'Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert': Reconsidering ironic kinship in Neill Blomkamp's science fiction film *Chappie*

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ABSTRACT

Neill Blomkamp's 2015 science fiction film *Chappie* engages with the familiar narrative trope of robot sentience. Blomkamp confronts viewers with a naïve and vulnerable childlike robot protagonist that is more human and likeable than any of the stilted and stereotypical real human characters in the film. It is the mechanical creature with which the viewer readily identifies and sympathises. Blomkamp facilitates, not only between his characters, but also with the audience, a kinship of the sort that Donna Haraway in *Staying with trouble* calls affinity groups or assemblages of 'oddkin'. The immediately sympathetic response of the viewing audience to the mechanical robot is a key strategy in the way that Blomkamp applies irony in this film, which Haraway also identifies as central to her idea of the cyborg as an alternative and potentially liberatory myth. In this article, I engage in a close reading of the film, focusing on the broad network of speculative and science fiction narrative traditions within which this film operates. I consider possible reasons why the film was misread and met with criticism when it was first released. I also specifically investigate the strategies and techniques Blomkamp uses in his depiction of the robot character and how his use of its childlikeness and vulnerability and its engagement with violence and sacrifice are central to the film's ironic engagement with the central argument about the dangers of dehumanisation and the need to recuperate humaneness.

Keywords: *Chappie*, Neill Blomkamp, Donna Haraway, irony, kinship.

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Introduction

In his 2015 science fiction film *Chappie*, the writer and director Neill Blomkamp presents his viewer with an iteration of the familiar speculative narrative trope of robot sentience, which he here structures as a deceptively simple Bildungsroman, telling the story of the eponymous robot-child Chappie's genesis, development, and escalating engagement with power, both its own and those of others. Though playing with posthuman themes, the film invites engagement with very human-centred ethical considerations through the ironic mediation of a non-human entity, a robot. Blomkamp does not, however, present the film as a version of the 'machines will destroy us' narrative trope, so familiar in much of science fiction, for it is the humans that are most dangerous and destructive in this narrative. Instead, Blomkamp confronts his viewers with a naïve childlike robot protagonist that is more human and likeable than any of the stilted and stereotypical real human characters in the film. It is the mechanical creature with which the viewer readily identifies and sympathises and that we are immediately and intuitively convinced is 'just like us'. Blomkamp, therefore, facilitates, not only between his characters, but also with the audience, a kinship of the sort that Donna Haraway in *Staying with trouble* (2016:103) calls affinity groups or assemblages of 'oddkin', non-genealogical but 'logical relations' that are not tied by blood.

The immediately sympathetic response of the viewing audience to the mechanical robot is a key strategy in the way that Blomkamp applies irony in this film. He mimics innocence to convey profound existential questions about humanity and ethical living. He does this by creating an experience of cognitive dissonance in his audience when they instinctively feel human compassion for the robot, *a machine*. He thereby essentially short circuits (pun intended) the dominant, normative, and popular polarised cultural programming (human = good; machine = bad) to create an experiential and experimental affective space in which the inherent paradoxes, polarities, and dualities of life can be contemplated, because, ultimately, the dismantling of one binary can imply the dismantling of other binaries. For example, the robot presents a space for the viewer to contemplate the paradoxical and perplexing inescapability of the simultaneous existence of kindness and violence, egotism and altruism in human behaviour.

When presenting alternative future worlds, whether utopian or dystopian, speculative and science fiction often rely on irony as a rhetoric and narrative device. As a narrative strategy, irony usefully induces some form of distancing or detachment of perspective to conceptualise or convey a specific intention or argument. It hinges

on the application of seeming incongruences, wry amusement, and deliberate contrariness in the deployment of a narrative to facilitate conversations about issues that are deeper than what is seemingly presented on the surface. For this reason, it is especially useful in conversations, commentary, or critique about sensitive or complex issues, such as deeply political, existential, or cosmic questions about ethics, morality, and fate. This is indeed at the core of Blomkamp's film, where the larger narrative engages with the potential dangers inherent in the human capacity for, and unmitigated tendency towards, indiscriminate technological creation and with the fact that we may dangerously not understand the associated power or potential consequences. In a 2017 interview, Blomkamp spoke of this ironic dialectic at the core of *Chappie*:

> The main reason for *Chappie* existing in my mind is because it has the most farcical, weird, comic, non-serious pop-culture tone, that is almost mocking or making fun of the fact that it's talking about the deepest things you can talk about. The fact that those two things exist in the same film is what the film is about. Because that's what the experience of life is about. … So it's almost a grand joke, in a sense. That was the main thing. … It was saying, 'Here's the most important thing you can talk about, wrapped up in a farcical giant joke that looks like we're all having a big laugh'. And that was the point. … Existential absurdity (Lambie 2017).

In her seminal essay, *A cyborg manifesto* (1983, 1991), Donna Haraway defines irony as 'contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, [it is] about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true' (Haraway in During, 1993:272). She then posits the cyborg (a hybrid of human and machine, like Chappie) as a useful ironic, non-innocent and blasphemous alternative myth of liberation and kinship. Her metaphorical cyborg is 'wary of holism, but needy for connection', and she saw in it the potential for 'another response through coalition – affinity, not identity' (in During 1993:277). She said that 'the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion', that 'the relations between organism and machine has been a border war', that 'we are all chimeras, theorised and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism', and that 'cyborg unities are monstrous and illegitimate … we could hardly hope for more potent myths for resistance and recoupling' (in During 1993:272-5). In a 2000 interview, she noted that 'cyborgs are also places where the ambiguity between the literal and the figurative is always working. You are never sure whether to take something literally or figuratively. It is always both/and' (Markussen *et al*. 2000:9). Thus, its potentially ironic nature. But she also acknowledged that her ironic intention with the cyborg metaphor has limitations.

She said, 'I learned that irony is a dangerous rhetorical strategy. Moreover, I found out that it is not a very kind rhetoric, because it does things to your audience that are not fair. When you use irony, you assume that your audience is reading out of much of the same sort of experiences as you yourself, and they are not' (Markussen et al 2000:10). This may indeed account for some of the (mis)readings and the generally poor reception of *Chappie* by popular critics when it was released. Reflecting on *Chappie* in a 2017 interview, Blomkamp noted,

> *Chappie* was unbelievably painful for me … the audience didn't get what I was going for. … What a lot of critics seemed to miss was that it was about the nature-versus-nurture thing, about how an innocent creature is the product of its environment. I thought all that was incredibly powerful.
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> There are millions of things that were missed. … For whatever reason, there were many elements that critics in general didn't pick up on … . One of them is that … it's not about AI. *Ex Machina*'s about AI. *Chappie*'s not about artificial intelligence – it's meant to be asking questions about what it means to be sentient. That doesn't mean AI, that means sentient at all. … Missing that it's not about AI is a big deal. And the nature versus nurture discussion, the birth of a family, the birth of a soul, those are the things the film is about (Lambie 2017).

Irony is intimately linked with the practice of social critique and satire, often allegorically, so the setting of such narratives is paradoxically both significant and irrelevant, applying to a specific set of circumstances and being applicable across time. It is, therefore, important to address this aspect of the film briefly. *Chappie* is set in an imagined contemporary dystopian urban landscape, a staple of science and speculative fiction, here specifically inner-city Johannesburg in 2016 (now nearly a decade ago, but then it was the year after the film's release). Blomkamp's insight into the South African social and political context (he grew up in South Africa and later moved to Canada) gives *Chappie*, like his earlier Academy Award-nominated film *District 9* (2009), a sense of ironic hyper-realism as a backdrop to the narrative. He also directed the big-budget *Elysium* (2013), about humans' colonisation of (outer) space, released only two years before *Chappie*. However, *Chappie* is not in the first place a South African film, or even necessarily a film about South Africa. Its narrative and thematic preoccupation is not in the first place, or arguably even at all, nationally or culturally specific, despite the flavour added by local vernacular, the casting of the local pop group Die Antwoord (alongside big-name Hollywood stars like Sigourney Weaver and Hugh Jackman), and the use of recognisable Johannesburg landmarks. *Chappie* could contextually have been set in any large global city without any major changes to the narrative

or the film's philosophical argument. The narrative is intended to be universal and general, rather than unique and specific, which also accounts for its more global popular appeal, while going mostly unnoticed in South Africa. *Chappie*, therefore, does not engage with South African historical or contemporary politics in the same way that, for example, *District 9* does.

Though there is undeniably potential for a reading of the film as a socio-political parody or satire of South Africa specifically, the limited space available and the specific focus of this article do not allow for discussing that here. While *District 9* is a dramatic and overtly political Kafkaesque allegory told through the genre of science fiction, *Chappie*'s narrative context and genre designation as an action-comedy robot movie, one among a vast multitude of popular mainstream AI films, could then also account for its relatively negative reception (it was 'blasted by critics and received tepid reactions' (Bui 2017)) and for the lack of critical engagement with the film when it was released. Though there are some deceptively predictable and easy comedic laughs in *Chappie* (the film is as likely to be classified in film libraries as a 'comedy' as it is to be labelled as 'sci-fi' or 'action', but unlikely as 'drama'), the humour in the film functions at a much deeper and more ironic level. An understanding of this seems to be absent from popular discussions of the film, which mostly consider the film as merely another sci-fi robot film in a much over-saturated visual entertainment genre. A closer reading and reconsideration of the film is therefore necessary.

I will now proceed with a brief contextualising synopsis of the film. I will then briefly situate *Chappie* within a specific type of science/speculative fiction narrative and film tradition, referring specifically to some of the most significant interlocutors and subtexts to Blomkamp's film, for example, Mary Shelley's seminal novel *Frankenstein* (1818), two of Steven Spielberg's films in which some of the same film techniques and semantics are applied—*ET, The Extra-terrestrial* (1982; re-released for IMAX again in 2022 to celebrate its 40th anniversary) and *AI: Artificial Intelligence* (2001)—and the seminal ideas about robotics and AI of novelist Isaac Asimov and scientist Alan Turing. The central aspect of Blomkamp's approach to the narrative is the childlikeness, innocence and vulnerability of the robot main character. In the article, I consider how this strategy elicits empathy and kinship in the viewer through a close reading of the film text, with specific discussion of two key aspects of the narrative, namely violence and sacrifice, and how the film's ironic engagement with these themes drive Blomkamp's central argument about the dangers of dehumanisation and the need to recuperate humaneness.

Contextualising synopsis of the film

The narrative revolves around police Scout robot number 22, which becomes damaged beyond repair and is designated to be destroyed. Robotics engineer Deon Wilson (played by Dev Patel), who created the Scouts for the global weapons company Tetravaal, dreams of writing a sentience programme to make robots 'fully human'. He reductively and naively thinks this means being able to independently create and appreciate art, losing sight of the obliqueness of what 'human' truly means. The head of Tetravaal (played by Sigourney Weaver), however, denies Deon access to the broken body of Scout 22 to experiment on, so he steals it to secretly use as a prototype for his sentience programme. However, as he flees Tetravaal's premises in a corporate utility van with the stolen broken robot in the back, he is hijacked by a trio of bumbling but dangerously violent gangsters (Ninja (Watkin Jones) and Yolandi (Anri du Toit) (of the South African pop group duo Die Antwoord, using their stage names in the film too) and America (played by Jose Pablo Cantillo)). They want a Scout robot for their own nefarious purposes—to commit a multimillion-rand cash-in-transit heist. Under duress and fearing for his life, but also spurred on by his own hubris and curiosity, Deon reassembles the broken robot at gunpoint in front of the gangsters at their hide-out, uploads the sentience programme and watches with them as the robot comes to life.

Much of the rest of the film comically and poignantly depicts the moral dilemma of the sentient robot-child, who receives different and contradictory instructions from its two sets of clumsy influencers: Deon (its 'maker') on the one hand, who tries to instil goodness, ethics, and morality (such as non-violence and kindness); and the gangsters, on the other hand, who try to teach it to be criminal, but also provides it with a surrogate family (Yolandi becomes 'Mommy' and Ninja 'Daddy'). However, Chappie's sentience also means that the increasingly wilful robot can contradict and disobey its creator and family (thus nature and nurture) because it can increasingly feel, reason, and make decisions autonomously.

At one point during its 'gangster training' with Ninja, Chappie realises that it will soon 'die'—its battery life will run out because its battery and chassis were fused when, during police action, it took an RPG grenade to the chest. This is why Tetravaal condemned the robot to be demolished. Ironically, Deon's sentience programme did not save Chappie's life; it merely produced in the robot an acute awareness of what mortality actually means. Ninja promises Chappie that if it helps them to commit the heist, there will be enough money for Chappie to buy another battery and extend its life. This is a lie, which Chappie only discovers after

participating in the heist, leaving it feeling twice betrayed—by its maker, Deon, and by its father, Ninja.

The climax of the film is reached when Chappie and Deon are forced into a violent showdown with Deon's Tetravaal colleague and nemesis, Vincent (played by Hugh Jackman), also a robotics engineer —and ex-special forces soldier—who created another combat robot, the Moose, as a prototype for the South African Defence Force. After the heist – in which Chappie, still identifiably a police robot, is captured on video participating in criminal activity—Tetravaal calls in Vincent and the Moose to stop Chappie. The Moose (controlled remotely by a maniacal Vincent in full psychotic mode) kills Yolandi, Chappie's 'Mommy', in the battle that ensues, and this is the straw that breaks Chappie's moral backbone and resolve against violent action. It first destroys the lumbering Moose (by dexterously planting a limpet mine onto the machine's bulk) and then goes looking for Vincent, whom it attacks viciously and whose body it then leaves broken and discarded.

A grief-stricken and now dying Chappie (its battery is exhausted) is left with a dead Yolandi and a dying Deon, who was also fatally wounded in the Moose's attack on Chappie. However, Chappie realises that it can revive all of them by transferring each of their consciousness into a new indestructible robot body obtained from the Tetravaal assembly line where it was created. Chappie does this first for Deon, thereby ironically becoming the maker of its maker, the (re)creator of the one who created it. It then transfers its own consciousness into another robot body. In a new equalised kinship, the two new robots (Deon and Chappie) recognise each other and run away from their persecutors, disappearing among the township shacks of Soweto. This is followed by a scene depicting the burial of Yolandi's human body, after which Chappie hacks and overrides the Tetravaal production line to remotely create a new robot body for Yolandi. The film's last scene is of the Yolandi robot's face, specifically when its eyes blink open as Chappie transfers Yolandi's human consciousness into the new robot body, and it comes alive. The robot chillingly looks the viewer straight in the eye as both a warning about, and a promise of, a possible life eternal, as the film ends and the credits begin to roll.

Chappie's interlocutors

Chappie shows how the robot protagonist's creator, Deon, spurred on by the thrill and adrenaline rush of his dream to create a sentient robot, but not thinking about the ethics or consequences of this act, brings to life something with the potential for devastation and destruction; but, maybe more disturbingly, also with the potential

for the more positive aspects of sentient life, such as care, compassion and empathy. Ironically, Deon, a robotics engineer, has a motivational note tacked up above his office desk at Tetravaal. The image is the ubiquitous 'cute cat picture' and reads, 'craft life, don't let life craft you'. It pictures a cat wearing reflective sunglasses, thus giving us a clue as to Deon's masked and hidden hubris and his dubious relationship with, and blindness to, the ethics of his own creativity.

This is what contemporary historian Yuval Noah Harari (2018), author of the popular science-critiques *Sapiens* (2015) and *Homo deus* (2016), warns about when he speaks of the 'gap between manipulation and understanding'. He says, 'I think the worst danger on this front is that we are about to gain the ability to manipulate the human body and the human brain and the human mind long before we understand the full complexity, especially of the human mind' (2018). Even Tesla tech-master Elon Musk has said, 'I think we should be very careful about artificial intelligence. If I had to guess at what our biggest existential threat is, it's probably that. … With artificial intelligence we are summoning the demon' (Gibbs 2014). The late physicist genius Stephen Hawking notably also warned that 'the development of full artificial intelligence could spell the end of the human race. Once humans develop artificial intelligence it would take off on its own and redesign itself at an ever-increasing rate' (Cellan-Jones 2014). Blomkamp's *Chappie* provides viewers with a narrative iteration of this theme, which is both exceedingly contemporary today and resonant with a long history of narratives about human anxiety about our relationship with technology. It is also necessarily a cautionary tale about the relationship between humanity and divinity and the ever-present dangers of hubris and of the 'divine promise of immortality' (Kwiatkowski 2016:219). Blomkamp has been quoted as saying about the film, 'I'm pushing back against [pre-existing traditions of the science fiction genre] because I think that evolution always finds answers in the weirdest places. If we want to play God, things aren't going to be as easy as we think they will be' (Thurm 2015).

As neuroscientist and philosopher Sam Harris astutely notes,

> [T]he moment we admit that information processing is the source of intelligence, that some appropriate computational system is what the basis of intelligence is, and we admit that we will improve these systems continuously, and we admit that the horizon of cognition very likely far exceeds what we currently know, then we have to admit that we are in the process of building some sort of god. Now would be a good time to make sure it's a god we can live with. (www.ted.com 2016)

This is, in essence, the central concern and question of Blomkamp's film: are we creating, through our indiscriminate technological developments, future gods with which we will be able to live, and which will let us survive? It is then ironic that in the film, Vincent Moore (with wordplay on his creation, the 'Moose', in his surname) says that he has 'a fundamental spiritual issue with artificial intelligence'. In a television news report on the robot defence work of Tetravaal, Vincent says, 'I have a robot [the Moose] that is indestructible, it is operated by a thinking, adaptable, humane, moral human being', arrogantly implying himself. This is juxtaposed with the independent and autonomous sentient robot (Chappie) that Deon creates, with 'true intelligence – a machine that c[an] think and feel, a machine that is truly alive', as Deon says when interviewed for the same television programme. When he sees the fully sentient Chappie for the first time, Vincent, the most morally vacuous—and sadistic—character in the film, calls Chappie 'a godless freak'. In the final battle between Vincent and Deon's creatures ('The Moose versus Chappie'), Vincent's grandiose declarations about his 'humanity' and 'morality' are revealed as a superficial veneer covering blood-lust and cruelty, while Chappie's humanity is revealed as it sacrifices itself to save others. The irony lies in the fact that its sentience makes it able to autonomously consider, weigh its options, and then decide to transgress its own moral code to save others.

Harris also speaks of 'a failure of intuition that many of us suffer from', which is inherent in our engagement with AI and science fiction. He says, 'it's really a failure to detect a certain kind of danger … . Death by science fiction … is fun, and one of the things that worries me most about the development of AI at this point is that we seem unable to marshal an appropriate emotional response to the dangers that lie ahead' (www.ted.com 2016). In *Chappie*, Blomkamp provides an eloquent depiction of what Harris here calls science's—and by extension science fiction's—frequent 'failure of intuition', and he problematises and speculates about 'an appropriate emotional response', specifically by means of the viewer's response of empathy for and kinship with the initially innocent and childlike creature, Chappie, who then evolves to become the/a creator.

As with nearly all creature/monster films, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is necessarily, whether subtly or overtly, a ubiquitous master narrative subtext to *Chappie*. *Frankenstein*, published over two hundred years ago in 1818, is often considered the seminal, prototypical first science fiction narrative and is, in essence, a meditation on the ethics of humanity's relationship with its own technological creative power. Indeed, Shelley's creature says to its creator, Doctor Frankenstein: 'Beware, for I am fearless and therefore powerful. … Man, you shall repent of the injuries you

inflict' (1987:179 [1818]). Significantly, *Frankenstein*'s full title is *Frankenstein, the modern Prometheus*, alluding to the fact that Shelley herself also borrowed from an even earlier narrative tradition about the engagement of humans with technology, namely the Greek myth of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods as a gift for humanity and was punished for it by Zeus. Zeus punishes Prometheus by having him regenerate continuously—his liver is pecked out daily by an eagle just to be restored, and the cycle repeats infinitely. Then Zeus instructs Hephaestus to create Pandora, the first woman, as a 'gift' to hu*man*ity to counteract Prometheus' gift of fire. She receives the famous jar (not a box) containing all manner of evil. When she opens the jar, the evils are released into the world, and after hastily closing the jar up again, hope is trapped at the bottom. Questions that have intrigued philosophers and mythologists through the ages include, 'Why was hope in the jar of evil in the first place?' and 'Why was it withheld from the world?' There are clear resonances between Yolandi and Pandora—as dubious 'first woman' prototype characters, Deon and Prometheus, and between Chappie as both creator-god and the 'gifts of the gods', read here as technology. One can also not help but remember another Greek myth about the bestowing of sentience: the myth of Pygmalion, a sculptor who attempted to create a perfect female creature in stone, with which he inevitably falls in love. He prays for her to come alive; his wish is granted by the goddess Aphrodite, and Galatea is born from the stone. George Bernard Shaw's rewriting of this myth (*Pygmalion*, 1912), the later adaptation of his play as the 1956 musical *Pygmalion*, and the subsequent 1964 film *My Fair Lady* (also loosely revised as *Pretty Woman* in 1990) kept these ancient questions about human (male) creative energy and desire alive in the popular mind.

Another obvious subtext to Blomkamp's film is another seminal science fiction author, Isaac Asimov, specifically his three famous anthropocentric laws of robotics. Chappie continually engages with these as part of its dynamic moral development and eventual descent into violence and control over humans. Asimov's laws (from *I, Robot*, 1950) decree that a robot may not injure or cause harm to a human being, must obey all legal human orders, and must protect itself, provided that these orders and protections do not contradict the other laws (Asimov 1950). Ninja and America's manipulation of Chappie, when it refuses to shoot people because it will hurt them, is especially villainous because they trick it into transgressing one of its core values. They tell it that it can use knives instead of guns, because knives do not hurt people—they just make them go 'sleepy weepy'. The tragic irony of Chappie's horror and disillusionment during the heist they commit at the end of this film is particularly moving, as it then sees how its good intentions (to help its 'family' and ensure its own survival, while not hurting anyone) turn out bad, when it witnesses and recognises the fear and pain of the person it cuts with its knives.

Robots, as an extension of Frankenstein's creature, have become a cinematic staple in the science fiction/speculative genre, and there is a vast library of examples of memorable robot/cyborg/android film characters that range across the spectrum from malevolent, through benign, to beneficent. These range from Fritz Lang's seminal 1927-film *Metropolis*, through the B-grade cult classic sh(l)ock theatre and creature features of the 1950s onwards, to game-changing movies like *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *The Stepford Wives* (1975, remade in 2004), the *Star Wars* franchise (original film released in 1977), *Blade Runner* (1982, 2017), *War Games* (1983), *The Terminator* franchise (original film released in 1984), *Short Circuit* (1986), *Robocop* (1987), *The Matrix* films (1999, 2003, 2003, 2021), *Bicentennial Man* (1999, based on an Isaac Asimov novella), *AI: Artificial Intelligence* (2001), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (remade in 2008, based on a 1951 creature feature film), and the animated children's film *WALL-E* (2008). More recently, and closely coinciding with *Chappie*, there has also been *Her* (2013), *Transcendence* (2014), *Ex Machina* (2015), to which Blomkamp referred in the interview quoted above, and Blomkamp's own *Elysium* (2013).

Within this extensive science fiction robot genre, *Chappie* follows a very particular tradition, namely that of *endearing* film robots, like Johnny 5 in *Short Circuit* (1986) and Pixar's *WALL-E* (2008). One popular critic indeed called *Chappie* 'the most endearing of the anti-authoritarian science fiction films that have become the speciality of South African writer-director Neill Blomkamp' (Wilson 2015:np). However, *Chappie* is also unique in feature film techno-history in presenting the first film where the robot main character in a non-animated feature film, carrying the narrative and dramatic action of the film, was entirely computer generated (CGI). The character of *Chappie* was played in voice-over by actor Sharlto Copley, who also played the role for motion-capture purposes on set with the other actors. Much of the character's attraction relies on the robot's physical fluidity and human likeness, achieved through CGI and Copley's childlike voice and diction.

This stands in clear contrast to either the monotone or hysterical voices and mechanistic or hyper-stereotypical behaviour of the other characters in the film: Chappie's creator ('maker') Deon, Deon's nemesis, Vincent, and, especially, the bumbling trio of gangsters; also the maniacally evil drug lord Hippo (played by Branden Auret). Likewise, the clumsy and lumbering Moose, depicted as a nonverbal mechanical cross between an amphibian and a dinosaur, is juxtaposed against Chappie's dexterity and verbal eloquence. This discrepancy between Chappie and the other characters reminds one of Donna Haraway's comment in *The cyborg manifesto* that increasingly 'our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert' (in During, 1993:274). Popular critics of the film specifically noted

and commented on this aspect of the film, saying that it 'plays up the flatness of its flesh-and-blood characters to focus on the soul of its robot hero' (Kilkenny 2015), 'the humans feel artificial compared to this most human of robots' (Archer 2015), 'Chappie is a fully realised character in a world of underwritten ones' (Peterson 2015) and 'every time [Chappie] hurt, I hurt. His innocence bordered on infectious … he becomes the only character any of us give a damn about' (Peterson 2015).

Vulnerability and childlikeness as vehicles for creating audience identification and empathy

This ironic discrepancy between the characterisation of the human actors in the film and the robot main character is an intentional narrative technique, strategically employed by Blomkamp to facilitate and enhance the viewer's identification with and empathy for the childlike robot and its, paradoxically, recognisably human suffering. The ludicrous absurdity of many of the situations in the film is obviously clear (this is a *machine*!), but at the same time, the robot's behaviour is recognised as typically *human* behaviour. Despite the illogicality of it, the machine is presented to and fully accepted by the audience as vulnerable and open to injury.

There are several reasons why this works well visually and narratively on screen, where showing rather than telling is a key narrative feature. Firstly, the robot is presented as physically vulnerable—for example, its arm is violently severed in one scene, and in another, it is set alight with a Molotov cocktail. However, secondly, it is also emotionally vulnerable—its feelings get hurt, and it feels fear and rage, but it also shows love, care, and kindness. For example, in the scene where, after being abandoned by Ninja and America and then attacked by vagrants, who still recognise and react to it as a police robot, Chappie dejectedly sits alone on a hill overlooking Johannesburg and is approached by a stray dog. The robot reaches across and gently pats the dog, leaving the viewer with, on one level, the visual sympathy cue to feel for the robot what is reserved for helpless and lost animals and, on another level, feeling some existential shame at the way humanity failed this creature, who is ironically extending typically human signs of care to an animal often designated as 'man's best friend'. The allusion between animal abuse and the abuse of the robot, and of the essentially human capacity of cruelty and betrayal, is obvious and implies messages about interspecies responsibility and accountability that transpose the human-animal binary to all of non-humanity and the machines which we create, use for our own purposes, and then discard. However, even more importantly, it speaks of how humans treat other humans, of the dehumanisation

that is a familiar trait of human behaviour and of the alternative of humaneness, here, ironically displayed by the sentient robot. Chappie's openness to, and trust of, this animal, and *vice versa*, despite the way both have been violated and betrayed by humans, is a decidedly human and sentient dynamic, which is successfully communicated because it resonates with Chappie's inherent childlike innocence and naivety.

Thirdly, Chappie is also psychologically vulnerable and can easily be manipulated, which is the central plot device that drives the narrative and much of the film's drama and humour. Chappie gets anxious about its physical safety, but, more importantly, the robot experiences existential anxiety, for example, as it tries to keep to its maker's commandments about not causing harm and when confronted with the inevitability of its own demise. Its vulnerability, however irrational it may be, makes the machine character seem decidedly human and therefore very relatable, because it shares with the audience the experience of life's inescapable precariousness. The emotional connection and empathy that the viewer feels for the confused, bullied and abused robot overwhelms reason, because the narrative mimics overly familiar situations of human cruelty and vulnerability. For example, when Chappie is caught by Vincent, who cuts Chappie's arm off with an angle grinder, Chappie screams in fear and panic ('please, Chappie has fears…'). Vincent here is the stock schoolyard bully character, picking on a vulnerable child. As he removes Chappie's programming chip, Vincent says to Chappie, 'see, your simple AI programme makes you think that you're real, but you know what's in here [tapping his own head]? Just a bunch of wires; you're not the full quid, are you?'. To which Chappie defiantly but impotently says, 'Chappie is real'. Dramatic irony like this is ubiquitous throughout the film, as the viewer is continually aware of the deeper meaning of certain actions or events.

Steven Spielberg notably managed to achieve the same cinematic feat in *ET, The Extra-terrestrial* (1982), namely making a human audience care deeply for something that is utterly non-human, when he led his audience into a deep empathetic relationship with an ugly little space alien stranded on earth. In *ET*, the audience gains empathetic access to the alien through the character of Elliott, the lonely young boy who discovers and saves the alien. Blomkamp uses a similar strategy by making Chappie accessible to his audience through the character of Deon, the young and naïve robotics engineer. However, most significantly, Chappie is made accessible to the audience because it is presented as childlike, arguably even more so than ET, who was physically both childlike and geriatric, therefore doubly vulnerable, but still distinctly alien-looking and remained mostly pre/non-verbal throughout the film, except for the climactic 'ET phone home' and 'I'll be right here' lines. In contradiction to this, Chappie is highly verbal and even quite eloquent.

Unlike Spielberg's alien, Blomkamp also presents his robot as not merely childlike, but indeed *as a child* ('a virtual new-born' (Marcus 2015)), learning language, behaviour, and morality through sequential developmental stages, like a human child. Spielberg's alien always clearly had higher comprehension and intellect, but just needed to learn the medium of human language to communicate, adapting quickly to an alien-to-it human planet. On the other hand, Chappie is born anew into, through, and to humanity as Deon gives it sentience; it does not arrive fully sentient, aware, and autonomous amid humanity like ET. Initially pre-verbal and uncomprehending, the robot immediately adapts to its environment and learns via mimicry, like a child, but much faster. This is an homage by Blomkamp to the work of visionary war-time Bletchley Park code breaker Alan Turing, often considered the 'father' of AI. This centred around what came to be known as the Turing Test (that a machine can be thought of as intelligent if its output cannot readily be distinguished from human intelligence) and the idea that it is best to fashion AI on the model of a child's brain, and to then teach it and allow it to develop and learn like a child, rather than to fashion it based on the example of an adult human brain (Kwiatkowski 2016:223). Spielberg again did something similar in his film *AI: Artificial Intelligence* (2001), in which the robot is a little boy. But in *AI*, a human boy (Haley Joel Osment) plays the role and is not visually represented as a machine, like Blomkamp does in *Chappie*. It is arguably significantly more difficult to elicit empathy in a cinematic audience for a robot, so visually a chunk of metal, than for a decidedly adorable, though eerie, little human boy, which Osment is.

The link between robots and children seems to be a particular interest of storytellers. Ian McEwan and Kazuo Ishiguro notably also deal with similar robot-child concepts in their most recent novels, *Machines like me* (McEwan, 2019) and *Klara and the sun* (Ishiguro, 2021). Turing is even a character in McEwan's novel and advocates for the rights of the 'synthetic humans' of the novel, who are created as human companions, as are the Afs (Artificial Friends) in Ishiguro's novel. As the initially *tabula rasa* robots learn, adapt, and mimic humans, they also become uncomfortably and dangerously human-like, to the point where, in McEwan's novel, they experience jealousy and depression, become deceptive and violent, and even commit suicide. McEwan poignantly writes that 'it might give the writers of the affect code [akin to Deon's sentience programme in *Chappie*] some consolation to learn that they [some of the suicidal robots] died in each other's arms. I could tell you similar stories of machine sadness' (2019:181).

As Marcus (2015) points out, Blomkamp's film, in effect, deals with the topic of 'the educator's question about how human beings can raise moral robots … [because] Chappie doesn't just learn a set of facts; Chappie learns a set of values'.

This, of course, is similar also to Doctor Frankenstein, who *teaches* his creature. With *Chappie*, Blomkamp, therefore, presents the popular imagination with another example of the concept of 'childhood *ex machina*' (Kupferman & Gibbons 2019:1) or 'franken-education' (Gibbons 2019:19), as do McEwan and Ishiguru. Charlie, the human protagonist in McEwan's novel, speaks of how the human owners of the novel's robots (significantly called Adams and Eves) had only 'an illusion of control, the kind of illusion parents have in relation to their children's personalities' (2019:8). In *Chappie*, Deon has a similar revelatory experience. Close to the end of the film, when confronted by Chappie about its mortality and dying battery, Deon says to Chappie, 'You became so much more than I could ever have imagined. How was I supposed to know that you'd become … *you*'.

Visually, Blomkamp makes the robot accessible to the audience through several means. First, like ET, Chappie is presented as naïve and innocent, making endearing mistakes and missing social cues in a way that children would do, thereby increasing the character's pathos in scenes of situational irony. ET, for example, gets drunk when it drinks beer, falls over, burps and runs into furniture. Likewise, Chappie's naivety and incomprehension when it mimics the gangsters when they 'talk ghetto' is humorous, as is the dramatic irony of the misunderstandings when they trick it into stealing cars by telling it the drivers are bad people who need to be punished. Secondly, though very clearly a machine, *Chappie* is modelled on recognisable human anatomy, far more than was the case with ET. Chappie is bipedal with a clearly discernible human-like head, chest, arms, legs, hands, and feet, though made entirely of metal and wires. It even has component parts that look and function like eyes and ears, by which emotion is communicated, as in animals like dogs, cats and horses. The comedic contrast between Chappie's metallic bulk and its childlikeness further hugely encourages endearment in the audience.

Thirdly, the fact that Chappie is named (by Yolandi) and therefore has personality and a specific personal identity is another hook that enlivens the robot and creates an instant rapport with the viewer, particularly through the rhyming, non-threatening diminutive form of its name, which is derived from the colloquial expression 'happy chappy', but also resonates with especially South African audiences who are familiar with the sweet manufacturer Cadbury's Chappie's bubblegum, a staple of every child's childhood experience. This contrasts with the fact that, as a police robot, Chappie was designed to be an anonymous (it originally was just Scout Number 22) and unambiguous vehicle for enforcing violence, thus a killing machine. Therefore, the familiar narrative tropes of the gentle giant and the misunderstood/redeemed bad guy meet in the subtext of Blomkamp's presentation of Chappie. The fourth is Chappie's own idiosyncratic diction and ways of expressing itself,

much like a child learning and mimicking, for example, how Chappie refers to itself in the third person. This is presented and played up humorously in the local vernacular of 'zef' counter-cultural street slang that Chappie learns from the gangsters, playing again on the nature-nurture debate, which was central to Blomkamp's vision for the film.

Finally, Chappie is also presented as being capable of humour, an essentially relatable human trait. Humour is not merely enacted on the robot (like when its gang family dresses it up in 'bling' gang couture and teaches it gangster swagger and 'ghetto talk'), but Chappie is presented as innately agentically capable of generating and understanding humour, which gives it both a sense of dignity and pathos and makes it very relatable to the viewing audience. Surprisingly, the audience laughs *with* Chappie and not merely at *it*. The humour, dignity, and pathos of the character link to the narrative theme of the film, namely the robot becoming sentient (aware, responsive and autonomous), which Deon quickly learns is more than merely the capacity to create and judge art, as he originally thought when he conceived of a sentience programme for robots. This is deeply ironic, as Deon becomes an incarnation of the trope of the teacher who becomes the learner (like Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady* and also Doctor Frankenstein), of intellectual hubris turned to humility and of the idea of the self-appointed saviour most in need of salvation.

The irony of violence and sacrifice

The film's final message is one of redemptive potential and cautious hope, while not losing sight of signals of danger. That this redemption of humanity and humaneness is embodied as a robot is deeply ironic. The film's tagline is indeed 'humanity's last hope isn't human'. Following the work of Anton Karl Koslovic (2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2016), one can identify in the character of Chappie a filmic representation of the familiar symbolic Christ figure: through the ultimately human(e) self-sacrifice of the robot, the audience is allowed to momentarily and cathartically grasp their own transcendent humanity and greater relational potential—*agape*, charity, and compassion. So, in *Chappie*, Blomkamp is essentially doing what Harris alludes to, namely creating an image of, and narrative about, a techno-god that we can possibly live with (as in 'tolerate', 'collaborate with', and 'survive'), thus ironically necessarily one that reminds us of ourselves and our own highest altruistic capacity. However, this is, like Victor Frankenstein's, a deeply contentious and hubristic act, for there is a shadow side which cannot be foreseen or controlled, as the blinking open of the Yolandi robot's eyes at the end of the film may signal.

The film's ending, with a reconstituted robot family (Deon, Chappie and Yolandi), not only plays on the blasphemous (in Haraway's sense of the word) idea of a divine or oedipal family unit (creator/maker/father, transgressing/transcendent son and object-of-desire-mother), but also leaves the discerning viewer asking some perplexing questions. The first of these questions concerns the morality and ethics of indiscriminate creative acts and the motives that drive them. Yolandi is, after all, an extremely violent criminal and murderer, and her re-enlivened/salvaged consciousness would include these tendencies along with her nurturing and caring ones. Following the Pandora argument, this then leads one to ask, what would saving her consciousness put back into the world? One must also ask, reading Chappie here as a Prometheus prototype: is Chappie's action at the end of the film an act of self-sacrificial altruism—ensuring life ever after for Yolandi—or self-centred egoism and narcissism? The latter would imply that Chappie's motive is to create a companion-being that will mitigate against its own loneliness and, through 'seeing' or mirroring itself to itself, will constitute it as a subject; thus, it essentially engages in an act of *self-creation*. This resonates with the existential space in which we find Deon at the start of the film as he works to perfect his robot sentience programme, consuming energy drinks as he obsessively toils through the night, surrounded by only robot prototypes and computer workbenches in his nondescript suburban home.

Chappie's act of violent vengeance against Vincent at the end of the film constitutes its eventual embrace of its own paradoxically fallible and complex humanity, which is triggered by the violence committed against its 'family' and its desire to protect them. This is also a morally cathartic moment for the viewing audience, who sides with the robot (Chappie) over the human being (Vincent). As he violently attacks Vincent (punching, kicking, breaking his arm), Chappie tells Vincent, '…you killed Mommy. You hurt my peoples, why? … No, you don't use guns … I'm gonna crush you, bad man I... No shooting … No hurtings, no violence. I'm gonna teach you a lesson. You are a very bad man. … [Chappie throws Vincent against the ceiling of the Tetravaal offices.] … Now, I forgive you, bad man'. The latter is said to Vincent's unconscious, broken and bleeding body. Complex moral questions are posed in this scene, as justice and forgiveness are presented as dependent on vengeance; lessons about non-violence are presented amidst the performance of egregious violent acts; and all of this is done through the character of a machine that performs humanity in a purer form than any of the human characters in the film.

This resonates with Harris' warning that,

> [t]he concern is really that we will build machines that are so much more competent than we are that the slightest divergence between their goals

and our own could destroy us. … Just think about how we relate to ants. We don't hate them. We don't go out of our way to harm them. In fact, sometimes we take pains not to harm them. We step over them on the sidewalk. But whenever their presence seriously conflicts with one of our goals, let's say when constructing a building … we annihilate them without a qualm. The concern is that we will one day build machines that, whether they're conscious or not, could treat us with similar disregard. (www.ted.com)

When Chappie confronts Deon about its own mortality and death—that its chassis and battery are fused and that it can only live for five days—Deon tells Chappie that it cannot simply be given another body, 'because you are conscious … you cannot be copied because you are not data … we don't know what consciousness is, so we cannot move it'. As Harris predicts, Chappie then applies its mind to understanding what consciousness is (using the Internet, 'all the information that human beings ever had'); it does so more competently and successfully than its own creator and proceeds to engage in criminal and ultimately violent behaviour to ensure its own survival. As Harris again notes,

At a certain point, we will build machines that are smarter than we are, and once we have machines that are smarter than we are, they will begin to improve themselves. … This is what makes our situation so precarious, and this is what makes our intuitions about risk so unreliable. (www.ted.com)

The implication, and the ethical dilemma with which the viewer is left at the end of the film, is that if this sentient leap of conscience and consciousness between human and machine can be made once (Chappie), and then repeated (Deon and Yolandi), a threshold has been crossed. It can then indiscriminately be done for/ by any/everyone, potentially leaving a world populated by indestructible, eternally replicable machines with human consciousness—a world in which human bodies have become obsolete, and ethics is relative.

Conclusion

In *Chappie*, Blomkamp presents a familiar communicative space: a world in which humans and machines communicate with one another for functional and instructional purposes, like the police Scouts receive and give instructions in performing their policing duties. He also depicts the vulnerability of these systems, for example, in the way they can be intercepted, broken and reappropriated as part of destabilising criminal activities—what Wood (2018) refers to as 'algorithmic tyranny' and 'the

scientification of social control'. However, this utilitarian functionality is also disrupted by another type of communication system when Deon (and then Yolandi and Ninja) start to teach Chappie language as a carrier of more than mere utilitarian functionality, thus language as an expression of, and vehicle for, values, emotions, care and what Haraway refers to as kinship. Read like this, *Chappie* is then indeed an example of the Haraway cyborg metaphor—an ironic, blasphemous, liberating myth *for humanity*. Chappie's struggle to preserve sentience and consciousness (its own and others') is the struggle to reinvigorate and preserve this in/for humanity at large and ultimately guard against dehumanisation.

It is finally through, and because of its grieving for Yolandi, that Chappie can transcend its violent rage and reconstruct something new, creating a new body for Yolandi. This symbolically signifies the meaning-making process of mourning and the eventual reintegration of the dead loved one into a new sense of the self. At this point, the film itself cathartically becomes an act of imaginary grief work for what is lost in the processes of digitalisation and dehumanisation. This folds back to Harris' call for 'an appropriate emotional response to the dangers [of AI] that lie ahead', should our intuition about our techno-creative actions continue to fail and our hubris finally consume us. The burial of Yolandi's human body, wrapped in a shroud, and her subsequent resurrection in a mechanical body, is reminiscent of Haraway's phrase at the end of *A cyborg manifesto* that, 'in the fraying of identities and in the reflexive strategies for constructing them, the possibility opens up for weaving something other than a shroud for the day after the apocalypse that so prophetically ends salvation history' (in During, 1993:278). The ultimate irony is presented as the robot hacks humanity to save itself from loneliness, create companionship, communicate its care for others, and transcend its grief over losing the object of its desire, love, and affection. By continuing its kinship with Yolandi and Deon, even beyond physical human death, and engaging in the reconstructive meaning-making processes so central to human life, Chappie transforms itself from the child it initially was into a fully developed adult human, fully and frighteningly capable of the entire range of human affect and behaviour.

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