

INTRODUCTION

The Critical Context

‘The Cinema of Steven Spielberg’ has several meanings, including the following:

- films directed by a bearded, bespectacled Jewish American with seven children who was born in Cincinnati in the late 1940s
- films involving that individual as writer, producer, executive producer or studio mogul as well as those he has directed
- what cinema means to that filmmaker; the influences and tastes that shape his work and the view of the world it expresses
- the contemporary popular cinema his extraordinary commercial success has helped spawn, including audience expectations and attitudes
- a body of work, more or less self-contained as a critical entity, recognisable as distinctive for its themes, style and vision and identified by the director’s credit, ‘Steven Spielberg’, which consequently labels it irrespective of which individual – screenwriter, cinematographer, composer, editor, art director, performer, and so on – is responsible for any aspect or whether it is consciously intended

Although these definitions overlap and interact, it is helpful to separate them where possible. This book deals with the first, but is not greatly concerned that Spielberg’s parents divorced when he was young or that he suffered bullying at school. There are

biographies available for those who want them. Spielberg's energetic involvement in other filmmakers' work is considerable; as mentor, financier or, in one controversial instance, as 'puppeteer' director, allegedly on-set daily. While the results have been variable – although many of the movies, regardless of quality, intriguingly evince stylistic and thematic continuities with Spielberg's – the filmography is too vast and raises too many conceptual questions to examine alongside them here. Nevertheless, confusion between this and the other categories has muddied critical as well as popular understanding of Spielberg's directorial concerns, often leading to over-simple interpretations; this matters when his films engage with politically sensitive issues. The cinematic vision Spielberg's movies express, in terms of cinema's nature, function, relation to reality and other movies – too often overlooked at the expense of the director's critical reputation – is, I argue here, fundamental to understanding their meaning. The contemporary popular cinema, shaped partly by Spielberg's blockbusters, is an institution providing opportunities and imposing restrictions which criticism must not ignore as the conditions for production and reception of his work.

Primarily, however, this book examines a collection of films released under the same director's name which share common properties and concerns. The 'Steven Spielberg' responsible for them is, except when the context indicates otherwise, a critical construct, inferred from the texts. While philosophical and methodological problems accrue to this auteur-structuralist approach, these are long recognised and well rehearsed; if not already familiar to readers, they are easily available in standard textbooks or on the internet. The approach has the advantage of acknowledging the author-function as central in the movies' financing, production, marketing, reception and criticism (as confirmed by the series to which this book belongs), whether or not, as auteurism originally claimed, authorial integrity is a mark of artistic quality that separates certain directors' work from the mainstream.

People once again take Spielberg seriously. *Amistad* (1997), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), *Minority Report* (2002), *Catch Me If You Can* (2002) and *Munich* (2005) all embrace adult themes and this later stage of his work attracts much academic commentary. The shift came after *Schindler's List* (1993), promoted and received as marking a new maturity in Spielberg's vision, unexpectedly triumphed critically and commercially. Inevitably, given its subject, the film generated controversy, but it rapidly gained general respect. In the US *Schindler's List* swept the boards with seven Academy Awards; these included Best Director, which, pointedly, had previously eluded Spielberg. In Britain, film and media teachers voted it one of 'Ten Films Which Shook the World', elevating it alongside *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Psycho* (1960) and *The Godfather* (1972).

To a cynic these accolades have as much to do with the events portrayed as the merits of the movie. Academy Awards generally endorse liberal views and worthy topics. Moreover, the Academy lives up to its pretentious name by disproportionately nominating literary adaptations; *Schindler's List* came from a winner of Britain's prestigious Booker Prize. This is not, however, to denigrate Hollywood's first direct representation of the Holocaust. Given one studio executive's warning that Spielberg's budget would be better spent donating to a memorial charity (Brode 1995: 230), it was an extraordinary achievement that audiences crowded into theatres for a black-

and-white movie that lacked major stars, presented such an ostensibly bleak subject and exceeded three hours.

Nevertheless, this book insists, Spielberg's movies have always demanded proper consideration, even if – and I approach my task with some trepidation as a result – it was self-evidently amusing when Malcolm Bradbury in a parody of critical theory included an index entry, 'Spielberg, Steven, Deconstructionist film of' (1987: 104). What made *Schindler's List* successful is not radically different from Spielberg's previous output. Because he worked mainly in the critically despised and, until recently, academically neglected genres of fantasy and adventure, his films received remarkably little analysis. It may be precisely because these films foreground childish, regressive elements inherent in the pleasures of Hollywood that the industry's own glitzy Academy (like film professors determined to project a 'grown-up' image of their emergent discipline) maintained its distance.

When Robin Wood began his seminal book, *Hitchcock's Films* (1965), with the then provocative question, 'Why should we take Hitchcock seriously?' it was to argue that Hollywood, despite the industrial mode of production, could occasionally present a complex, nuanced view of the world, that entertainment could in some cases become great art. That is not my primary consideration in writing about Spielberg, although I will be happy if my analyses convince some readers that many of the films at least are more interesting than they appear to a prejudiced eye. My starting point is their phenomenal popularity, and what this reveals about commercial cinema and audiences who derive pleasure from it.

Peter Nicholls once calculated that

according to the figures published by *Variety*, Spielberg has directed four of the top twelve money-makers of all time. *E.T.* (first), *Jaws* (fourth), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (fifth) and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (twelfth). These four films have made over one billion dollars worldwide. (1984: 10)

The Indiana Jones sequels subsequently enjoyed similar success. *Jurassic Park* (1993) displaced *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) from pole position. Domestic video compounded the profitability, with *E.T.* becoming the best-selling videocassette in history (Kent 1991: 64–5).

Spielberg has more than once been hailed as cinema's saviour. *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) rescued Columbia from almost certain liquidation (indeed, the company's stock had fallen alarmingly when *New York* magazine slated the film after gate-crashing a preview (Grenier 1991: 76)). One-eighth of the US population saw *Jaws* (1975) within six weeks (Auty 1982: 277). *E.T.*'s release coincided with the slowing down, then reversal, of a quarter-century admissions decline.

Detractors quickly point out shortcomings in how commercial success is measured. First-run and longer-term profits are not immediately comparable. Distributors, hyping their product, ignore inflation when making historical comparisons. Profits expressed as a multiple of production costs create different results from subtracting expenditure from income. Is a \$500,000 film recouping \$2 million more profitable than one costing \$100 million and recouping \$150 million? Merchandising, profits

from which may or may not be included, and promotion and publicity further complicate the equation. (The \$100 million movie needs to gross \$250 million before breaking even (Branston 2000: 76), given the exhibitors' share, interest charges and prints and advertising costs).

Yet however profitability is measured, and notwithstanding any Spielberg film's precise position in an all-time hit parade, his international success is a major commercial and cultural phenomenon. Box office takings from just four films equalled Hollywood's entire domestic returns for the year Nicholls was writing. Spielberg is the one director with a household name – exploited in marketing not only his movies but others on which he is executive producer. In 1998 he was the only director everybody knew in a multiplex spot poll (Malcolm 1998: 11), a finding corroborated in small surveys when Spielberg's name led many more times than any other when filmgoers listed five directors (Roberts 2005). 'Steven Spielberg' offers a promise analogous to stardom and genre. This is arguably unprecedented except by 'Disney' and 'Hitchcock'.

To understand such popularity appears crucial for media theory and media education. How little serious debate has appeared is therefore astonishing. Equally striking is the polarisation of critical attitudes. Yet it was not always thus. Michael Pye and Lynda Myles' 1979 account of Spielberg's early career, like many critical responses before his success became entrenched, is both reasoned and generally positive. After about 1980 (and the critical and commercial failure of the profligate *1941* (1979)) many writers position themselves in response to Spielberg's success rather than the films themselves.

Broadly speaking, academics and left-wing journalists capitalise professionally by presupposing that anything so successful must be suspect; popular writers capitalise financially by exploiting public fascination. This reflects the 1980s' politics, split between disappointment at the failure of 1960s' and 1970s' experimentalism to prompt revolution (or nostalgia for activism that preceded America's withdrawal from Vietnam and achievements by the Civil Rights and the Women's Movements) and celebration of competition and financial gain. Most books on Spielberg are uncritical popular hagiographies or highly critical personal biographies, while the films prompt enthusiastic but banal celebrations in cultish science fiction magazines. On the other hand, especially left-wing reviewers often sniffily dismiss the films on such grounds as conservative ideology, cuteness, racism, triviality and escapism. The sheer intensity of responses, critical or celebratory, contributes to the phenomenon:

'Steven Spielberg's *E.T.* ... is so mawkish that I can barely manage to write about it' (Grenier 1991: 62).

E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial, however polished and manipulative, boded ill. Much ado about Martian munchkins, it was moving in a sickly, slickly optimistic way, the creation of a man so out of touch with both the joys and unpleasanties of modern life that he feels the need to pummel us with a starry simpering version of a grotesquely distorted garden gnome. Drool, drool. One can't help feeling that a few decades ago, he'd have been happiest producing vehicles for Shirley Temple, Deanna Durbin and Lassie (Andrew 1984: 17).

Such rhetoric reveals extraordinary vindictiveness – especially as the latter appeared two years after the film, which was massively more profitable than any of the star vehicles cited. Filmgoers did not consider themselves ‘pummelled’, while it is hard to see how ‘a man so out of touch’ could hold such appeal, or why the writer seems so determined to personalise his negative reactions. Alliteration (‘Much ado about Martian munchkins’; ‘starry simpering’; ‘grotesquely distorted garden gnome’); internal rhyme and sibilance, implying something insidious, in ‘sickly, slickly optimistic’; the overall emotive tone and breakdown of critical discourse (‘Drool, drool’); all point to Andrew’s obsession: fetishisation of the experience his language seeks to dismiss while simultaneously it savours, lingers over and attempts to capture it. Confirmation occurs in another passage in which language similarly poeticises itself and soars beyond prosaic needs of description – this time by an enthusiastic critic enthralled by *Close Encounters*’ opening:

White on black on silence. The pared-down, spare titles of Steven Spielberg’s science fiction epic grow tense with premonition as a high-strung, portentous chord masses behind them, swells to breaking point, and rends the darkness into a dust-drenched sunburst on the Sonora desert. (Stewart 1978: 167)

The paradox in Andrew’s account is resolved in light of an astute response to Andrew Britton’s commensurately negative Marxist commentary:

Psychoanalysis is compelled to acknowledge that extreme revulsion is *always* the sign of an equal unconscious attraction. The energy needed to denigrate a film has to be expended in order to prevent oneself falling in love with it; or, rather, to deny that one has already fallen in love with it. (1986)

In his description of a scene from the film Britton refers to ‘E.T.’s drunken odyssey through the deserted family house’ ending with his ‘fumbling with the television’. The writing here has the delectation of accurate description – the precision of words (‘odyssey’, ‘fumbling’) carefully chosen uniquely to evoke the events, conveys an enjoyment his analysis suppresses. The film has, after all, caught his desire, his passion and his pen (Benson 1989: 64).

Andrew’s phrase ‘it was moving’ – a sublimation of ‘I was moved’ – exposes a need to project the critic’s contradictions onto the text and other spectators. Critics sometimes appear less than honest about their responses and define themselves contemptuously against mainstream audiences characterised as passive dupes. Far from ‘analytical invective as an antidote to the functionings of ideology’ – advocated by Robert Ferguson (1984: 40) – they use blunt invective in a self-congratulatory appeal to assumed radical consensus.

Some reasoned criticism has developed ideological objections, yet not without succumbing to language best described as vitriolic: ‘*Close Encounters* is nothing less than a Disneyland version of *Triumph of the Will* [1935], runs one not untypical response (Williams 1983: 23). Such analyses presuppose a relationship between the films and

audiences in terms of harmful effects. They allegedly constitute escape from reality assumed (quite apart from considerations of content and style) to be unquestionably reactionary, therefore dangerous. At another extreme, right-wing commentators have seen in Spielberg's films anti-Americanism, symptomatic of creeping takeover by the Left of the nation's cultural institutions (Grenier 1991).

Clearly the films touch a nerve politically with their harshest critics, while exercising powerful emotional appeal to mass audiences. That these mainstream entertainments, apparently simple and unambiguous, elicit such contradictory readings, suggests audiences do not necessarily respond monolithically, as confirmed by Jacqueline Bobo's account of black American female viewers' qualified enthusiasm for *The Color Purple* (1985) (1988a; 1988b; 1995). The range of meanings and pleasures available help explain how such large numbers are attracted and satisfied.

While Spielberg's representations of race and gender have caused real offence – with varying degrees of justification – in the Indiana Jones series, *The Color Purple*, *Schindler's List* and *Amistad*, much of the more general ideological criticism appears over-simplistic in light of psychoanalytic theory concerned with subjectivity and pleasure. Rejection by the Academy Awards committee, neo-McCarthyite or Marxist criticism precludes analysis and thereby understanding, as does adulation. Part of the inability of much criticism to deal with Spielberg is failure to ask fundamental questions. If escapism *is* a factor in popular appeal, what are audiences escaping *from*, and what *to*? Do audiences *really* 'escape' at all? Why does it matter? Does alleged escapism have lasting effects beyond the screening? *Do* audiences succumb unconsciously? And how do critics avoid implication?

Such questions demand long-term audience research, beyond the scope of this book and impossible retrospectively. (Bobo's work with African American women – part of an explosion of audience-oriented studies in the 1980s and 1990s, reacting against high-minded theory that treated subjects as little more than effects of the text – although suggestive, uses a sample of only 15 and has to take their comments at more or less face value.) There remains a need to examine the films closely – not only through textual analysis but also in terms of their historical context (including marketing, promotion and publicity) and of the pleasures they offer (and mechanisms by which these are achieved).

One of Spielberg's characteristics is extensive pastiche and quotation from other films, including Hollywood classics, European art cinema and his own oeuvre. Annoying to many serious critics – although such playfulness is celebrated as postmodernism in more highly respected cultural forms – it clearly pleases fans if pedantic tracing of these allusions in popular publications is a reliable guide. Yet pleasure derived from spotting references – reminders that a film is being watched – seems incompatible with simple notions of passivity and escapism. Conversely, audience members may enjoy the films without noticing these references, or be aware of them; again this suggests more than one kind of pleasure, and that the appeal is more complex than allegations of mass manipulation imply.

Another characteristic is Spielberg's distinctive lighting code: 'diffused images ... strongly backlit and countered with a weak fill light' (Mott & Saunders 1986: 89). This, I argue later, is consistently associated with the desires and fantasies of characters

with whom the spectator is encouraged to identify. Light shafts (created by burning oil in the studio (Fraker 1979: 121)), demonstrably resembling projector beams, inscribe the cinematic apparatus onto the films. Metaphors for cameras, screens, projectors, audiences and cinema as an institution inform many sequences. The typical Spielberg identification-figure is a spectator, often also a surrogate director.

Many of the films' emotional appeal involves a recurring narrative structure centred on a family splitting which leads eventually either to reunion or a spiritual substitute. Through this theme of wish-fulfilment, together with the cinematic allusions and symbolic lighting, the films reflect upon as much as demonstrate the alleged function of popular cinema as an escape.

My intention, then, is to examine both text and process. This requires analysis informed by a theory of subject positioning, provided (not without controversy or difficulty) by Christian Metz's 'The Imaginary Signifier' (1975). (For guidance on Lacanian principles and terminology underlying Metz's arguments, see Benvenuto & Kennedy (1986) or Kaplan (1983: 11–20).) This theory, developed during the formative stages of Spielberg's career, is adopted quite simply because the films suggested, and continue to suggest, Metz's imagery. Metz holds that

the cinematic institution is not just the cinema industry ... it is also the mental machinery – another industry – which spectators 'accustomed to the cinema' have internalised historically and which has adapted them to the consumption of films. (The institution is outside us and inside us...) (1975: 18–19)

Within this understanding, the broken family's reconstitution represents, psycho-analytically, the Oedipal drama resolved through the subject's return to the Imaginary or acceptance of the Symbolic – desire associated with light in Spielberg's films, and a constituent of the pleasure of 'cinematic fiction as a semi-oneiric instance' (1975: 18). Such a reading, reciprocally implicating spectatorial desire in the meaning of the text, and textual mechanisms in constituting the spectator as subject, imbricates the text and its reception in ideology. Apart from my core contention that Spielberg's films figuratively embody the terms of Metz's argument, the world's most profitable director should logically provide examples and test cases for theory which seeks to explore pleasure.

The book begins with *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, Spielberg's fourth theatrical release, as it is the earliest of his films that most graphically demonstrates recurrent concerns thereafter traced chronologically, film by film, starting with *Duel* (1971). There follows at the end a consideration of theoretical implications not resolved in individual analyses. Each chapter, therefore, is relatively self-contained, although there is inevitably cross-referencing between them, and earlier chapters introduce ideas pursued subsequently. I omit *Poltergeist* (1982), subject of debate as to whether Spielberg directed it, for reasons of space. This book should assist readers for whom this is an issue to decide for themselves, and it is hoped, therefore, that this study will serve to revisit the entire work of Steven Spielberg and provide a coherent critical appraisal.