

*senses of cinema*

# The Question Spielberg: A Symposium Part One Position Papers

👤 Various 🕒 July 2003 📁 Steven Spielberg 📖 Issue 27



See the end of Part Two for a Spielberg **filmography** [[HTTP://ARCHIVE.SENSESOFCINEMA.COM/CONTENTS/03/27/SPIELBERG\\_SYMPOSIUM\\_FILMS\\_AND\\_MOMENTS.HTML#FILMO](http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/27/spielberg-symposium-films-and-moments.html#filmo)] .

While few directors hold more sway over contemporary cinema than Steven Spielberg, few have been viewed in more polarised terms. Is he an authentic poet of childhood, or a sentimental manipulator who infantilises his audience? A modern equivalent to the great ‘classical’ Hollywood directors, or the baleful personification of US cultural imperialism? Whatever the answers to these questions, Spielberg’s recent films – beginning with his landmark ‘collaboration’ with the late Stanley Kubrick on *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, and proceeding through *Minority Report* and *Catch Me if You Can* – arguably mark a new, highly personal stage in his career. With this in mind, we asked critics from around the world to contribute short reflections on Spielberg as artist and cultural phenomenon.

## **The Entries**

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## **The Master of Consensual Manipulation**

**by Thomas Caldwell**

The films of Steven Spielberg are often derided for their populist appeal. However this quick judgement is often made without an attempt to examine why Spielberg has maintained such a high level of box office success over the past three decades. Prominent in Spielberg's filmic style is his mastery of techniques of cinematic manipulation, techniques that paradoxically have made his work both commercially successful and critically undervalued. Yet Spielberg's trademark use of swelling music, emotive dialogue and intimate close-ups, and his thematic concern with family trauma, innocent children in a hostile world, and the child who never grew up, contribute to a powerfully engaging and satisfying filmic experience.

The off-hand dismissal of Spielberg's films says much about how cinema is defined as either 'good' or 'bad.' There is a prevalent attitude that the emotional impact of a film should never be taken into account when the film is being seriously analysed or critiqued. A film that emotionally moves us is regarded as manipulative. This is the criticism that is most often attached to Spielberg's work. The fact that Spielberg has been able to repeatedly exhilarate, terrify and move audiences *en masse* does not seem to be a strong enough indication of his status as a cinematic artist.

Yet isn't all cinema manipulative? After all, we assume that films are made to reach an audience, not just to indulge the director. The only way to reach an audience and entice them on a journey is to somehow manipulate the way the audience thinks and feels. Regardless of whether the film has challenged the way we view the world, empowered, disgusted, upset, moved us, made us politically aware or amazed us with its ability to transcend traditional notions of cinema – it is all a form of manipulation.

Films that are obviously manipulative are considered 'bad films' while films that better disguise how they are emotionally or intellectually moving the audience are regarded as 'good films.' Spielberg's films are obviously manipulative; however, Spielberg engages with the audience to the point where they consent to his manipulation. Spielberg's thematic concerns and stylistic techniques are almost proudly simple; the audience recognises that Spielberg is not concealing his intentions to make them think or feel a certain way, and they become willing to enter a type of contract to let him take them on the emotional journey that he has created. This is in fact an extremely difficult response to elicit from audiences, yet Spielberg has done it numerous times and for this is worthy of much admiration. When audiences see a Spielberg film they consent to the obvious manipulation and the sign of a good Spielberg film is how well he rewards their consent and whether he can sustain their consent throughout the duration of the film.

Obviously not all of Spielberg's films are successful in sustaining that consent. *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* and *Minority Report* overestimated how far audiences were willing to go along with his themes of family unity and suspension of disbelief, and hence lost the consent of many audiences in their concluding passages. However there are many examples of Spielberg films where the audience is successfully primed by the bulk of the film to surrender themselves totally to the climactic ending. Emotionally satisfying endings such as the showdown between human and shark in *Jaws*, the apocalyptic destruction of Nazis by the fury of God in *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*, the teary farewell between child and alien in *E.T. The Extra Terrestrial*, and even the symbolic father/son partnership between FBI man and ex-criminal child in *Catch Me if You Can* would have appeared ridiculous if the rest of the film had not so carefully established the chain of events and nurtured the emotional needs of the audience.

The greatest example of an overblown yet brilliantly emotional ending of a Spielberg film is the final half hour of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* where music, special effects and Spielberg's recurring theme of family bonds create a total wash of 'feel-good' cinema. After the abducted child, broken family and military conspiracies of the bulk of the narrative, the final magical encounter with the kind childlike aliens acts as the emotional reward for the audience.

Spielberg not only makes his manipulative intentions obvious, he asks for the audience's permission and they willingly submit to go wherever he takes them. Spielberg's mastery of consensual manipulation makes his films worthy of more than simply being dismissed as guilty pleasures.

Thomas Caldwell is a freelance film writer currently writing a textbook on film style to be published early 2004.



## Arrested Development

by Dan Callahan

Steven Spielberg is in some ways the François Truffaut of the American New Wave of the 1970s. He's so lovable that even his extreme financial success can be forgiven. While Scorsese has stumbled, Spielberg keeps developing slowly but surely.

Yet he is a frustrating figure. Imagine if Truffaut had never been stirred by Adele Hugo and had instead made *Small Change* (1976) over and over again. Imagine if he had loved and lost Françoise Dorléac and her sister Catherine Deneuve and had never bothered to make *Two English Girls* (1971). Can a director really make an impact doing only things that come easily to him? Spielberg is intent to share little kid wonders with *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), but has failed to explore or even acknowledge his Strindberg travails with Amy Irving. On this point he refuses to budge.

His films themselves can be easily categorised. Four of them have energetically followed in the footsteps of Hitchcock and Val Lewton, playing on our fear of the unknown: *Duel*, *Jaws*, *Jurassic Park* and *Minority Report*. These are all respectable, and they lead on to a capper, which Spielberg produced and supposedly ghost-directed, the superb *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hooper, 1982).

Childhood fear of the dark gives way to lust for adventure and little-kid awe in the first two *Indiana Jones* films, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *E.T.* These four are sacred cows that don't really repay re-viewing.

There are some outright misfires: *1941*, *Always*, the third Indy movie, the second *Jurassic* film, and *Hook*. Of these, *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* is the most interesting. It reveals its director's painful intellectual uncertainty and amplifies his threadbare obsession with "Where's Mommy?" melodrama.

Then there are the socially conscious fantasies, science-fiction behemoths intended to win Oscars and respectability: *The Color Purple*, *Schindler's List*, *Amistad* and *Saving Private Ryan*. *Purple* and *Amistad* show his admirable interest in race, while *Schindler* and *Ryan* are spectacular cinematic ruffians that flaunt their outsized technical brilliance until we can not object or interact with them – they both pummel us right into the ground, all in the name of "catharsis."



Finally, there are three real films that suggest who Steven Spielberg is and what he cares about. These are wayward, shifty movies that are considered minor by most, but they represent our most popular director at his most unguarded: *The Sugarland Express*, *Empire of the Sun* and *Catch Me if You Can*.

*Sugarland* is a reckless debut feature, bursting, crude, and American in the best sense of the word. *Empire* is a strange epic about a child being cast into a wartime abyss. One scene in *Empire* is unforgettable: kid survivor Christian Bale and broken-down upper class wife Miranda Richardson are running from their Japanese captors and decide to stop in a field strewn with discarded furniture. Richardson plops herself down to die with a blistering sort of black-humored weariness, as if all her troubles had only been an absurd game. This is the deepest Spielberg has ever gone into adult emotions.

*Catch Me if You Can* is a perfect Spielberg title – it emphasises his playfulness and his refusal to grow up. The film is a deeply felt fable about teenaged fantasy and the brutal disillusionment of adult responsibility. Underneath the shiny surface is a fascinating admission of movie-mad tunnel vision that lives in fear of an unexceptional 9 to 5 existence. It proved a revelation of Spielberg's real nature, yet audiences and critics dismissed it as fluff.

Spielberg, a man in his late '50s, has explored childhood exhaustively, not to say evasively; now he's making a bold move into...adolescence. When he's in his eighties, will Spielberg finally be comfortable enough to offer a portrait of young love? His work is warped by the need to please the biggest crowd, yet even the sneaked-in underground subtext of *Catch Me*, while touching, is hardly interesting coming from a supposedly mature artist.

Spielberg is widely loved, and deservedly so. He has given us loads of pleasure, and this cannot be discounted. There can never be a way to dismiss him completely. He's groping towards different material, and he shouldn't ask himself whether or not the audience will get it. What he must really wonder is if he has it in him to go in different directions. I think he does. It's only a question of when he will find subjects to grow with, so that we can grow up with him too, and soon.

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# The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

by Carloss James Chamberlin

Let's parse the *Oeuvre*:

## **Blondies**

(i.e. Warm, Poetic, Weirdly Emotional)

*Close Encounters*

*Empire of the Sun*

*Sugarland Express*

*A.I.*

*Catch Me if You Can*

*Indiana Jones and the Last*

*Crusade*

(Vaclav Havel likes these)

## **Angel Eyes**

(i.e. Proficient, Heartless, Manipulative)

*E.T.*

*Saving Private Ryan*

*Schindler's List*

*Minority Report*

*Jaws*

*Indiana Jones and the Temple*

*of Doom*

*Jurassic Park*

*Jurassic Park: The Lost*

*World*

*Raiders of the Lost Ark*

(Kim Jong-il likes these)

## **Tucos**

(i.e. Beady-Eyed Mama's Boys What Cain't Get No Love At All)

*Always*

*1941*

*Amblin' (1968)*

*Duel*

*Hook*

*The Color Purple*

(Fidel Castro likes these)

Ah, the three faces of Steve. When he's good, he's the Jacques Demy of American Melancholy, when he's bad, a teenaged yet prudish Hitchcock, and when he's ugly, he's like nobody else in the whole world. Is there a real Steven Spielberg?



As time passes and vitriol fades, it becomes clear that Steven Spielberg is manifestly in the class of maverick '70s filmmakers, but unique among them in that he quickly grasped the virtues of 'concept' filmmaking over old-fashioned star vehicles. When the window for experimentation closed on his peers, he was ready to take advantage. While the rest of Hollywood caved to movie star egos and super-agents, Spielberg and Lucas made their money by making the audience king. In retrospect, it seems like a sound scheme: Use the power of the Audience to defeat the power of the Movie Star. It's easy to forget that *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977) were movies without MOVIE STARS, and nobody, absolutely nobody, thought they would work. Now arguably the most famous director since D.W. Griffith, Spielberg runs a movie studio that bears his name, and Lucas has cornered a large market of special effects technology that makes money while he sleeps.

And unlike Lucas, Spielberg has never made a movie cynically, i.e. just for the tie-ins. With few exceptions, each movie lights up a new corner of his soul, regardless of its success or artfulness. And nothing proves my thesis more than comparing Spielberg's movies to the deluge that comes after him. Watch a Michael Bay movie for an instructive contrast. Bay, who directs like Jerry Bruckheimer cooked him up in the lab late one night, represents a new kind of movie director, master of the 'ride' film, a sinister development, an action-porno film that does not bother with narrative set-up, that regards the story as that irritant that must be dispensed with before the 'action' starts. Ride films are deliberately meant to be slightly unsatisfying, almost consciously evanescent. There are no 'movie moments' in ride films because the whole thing *is* a movie moment. And even Bay and Bruckheimer look restrained compared to the next generation of one-name-moniker action pornographers.

In contrast, Spielberg's latest film, *Catch Me if You Can* (2002) is either an anomaly or the beginning of another stage. It is the best of the Blondies, delivering its subversive melancholy inside a candy-coloured genre chase where the emotional rendering is near perfect, and yet the *mise-en-scene* is not strangled. A loose and personal film, fully at ease with itself. And it is unusual among his good films in that it is a Tuco which became a Blondie. Most of his Blondies are failed Angel Eyes, where Spielberg's desire to please himself overrides his desire to punnel the audience with the concept of the movie. While Tucos are films that one feels Spielberg had to make for obscure personal reasons, 'selfish' movies filled with intense energy that totally fail to connect with audiences, Angel Eyes are clear concept films where the anticipatory tyranny of the audience edges out all but the barest elements of personal touch.

Pauline Kael once wrote of Jacques Demy that he subtly poked fun at the romantic gimmicks of Hollywood films only to deploy them himself in even more romantic ways. Demy possessed all the gifts of a Steven Spielberg, he too was written off as banal and reactionary, and their best films are bittersweet in the same sneaky way. To those who find the comparison perverse, I blow a tender kiss in their direction.

Carloss Chamberlin is a screenwriter living in New Mexico. Nobody told him film was dead, so he keeps fighting on, like an Imperial Soldier on Saipan.



## The Impotence of Being Earnest

by Darragh O'Donoghue

Steven Spielberg famously came to prominence in the 1970s as one of the 'movie brats,' those Saturday-matinee-reared, film-school-educated directors keen to reinvent the 'magic' and modes of Old Hollywood for a new, more cynical and fragmented era. They liberally doused their own works with references to everything from Hitchcock and Ford through Disney and Looney Toons to the *nouvelle vague*, although Spielberg and his usual co-defendant in the dock for crimes against cinema, George Lucas, had an ominous preference for late David Lean. This latter resulted in potentially prickly stories like *Empire of the Sun* being scrubbed of their ambiguities, leaving the audience gagging on a surfeit of spectacle. But up until, say, *The Color Purple* (1985), Spielberg was doing all right, as long as you could stomach the sentiment and the seasick lunges of John Williams' 'music.'

Judging by the wide-ranging allusions in his films, Spielberg probably sees himself as part of the great *auteur* tradition, but the Hollywood director he most reminds me of is not a master like Hitchcock or Hawks, masking personal expression with studio professionalism, but George Stevens, maker of *Shane* (1953). In the 1930s, Stevens was a reliable craftsman of brisk, unpretentious entertainments, occasionally rising to grace notes such as *Swing Time* (1936), the most celebrated of the Fred and Ginger musicals; the boisterous Raj epic *Gunga Din* (1939) (one of the influences on *Raiders of the Lost Ark*); and the exemplary weepie *Penny Serenade* (1940). These films were primarily concerned with telling stories with economy and wit, and bringing the best out of major acting talents; if they penetrated some of the more elusive reaches of human experience, this arose naturally from the material rather than being imposed upon it.

Then something happened. The official story is that Stevens went to war as a cameraman, filming among the detritus of Europe the first footage of Dachau. After *that*, as they say, he could never go back, and a dinosaur-like ponderousness soon characterised his work. The films got longer, the vistas wider, the themes heavier. Stevens turned to adapting prestigious, prize-winning literary works (*A Place in the Sun* [1951]); ‘meaningful’ Westerns (*Shane*, *Giant* [1956]); narratives recreating the horrors of World War Two and the Holocaust (*The Diary of Anne Frank* [1959]); and Biblical epics (*The Greatest Story Ever Told* [1965]). The mantle of moral responsibility weighed down Stevens’ filmmaking instincts, and, eventually, the experience of watching his films.

Without the excuse of a traumatic historical experience, Steven Spielberg’s talent as a director began to curdle in the mid-’80s, when he became impatient with movie-long motor chases, alien visitations, jungle adventure and flying bicycles, yearning instead for the middlebrow respectability conferred and symbolised by the Academy Awards. Ignoring the lesson of the film history he has plundered so often, which shows that populist forms such as melodrama, comedy or action in the hands of an imaginative director are a surer route to cinematic immortality than platitudinising about Serious Issues (i.e. Keaton vs. Kramer; Sirk vs. Zinnemann), Spielberg began adapting prize-winning literary works, renovating the war film and tackling the Holocaust. This is not the place to ask, as Gilbert Adair does, whether Spielberg should ever have made *Schindler’s List*; certainly, in his hands, with the use of conventional narrative and dramatic devices, the foregrounding of Oscar-worthy acting and the synthetic recreation of tropes from Eastern European cinema, the Final Solution was made over into a movie threat the equal of a precipitating boulder or a rampaging dinosaur. And after some false starts, the Academy duly delivered.

The more critical and civic plaudits heaped on Spielberg the Great Artist (is it really true, as Todd Solondz's *Storytelling* [2001] suggests, that *Schindler's List* is compulsory viewing in American schools?), the less like a filmmaker he seems. I could even forgive these pompous detours as evidence of personal insecurity, but, most unforgivably, he has lost the knack of knocking out effortless diversions. *Jurassic Park* never moved beyond the mechanical; *Minority Report* is the kind of film Q from Bond might have made; while the supposedly lightweight *Catch Me if You Can*, with its poor pacing and clunky compositions, is shamed by comparison with its model, the '60s caper. Because of the escalating budgets of these films and the extravagant logistics behind each shot, the possibility of flourish, spontaneity or surprise is suffocated. Only *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* survives from this period, as if Spielberg was goaded into playfulness by Sean Connery's twinkle. If he concentrated a little less on adult manipulation of the 'childlike,' and returned to the youthful exuberance of his still-enchanted early films, Spielberg might yet save himself from the deadly grip of Duty.

Darragh O'Donoghue failed to complete his PhD in French Crime Films and Literature. He now works in a Dublin public library.



## Master of the World

by Jean-Michel Frodon

For he's a film director. That's the point. The guy turned out to become Master of the World, OK. He's not the only one, and all these Tycoon stories are so despicable, and most of the time boring, as long as Scott Fitzgerald or Orson Welles does not come and make a work of art out of it. Steven Spielberg became Master of the World in the entertainment business in the early '90s, when he did three things almost at the same moment. He achieved the making of *the* major entertainment product of up-to-date formula (full-range capabilities of digitalised image and sound, extended merchandising opportunities from toy to theme park through video games and TV or feature sequels, world market control) with *Jurassic Park*, and simultaneously seized the dark centre of contemporary civilisation, the abyss of the Shoah, and turned it into a feel-good, happy-ending, Oscar-winning, Americanised epic. And then he achieved the creation of the only new studio ever to stay alive in Hollywood for 70 years, Dreamworks, together with his accomplices Geffen and Katzenberg. This draws the outlines of a success story, different but similar to that of Mr Microsoft, Mr AOL, Mr Boeing or Mr Monsanto (or Mr whatever the name of the motherfucker who makes medicine against AIDS the Third World can't afford). But the guy directs films. Almost every year, he comes and tells a story, invents, reshapes, builds images, connects them with sounds, etc. *This* is different and somehow unique. Neither Chaplin nor Griffith ever had a tenth of his economic – then political – power, not because Chaplin or Griffith were not as good as Spielberg is, but because there was (there is) a contradiction in terms between becoming a major artist and an Industry Mogul. Disney found a way out, clearly on the Industry side, and though he certainly invented a whole bunch of formal concepts for his cartoons (and in the entertainment business), he would not be called a film director. So the question is: what films (what plots, what shots, what aesthetics) do you make as – and to retain and even enhance your position as – Master of the World?



The answers are on the big screen. They are called *Saving Private Ryan*, *A.I.*, *Minority Report*, *Catch Me if You Can*. They translate into actual film-directing, this status Spielberg has reached (the way his former movies accomplished this is another very interesting story). In this sense, Steven Spielberg does embody the contemporary definition of Hollywood, as the name of the process which intends to reshape the imaginations of the world into one centralised, simplified and industrialised form: to find the common and reproducible formula of the incredibly diverse ideas humankind has of the meaning of words like “love”, “freedom,” “sky,” “family,” “child,” “home,” “friendship,” “individual,” “dream,” “toy,” etc. To achieve this of course needs, from a single person, huge talent and expertise, and also a sort of courage. The courage to face, and deal with, all the types of mental and sensory representations that already exist, in order to incorporate them into this efficient and ultimately comforting and selfish digest each Spielberg film, in its own way, provides. The recycling of *the* modern American-European (yet English-speaking) auteur, Stanley Kubrick, very cleverly remaking Kubrick’s anthropological pessimism into a sentimental individual fairy tale, is part of this process (just try to imagine one minute what Kubrick would have made of *Minority Report!*). As well as the sacrifice of the collective values of the war-movie genre on the altar of up-to-date individualism, or the incorporation of the vulgarity of the ’60s TV series into a shared regressive goodwill, etc. What I am writing here is, of course, absurdly short and simplifying, it would need pages and pages about each film. What I am trying to say here is that there is an idea of art which is worth standing for, which opens a space and intends to drive everyone to build, and to build with their own materials (philosophic, political, poetic, imaginary, metaphysical, psychoanalytic, whatever), their own position in the world. It has been the privilege of the American cinema industry (the original Hollywood) to produce the mythological building of a nation, the USA, in a form that – with all its ideological twists – could be used all over the world to elaborate a critical and original position for each individual, despite their being in a very different situation. What is different in the contemporary Hollywood personified with an incredible strength and creativity by Steven Spielberg is the abandoning of this building of oneself, replaced by the marketing of the impulse of the return to the lost maternal paradise. This means no less than the abandoning of what art is ultimately about, through, but beyond, all the formal inventions: to contribute to elaborating each individual’s own freedom facing the abyss of death and of the inexplicable universe, in the sharing of the words and signs with the other speaking animals that define humankind. Exactly what Spielberg (with, of course, a lot of goodwill and sincerity) works against, and, doing so in a world that does not want to be free, makes through this an incredible amount of money and power.

Jean-Michel Frodon, former senior editor on cinema at French daily *Le Monde* is now director of *Cahiers du cinéma*.



# Omnipotence and Surrogate Fathers

by Christian Ramírez

Ten years ago, one detail that attracted particular attention in *Schindler's List* was its being dedicated to the memory of Steve Ross, the recently deceased Time Warner's CEO. Those who were closest to the filmmaker testified to Spielberg's enormous debt to and affection for the executive, but it wasn't until later that the director confessed how much the light and shadows of the cinematic Schindler were indebted to Ross, whom he came to regard almost as a father.

Ross, however, wasn't the only foster father that Spielberg had during his Hollywood formative years. The list is varied: Chuck Silvers (Universal's chief librarian and the first to see Spielberg's teenage short films), Sid Sheinberg (MCA's big man, whom first signed him as a director), Jennings Lang (TV executive and the first to acquire the screen rights to Benchley's *Jaws*)... Just as Spielberg showed the perennial absence of paternal figures in his cinema, he never ceased to look for them in real life.

Now, many will argue that this has changed – for better or worse – since Spielberg has become a sort of father figure for newer generations of audiences and filmmakers in a way few popular artists have ever achieved. But one of the most revealing consequences of this increasing identification with the idea of a father is his growing concern with the theme of power. Right now, when Spielberg's influence over cinema and media at large has surpassed that of his mentors at their zenith, it is nearly impossible for Spielberg to return to portraying primitive, irresponsible father figures such as *Close Encounter's* Roy Neary (Richard Dreyfuss), *Empire of the Sun's* Basie (John Malkovich) or Indy's father, Henry Jones Sr (Sean Connery).



The turning point for this was the demiurgical status of *Jurassic Park*'s impresario, John Hammond. Coincidentally (?) played by director Richard Attenborough, Hammond appears as somebody with enough power, money and imagination to make his wildest fantasies come true and who only accepts his finitude when nature sends him the bill: he is forced to abandon the kingdom he has created and that now functions under its own rules.

That same acceptance can be detected in Oskar Schindler's sorrow when, at the end of *Schindler's List*, he understands that his role as saviour is closely linked with his own wealth: a horrible way of testing the limits of his own omnipotence.

A less kind side to this paternalism can be seen in the legal battle for the freeing of slaves in *Amistad* (particularly through ex-president John Adams's inner struggle) and also through the sending of soldiers to their deaths in *Saving Private Ryan*; but this tension finally explodes in the figure of professor Hobby, *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*'s marvel-maker and virtual monster.

A cross between *Pinocchio*'s Geppetto and the God from the Old Testament, he's the one who offers a moral justification for manufacturing "new life" from the inanimate; but having once achieved the miracle, he cannot resist his own impulses and immediately plans a multitude of ways to make money through it. The scene in which David stares at Hobby's workshop, full of facsimiles of himself, some of them packed and ready to be shipped to childless parents, speaks for itself. Spielberg, his art and – by extension – the merchandising that comes from it, bites its own tail.

Through the failure of David the Droid's creator, the filmmaker exposes his worst fear: the unpredictable consequences of his influence over nature and coming generations. It's interesting, because in putting his own legacy to the test, Spielberg gives us an undeniable sign of his own humanity, at the same time accepting his immense power over the development of our collective imagination.

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# The Major and the Minor

by Keith Uhlich

If autobiography is inherent to the best art, then *Catch Me if You Can* (2002) is Steven Spielberg's masterpiece. Here is the director in a nutshell, splitting his conflicting impulses into two lovingly caricatured opposites: Leonardo DiCaprio's Abagnale (the perpetual child) and Tom Hanks' Hanratty (the no-nonsense adult). Out of their interactions does the central Spielbergian conflict arise: juvenilia vs. maturity. It is this very conflict that defines the director's career and, in his recent run of films post-*Schindler's List* (1993), epitomises his soul.

Until *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* the scales of this conflict are tremendously unbalanced, neither always for the worst nor the best. The early-period Spielberg of *Duel*, *Jaws*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* sits uneasily with the middle-period Spielberg of *The Color Purple*, *Empire of the Sun*, *Always*, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, and *Hook*. Up to and including *Temple of Doom* Spielberg is an ingratiating juvenile – his sheer dedication to (and memory of) childhood joys and sorrows is something to be treasured. *E.T.* is Spielberg's greatest expression of this tendency. With cinematographer Allen Daviau's camera placed almost always at waistline (i.e. at a child's POV) Spielberg lays out the simultaneous excitement and banality of youthful existence. Visually approximating a child's desires, the camera also feels like a fervid anticipator of things to come. The present moment is captured mainly in fleeting peripheral glimpses and it is only when faced with the emotional weightiness of the now that Spielberg lingers. Who can forget Elliott (Henry Thomas) standing over E.T.'s mechanical coffin contemplating death while the older Keys (Peter Coyote) stands in the background like a future, knowing self-projection? Until *Catch Me if you Can* this image is as close as Spielberg gets to perfectly articulating his conflicting impulses.

Meanwhile, Spielberg's middle period is fraught with the uncertainty of a frustrated adolescence. Not surprisingly these are rougher years and I find I cannot recall the films to mind as readily. This does not mean that Spielberg's output here is any less worthwhile, merely that I see the films more abstractly like the experiments they are. Pieces stick out: the backlit closing image and a church-set musical sequence in *The Color Purple*; the Japanese rising into view in one of *Empire of the Sun*'s spectacular long shots; the early morning disturbance of a fire plane on a placid lake in *Always*. There's a tipping of the scales here to a more mature, adult cinema. Select images show Spielberg's adult commentary on childhood; no longer does he one-sidedly mythologise the experience. Yet the seams often show, hampered as many of these films are overall by Spielberg's juvenile impulses. *Hook* is the absolute nadir, but the film before it, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, shows Spielberg's awareness of the awkwardness of this period. The relationship between father (Sean Connery) and son (Harrison Ford), lovingly tempestuous, is the foundation of Spielberg's middle-period bridge to better cinematic things.

With age comes wisdom: After 1993's *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg's 'perfect' summation of his juvenilia) the director made one of his wisest artistic decisions in teaming with cinematographer Janusz Kaminski. Theirs is a symbiotic partnership, perfectly, cinematically cyclical. In *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* Kaminski's light and shadow games, punctuated by languorous, beautiful tracking shots, belie the first film's candy-colored theme park palette, courtesy Dean Cundey. Within the confines of *The Lost World*'s admittedly sub-par storyline Spielberg challenges the status quo of traditional familial relationships – a single white father (Jeff Goldblum) and his black daughter (Vanessa Lee Chester) are front-and-center characters (biological or adopted paternity unmentioned, the challenge becomes purely visual). From here, Spielberg delves more deeply into his mind's eye, rejecting perfection. His newfound greatness arises out of imperfection, out of a dichotomous conversation between his elder and younger selves.

Some fascinating ups (*A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*) and downs (*Saving Private Ryan*) later, Spielberg achieves apotheosis in *Catch Me if You Can*. The title is a brazen challenge to both his audience and himself. Defying those who peg him as merely a mediocre craftsman, Spielberg simultaneously looks inward, baring his soul through a deceptively light-hearted surface. The perfection of *Catch Me* comes from its mischievous, tragic center – at the close Spielberg pulls back from Abagnale and Hanratty, no longer in conflict, absorbing them both into the dull, dreary grayness of the world at large (labels such as juvenile or mature do not apply to this limbo). The visual equivocation is heartbreaking and humorous – where does Spielberg go from here now that the scales of his main thematic conflict are balanced? But that’s the inherent question for any Spielberg connoisseur: his films challenge us to move along our own internal timelines with reckless abandon, child and adult forever conversing and arguing in that ineffable flux unique to cinema.

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To The Question Spielberg: A Symposium **Part Two: Films and Moments** [[HTTP://ARCHIVE.SENSESOFCINEMA.COM/CONTENTS/03/27/SPIELBERG\\_SYMPOSIUM\\_FILMS\\_AND\\_MOMENTS.HTML](http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/27/spielberg_symposium_films_and_moments.html)]

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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