and the box office

was predictably high for a Spielberg summer tent-pole film, bringing in nearly \$30 million on its opening weekend (although *Harry Potter* would pull in three times that amount a few months later).

But from the day of its release, *A.I.* has been a polarizing movie. The film's most loyal fans seem to be Kubrick's friends and family, who all agree the auteur would have loved it. Producer Bonnie Curtis called it a "Stevely Kuberg" film: "Every word, every thing you see has both of them in it." Even Brian Aldiss, who hadn't worked on the project in more than a decade, liked the film, although he did admit, "There are flaws in it." He was especially bothered by the new ending. (Minor spoilers ahead.) The movie is broken up into three parts: family gets a robot boy, robot boy gets lost in a strange city, and ... that's all you need to know. Suffice it to say, the third act took the movie in a much different direction, which a lot of people—especially Kubrick fans—called "saccharine."

ROLE REVERSAL

Here's the ironic twist, as Spielberg is always quick to point out: "It was Stanley who did the sweetest parts of *A.I.*, not me." Those "sweetest parts" mostly come at the beginning and end. And they were mostly Kubrick. It was Spielberg who darkened up the middle section that most people assumed was Kubrick's doing, including keeping a robot gigolo character from the source material (although Spielberg did omit the robot sex scene that Watson had written in). And it was Kubrick, not Spielberg, who added the plot point that the robot, David, wants to find the "Blue Fairy so she will turn me into a real boy" (not what you'd expect from the man who directed *A Clockwork Orange*). Most people assumed it was Spielberg who tapped Robin Williams to play a cartoon version of Einstein called "Dr. Know," but that was also Kubrick's idea.

"[*A.I.*] shows a side of Stanley that people haven't seen before," Spielberg told his biographer, "which was a very deeply emotional and lonely side." So it could be said that *A.I.*'s unevenness is the result of two filmmakers trying to cop each other's styles within the same film.

PARTING GIFTS

Spielberg had another goal with *A.I.*: drop clever references to Kubrick's other films. Our favorite: in the scene where the robot David (played quite convincingly by Haley Joel Osment) is stuffing spinach into his mouth, the father (Sam Robards) says, "Stop, Dave, please stop." That's what the HAL 9000 computer (Douglas Rain) said to Commander Dave Bowman (Keir Dullea) in Kubrick's 1968 masterpiece *2001: A Space Odyssey*...the film that inspired Spielberg to make *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (which has a lot of Pinocchio references).



Technically speaking, birds can't pee, because they don't have urethras.
(They pee and poop at the same time.)