

MAKE SPIELBERG GREAT AGAIN

The Steven Spielberg Chronicles

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ARMOND WHITE

Resistance Works, WDC

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Armond White is the esteemed, controversial, and brilliantly independent film critic and three-times chair of the New York Film Critics Circle. He won the 2014 American Book Award for Anti-Censorship.

White is a film and cultural critic for *National Review*. Notably, *Out* magazine simultaneously featured his column “Our Bud at the Movies” for many years. Before these posts, he was Editor for *CityArts* and Arts Editor for *The City Sun*. In between which, he was lead film critic for *New York Press* (as selectively catalogued in the book *The Press Gang: Writings on Cinema from New York Press, 1991-2011*). That’s a 40-year career as “The Last Honest Film Critic in America,” to quote the title of an entire chapter devoted to White from the textbook *Film Criticism in the Digital Age*.

White, himself, wrote four books essential for anyone who loves pop culture: *The Resistance: Ten Years of Pop Culture That Shook the World*, *Rebel for the Hell of It: The Life of Tupac Shakur*, *Keep Moving: The Michael Jackson Chronicles*, and *New Position: The Prince Chronicles*. Now, *Make Spielberg Great Again: The Steven Spielberg Chronicles* joins the ranks of these auspicious tomes.

These books affirm that White practically invented the art of music video criticism, which he demonstrated for over a decade in an annual presentation of music video art at Lincoln Center. It was always the cultural highlight of the year.

DEDICATION

*Dedicated to Melvin Van Peebles.
Profound thanks to Richard Hecht and
John Demetry.*

PREFACE

The Wailing Wall

JAWS, *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS of the Third Kind*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, *The Color Purple* weren't just popular movies. Each one changed the world in which they appeared: inflecting spoken language, influencing social concepts and increasing visual appreciation at the movies. They also imprinted a name on the culture: Steven Spielberg.

Name recognition such as Spielberg's means more than just popularity. As for only a few cultural impresarios—Charlie Chaplin, Alfred Hitchcock, Walt Disney—it also indicates broad affection, familiarity and trust. Spielberg is the only filmmaker to win that legendary regard in the second half of the 20th Century—certainly he is the one director of his baby boomer generation whose sensibility is fully conveyed by name alone. This phenomenon came apparent with a surprise—that during one swift decade his sensibility also seemed to be shared by viewers of all ages and around the world.

Spielberg's fame represented the apex of that moment when American filmmakers, inspired by the post-Second World War international art film boom and the French New Wave, reinterpreted their own experiences and art ambitions through the heritage of the movies. The cultural development that defined Hollywood's '70s American Renaissance was

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personified in the singular figure of Spielberg. Such towering peers as Robert Altman and Francis Ford Coppola made formally radical hits *M*A*S*H* (1970) and *The Godfather* (1972) that demonstrated an instinct for truly popular pop spectacle but Spielberg was able to convey that new, complex motivation uncannily—with the simple, direct, powerful effect and purity of D.W. Griffith's silents. As inheritor of Griffith's vision, Spielberg and each one of his early hits seemed to bring almost all of film history up to date.

During that first stage of Spielberg's renown listed above, moviegoers and the public at large discovered an image for their fear of marine carnivores (*Jaws*); discerned symbols for unearthly delight (*Close Encounters of the Third Kind*); found a source of their traditional moviegoing affection (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*); then—as if to prove the peak of popular response—went further to realize a fresh, rejuvenated expression of their need to communicate (*E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*) and through communication located a deeper understanding of their common humanity (*The Color Purple*).

While many filmmakers achieved fame with a particular kind of story and storytelling, Spielberg proved to be one of cinema's uniquely adept young masters, much like Jean Vigo, Orson Welles and Jean-Luc Godard and as promptly as *The Sugarland Express* and *Jaws*. But *Close Encounters* importantly suggested that Spielberg had a God-given talent to influence mainstream narrative and viewership. His imprimatur was the only counterweight to the growing cynicism during the Eighties decade of Hollywood corporate procedures and its high-concept filmmaking practices that trashed Nouvelle Vague connoisseurship and was crassly based on imported British advertising methods.

Spielberg's interest in genre purity—like the “romance with the Word” he professed at the 1987 Oscar ceremony when accepting the Irving G. Thalberg Award—was bolstered by his craftsman's aesthetic ingenuity and wit. He avoided the sheer, impersonal calculation of industry peers and imitators who chased his success but lacked his unique personal expressiveness; a movie love that could uniquely blend contradictory emotions—humor and fear, tragedy and hope—into unabashed profundity: spiritual revelation, agape. Yet, after nearly a century of classical innovation and modernist revitalization, in an age of hyper-sophistication, Spielberg's signature technique was often mistaken for mere technique.

The first unexpectedly precise insight about Spielberg described his sensibility as “ecumenical,” and the next phase of Spielberg's career confirmed a devotion to spiritual and cinematic practice through more than secular expressivity. The appearance of the uncanny and the supernatural in his films evokes common custom, ritual and tradition—the Ark of the Covenant, the Rainbow Sign, the Holy Grail, even *Jurassic Park's* admonition of “what ought not to be.” These concepts repeat and rehearse traditions that enrich the cultural experience of movies—the screen before one's eyes like a Wailing Wall that receives our genuflection and devotion. As a mass media entertainer and showman, Spielberg spread his awareness of audience expectation, personal feeling and public obligation into the world-citizen expressions of *Always*, *The Last Crusade*, *Jurassic Park*, *Schindler's List*, *The Lost World*, *Amistad*, *Saving Private Ryan*.

Peripatetic creativity characterized his first films of the new millennium—*A.I.*, *Minority Report*, *Catch Me If You Can*. Then 9/11 hit and the most profoundly American film artist

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since D.W. Griffith changed. *The Terminal* wasn't called "The Terminal" for nothing. *War of the Worlds* and *Munich* are simultaneous climaxes of both purgation and new beginnings. His artistry sharpened. He changed games with *The Adventures of Tintin* and *War Horse* (his first animation, his first theatrical adaptation). Game-changers or End-gamers?

Then, with the 2008 election, the ecumenicism soured. Can Spielberg be made great again? Can political revolution be transformed back into revelation? Can the once miraculous gift for mass excitement, enchantment and education be offered with his original virtue and guiltlessness? Obama turned him onto guilt, Tony Kushner brought him corrupt sophistication. Griffith's advancement turned into a retreat from what was both moral and aesthetic.

As this narrative resolves itself, one's early great enthrallment becomes great disappointment and now stands as a hope that greatness will return. His best films will line up with the word of God—they pursue truth without sophistry.

INTRODUCTION

MSGA

Oriana Fallaci: I don't believe in objectivity. A journalist is a historian who writes history in the moment history happens and it is the damn best way to write history.

SPIELBERG'S EXCEPTIONALISM PARALLELS American exceptionalism. His trajectory from the most popular filmmaker in the world to his current marginal status that no longer guarantees a box-office hit—nor popularity—parallels the trajectory of the nation that produced him. Spielberg once excited the imaginations of America's young cultural consumers, but consumers of the current generation ignore his recent entreaties. The embarrassment felt by Spielberg's hipster detractors, who protested his films as corny and middle-brow, is ingrained and turned into American shame. Not even the odd politicization of Spielberg's latest films can satisfy that unease, which is a personal disdain—the opposite of the common, all-American, “suburban” idealization of family and spirit that is at the heart of even his internationally-set films. American shame is the product of progressive politics that seeks to deny or transform America's history and its soul which Spielberg uniquely expressed like no other filmmaker since D.W. Griffith.

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Anyone fortunate enough to go to the movies during the peak moment of Spielberg's exceptionalism—from *Jaws* to *Close Encounters* to *Raiders of the Lost Ark* to *E. T. the Extra-Terrestrial* and *The Color Purple*—knew how special it was for an American pop artist to delight and edify a global audience. That delight was not jingoism but spiritual harmony—unity. Those movies showed the unassumingly sophisticated art form of the cinema going broad and deep into viewers' kinetic and emotional needs. To wonder how Spielberg can be made great again parallels one's hope that America—and its cinema—be rescued from its current crisis, the manic contempt for creativity, originality and ecumenical humanism.

Spielberg's avowed fealty to liberal politics has not only hobbled his miraculous "touch," but prevented him from openly embracing the values implicit in President Donald Trump's optimistic campaign slogan "Make America Great Again." Those values seem hidden from view in Spielberg's recent films, just like the personal treasures hoarded in the *Citizen Kane* (1941) storehouse at the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Spielberg's best chance at renewed popularity is to retrieve his unifying vision and Millennial moviegoers (perhaps future moviegoers) wanting that unity.

Besides sharing a middle name with Steven Allen Spielberg, his filmmaking career parallels my own practice of professional film criticism starting at the peak of the American Renaissance (1967-1983) and through that halcyon period of the culture when I wrote for Wayne State University's *The South End* newspaper and my national launch at New York's *The City Sun*, *New York Press* and *National Review*. This collection of reviews and essays chronicles the warm, radiant, eye-widening light that Spielberg brought to the cinema. For me, each piece

reads like a diaristic memory of how I thought at the time that they were written, taking note of Spielberg's astonishing, developing art and its effect on the world.

There are humble regrets here (every critic has them), but also in-the-moment ideals. Oriana Fallaci was right to reject objectivity—most especially when it comes to the critical branch of journalism. Criticism is never objective but it should be informed and honest and inquiring—and that's the aim of these chronicles. Here's a history of Spielberg's multifarious art, a history of my impressions and a history of American greatness.

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PART ONE

**AMERICA
AND THE
WORLD**

THE SUGARLAND EXPRESS (1974)

The Sugarland Express

CARS AND MOVIES are probably the two most identifiably American phenomena of the century. They both provide different sorts of unprecedented transport and have had an incalculable influence on contemporary American life, by making us travelers and dreamers of a daring, romantic sort. They have the unusual ability to, at a single-time, hold many people and involve them in a shared experience.

The Sugarland Express is a film that glories in the existence, the use and the beauty of automobiles, and it does something unique in that it expresses human nature through automobiles, through the way people act in and with them. This isn't as weird as it may sound, for is there any aspect of 20th century life that cannot and has not happened on wheels?

There is a central scene in *The Sugarland Express* in which the lead characters—fugitives flouting the law—spend the night in a trailer watching a drive-in movie. In this scene, they illustrate the inextricable faults and good points of their nature (their awareness and their naiveté). The scene indicates what it is that gives the film its unusual energy and meaning: The intrinsic value of cars and movies in modern American life. Take them away and we lose our color—they are our color; part of our own peculiar style and quality of living.

Cars and motor vehicles of all sorts are more than just a motif throughout this film they also become characters that are keys to the exclusively American spirit of the movie's energy and humor. The director, Steven Spielberg (who makes a stunning debut with this film) shows an inordinate and exhilarating love for cars; so much love that he sees them as toys—things he can manipulate to show what he knows and feels about modern American life.

The film uses the phenomena of our culture to express a profound knowledge of it. It does this playfully, but the glee it imparts doesn't lessen the movie's impact; it's a hilariously wry vision of modern behavior, and is at all times, very effective. Even when there are toys on screen, they are formidable portents also invested with character. One of the saddest and most memorable images in the movie is the sight of car tires crushing and overturning a Teddy Bear on a dusty road. That's the kind of movie this is—crazily sweet and charming with a touch of pathos.

The Teddy Bear belongs to Lou Jean and Clovis Poplin (Goldie Hawn and William Atherton) an escaped convict and his wife, who kidnap a Texas policeman (Michael Sacks) and drive his patrol car to Sugarland, the town where their baby (put under court custody when Lou Jean herself served a jail sentence), has been put up for adoption in the home of foster parents. In their headstrong endeavor, the Poplins go across Texas dragging behind them in frenetic pursuit what looks like the entire state police force.

The film is based on a true story that happened in 1969, but it has the pleasure of an extraordinary fable. It's like a great, profound joyride in a car with its motor started before one realizes it. In no time at all after the opening, you

discover, engrossed and laughing, that the film built up a good head of steam.

It's as invigorating as anyone could want a movie to be, yet when the film takes a dramatic turn and then ends, one may feel there's a fault in its not having the definitive power of the endings of *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971). This joyride of a movie doesn't come to a psychologically or emotionally jolting end. It isn't like a pretentious touch of cynicism, or a try for a classic dramatic close; the ending is right. There's a limit to the knowingness of the picture—its theme is expounded early and brilliantly, but it doesn't deepen. Yet, it does an emotional about-face with great surety and persuasiveness. The ending leaves us with our feelings for the characters and for their story's meaning. We mull it over and are profoundly, almost inexplicably touched.

Lou Jean and Clovis Poplin are impetuous daredevils, prowled by Justice figure Captain Tanner (Ben Johnson). They befriend their hostage and all of them are put under stress. The movie is effective in showing the import of their behaviors, but what elevates it are the automobiles. They're alternately giddy, affectionate figures, then pathetic ones, ruthlessly destroyed, or even a medium upon which a person vents his rage. Innumerable police cars with their lights flashing pursue Lou Jean, Clovis and Slide and that, along with the vivid neon of roadside establishments and the parades and congregations of rural folk who sympathize with the Poplins and cheer them on, makes the film like a great dazzling circus that displays and incarnates wondrous human folly.

At the beginning of her career, Hawn had a bright, shrill daffiness that was often cute, but not much to brag about or

build a career on. I had come to accept it, thinking it was the best and probably all she could do. It hardly shows in his movie and I didn't miss it. Here she has a human glow and energy—gumption instead of kookiness. She uses that glow and energy to beguile the three men, and to entice wary Clovis out of prison, even out of his senses and onto his fate. Atherton (who sings “What'll I Do” in *The Great Gatsby* (1974)) portrays Clovis equally well, and Michael Sacks redeems himself after his showing his limitations in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1972).

It's said that people buy cars to fit their personalities. Spielberg takes off from that axiom using cars to express and embody the soul of his characters, his story, and American life. There's more spirit to his direction that there was to Peckinpah's mechanical marvels in *The Getaway* (1972), and it's quite a feat. It's a bit shallow but like the careening, hopping, sashaying automobiles, it's funny and touching.

Spielberg may not be an artist of deep ideas, but he's able to transmute affection and give a story fullness without depth—that's what a lot of the best movie entertainments have had, and an audience can respond deeply to that.

The Sugarland Express is an effervescent, clear-cut movie. It takes one through a gamut of emotions, and is marvelously entertaining. There hasn't been a comedy nearly this good since *M*A*S*H* and I'm almost sure this is going to be a big hit—it really deserves to be.

The South End

March 1974

The Sugarland Express and Duel on DVD

SOME PEOPLE LIKED Steven Spielberg better when they felt like they didn't have to take him seriously. For a long while, these contrarians preferred *Duel* (1971) to the large scale and large ambitions of such theatrical productions as *Close Encounters* and *The Color Purple*. Even after *Schindler's List*, one mainstream New York reviewer argued with me that *Raiders of the Lost Ark* was Spielberg's best movie. (Was he pulling my leg or just shortening his intelligence?)

This dilemma is refreshed with the new restoration of *Duel*, a made-for-tv movie that Spielberg just barely transcends. The square frame and spare plot (motorist Dennis Weaver is menaced by an 18-wheeler along the California highways) don't lend themselves to grand themes, but Spielberg makes the most he can out of camera velocity and surprise edits. It's a textbook example of how virtuosity can lift a B-movie into a new level.

Duel offers mystery and threat. It is the most plainly manipulative of all Spielberg films, but you have to be attuned to the potency of movie grammar to see anything more in it than the kind of portentous graphics that buffs love in Kubrick. By releasing *Duel* along with the first DVD version of *The Sugarland Express*, Universal has helped clarify the difference between a B-movie with potential and a full-scale movie vision. *Sugarland* belongs to the same lovers-on-the-lam genre as *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Thieves Like Us* (1974) and *Badlands* (1973), but it is the most dynamic of the bunch. The feel for the pop-culture landscape (endless ribbons of police cars

stretched along the highways in pursuit of Goldie Hawn and William Atherton) is made almost tactile by Vilmos Zsigmond. But this 1974 movie still astonishes through its combination of folk and pop humor and visual panache.

The difference from *Duel* is like that between an idea and an experience. The outlaw couple of *Sugarland* trying to reclaim their baby from foster parents is not mysterious. It can be appreciated as a parable (based on a real-life incident) of the younger generation testing its allegiance to the values that the older generation thinks are solely theirs. (Ben Johnson plays the first of Spielberg's ambivalent authority figures.) A key moment is Atherton realizing the gravity of his heartfelt folly when pantomiming a Road Runner cartoon. The meta-movie complexity is way beyond *Duel*—way beyond Guy Maddin. You'd have to be blind not to take this kind of talent seriously.

New York Press
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