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## Why Did I Marry A Sentimentalist?: Family & Domesticity in the Films of Steven Spielberg

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Why Did I Marry A Sentimentalist?:  
Family & Domesticity in the Films of Steven Spielberg

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Arts  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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## INTRODUCTION: Establishing the Critical Context

In January of 2017, roughly halfway through my work on this thesis, prominent Marxist-feminist film critic Molly Haskell published *Steven Spielberg: A Life in Films* for Yale University Press' "Jewish Lives" series. The book, which purported to be a generous reevaluation of Spielberg's career by an avowed skeptic, spurred a short wave of think-pieces considering why Spielberg has been unfairly maligned by the critical establishment. Considering that my motivation for pursuing this project was the lack of scholarly rigor in discussions surrounding his filmography, I found myself somewhat deflated—Haskell had stolen my thunder. No matter that my reaction to the book's release was baseless, I struggled to consider how to move forward. If Haskell's book was as advertised, it would provide the close analyses of Spielberg's films that have been sorely lacking and that I had hoped to write. Reading the book, however, I found that Haskell's approach follows precisely the misguided assumptions and reductive analyses that have dominated the discourse surrounding Spielberg's films.

In her preface to the book, Haskell frames Spielberg's films as being anti-ambiguity. She writes, "He always wanted his films to arrive someplace. But brooding ambiguities, unresolved longings, things left unsaid, and the erotic transactions of men and women are the very things that drew me to movies in the first place. His great subjects—children, adolescents—and genres—science fiction, fantasy, horror, action-adventure—were stay-away zones for me. Even his forays into history were inspirational rather than ironic or fatalistic, the work of a man who favored moral clarity, was uncomfortable with shades of grey" (x). She frames the project of the book in



a negative way—as if she is burdened by having to write about such an anti-intellectual filmmaker. This is significant not because of her opinions of the films—liking or disliking a work should not be a factor of rigorous criticism—but because of her willingness to dismiss their intellectual engagement and accept surface aesthetic engagement as sufficient. Claiming off-the-bat that his films patently lack what she frames as mature and worthwhile values ("brooding ambiguities, unresolved longings..."), it is as if writing this book is a favor Haskell is doing for someone else. And beginning with this perspective completely colors her engagement with Spielberg's films. In the vein of this attitude, the majority of the book is a collection of assumptions regarding Spielberg's life and psychology, as well as brief only loosely detailed reactions to the films.

The issues with this approach crystalized early in Haskell's book, when she claims to have figured out Spielberg's "truly" personal film: *An American Tail* (dir. Don Bluth, 1986). She suggests that this film, which Spielberg executive produced and oversaw, "is in many ways more deeply personal than 1993's *Schindler's List*" (21), for the simple reason that its protagonist, Feivel, shared Spielberg's grandfather's name. While it is true that the film is in many ways personal, presenting a uniquely Jewish-American story in Spielbergian fashion, the notion that it is somehow more personal than *Schindler's List* reveals an apparent lack of engagement with the emotional and intellectual complexities of the latter film, as well as of Jewish identity. *An American Tail*, Haskell fails to realize, is "deeply personal" for any American Jew—and therein lies its power. It is a deeply simple story, and a uniquely Jewish-American one, but not a uniquely Spielbergian one. The film has its own complexities, and notably does not shy away from harsh realities. Early in the film, for example, the first night of Hannukkah brings an attack

on the Mousekewitz family by the cats, framed parallel to a violent, flaming pogrom by the human Cossacks on the Jewish village. But *An American Tail* shows little of the nuance and rigor with which Spielberg executes even his most seemingly simplistic, child-oriented entertainments—his artistic and intellectual nuance is revealed through the craft of his directing. Without closely engaging with that essential element of his films, it is impossible to discuss Spielberg's films on their own terms, and so in any productive way.

Haskell's prioritizing of *An American Tail* over *Schindler's List* is typical of the reductive mythologizing that dominates her analysis of Spielberg's career. With little evidence of direct creative input in the film, Haskell nonetheless considers *An American Tail* primarily a Spielberg film thanks to a complete disregard for the role of the director. And because of its moral clarity and simplistic narrative, more personal and Spielbergian than *Schindler's List*. In the fashion of many Spielberg critics, Haskell does not allow for the ambiguities in his films to be his own. The simplicity is Spielbergian, the ambiguity is a fluke. And though the focus of my project is not to speculate on Spielberg's psychological intention or emotional attachment, it should be noted that the counterpoint between Oskar Schindler's *goyishe* flair for pomp and Itzhak Stern's moral is far more Spielbergian than a mere story of survival. That Spielberg makes his most ostensibly personal film about a Nazi saving Jews, rather than the survival of one mouse-Jew, provides a far richer insight into his own Jewish identity and insecurity than anything in *An American Tail*. Haskell limits the scope of Spielberg's Jewish engagement to “promises desperately believed and hopes dashed by brutal reality” (20). But by making his seminal Holocaust film through the eyes of the gentile Schindler, Spielberg dives into a moral gray area that Haskell at no point engages with. For her, a sweet story about the trials of a Jewish mouse is more Spielbergian than a

complex engagement with history and representation, politics and faith, loyalty and compromise. This value judgement on her part is not defended with analysis but is an excuse to avoid analysis—if the true Spielberg is found in his simple films, why waste time parsing through the challenging visual treatment of *The Color Purple*, or the unsettling approach to humanism in *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, or the relentlessly murky politics of *Munich*.

But despite this lack of engagement with Spielberg's films on their own terms, there is a consistency in the rhetoric surrounding him that is itself revealing. Lester D. Friedman writes in the introduction to his 2006 biography *Citizen Spielberg* (University of Illinois Press), "This book has taken longer to complete and entailed more frustration than any of my previous works. The difficulty was neither the breadth nor the depth of the subject matter. It was a question of finding my voice" (3). While Friedman's analyses of Spielberg's films are more rigorous and generous than Haskell's, both projects are distinctly personal. Friedman is right to be challenged of the project, but fails to consider that this may in fact be due to the films themselves. Haskell ends her preface similarly: "To tell the story of Spielberg through his films is to take into account one's own engagements" (xiii). This suggests a reflective qualities in Spielberg's films that neither Friedman nor Haskell even attempt to engage.

"As an artist," wrote British novelist Martin Amis, "Spielberg is a mirror, not a lamp." Amis, known for his parodic explorations of the excesses of late-capitalist Western society, became one of *E.T.*'s most ardent supporters upon its release in 1982. He concluded his glowing review in *The Guardian* by writing, "[Spielberg's] line to the common heart is so direct that he unmans you with the frailty of your own defenses, and the transparency of your most intimate fears and hopes." Using Amis' comparison of Spielberg to "a mirror, not a lamp," sheds light on

discontinuity between the criticism of Spielberg's films and the films themselves. Critics have been looking at a mirror and reviewing a lamp—that is, the criteria for evaluating a lamp's functionality and aesthetic value are useless in evaluating the effectiveness of a mirror, and vice-versa. To watch *E.T.* and reject it for how it makes you feel (“icky,” “manipulated,” and “queasy” were common reactions) is to look at a mirror and reject it for how it makes you look.

Spielberg's assertion that *E.T.* is a love story, “an intimate, seductive meeting of minds,” depends a certain openness in the viewer, a willingness to consider forms of love and vulnerability that go far beyond the romantic (this love story is between a nude, elderly being and an impressionable adolescent—the subtexts are plenty). Whether knowingly or not, both Friedman and Haskell reveal this unique quality of Spielberg's films simply by their personal struggle to find an appropriate voice.

The struggle to appreciate Spielberg's unique brand of humanism extends to some of his collaborators: *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* was initially to be made from a script by Paul Schrader, but after creative differences Spielberg decided to spearhead his own screenplay. Schrader recalls, “It came down to this. I said, ‘I refuse to send the guy off to start a McDonald's franchise.’ Steven said he wanted an ordinary man, precisely the sort who would want to set up a McDonald's franchise on another planet. Steven's Capra-like infatuation with the common man was diametrically opposed to my religious infatuation with the redeeming hero” (*Eyes on Cinema*). This dispute illustrates not only the core of Spielberg's vision for *Close Encounters*—he is less concerned with the aliens than with our experience of them—but also the humanism that drives his films. The film is about what happens to an already-fraught family when aliens enter the picture, what a divine abduction does to a mother's understanding of reality. This

fixation on disruptions of the home, interactions with the extreme, is an essential aspect of Spielberg's entire filmography.

Because of his umbrella status in 1980s Hollywood, and his effectively creating the blockbuster, it can be difficult to thoroughly engage with the artistic nuance of his work. Spielberg's influence is so wide-ranging, and his films so complex in terms of personal vision as well as pressure from audience and studio expectations, that it can be difficult to perceive his films as artworks on their own terms. But here I posit there is a through-line in his filmography that, if studied closely, will illuminate his unique talents and the mechanisms by which he achieves his success—that is, how he approaches the childhood perspective. This includes his engagement with the emotional intelligence of his younger characters, as well as the more general child-like awe and wonder that he inspires in audiences even without a child foil on screen.

Through his entire body of work, Spielberg seems to suggest an inherent authenticity in childhood experience, an innate wisdom and value in the complex innocence of the child. Since for Spielberg the mechanisms and magic of cinema are tied to the child's capacity for wonderment, it is through this thread that his most nuanced engagements are revealed. With this theme in mind, his directorial singularity becomes apparent in his *mis-en-scène*, lighting, camera work, dialogue, visual effects, and editing. By closely dissecting Spielberg's craft, we see the degree of artful intentionality that goes into each film. When Spielberg missteps, those films are as interesting and no less artful—incomplete, perhaps, but in the sense that an auteur's least compelling work is more valuable than a machine's best, even through Spielberg's least effective films we can see a personal vision and intimate engagement with the medium.

As I will be approaching these issues through the lens of auteurism, loaded with implication, it is necessary to define the term as it applies to my thesis. I posit that the auteur qualities of Spielberg's work come from being able to track a logical and cohesive, though complex, developing worldview through his career. This is a worldview and approach to filmmaking that transcends his subject material. Pauline Kael's criticism of the auteur theory is that it can allow lowbrow film to masquerade as highbrow film—by projecting our ideas of an artistic vision onto a manufactured & multifaceted product, we are simply trying to justify our entertainment. But her argument against this approach to film analysis is reductive—in fact, by applying the auteurist lens to Spielberg's films, we are able to engage with the overall work more deeply on its own terms. *New Yorker* critic Richard Brody writes, in response to Kael, that “a well directed movie is one that reveals the director's personal involvement in it.” He also notes that the auteurist lens adds to film “criticism the element of artistic psychology” (*Auteur, Auteur*, 2009). Spielberg's films become infinitely more complex, and the tension between his showmanship and proclivity for moral ambiguity is revealed, only when we are able to isolate his directorial role and its effects on the project at large.

Andrew Sarris writes in his seminal essay “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962,” while discussing Marlon Brando's 1961 directorial debut *One-Eyed Jacks*, “One can talk here about photography, editing, acting, but not directing” (*Film Theory and Criticism*, 562) Like for Brody, auteurism is not a question of quality of execution, but rather of the presence of the director. Sarris also notes that “because so much of the American cinema is commissioned, a director is forced to express his personality through the visual treatment of material rather than through the literary content of the material” (563). This is precisely why it is necessary to use the auteurist

lens to truly understand Spielberg's work—the tension between visual treatment and literary content can be viewed as parallel to Spielberg's tension between personal vision and audience expectation. Spielberg short-circuits this, however, by creating an audience base whose excitement comes as much from desire to see a particular story as excitement to see the director's *treatment* of the story.

Spielberg, throughout his career, is well aware of the debates regarding the auteur theory. An autodidact in cinema history and production, his films engage this tension between theories to their advantage. The lens of auteurism is particularly useful in distinguishing Spielberg from his contemporaries and protégés. His films are all of a piece, bearing the Spielberg stamp. But those that most effectively achieve a synthesis between his proclivity towards showmanship and his intellectual rigor are those most deeply engaged with childhood experience and variations on the home. Spielberg assumes an inherent authenticity to the childhood perspective, and his attempts to revive that in adult audiences are both humbling and illuminating.

In the following three chapters, I hope to shine a light on a few key issues through a close analysis of some of his films. The first issue is that of how Spielberg, though more often than not working from scripts and stories that are not his own, is able to articulate a singular and personal vision. To identify his effectiveness as primarily a result of his business acumen or Hollywood's climate in the 1970s and 1980s is not only misguided, but also fails to capture why it is that the films have such profound effects on audiences—it skirts around the heart of the matter: that there is something in the films themselves that resonates and disarms.

This brings us to my subject's significance beyond the question of Spielberg as an auteur: the foundational assumptions and vocabulary of film studies have provided a framework for

easily disregarding and relegating a certain kind of film to the sphere of machine-produced mass entertainment. Limited by this framework, we have yet to truly understand why his films resonate so widely without sacrificing their singular vision. To simply apply to Spielberg the standards applied to, say, Jean-Luc Godard or Stanley Kubrick would be misguided. Their work, often embodying a detached and cynical quality, is more amenable to academic film studies—they are, first and foremost, cerebral films. Spielberg, on the other hand, is primarily engaged with emotional vulnerability and warmth, and uses these as springboards for intellectual engagement. Because film studies lends itself so well to discussions of the cerebral and theoretical, it can be difficult to discuss Spielberg's heart-on-his-sleeve sensibility in a rigorous yet uncynical way.

Critic Armond White, who in 2014 was expelled from the New York Film Critics Circle for his contrary and often provocative rhetoric, gets at the heart of the matter in his review of *A.I.*, published in the *New York Press*. Admiring Spielberg's ambition and the film's bewildering effect on critics and audiences alike, White argues, "*A.I.* goes so openly and deeply into beneficent emotions it is bound to scare off pseudo-sophisticates, people who think it is progress to forget they were ever children." This critique takes dead-aim at those critics so content with dismissing Spielberg's films for their engagement with childhood emotion (i.e. Jonathan Rosenbaum & Gene Siskel on *Empire of the Sun*, Manohla Dargis & Mick LaSalle on *A.I.*). White takes a step back from the critique that Spielberg's emotional engagement is limited to childlike sentimentality, questioning firstly why it is that childhood emotions seem dismissible and secondly why it is that childhood perspective is so often conflated with sentimentality. In *A.I.*, Spielberg directly confronts his accusers by telling his story through varying layers of



artificiality and realism, self-aware kitsch and visual experimentation that complicate rather than answer these questions.

But rather than simply respond to critics with whom I disagree, my own analysis will focus mainly on the nuance of Spielberg's craft, which I hope will shed light on why it is that his films inspire such tense discourse. Drawing primarily from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *E.T.: The Extra Terrestrial* (1982), *Empire of the Sun* (1987), *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2000), and *Munich* (2005), I will attempt to distill what might be called a uniquely Spielbergian approach to cinema. Chapter One will explore Spielberg's development of a cinematic vocabulary for non-verbal communication. In Chapter Two, having established the formal qualities that define Spielberg's approach to cinema, I will explore his representations of domesticity and home environments. Finally, Chapter Three will consider the ways in which his technique and thematic preoccupations combine to achieve a brilliantly realized synthesis of camera and character.

Dissecting the craft of each film—lighting patterns (e.g. soft, bright streaks through windows, shimmering halos), framing and camera movements (e.g. low angles, push-ins), mis-en-scène, and editing—will illuminate the intentionality and intellectual rigor of Spielberg's filmmaking. I choose these five films (though others will be mentioned in passing) to discuss Spielberg's core preoccupations because of their tonal distinction and thematic similarities. Focusing on the threads that run through these tremendously varied films—varied in both production and content—will articulate the degree to which Spielberg's fingerprints color every aspect of his films. At points taking inspiration from Nigel Morris' comprehensive study of Spielberg's career *Empire of Light* (Wallflower Press, 2007), I will show how the films' formal

nuances and thematic profundities, much more so than the marketing and culture of the New Hollywood, are responsible for his profound effect on American audiences.

Spielberg is a filmmaker of collapsed dualities. He uses the visceral and the spectacle *in order to* reach the cerebral, the nuanced. He uses the new marketing systems of Hollywood to reach wide audiences with his messages, rather than using this new playing field for cynical, personal gain (though it is of no help that his net-worth now exceeds \$3.7 billion). More than any other filmmaker of his generation, Spielberg has showed a unique mastery of the visual language of cinema—his kineticism and dynamism in the medium are astonishingly articulate. His camera often emphasizes the tactile: hands clapping, fingers tracing maps or other surfaces, hands touching faces to confirm their reality. His visual storytelling, distinct from his dialogue, has a transcendent quality that has influenced and inspired filmmakers worldwide invested in using the unique abilities of the medium to connect widely yet intimately with audiences. Ranging from the likes of Wim Wenders and Francois Truffaut to J.J. Abrams and Michael Bay, Spielberg's influence transcends the distinctions of film studies circles—practicing filmmakers tend to be, more so than critics, willing to engage directly with the artistic value of his craft.

## Chapter One: Kinetic Filmmaking & Non-Verbal Communication

Spielberg's films achieve a kind of character study through a study of wordless interactions—how people see, receive, touch, are touched. Glimmers of communication, often non-verbal, are the most revealing for Spielberg. It is through vivid instances of non-verbal communication that each character is fully realized—the endings of *Empire of the Sun* & *The Color Purple* articulate this, with the touch of long-lost family. The ending of *Close Encounters* is the ultimate instance of this—the essence of Lacombe's character and the alien's values can be distilled from how they experience their sign communication. These interactions reveal the characters' inner lives and emotional nuances. This is not to say that his films are conceived as showcases for actors—they rarely are—but rather that the films articulate the depth of their characters through means other than the spoken word. These moments of revealing interaction exist in concert with, though distinct from, the narrative. They create multiple layers within each scene (and often shot)—the camera at once advances the narrative and reveals the character as they react. This duality is the driving force behind many of Spielberg's most impactful sequences—the camera and editing mediate narrative and character in a way that enhances the urgency and depth of both.

In his earliest films, Spielberg began developing a vocabulary for communicating non-verbal relationship dynamics. His first professionally financed film, a 1968 26-minute short called *Amblin* (shot by Allen Daviau, who would go on to shoot *E.T.*, *The Color Purple*, and *Empire of the Sun*), chronicles a wordless romantic journey between two hitchhikers—a male



(fig. 1) Dennis Weaver's emasculation

square and a female hippie—across the California desert to the Pacific. The film tells its story through the characters' glances and gestures, and the filmmaking gives shape to these nuances and brings them to the fore. Clever experiments with foley audio and original score, as opposed to any sync-sound or dialogue, articulate the emotions and narrative momentum.

*Amblin* launched Spielberg on brief a career directing television, culminating in his 1971 film *Duel*. The made-for-TV thriller, Spielberg's first film to receive international attention, is an experiment in form. *Duel* introduces its protagonist, a traveling salesman played by Dennis Weaver, being passive-aggressively berated by his wife over a payphone. The film's first dialogue, over the phone, emasculates its lead character. His esteem is controlled remotely. This lends the film its allegorical quality as our protagonist gets into a fight to the death with an 18-wheel oil tanker, conspicuously labelled "FLAMMABLE!"— a road-rage fantasy spurned by domestic emasculation. It is both an exercise in pure suspense and an exquisitely grotesque tour

of Americana imagery—sequences of relentless tension are punctuated by bizarre pit-stops that showcase a Fellini-esque catalog of local faces. Weaver’s phone call with his wife, for example, happens on a payphone in a laundromat and is filmed through the open door of a washing machine as an elderly woman’s obese arms load the machine (fig. 1).

While American distributors saw the film as television-fodder, it was released theatrically in Europe—across the Atlantic, the film was seen as an artful, distinctly auteurist formal exercise in suspense, whereas state-side it was reductively seen as yet another of the era’s cheap TV thrill-machines. Though Haskell applauds Spielberg’s “extraordinary technical mastery” in the film, she attributes it to his “hard-won lessons from television—how to avoid monotony and vary interest visually” (50). Seeing the film as a mere showcase of television skill, Haskell fails to recognize the film’s bizarrely rich characterizations and staggering visual ingenuity. The film is more of a piece with Polanski’s *Knife in the Water* or Malle’s *Elevator to the Gallows* than the television shows and B-movies on which Spielberg grew up—and to which Haskell limits his creative capacity. Director David Lean, whose *Lawrence of Arabia* Spielberg cites among his biggest influences, recalls seeing *Duel* during its theatrical run in the UK. Describing the experience, Lean says, “Immediately I knew that here was a very bright new director. Steven takes real pleasure in the sensuality of forming action scenes—wonderful flowing movements. He has this extraordinary size of vision, a sweep that illuminates his films. But then Steven is the way the movies used to be.”

The film opens with a 3-minute traveling shot from a car’s point of view—the camera is attached to the car, level with the headlights and pointed straight ahead, as if we are hovering just above ground. The accompanying audio is from the car radio—perhaps diegetic, except that we

see no part of the car or the radio. We are driving and listening to the radio, except that we see none of these. This bold opening eventually made its way into a film by one of Europe's most philosophically engaged auteurs—Wim Wenders' *Lisbon Story*. That film, a pseudo-mystery, pseudo-road movie, follows Rudiger Volger through the streets of Lisbon as he records the city's sounds in an effort to find an old friend gone missing. It begins with a shot identical to Spielberg's in *Duel*, except that here we are driving from Berlin to Lisbon. The radio we hear, its dial often changing, is a tour through the languages of Europe, ingeniously articulating the passage of time. That Wenders quotes *Duel* is a testament to its value not simply as a technical showcase but also as a uniquely artistic vision of both Americana imagery and the road movie as a form.

Throughout the film, Spielberg is able to wordlessly raise the stakes higher and higher. Weaver's is the only principal role in *Duel*, his floundering family-life expressed through just the one phone call with his wife. Establishing Weaver's frustrated nature from the film's start makes all the more determined his fight with the tanker—he has nothing to lose. While the tanker is from the start an intimidating character, the rules of its game are not set until a few minutes into the road fight. For several minutes initially, the tanker intimidates Dennis Weaver's sedan in ways terrifying but not necessarily lethal—tailgating and passing. There is a bully, but not yet a villain. After a moment of calm, the truck ahead of the sedan, Weaver decides to speed up and tailgate the tanker. Surprisingly, a hand emerges from the truck driver's window and waves to let the sedan pass. Weaver begins to do so, but as soon as he enters the opposite lane an oncoming car barrels towards him. Weaver swerves away, just barely missing a head-on collision. This moment establishes that the oil tanker is truly evil—the one time we see any indication of a

human presence in the truck, in what appears to be gesture of kindness, that human confirms his desire to kill Weaver. After this point, the film is no longer about road games but rather an emasculated husband pinned in a fight-to-the-death. The film's lack of a non-diegetic score contributes to its allegorical quality, as well as its formal purity. The tension is heightened by the long silences and screeching tires, blanketed by the drone of the engines—a sensory nightmare.

After developing this visually-oriented and distinctly kinetic cinematic language, Spielberg would use the mechanisms of non-verbal communication to varying degrees. Non-verbal communication, in his films' worlds, becomes necessary once verbal forms of communication are no longer satisfactory. Whether to articulate small moments of nuanced emotion or great climaxes, it is through instances of non-verbal interaction that we find the greatest truths. Whereas *Amblin* and *Duel* experiment with forms of wordless communication, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* is Spielberg's first articulation of what approaches a thesis on the the matter. The importance of non-verbal communication grows throughout the film, reaching its climax with a spectacular sound-and-light show. This is followed by an even more significant exchange of sign-language gestures between Lacombe and an alien.

Spielberg establishes early in the film the limits of verbal communication. After Roy's first encounter, when his face gets burned by the aura of a UFO which he then chases along the road, he rushes home to wake his wife, Ronnie. His excitement is overwhelming—he cannot stop trying to describe what he saw, frantically turning on all the lights and talking at the speed of light but unable to articulate. As he paces around the bedroom, frantically recounting his experience, Ronnie, woken from her sleep, groggily tries to tell Roy: "...they said they want you to call them right away, they said they couldn't reach you...the phone's been ringing off the

hook, woke Sylvia up two times already, I think you better call them.” As she says this, Roy talks over her about how what he saw is “better than the Aurora Borealis.” He has been consumed and transformed by his encounter and is unable to process the fact that he ignored his higher-ups and did not in fact get to his job at any point in the night. While Ronnie is telling him harsh realities, suggesting that he may have lost his job, Roy is lost in his head, obsessed with what he saw. Nothing she can say will bring him out of this haze.

The climactic conclusion of *Close Encounters*, which lasts for roughly a half hour, features the arrival and landing of the alien mothership, the return of Barry and his fellow abductees, and Roy’s ascent into the cosmos. This sequence features the three principal characters (Roy, Jillian, and Lacombe) as well as dozens of secondary characters and hundreds of extras, all ready to provide the Spielberg Face whenever their part of the set appears on screen. Within this sound-and-light show, witnessed by the giant audience of awe-struck scientists, appears the zenith of Spielberg’s early expression of non-verbal communication. After the aliens select Roy to join them on their journey and usher him into the mothership (Williams’ score here



(fig. 2) Lacombe gestures to his new friend



quotes “When You Wish Upon A Star”), a single alien comes back out and approaches Lacombe. The two figures lock eyes for a moment, and Lacombe’s begin to swell. The alien has a gentle demeanor. We cut to an over-the-shoulder of Lacombe, aching to communicate with a shared vocabulary, as he begins using his right hand to slowly sign the five-note melody that his team had been using to communicate with the UFOs. The alien watches curiously, attentively (fig. 2). The film cuts to a close-up shot of Lacombe’s hand completing the signs. Once complete, the camera pans up to show Lacombe’s face at the foreground and his assistant Laughlin’s to his back-right. Lacombe’s mouth is agape, grinning broadly, eyes watering. What is he reacting to? We cut back to a medium-close-up of the alien, looking straight at Lacombe, signing the five-note melody with the same hand gestures, mimicking Lacombe. Once finished, the alien flashes a broad, toothy smile and shifts its head left and right, as if assessing the crowd. This exchange is followed by a series of medium closeups of reaction shots—the Spielberg Face—that pull back each time to reveal a different cluster of men, many wearing aviator sunglasses, all in suits or lab-coats.

This sign-language exchange between Lacombe and the alien is the culmination of several issues the film raises regarding translation, communication, and truthfulness. Using the shared vocabulary is not a means to an end but an end in itself. It is not a question of what they are saying, but rather that the cosmic/messianic and the grounded/human have formed a mode of communication, are able to fathom and accept the other’s terms. Lacombe is communicating through a complex musical sequence simplified to a five-note melody and translated to its visual/gestural representation. These layers of compromise are necessary for communication—who knows if the aliens have ears? if they consume audio through some other mechanism? if they

conceive of sound in the same way as humans? The most direct line of communication is the hand gestures, and it works. The hand gestures bring Lacombe and the alien to the true climax of their interaction: the shared toothy smiles. These smiles express a profound empathy in Spielberg's filmmaking. The alien and Lacombe are smiling because their system worked. More significantly, however, the smiles show that both parties are aware of how fundamentally powerful this exchange truly is, and that the flood of positive emotion is, quite literally, universal.

If gesture (signs) and light are used to communicate between disparate entities on a cosmic scale, then tactility is how Spielberg expresses significant connection on a more human, intimate level. Early on in *Empire of the Sun*, we see tactile communication between past and present. When Jamie first returns home after being separated from his parents in the chaotic city streets, he runs upstairs to his parents' bedroom only to find it torn to shreds—lamps and clothes and furniture and bedding strewn all over. Spielberg's camera, exploring the room from the boy's point of view, settles on a tipped container of talcum powder spilling out over the desk and covering the floor. Jamie notices footsteps and handprints in the powder—they tell some kind of story. The room shows clear signs of a struggle, its harrowing moments told through the marks in the powder: dragged fingers at various spots around the floor, shoe-prints and boot-prints, broken high-heels nearby. Jamie sees the story in the powder and, overcome, abruptly opens the window and lets in big gust of wind. By opening the window he is effectively erasing what happened. The prints in the powder had created a palimpsest of the violence that occurred in the room. This leads him to believe his parents are dead—a notion which he literally blows out of his sight. It is at this point that Jamie's narrative truly kicks off—he must learn how to become an adult, alone,

at age twelve. He receives this wake-up call from the past, tactile signs that reveal to him what occurred.



(fig. 3) Peter Pan returns to Neverland in *Hook*

In the film's final scene, Jamie's reunion with his parents, Spielberg presents a trope that appears frequently enough in his filmography to rival his disturbed refrigerator: hands touching faces. Whether played with shameless sentimentality, as when the Lost Boys touch every inch of Peter Pan's face upon his return to Neverland in *Hook* (fig. 3), with a heavy element of fantasy and suspension of disbelief (as in *E.T.*), or with utter seriousness, as in *Empire of the Sun*'s finale, these moments have a disarmingly earnest quality. This recurrent image is a product of Spielberg's uniquely tactile filmmaking, where the scene's grounding comes from the characters' physical engagement with their surroundings. The hands touching faces represent the emotional climax of this sort of tactile engagement. In these instances, neither words nor sight are sufficient—Spielberg tries to express the sole sensation that film patently cannot.

Towards the end of *Empire of the Sun*, after the internment camp where Jamie is held is liberated by American troops, the film cuts to an orphanage for European children. We see a

crowd of orphans, eagerly craning their necks and angling to see a batch of parents whose children have gone missing. The film cuts back and forth between the crowd of kids and the crowd of parents, as each person tries to locate their loved ones. As the camera dollies across the crowd of children, level with their heads so that the tallest pre-teens are cut off, it is easy to miss Jamie, standing towards the back of the crowd, stoic and unmoving. Unlike the other children, he appears completely disaffected. After one successful reunion between mother and daughter, the orphanage becomes a madhouse as parents and children run around frantic, trying to find one another.

In the midst of the chaos, the camera focuses on Jamie's parents. They look just as they did before the outbreak of the war and their separation from Jamie (though his mother's lipstick is significantly darker than when we first saw her). We return to a shot of Jamie in the midst of the crowd, but this time the camera is at the level of an adult's eye-line, looking slightly down onto the crowd. Jamie's parents walk forcefully but carefully through the children, trying to spot their son. The father, too concerned to look closely, walks right past Jamie who, disaffected and numb, is unrecognizable compared to the innocent choirboy that opened the film. His father either does not notice or recognize Jamie. He wades through the crowd of children, skipping right past his son. This alludes to an earlier sequence in the film—Jamie's narrow escape from the reeds in the internment camp, the Imperial guard stepping right over him—which will be explored closely in Chapter 3. The focalization in that scene, where the stakes are actually as high as Jamie imagines but far more cynical and depraved, serves to articulate a disparity between Jamie's experience of the world and how that world appears from a distance. With this

final scene, that focalization becomes real as the fathers' gaze prevents him from seeing this new Jamie, & vice versa.

It is Jamie's mother who, wading slowly and gingerly through the crowd of children, spots her son and heads straight towards him, the father tagging behind. She makes eye-contact with Jamie as she and her husband come closer. Jamie and his mother stare at each other in awe for a moment before the boy shifts his gaze to lock eyes with his father, and then back again to his mother. As this sequence unfolds, very slowly, the diegetic audio of the families reuniting is gradually replaced by Jamie and his choir singing "Suo Gân," the Welsh lullaby we first hear during the film's opening montage. The film—Jamie—withholds any embrace for over a minute. After thirty seconds stunned eye contact, Jamie gently grabs his mother's hand and inspects her perfectly manicured fingers. He slowly moves his hand up to his mother's face and touches her lower lip, softly and with intent, and then rubs the lipstick residue between his fingers. After this, he removes his mother's hat and touches some strands of her hair. A slight smile appears on



(fig. 4) Jamie reunites with his parents

Jamie's face and he carefully moves his hands to each of his mothers upper-arms and, still with much hesitation, pulls her into a close embrace (fig. 4). The film cuts from this medium shot of the embrace to a close-up of the mother's back. The frame's bottom two-thirds are filled with the crisp white of her jacket, but our eyes are drawn to the top third—Jamie's eyes, glazed-over, look straight ahead and gradually swell with water before gently closing.

Forever changed by his experiences in the war, Jamie is no longer able to trust solely what he sees. To confirm his mother's reality, he must do so through touch. *Empire of the Sun* is so much about the fallibility of subjective vision that this finale is not only emotionally devastating but also very much in line with the film's philosophical theses. When the possibilities of cinema (sight and sound) have been milked, all that is left is touch. Spielberg's preoccupation with tactile communication serves to ground his films, while also creating for him a unique challenge.

By its ending, the film has explored in both its form and content the various ways in which the mechanisms of cinema and audience dynamics exist in one's subjective experience of the world (as explored in Chapter 3). Through this final scene, Spielberg is attempting to articulate the one sensation that film, by definition, cannot articulate. While this approach is rarely as essential to the film's thesis as in *Empire of the Sun*, in every instance it grounds the characters' intimate presence and expresses some revelation. From Jamie's reunion with his parents, the film cuts to a brief sequence showing the liberation of Shanghai, which is followed by a shot of the canal that opened the film. This last shot pans down to fill the frame with water and abstract its points of reference, as in the beginning. Before the film fades to black, the baggage that Jamie had early on tossed into the canal floats across the frame.

*E.T.*, made five years before *Empire of the Sun*, is a deeply tactile film—both the audience’s introduction to the characters and those characters’ emotional revelations are achieved through touch. E.T. is first introduced right after his landing, shown only in silhouette and brief glimpses of his eyes. His first actual meeting with Elliott, however, begins in a way that will be echoed by David’s initial homecoming in *A.I.* Elliott first lures E.T. into the house by creating a trail of Reese’s Pieces. E.T. follows, collecting each candy along the way. Once Elliott places the final pile of candies at the top of the stairs, he hides by his bedroom door. The film settles into a medium shot of Elliott, crouching in wait, eager to see E.T. follow. The camera is inside the boy’s bedroom, its door frame-left and Elliott frame-right, his back to the lens. A soft, white light falls right where the wall-to-wall carpeting meets the stairs. E.T.’s hands, almost level with the ground, emerge from out of the darkness and take a piece of candy. Once the hands retreat, we hear the sound of slobbery chewing. Elliott shuffles backwards into his room, placing a pile of



(fig. 5) E.T. sneaks behind Elliott

candies at the entrance, and is quickly followed by E.T. Again, only the alien's hands come into frame, illuminated by the same soft, white light as in each similar shot before. Once they have grabbed the candies, the hands once again retreat out of frame.

Elliott turns around to get more Reese's for the alien—when he turns back with the candy, E.T. is gone. As Elliott goes to the door and look around, we see two alien hands, by now very familiar, creeping up over a box on the boy's desk (fig. 5). E.T. knocks over the box, catching Elliott's attention. He watches as the pair of headless alien hands feels its way across the obstacles on his long desk, shuffling objects around and toppling markers. By this point, Williams' score has completely faded away and the audio is diegetic—crickets, room-tone, toppling objects, and, for the first time since his shriek in the corn field, E.T.'s voice. Reaching the far edge of the table, E.T.'s hands knock over a large plastic bin of kid-stuff, making a loud crashing noise that prompts Elliott to abruptly shut the door. E.T. still behind the table, the camera follows Elliott. By this point neither the audience nor Elliott has seen the creature in full. When goes to E.T. behind the table, Elliott immediately covers him with a blanket—E.T. is stark naked, which makes the boy uncomfortable. Tossing the blanket over E.T., Elliott accidentally hits a hanging desk lamp, which swings in every direction as the scene cuts to its first wide shot. In the far left of the frame we see E.T., standing right under the swinging lamp, most of his body in the shadows. The lamp casts an ominous light on the alien, whom we have yet to see in full, that comes and goes.

The scene cuts to a medium close-up of Elliott's reaction—his mouth is open, stunned, but his eyes are calm, quizzical. Staring at E.T., he itches his upper lip. The film cuts to its first well-lit medium-close-up of E.T., who likewise rubs a hand on his upper lip—he is mimicking Elliott.



We return to the close-up of Elliot, who begins to realize what is happening. The boy puts a finger to his lips, as if to go “shhh...,” and the film cuts to E.T. doing the same. Elliott scratches his temple, and E.T. does the same. The sign communication that was the climax of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, Lacombe and the aliens’ gestural call-and-response, is the starting point in *E.T.*, the foundation for Elliott and E.T.’s relationship<sup>1</sup>. That the first several sightings of E.T. during the film’s opening scenes show only alien hands engaging with human materials serves to ground his eventual appearance in reality. When we do see him, we are familiar with the texture and color of his skin, with the rhythm at which he moves. For E.T., acclimation through touch functions not unlike David’s stepping and tapping in *A.I.* (discussed in Chapter Two)—both characters are trying to acclimate to their new environment, gauging its viability through tactile experiments.

For the viewer of *E.T.*, however, this tactility allows us to accept E.T.’s existence in our world. The function of this device is not unlike Elliot’s use of *Star Wars* action figures to teach E.T. later on, though in that case the tactility serves a profound cinematic, not narrative, purpose. This tactility is the mechanism by which Spielberg suspends our disbelief. In part an extension of his ‘withholding the monster’ technique developed in his 1975 film *Jaws*, introducing E.T. through his hands creates a gradation in our suspension of disbelief. The audience is primed before the creature fully appears.

The power of touch in *E.T.*, grounding the character in our world, extends beyond suspension of audience disbelief. Some scenes later, E.T. casually (though conspicuously for the

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<sup>1</sup> E.T.’s creature design was by puppeteer Carlo Rimbaldi, the man responsible for the aliens in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*

camera) places a long, wrinkly hand on Elliott's shoulder—a simple warm gesture, the first time E.T. touches a human. In the scene that immediately follows, Elliott is at school while E.T. is alone in the house. E.T. ruffles through the fridge, cracks open a beer, and guzzles it down. The film cuts to Elliott in a classroom as his eyes suddenly become droopy and dazed and he lets out a loud burp. After a brief moment of intercutting between their respective drunken antics, the situation becomes clear—E.T. is getting Elliott drunk. Touch, then, has a power not only to suspend disbelief and transcend the distance of the movie screen, but to connect beings on a level deeper than anything cognitive. This new relationship between Elliott and E.T. is one of pure feeling.

*E.T.* uses its score by John Williams not simply to accentuate this sensational feeling between E.T. but rather provides the diegesis with a nuanced and intertextual counterpoint. When the film's ostensible villain, "Keys," is introduced in the film's first scene—his defining characteristic is the jangling key-ring on his belt—it is from E.T.'s perspective (i.e. a child's), and therefore waist-high. After the ship's peaceful landing and the aliens' brief jaunt in the California forrest, William's score, which has been fresh throughout the scene, becomes vividly familiar. As a row of bright car headlights enters the frame, disrupting E.T. and co.'s business, we begin to hear echoes of Darth Vader's theme from *Star Wars*, the Imperial Death March. This subtle self-reference serves multiple purposes. On the most basic level, the musical phrases shared by both Keys' and Darth Vader's themes are sinister and menacing. But by quoting what is not only one of his most recognizable tunes, but his phrase most conspicuously alluding to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, Williams' score serves to effectively canonize the film within its first five minutes. An infant will recognize that this music must be sinister, a child will recognize

it from *Star Wars* and thus apply the same high stakes of Darth Vader onto Keys, and an adult will not only recognize the theme from *Star Wars*, but will also, upon hearing it recontextualized, become aware, even if subliminally, of the ways in which the theme engages with Beethoven, as well as itself.

The use of this theme for Keys, of all characters, calls into question the value of the theme at large, the significance of sinister music. Is it unique to *Star Wars* if it can be used here? And is it dishonest if it is being used to non-diegetically color a character who, we will find later on, is in fact benevolent? The potential associations are vast and loaded—just two years before *E.T.*, at the climax of first *Star Wars* sequel, *The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner, 1980), Darth Vader confesses to protagonist Luke Skywalker, in the ultimate operatic reveal, “I am your father!” This moment seared itself into the minds of American audiences, to this day a part of our common cultural vocabulary. By the time of *E.T.*’s release in 1982, the introduction of the apparent villain paired with echoes of Vader’s Imperial March no longer suggest merely the sinister. The theme had added to its associations the potential for a reclamation of the family. It is a villain’s theme, certainly, but now also a father’s theme. This chain of associations is not insignificant—by the final scene of *E.T.*, Keys will have not only become a figure of good in the narrative, but will have insinuated himself into the vacant slot of the father in Elliott’s life. One of the final shots shows Elliott’s mother in Keys’ gentle embrace as they watch E.T.’s ship takeoff. Though E.T. has left, another vacancy in Elliott’s life has been filled.

## **Chapter 2: Defining the Home**

### **What the Introductions Tell Us:**

Having established Spielberg's distinctly tactile filmmaking, we can begin to explore and deconstruct how he so vividly renders domestic spaces and so fundamentally understands family dynamics. He explores various modes of family, using his kinetic approach to filmmaking, to achieve immediacy, intimacy, and empathy on vastly different scales. In *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, Spielberg shoots the scenes of domestic strife and '70s-style suspense in distinctly different ways. Roy and Jillian, in their respective home lives, are shot mostly with wide, anamorphic lenses, whereas the scenes of government conspiracy and suspense are shot with longer, slower lenses (for the effect/composite shots, Zsigmond used 65mm spherical lenses). The clutter and chaos of the domestic spaces are brought to the fore in clear focus—thanks to Zsigmond's lenses, the clutter is the same size as the characters in the frame. Roy and his family are a part of the clutter of their den, submissive to the chaos. This allows for much of the simultaneous action and dialogue that makes the film's portrayals of domesticity so fraught and high-strung. When we are first introduced to Roy and his family, the camera does not let us focus on any single subject. Rather, in the back left corner of this deep-focus wide shot we see the youngest son smashing a doll's head against the wall of his playpen, slightly to the boy's right his mother Ronnie paces around and tidies up, and in the frame's far right Roy and his eldest son, hunched over a mechanical train set, argue about seeing Pinocchio in the theater. Everybody is

speaking at once, everybody is moving at once, and everybody appears at once in and out of focus, blending in with their clutter.

One of Spielberg's dominant preoccupations is the fluidity of scale. In *Close Encounters*, a messianic story is presented in equal parts through two vastly different frames, scales—broad political conspiracy and raw domestic drama—that converge at the climax. Each of these is necessary for our understanding of not only the film's events but their significance as well—events whose scope would be impossible to comprehend if not for the balance created by these opposing scales. After opening with a mystery in the Sonoran desert, then cutting to an air traffic control center wherein multiple navy pilots are heard narrowly avoiding collision with glowing UFOs, the film finally brings us to a small farmhouse in Muncie, Indiana, where the aliens will first make their presence known. The scene opens with Barry (Cary Guffey), a toddler asleep in his bedroom, his floor riddled with toys.

Seemingly unprompted, his eyes pop open and he looks out his window, its curtains blowing in the wind. Suddenly his motorized clapping monkey toy turns itself on, clanging loudly. Barry sits up interested, but seems neither startled nor afraid. What follows is a series of shot/countershots of Barry observing his toys as they come to life: the needle drops on a record player and children's music starts playing; across the room, a Frankenstein action figure lights up and begins walking in its motorized, would-be menacing way. Then the many toy cars and planes on his floor begin driving in circles and flashing their lights, crashing into each other and causing commotion. An ambulance hits an airplane which hits a tank which just barely passes by a firetruck—an entire scene of vehicular chaos, realized on a toddler's bedroom floor.

The toys' coming to life is accompanied by a flood of unidentifiable waves and flashes of warm light which draw Barry, magnet-like, out of his bed and downstairs. He sees the front door mysteriously open, beckoning him, and when he turns away the film cuts to the refrigerator, wide open, its ingredients spilling out and scattered across the floor (an image that Spielberg would return to in *E.T.* and *Empire of the Sun*, among others). The spilled and scattered foods create a trail leading to the doggy-door, which is flapping violently—someone, or some thing, has been inside. The film cuts back to Barry, befuddled, looking out across the kitchen. This static shot lasts for 32 seconds, as his expression gradually shifts from confusion to glee and we begin to hear sounds of commotion. Barry's face full of giddy delight, the film cuts to the motorized toys from his room as they make their way out and into his mother's, startling her awake. His single-mother, Jillian (Melinda Dillon), is introduced in a realistically unglamorous way. She is in a twin-sized bed, under tussled blue sheets—hardly the image of parental bliss. Asleep with the TV on in her bedroom, books and pharmaceuticals scattered about, she is awoken only by the seemingly possessed toys that crash into her bedside table. She gets out from under her blanket only to reveal that she has fallen asleep wearing street-clothes.

Throughout this scene, Barry's bedroom windows are open, the windows downstairs are open, and Jillian's bedroom windows are open—whether this is for climate control or as a result of the aliens presence is unclear, but its cinematic goal is unambiguous. As we follow Jillian through the house in search of Barry, the little spotty light that falls on her shines through the open windows, flickering with the fluttering curtains. This creates a visceral sense of unease—Barry and Jillian are not protected by their home. The house is introduced in a wide exterior shot that establishes it in a beautiful landscape on a starry night, surrounded by an expanse of field

and Forrest. The open windows, paired with the secluded location, never allow for the possibility of safety or protection. The house, from the start, is fully open to the outside. Any notions of domestic stability only exist as characters' ideals, always in contrast to their realities. The aliens are entering an already fractured world, where domestic strife is the given. And whereas Jillian's solitude is defined by her lone farmhouse, Roy's suffocation is defined by his place in suburbia, trapped with his large and dynamic but nonetheless deeply fractured family.

Domestic strife is the starting point not only for the two families in *Close Encounters*, but for just about every family in Spielberg's filmography. This fundamental aspect of his films runs contrary to the pervasive (misguided) assumption that Spielberg somehow represents a conservative, Reagan-esque American utopia. And while the most common precursor for the start of a Spielberg narrative is a broken family relationship, this is not limited to the literal family. The familial relationship in *Munich*, for example, is one between the individual and Israel (as the mother). In the first two *Indiana Jones* films, Indy traipses the globe with a makeshift family (which in the third and fourth films becomes his biological family). The deep yearning to return home, or to the parental figure, is foundational to the films' surface narratives even without a traditional family at play. In that sense, all his films are "really" about family—they present a surface narrative as an allegory for, and a mechanism by which to explore, an emotionally and intellectually nuanced counterpoint.

In *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, Spielberg explores the 'realness' of a family in a very direct and cerebral way. When the film's protagonist, David, an artificially intelligent robot in the form of an early adolescent, is first brought home to his new, real parents (he is their surrogate son), he is introduced looking profoundly non-human. As with the aliens' emergence from the

motherhood in *Close Encounters*, David is silhouetted in a white light. We first see him before he steps through the door into his new home, lit and framed like an abstract image of an alien form. He appears as a hazy white torso, an elongated, hair-thin neck, and an ovoid head. This figure does not move a muscle, but rather bobs left and right, simply balancing with its feet together, almost floating. The film cuts to his soon-to-be-mother Monica's reaction—she looks stunned and curious, as if she cannot figure out what she sees. When we cut back to David's hazy figure, he still appears as a hovering alien. The expectation would be for Monica's gaze to reveal the sight—to be the confirmation of David's human reality—but Spielberg withholds. Monica sees David as we see him and is at a loss. As the boy's figure moves forward into the home, the camera pans down to focus on his feet. We have still yet to see any human likeness in the boy.

Once inside, the camera holds on David's feet as he steps from the carpet onto a wooden stair, taps his foot, then steps back onto the carpet and taps his foot again, his face still off-screen. He feels for his surroundings, at first just with his feet, methodically exploring his new home. It is only after this exploration of floor textures that the film cuts to a medium shot of David in focus, wearing a crisp white shroud. David becomes human not when he is seen by his \*mother\*, but rather once he has become part of the home. For Spielberg, questions of self-actualization and growth have at least as much to do with the space of the home as with interpersonal relations. Monica cannot make a human out of the alien likeness in the elevator—only a home can do that. As he explores the house, David is drawn to a shelf of family photos. The camera, level with his torso, tracks him as he looks closely at images of Monica, her husband, and their now-comatose biological son. As David looks at each photograph, his reflection appears superimposed into the scene—in a posed family photo, David's face takes its place right below



the parents, to the right of their biological son. He is visually inserting himself into the family, and it is these images that will be stored in his artificial psyche.

After the parents discuss whether they should irreversibly program David to love them, the film cuts to an unsettling extreme close-up of David's face, shimmering in soft focus. He is distant, eerie, until the focus pulls to reveal that we were seeing David's reflection in a shimmering mobile above his new bed. These layers of distancing in David's introduction give the clear impression of David's being there, but his reality remains questionable. We cut to a wide shot wherein David and his parents stand beside the boy's bed (a pod in the shape of a spaceship, or some kid-friendly MRI). David asks them, "Would you like me to sleep now?" It becomes easy to forget David's artificiality, as he is played by the iconically cute and precocious Haley Joel Osment<sup>2</sup>. Spielberg's solution is to fit him deep in the uncanny valley, where his artificiality is seen in relation to his surroundings (which themselves unsettle basic assumptions regarding home comfort and spatial orientation). Monica, forgetting for a moment that he is not real, asks David what time he usually goes to bed. He responds, "I can never go to sleep, but I can lay quietly and not make a peep." David is accommodating their human needs. He then asks Monica to help him change into his pajamas. This makes her uncomfortable, causing her to hurry out of the room and, in her words, "let boys be boys." Monica here is terrified of the implications of this "boy's" body. Since he is not in fact her son, or *any* son for that matter (except for possibly his creator's), the prospect of stripping and dressing the thing is too unnerving.

David follows Monica across the room until she closes the warped glass door on him, steps away from its line of view, and begins to cry. Monica is crying on the right of the frame

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<sup>2</sup> *A.I.* began production just one year after M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* made 10-year-old Osment the second-youngest person to ever receive an Oscar nomination.

while David, warped by the glass door that separates them, stands holding his pajamas up to the glass. The camera pulls back as we see Henry stripping David on the other side of the door and Monica slowly backing into the shadows, her hands covering her face. As Monica nervously peeks out of the shadows to look at David, the film cuts to a close up of his face, through the door, refracted and repeated dozens of times in the frame. He appears to lock eyes with Monica and smile, despite her being in the shadows on the dark side of the door. This image of David is deeply unsettling—he cannot be pinned down in the frame, he is perpetually obscured. To Monica, he is a refracted version of himself. This image goes a long way in suggesting something menacing and untrustworthy about David—or, in Spielberg’s worldview, simply non-human. David’s menace is cold and unintentional, and the domestic tension comes from layers of artificiality and discomfort. Spielberg presents this scene of David’s first homecoming effectively as an exercise in articulating the uncanny valley—David, and the scene at large, exists on the line between human and robot, eliciting both familiarity and fear.

Every would-be given family dynamic in *A.I.* is jarred by David’s awkward nature (or lack thereof). David silently and loyally follows Monica around as she does her housework, puppy-like to a distracting and unsettling degree. Fed up, she places him in the closet and closes the door—he does not object as he has no frame of reference, no reason to believe something is wrong. When Monica eventually remembers to retrieve him, some hours later, he asks her why he was waiting in the closet. Monica briefly hesitates before responding, “It’s a game, it’s hide-and-seek.” David accepts this preposterous answer (she did not hide, but rather hid him) because he does not know how games work, has yet no conception of anticipation and reward.

Shortly after she lets him out of the closet, David walks to the bathroom door and flings it wide open. He sees Monica sitting on the toilet and says softly, with a smile, “I found you.” Monica screams, drops the book she is reading, and pulls up her pants, yelling at David to shut the door. The Freudian depths contained in the imagery of an artificial son walking in on his surrogate mother on the toilet, believing it to be a game, are subtle yet plenty. But Spielberg wants neither for this loaded imagery to be lost on the viewer nor simply relegated to the level of gag, and so before Monica drops the book to pull up her pants, we see that she is reading *Freud on Women*. While on one level this does function as a clever sight-gag, it more importantly serves as one of the first direct-to-audience clues for how one should engage with this film. Are the characters real people to feel for? Are they rather symbols, representations of philosophical concepts? Are they props for intertextual gags and commentary on kitsch? Spielberg is walking this fine line between character and caricature, and it is precisely this grey-zone that becomes the film’s dominant territory. Every sentiment, perception, and conviction regarding the world of the film, both for the audience and its characters, is at some point confronted and unsettled.

The introduction to Elliott’s home in *E.T.*, while not quite unsettling as David’s in *A.I.*, nevertheless challenges basic assumptions about American domesticity. After E.T.’s arrival and Keys’ introduction in the California forest, the film brings us to the paragon of domestic bliss: suburbia. Following an exterior shot that establishes a nondescript suburban home, the film cuts to the interior and we are thrust into a game of off-brand Dungeons and Dragons—rather than see stability, we see a mother’s worst nightmare. Cluttered around the kitchen table are several high-school boys, friends of Elliott’s brother Michael’s. Cans of soda and crumbled chips riddle the table and smoke rises from the ashtray as the boys reach over each other and talk loudly.

With no sign of parental authority, the teenagers refuse to let Elliott play with them. One boy yells, with food in his mouth, “You can’t just join any universe in the middle!” The teens, who have just ordered a pizza, convince Elliott to go outside and grab it from the deliveryman, enticing him with the promise of post-errand gameplay. The film cuts back to the house’s establishing shot, as Elliott goes outside to wait for the pizza and, once delivered, walks back up the driveway. The film cuts to a medium shot of Elliott, backlit and silhouetted by the open garage. He hears a loud rattling noise come from the shed and calls out for his dog—“Harvey, is that you, boy?!”

From there, the film cuts back to the kitchen—this time, however, the camera starts on a medium close-up profile of a 30-something blonde, wearing just a pink robe, as she washes dishes while humming to herself and doing a little dance. The camera follows her across the room to the cupboard, revealing nearby the messy, smoking teens, undisturbed. One boy licks a finger and reaches out to poke the woman’s behind, only to have his hand swatted away by Michael—this woman is Mary, the mother of the house, raising her children alone. That the presence of any domestic authority is withheld from the film’s introduction to the house is significant—Michael and his friends seem to run the show, commanding Elliott around and smoking and ordering pizza on their own terms. And when mother Mary does enter the picture, dancing in her robe, she carries no parental authority—rather, she seems more like a big sister. In this minute-long sequence, Spielberg vividly establishes the state of the household (minus little sister Gertie, who appears only later). Not quite the Reagan-era suburban utopia that Spielberg was and continues to be misguidedly criticized for peddling<sup>3</sup>, this household is broken, lawless,

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<sup>3</sup> In a 2006 look-back at Spielberg’s career (anticipating the release of *Munich*), J. Hoberman writes that “Spielberg produced the quintessential entertainments for Ronald Reagan’s Morning in America.”

and loud. And in one of the film's aspects most subversive of suburbia, this fraught family seems nevertheless happy and close.

Mary's role in the family (and the film) is not simply maternal. Until the last act, wherein government scientists quarantine the family's home and brutally seal-off and inspect Elliott and E.T., not a single adult character is shown above their waist—except for Mary. The kids' mother does not function as an adult in their eyes—or in the world of the film, which is visually structured around a dichotomy between child and grown-up. The children's world is presented in rich, warm detail, whereas the adults are never more than a pair of sinister legs (until the very end). Mary seems to fall on the 'kid' side of this dichotomy, as she is given full life and rich characterization from the start. But it is crucial that the dynamic of the home is established between the kids before she even enters the picture. This is how the film is able to present a world at once deeply grounded and shown through the heightened perspective of the child. And that her entrance into the picture barely disrupts the teens' antics articulates a vision of suburbia that is somewhat radical—the mother is not angry or commanding, but rather disaffected and carefree, willing to allow just about anything. This seems an unconventional picture of parenting, but in fact takes cues from films like John Cassavettes' 1975 *A Woman Under the Influence*, a brutally raw portrait of domestic depression, in exploring the implications of suburbia. *E.T.* sets its stakes in a refreshingly direct model of suburbia, less based in propriety and peace than in repression and insecurity—a suburbia bursting at the seams. Setting his fantastical parable in an otherwise grounded and emotionally complex world, Spielberg is able to create a tonal counterpoint within each sequence. The greatness of *E.T.* comes from neither E.T. nor Elliott, but

rather from the collision of their two worlds—worlds which gradually become one-and-the-same.

After mother Mary is introduced, the picture cuts back to Elliott further investigating the sounds coming from the shed. As he slowly walks towards it we see light flooding through the grated wooden walls. In the back of the frame is the edge of a corn field with husks up to twice Elliott's height. Above the husks is a deep blue sky, lit by a bright sliver of moon. The moon creates a powerfully suggestive triangle in the frame—on the far left is the family's house, on the far right is E.T.'s (refuge in the shed), and between the two, at the top of the frame, is the bright crescent moon. Using the moon to complete the triangle effectively ties together Elliott's house and E.T.'s refuge. Without even seeing E.T. in this context yet, we are aware that Elliott is in some way interacting with a new world. The vaguely divine, seemingly sourceless light flooding out from the shed imbues Elliott's walk across the backyard with a religious, otherworldly significance. This is a Spielberg *motif*—the non-human emerging into our world from a divine white light is how we meet the aliens in *Close Encounters* and David in *A.I.* In *E.T.*, however, this magical quality is created not through the UFOs or E.T. himself, but rather by framing the two 'homes' as they relate to each other. Imbuing Elliott's world with this divine glow makes E.T.'s eventual entry into the family feel predestined and distinctly smooth—before even knowing E.T., Elliott is drawn to the light.

### **What the Toys Tell Us:**

But let us return to the toys coming alive in *Close Encounters*. These toys represent far more than their physical (and comedic) value. They become communicators, plastic children's items that facilitate contact with the beyond. There is a powerful empathy behind this notion—the aliens understand that to communicate with Barry they must do so on his own terms, and therefore through his toys. Spielberg is endowing the stuff of children with divine potential. He provides one particularly clever instance of re-scaling: the shot of the toy cars flashing and crashing into each other, creating a spontaneous and random traffic chaos, effectively shows an entire world within Barry's realm. This sequence is brief, but adds a layer to the film as a whole—there is no object or person too small to be affected by the awesome events of the dominant narrative. The fact that each detail ties back to the core narrative, both thematically and visually, creates a dynamic and unified film world in which nothing is random and everything is in dialogue with something.

The toys coming to life, then, represent both the sincerity and irony with which Spielberg approaches high-concept. It is a subtle joke that the toys come to life, these symbols of infantile excess ushering in the messianic Third Kind. More importantly, however, this is an attempt to truly understand and present how an event of this magnitude would play out for Barry—the *messiah came in a toy car, so only 3-year-old Barry noticed*. The film recognizes that Barry experiences and understands what most adults fail to.

In Spielberg's vision, truth is revealed when we see through the child's eyes. He articulates this notion explicitly just two years later, in *E.T.* In an effort to prevent his little sister Gertie from exposing E.T. to their mother, Elliott tells Gertie with the utmost gravity, "Grown-

ups can't see him, only little kids can see him." Gertie turns around and rolls her eyes, breaking the spell Elliott tries to cast, and says, "Give me a break." This most explicit articulation of Spielberg's glorification of the childhood perspective is immediately rejected by the film's youngest character. The Spielberg child is so astute, in fact, that she can spot his sentimentality from a mile away. 1987's *Empire of the Sun* will explore this notion from a more conceptual angle, providing a complex visual thesis on the perspective of the child.



(fig. 6) Elliott's bedroom

Spielberg's exploration of the child's limited perception—and what boundless insight can stem from that limitation—is, at least initially, somewhat more playful in *E.T.* than in *Close Encounters*. Elliott first introduces E.T. to the materials of planet earth through his toys, followed by a tour of his bedroom, which is lit and framed as an entire world in itself. It looks like an isolated domestic training ground—soft light floods in through slats of the blown out windows while the interior remains dim and hazy (fig. 6). The stuff of Elliott's daily life—his toys, the



house furniture, the television set—become E.T.’s existential points of reference. E.T.’s intrusion into Elliot’s domestic situates the film as a reframing of domesticity and childhood experience on broad, existential terms—each item of childhood significance is given a truly cosmic value.

Elliott begins by showing E.T. his action figures, among them *Star Wars* characters Lando Calrissian and Boba Fett. “And look, they can even have wars,” Elliott says as he smashes the two figures against each other, making laser-beam and explosion sounds. E.T. looks on, wide-eyed and attentive, then shifts his focus to the fish bowl on the left of the frame. Elliott drops his toys and moves on. “Fish eat the fish food, and the shark eats the fish,” he says as he inserts a toy shark on a handle into the bowl, scaring off the fish. “And nobody eats the shark!” Elliott moves on, providing an explanation of Pez dispensers and then more broadly the concept of candy. When he shows E.T. a toy car shortly after, E.T. grabs it away and, having just discovered candy, tries to eat it.

By using pop-cultural references to acclimate E.T. to his new world, the film effectively (if unintentionally) situates itself as somewhat of a bridge between Truffaut’s childhood realism and Lucas’ world-building. The film’s foundation is the genuine portrait of childhood experience, its goal an acceptance of the fantastic. But this acceptance of fantasy is itself a means to further understand the emotional experience of the child. Shared human experience begets the capacity to accept fantasy, which in turn begets a deeper understanding of Elliott’s (and so our) childhood experience—we must accept his fantasy as reality in order to explore the yearnings that drive him. On one level, the *Star Wars* references throughout *E.T.* are Spielberg winking at his friend George Lucas. More importantly, however, they serve an important function in establishing our conception of the other-worldly. The suspension of disbelief necessary to accept the premise of

*Star Wars* is fundamentally different from that necessary to accepting the premise of *E.T.*—a fact which Spielberg uses to its full potential. Boba Fett is from the movies, we are told, but E.T. is real. By placing E.T. in opposition to the movie-alien action figures that cluttered the bedroom floors of the film's target audience, we are able to accept E.T. as a part of our world more effectively. Spielberg bridges his film's world and the audience's world through the use of a shared cultural vocabulary. The film is telling us that he is not like those other aliens you see—*this time, it's real.*

While Elliott goes downstairs to fetch some food for the two of them, E.T. continues exploring the bedroom alone. E.T. picks up a spring-operated umbrella, presses the button, and jumps back startled as the umbrella opens up. Right as E.T. jumps back, the film cuts to Elliott at the refrigerator, likewise startled, likewise jumping back and dropping all of the food he has grabbed—the carton of milk begins pouring out onto the floor. Elliott grabs his chest, looking around puzzled—we will realize later in the film that E.T. and Elliott's psyches have been linked together. It is significant that this first time we see an open fridge and spilled ingredients serves to indicate that Elliott and E.T. have become one, even if unknowingly. And if we place this dropped-food sequence in the context of Spielberg's other open-refrigerator scenes, it neatly falls along the spectrum: stability is represented by a full and tidy fridge, and ultimate chaos is represented by the fridge literally shooting its food out onto the floor (in *Close Encounters*). And so Elliott making a mess by the fridge as a direct result of E.T.'s startling culture clash is the perfect median. E.T. is certainly a disruption, but neither absolutely negative nor independent of Elliott's actions and perspective.

### What the Fridges Tell Us:



(fig. 7) The Third Kind shakes up Jillian's fridge

The image of an open refrigerator, with food spilling out into a messy pile of ingredients on the floor, is a Spielberg trademark. Jillian and Barry's fridge in *Close Encounters* is Spielberg's first use of this loaded shot—it signifies the moment of irreversibly shattered domesticity (fig. 7). When Barry, during his first encounter (of the second kind), walks downstairs and into the kitchen, the fridge is in disarray. Spilled ingredients litter the floor as tipped-over Coke cans pour out of the fridge—his home has been violated. The refrigerator, ubiquitous in American kitchens by the late 1960s, had come to signify the luxury owed to every domestic American—the source of nourishment, stability<sup>4</sup>. By disrupting this image, the aliens have not only invaded the human world but targeted its comfort center, swiping the rug out from under us.

But while these violations of the fridge are certainly disconcerting, they are not necessarily menacing—disconcerting, certainly, but not inherently malicious. In *E.T.*, this image

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<sup>4</sup> Mass production of refrigerators effectively began after WWII, becoming synonymous with state-side post-war comfort (Refrigerators through the Decades).

is played for laughs in an effort to endear E.T. to the audience. But it is nevertheless at this point that E.T. effectively stakes his claim in the human world. By seeing E.T. fumble through the fridge (fig. 8), we are able to find a basic common experience. Some scenes later, Spielberg takes this notion of shared common experience to the extreme when E.T., alone in the house, inadvertently gets Elliott drunk. Entering the fridge, E.T. stakes his claim in Elliott's world. E.T. goes one step farther than the aliens in *Close Encounters*—he is not only entering the humans' domestic space, but their psyche as well.



(fig. 8) E.T. grabs a snack

In *Empire of the Sun*, however, the shot of the fridge suggests loss—it is the final nail on the coffin of Jamie's realizing that the only life he knew is over. It is the confirmation that his parents are gone, that his home safety is shattered, and that his world is effectively over. When he first returns home after being separated from his parents in the chaotic city streets, Jamie sees a banner on his front door reading: “This house is now property of His Imperial Majesty the Japanese Emperor.” Undeterred, Jamie pushes through and enters the foyer, seemingly

undisturbed. He runs around the vacant house, yelling out for his mother and father, until he reaches the kitchen. Reminding us of *Close Encounters* and *E.T.*, the fridge is open and its contents are a mess. Much of the food is rotting, and much of it is scattered about the kitchen. Until this point, the house felt strange and empty. Now, seeing the disturbed fridge and smelling the rancid food, something feels terribly wrong.

So we see the symbolic value of the disturbed refrigerator for Spielberg. It represents the ultimate threshold crossing, invasion of privacy, shattering of worlds. This, along with Barry's toys coming alive, is representative of a kind of Spielbergian tendency to show awesomeness, in the traditional sense, through its engagement with our every day. The stakes and gravity of a given situation are only revealed when they are communicated to us on our own terms, through an engagement with our experience of the world. Spielberg does not traffic in images of crop circles and cryptic languages—the aliens communicate through our toys, our refrigerators, our food, a basic tonal melody. Both alien communication and effective filmmaking depend on finding a common vocabulary and then eliciting a response. We do not decipher their complexity—they decipher ours, and meet us half way. They make our toy cars move and spill our coke because that is how we will know they understand our priorities.

And this functions as the most effective kind of foreshadowing—introduce the characters (and the audience) to a high-concept through its interaction with their own personal effects so that when we do meet the Third Kind, in the final act at Devil's Tower, we have been primed for that moment. Spielberg pushes our everyday objects to their breaking point, and uses the high-concept to explore to reveal something about our own engagement with our environments.

But Barry's connection to the aliens is not simply a clever narrative tool. After Lacombe demonstrates the five-note melody for the first time, Spielberg cuts to Barry with a toy glockenspiel playing the same five notes. This infant is inadvertently communicating with the aliens—Lacombe hears it through a radio signal and plays it back to his team, but Barry is alone with his mother and his toys. The camera pans up from Barry to reveal that Jillian has been sketching several approximations of Devil's Tower. The house has effectively become an antenna—the windows are naturally wide open, and its two inhabitants channel the sounds and images of the aliens.

Barry's abduction starts when Jillian steps outside to dispose of the trash—we begin to hear an ominous thunder, a growing chorus of barking dogs, and Barry's giddy, almost manic, laughter. Jillian is unsettled, but when the film cuts back to Barry, looking out through the window at the sky, he is glowing with joy. We then see what he is looking at: the sky appears to be opening up before him. Dark gray clouds shift around before opening up to reveal a flood of light. We then cut back to Barry, and as the camera pushes in to his face in an early instance of the infamous Spielberg reaction shot, he giddily exclaims, "Toys! Toys!" He is the first to understand precisely what is going on, to make the connection between his toys' coming to life and the sky's opening up before him. Initially, only Barry is offered true connection to the divine because only he is truly open to it, able to channel the aliens.

The next shot is a wide-angle landscape, framed exactly like the house's first establishing shot. With Jillian frantically rushing back towards the house as the clouds morph to create an opening for a flood of colored lights, this rural Americana setting is elevated to biblical proportions. Barry and Jillian's situation is given all the gravitas and loaded association of a

Gustave Doré etching<sup>5</sup>, all the more grand in the next shot which features *just* the sky and the lights opening up. It is basically an abstract image, and John Williams' ominous droning score provides a vivid sense of dread. But Spielberg does not revel in this image—next comes a hard cut, with no carryover from the music, to the inside of the house. Jillian frantically tries to close all the windows and push furniture in front of the doors, but these efforts are futile. Spielberg established in the beginning of the film that this house can guarantee no physical security, and now accentuates that by placing it at the center of an event of biblical proportions. So when we cut from the image of the sky opening up to the house's interior, Spielberg is articulating a vast difference in scale. Any effort by Jillian to stop this truly awesome event from entering their lives is not just futile, but laughably so. It is as if Moses had tried to douse the burning bush with water, terrified by what it might say. By setting these biblical stakes in an Americana framework, Spielberg is democratizing the divine. He is suggesting that immediate, intimate connection with the divine is not merely the stuff of ancient mythology, but applicable to contemporary narratives as well.

As Jillian is locking all the windows, Barry slowly walks over to the one door that has yet to be blocked. After a bright red light shines through the keyhole, he peacefully, as if in a trance, approaches and opens the door. Before Jillian rushes over to pull him away and shut the door, the camera lingers on Barry's back, level with his eye-line, as the door swings wide open and engulfs the toddler in a flood of bright red light. Only he is unafraid. After Jillian locks the last door, however, we begin to hear rustling from the air vents and fireplace and doggy door. As Jillian becomes more and more concerned, Barry goes to the fireplace, assuming that is where the aliens

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<sup>5</sup> Doré (1832-1883) was a French artist known primarily for his extremely detailed wood engravings of Biblical scenes, and for his visualization of divine rays of light.

will have to enter through, and says, “You can come and play now, you can come and play now!” For him, the aliens exist only in relation to his toys and sense of wonder—what Jillian treats with fear, Barry treats with delight. He welcomes them, beckons to them.

After a brief moment of calm, all light in the house is extinguished and replaced with a bright beam that shines down through the fireplace—confirming Barry’s connection to the aliens. Despite Jillian’s fears, it is as if the aliens are approaching the house on Barry’s terms: first through *his* toys, then through the door *he* saw, and finally through the fireplace *he* first spoke into. Staring into the light, Barry tries to reason with the visitors: “You can come in through the door!” But just as Jillian pulls shut the flap in the fireplace, seemingly safe at last, all the blinds on every window in the house coil back up, letting in a massive flood of unnaturally bright, white light. Shaken, Jillian fumbles around the house and bumps into the record player, accidentally dropping the needle on Johnny Mathis’ recording of “Chances Are.” This creates a dramatically ironic diegetic counterpoint to John William’s terrifying score in the scene. When we see Jillian holding Barry, silhouetted by the alien floodlight coming through the window, perhaps in their last embrace, Johnny Mathis’ crooning ironically articulates the disrupted domesticity—the stuff of our world is sweet and pathetic next to the magnitude of *Third Kind*.

The next shot shows what Jillian and Barry have focused on: a floor vent being unscrewed and removed by some unseen magnetic force. It is a terrifying image, this vent unscrewing itself. Not even the build foundation of the house is reliably safe. It is not that the aliens can crush the house if they so choose, for example, but rather that they can enter into the things of our world and unsettle them from within. This is accentuated even further when Jillian picks up the kitchen phone to call 911. Rather than hearing the dial-tone, however, we hear the



aliens' five-note melody. On one level, they are trying to communicate with Jillian on human terms—play the melody through the earpiece. On another, however, this lack of a dial-tone represents the aliens' complete and absolute invasion of Jillian's world. The only possible contact she or Barry is capable of having at this point is with the aliens themselves.

Once she hangs up the phone, the refrigerator opens itself up and its contents shoot out. The stove turns itself on and begins shaking uncontrollably, and the dishwasher opens up and starts foaming violently. With every household item sufficiently destabilized, the alien ship then descends before the house (though we see it only through the movement of its orange floodlight). Jillian, terrified and crying, has retreated into a corner. In the midst of the chaos, she loses her grip of Barry who, on all fours, eagerly crawls through the flapping doggy door. Jillian lunges forward and tries to grab his legs, pull him from the bright orange void outside the house, but the force is too strong and takes Barry. As soon as Barry is completely out of the house, the chaos and light show stop altogether. Jillian runs outside, calling out for her son, and the film returns to the establishing shot of their rural Americana landscape. Jillian cries for Barry, but the sky is closing itself back up. The biblical moment has passed, and with it Jillian's child. She runs away from the house and towards the sky, a vast expanse, in a grandiose shot evoking the vast difference in scale between the sky's opening and Jillian's search—she becomes but a blip at the bottom left corner of the frame.

The next scene's tone is abruptly different, but carries over some relevant elements. We are brought to an Air Force base where Jillian and others will be discussing their close encounters. Roy is off to the side, trying to get Jillian's attention as she is swarmed by paparazzi whose flashbulbs engulf her in bright lights. Her confusion and fear in the midst of this chaos,

the effect of blinding flashbulbs, are holdovers from the imagery of the abduction. The invasiveness of the aliens is presence is connected to the invasiveness of the paparazzi. Jillian is effectively blinded by the light in both scenes. Once she spots Roy beyond the paparazzi, she locks eyes with him and says, subdued, "They got him." Roy is the first person let into this loop, and it is at this point that their relationship will truly begin—they alone can trust each other, as they alone believe each other. Jillian is hounded by paparazzi, Roy is misunderstood and dismissed by his wife, and together they find common ground in belief in each other's close encounters.

During the press conference, we see Roy sketching mindlessly but vigorously the image of Devil's Tower implanted in him during his encounter—this is the first time we see of this image on Roy's side of the narrative. Whereas up to this point Jillian and Roy have been on opposite sides of the narrative, now that separation has collapsed as Roy reaches Jillian's level of medium to the aliens. After this scene Spielberg cuts to full-fledged conspiracy thriller, where several military vans pull into a warehouse full of navy pilots and military men busily moving around. Most of the pilots wearing sunglasses, this introduction to the film's conspiracy thriller mode is fully committed to the form. The camera lingers on dirty tires and tracks movement through the soldiers leather boots. The scene's focal points are Navy and NASA commanders, plotting the infiltration of a yet-unknown part of Wyoming (Devil's Tower). In a dramatic yet subtle low angle shot, the Air Force mission commander says, "If this mission fully develops, I get white knuckles just thinking about what might be ahead for those folks." The power of this moment is twofold: firstly it articulates the profoundly high stakes of the situation, and secondly it frames Barry's abduction in a clever and nuanced way. The only thing separating Barry's

delight at his abduction from the adults' fear and reluctance at the prospect of theirs is perspective. Barry is aware of something that the adults are still not—the aliens are our friends.

### **What the Mother Tells Us:**

The Spielberg child has a keen awareness of his relationship to the home—an awareness shared only by the filmmaking itself. In *Munich*, after a ten-minute sequence detailing simultaneously the Olympic Village hostage situation and the real-time worldwide engagement, the film's core narrative actually begins. We first meet the protagonist, Avner (Eric Bana), after it has been confirmed that all eleven hostages have been killed. Sitting in his Tel Aviv apartment with his pregnant wife, hands covering his face, Avner is glued to the TV as the whole nation of Israel gathers in mourning. As soon as the film enters this apartment, we hear “Hatikva,” the Israeli national anthem (its orchestration excerpted from a symphony by Smetana), playing through the television. Avner's home is defined by this melody, defined by his intimate and familial relationship to his nation. His character, as in most Spielberg films, is initially defined by the space he inhabits. He is defined by his home—whether that home means his pregnant wife or his loyalty to Israel is yet unclear. This tension between the conflicting forms of home is subtly suggested through the use of “Hatikva” in Avner's introduction and will be brought to the fore in scenes to come.

As Avner watches the newscast, the music from the TV grows louder and becomes one with Williams' non-diegetic score. The camera pushes in to the TV screen as the newscaster slowly recites the names of the innocent Israeli victims—a still of each athlete fills the screen as their name is read. After three names, the film cuts to an overhead shot of a new location—we

are now in a smokey bunker, where intelligence officers sit around a large table and go through a parallel list of names. The camera drifts down as one officer reads aloud the names of the Arab suspects allegedly responsible for the Munich massacre. Head-shots of each suspect are tossed onto the table as their names are called, and the film begins to intercut the two listings—Israeli victims and Arab suspects, alternating after three of each. The recitation of both sets of names is visually paralleled yet distinct—the Israelis are memorialized on television, the Arabs discussed in a smokey bunker. “A two-sided media eulogy, a double-edged tragedy,” critic Armond White wrote in the *New York Press*, noting that at this point “Avner takes on this bifurcated awareness.” The use of parallels, is crucial to developing Avner’s character—his domestic emotional attachment is, from the start, infiltrated by national obligation. The familial and the political are collapsed with the sound of “Hatikvah.” When the muddled anthem from the TV eventually swells into non-diegetic score, it envelopes Avner’s world as well as the film’s.

Rather than express the film’s political engagement through blunt verbal polemics, “Spielberg undertakes to revise the genres that have distorted or trivialized our understanding of politics and morality” (Armond White). The film’s intellectual rigor is apparent in its exploration of genre tropes and their implications—Spielberg’s contribution to the political discourse is not any kind of solution but rather a cinematic realization of the ethical nuance and moral ambiguity of nationalistic vengeance and blind obedience. Through this reframing of traditional espionage-thriller expectations, Spielberg makes us aware of the power of narrative in a broad, political sense. White continues in his review, “Avner is pressured by his love for everything this woman [Meir] represents.” By showing Prime Minister Golda Meir (played with an uncanny warmth by Lynn Cohen) as a distinctly maternal figure, the film considers Avner’s relationship to Israel as

inherently familial, its implications intimate and personal. Spielberg's self-aware genre breakdown in *Munich* becomes the mechanism by which the film achieves a soulful meditation on violence and media, Jewishness and terrorism. By collapsing the intimate and familial with political and genre explorations, Spielberg articulates the inseparability of narrative from reality.

Avner's first meeting with Prime Minister Meir is set in stark contrast to the ominous bunker where she is first introduced discussing retaliation with the intelligence officials, and where we first encounter the dossier of suspects in the opening montage. The film cuts to Avner being picked up and brought to Jerusalem—he gets in the car and, sitting next to him, is a high-ranking general who says, "I don't remember you... but of course I know your father." This brief interaction places Avner in the shadow of his war-hero father, expressing the degree to which all aspects of his life are colored by both family and nation. Avner is driven to Meir's residence in Jerusalem—a warmly lit, lived-in home. Meir comes across as a lovingly stern shtetl mother. She wears, in both of her early scenes, simple floral dresses, comfortable and homely. Her authority comes not from cold intimidation but rather warm resolve.

Upon *Munich*'s release, the film was criticized for allegedly being at once hypocritical and vague. Rex Reed, in the *New York Observer*, wrote that it had "no heart, no ideology and not much intellectual debate," that it was "a big disappointment, and something of a bore." Todd McCarthy, in *Variety*, called it a "...a lumpy and overlong morality play on a failed thriller template." What most critics failed to realize was precisely what Armond White rightly saw—that the film expressly uses its medium to explore and articulate vivid sensibilities and impossible dilemmas rather than any sort of polemic ideology. *Munich* is by all accounts a bleak film, but it is by no means cynical in the way a genre-bending political tragedy might seem.

For example: when Avner, flying to Europe to carry out Operation Black September, looks out the window by his seat, he sees a translucent vision of the massacre at Munich. The camera pushes into the round window as the massacre, Avner's nightmare, fills the screen. It is the first time we see, in all its graphically violent detail, what exactly transpired during the hostage crisis at the Olympic lodging. The violence depicted here is at once intimate and "almost casual, reportorial," writes Armond White. He describes watching the massacre as an "existential trap" with a "dull, dreadful terror." The massacre "is shown through [Spielberg's] exquisitely subtle technique that calls on our imagination and thus moves one to utter sorrow" (*NY Press*). The sequence ends with one of the Israeli athletes being mowed down by a submachine gun—the camera does not show his body getting shot, but rather pans up to reveal his blood splattering on a bare white wall. This blood-splattered wall fades into a red sunrise and the camera pulls back, out of the window, to Avner awake on the plane.

White also notes in his review the significance of this brutal vision shifting not into a red sunset, which would neatly cap the moment's sadness, but into dawn. "That's Spielberg's singular, personal vision in one image," White argues. "He isn't interested in the cynical politics of doom but the poetry of humanism which Munich portrays through Avner's struggle to keep living—and live sanely—despite the world's horror and the countdown to his own deadly task." Avner is unable to be a polemical character because his sole conviction is to live sanely and rationally despite the overwhelming psychological and societal forces at odds with that. But this is primarily articulated filmically, not verbally, in subtle and impressionistic ways that might slip by an unengaged viewer. White, willing to dive in fully to the film on its own terms, was an

outlier in the critical community—unsatisfied by the dismissive labels that so burdens most engagement with Spielberg’s film’s, his analysis rewards the clear effort.

An attempt to recreate the comforts of home becomes a *motif* in *Munich*, reflecting the shifting and complex but inherently familial dynamic of Avner and his team. Once in Europe, the film introduces Avner’s team in a scene of domestic bliss—they all argue excitedly and get to know each other over a home-cooked feast of Jewish foods. It is not merely that the team is given a family dynamic—that trope is not new to the spy film—but rather that their collaboration with each other is tied to their family values and cultural responsibilities. Avner, still wearing his apron as they all sit to eat, is team’s maternal authority, replacing Prime Minister Meir’s warmth and resolve with his own. The narrative of the mission is marked time and again by reframing notions of what constitutes a home and who constitutes a family. The team gathers for meals like this throughout the film, each one taking on a different tone that reflects their current situation. The implications of these meal scenes alternate between tragic irony and swelling humanism.

*Munich*’s climactic challenge to the assumptions regarding home comes halfway through the film. Avner’s team is taking refuge in a dilapidated safe house when a group of fighters from the Palestinian Liberation Organization suddenly appears. They will have to negotiate and share this space with their ostensible enemies. The safe house presents at once the film’s bleakest vision of a home (in physical terms) and its most enlightened articulation of the *value* of home. As Avner and his team first enter the safe house to settle in, they are stunned to find it in shambles, falling apart. The team’s bomb-maker says, “I’ve had nightmares that look like this.” Once most of them have fallen asleep, we begin to hear footsteps and movement in the building. The PLO group enters the house and, after a brief standoff, it becomes clear that both groups

have been allowed to stay there by Louis, the film's seemingly omnipotent international wheeler-dealer. Avner and his team introduce themselves as fighters from the Red Army Faction, so as to keep their Israeli identities hidden and identify with a cause sympathetic to the PLO. Calming down, Avner and the PLO group's leader exchange a long gaze, saying over and over again, never quite sure, that they are safe. The relief is palpable but their situation is dangerously fragile—everything is alright...for now.

The film cuts to a close-up of the only radio in the house being dialed to a station of Arab music as both groups are trying to sleep. Steve (Daniel Craig), one of Avner's men, gets up and changes the station to similarly Arab music, but softer and with echoes of Klezmer. The PLO fighter returns to the radio and dials back to his initial station. Steve, who has since sat down, gets back up to change the station yet again, but the PLO fighter stands tall to stop him. They stare each other down for a moment before approaching the radio together, surfing the stations to find something they can agree on. Steve stops the dial as Al Green's 1971 R&B single "Let's Stay Together" begins playing—the two exchange a nod and begin to enjoy the song. Whereas previously the music represented the cultural tension between enemy nationalities, Al Green ushers in a kind of secular, good-hearted unity, ensuring that the 'house' finally is 'safe.' The room calms down as they all chuckle softly. Shared appreciation for Al Green, and the dramatic irony of his romantic crooning in this situation, is what prevents the powder-keg from exploding. Their safety here is extremely fraught and unsustainable, but that does not diminish the humanistic power of this moment of connection and bonding between the two sides. This bonding happens not over any political discourse (at least not yet), but through a mutual understanding of what makes a home a home, what each of us needs in order to sleep at night.



Al Green's crooning carries over into the safe-house's stairwell, where a discussion between Avner and PLO group leader, Ali (Omar Metwally), complicates the harmony of those asleep. Ali explains that the state of Israel is unsustainable, that the Arab states will rise together and again control that land. Avner responds, "Tell me something, Ali—do you really miss your father's olive trees? Do you honestly think you have to get back all that *nothing*, that chalky soil and stone huts, is that what you really want for your children?" Ali, his eyes as full of tears as conviction, replies, "It absolutely is." Not knowing that Avner is a Jew Ali continues, "You Europeans don't know what it is not to have a home... Home is everything." Avner's suggestion that he not define himself by attachment to land is a deeply nuanced and Jewish value, and comes from a place of persecution. But because in this scene Avner must act as a *goy*, his empathy is lost on Ali—Ali is not wrong to push back. The disconnect between the two characters, as Avner is unable to be his true self, is wrenching. When he eventually moves his family to Brooklyn upon completing his mission, Avner has made himself into a refugee—he remains tied to Israel as a mother, but not as a home. Back in the room where the opposing fighters sleep, soulful music dominates. The safe-house becomes something of a home through music and discourse. There exists the potential for peace, but the conflicts, both personal and tribal, are so deeply ingrained that it is impossible to conceive of a solution. Al Green's utopia must be tempered by the stairwell talk. Not quite the hypocritical moral equivalency that many critics saw<sup>6</sup>, this scene is an articulation of the simultaneous closeness and tension between both parties—a closeness realized by the Jews pretending to be *goyim*.

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<sup>6</sup> Leon Weiseltier, writing in *The New Republic*, wrote that the film was "soaked in the sweat of its idea of evenhandedness." Gabriel Schoenfield, in *Commentary*, called the film "pernicious," and "the most hypocritical film of the year." The Zionist Organization of America released a press release calling for a boycott of the film and describing screenwriter Tony Kushner as an "Israel Hater."

The core ethical dilemma that runs through the film, crucial to understanding Prime Minister Meir's decision to follow through with Operation Black September (which, as historical hindsight would show, was colossally miscalculated), can also provide an insightful framework through which to engage with Spielberg's career: whether a nation, or an individual, must compromise their own values in order to defend them.

### Chapter Three: Craft and Character

*Empire of the Sun* opens with a shot that appears to be an abstract graphic: a bird's-eye-view close-up of a canal in Shanghai, the only audio the lapping of the waves. Before long, we begin to hear a children's choir sing a wrenching Welsh lullaby (Suo Gân) as wreaths of white petals float into frame, followed closely broken plywood coffins carrying rotting corpses, drifting with the current. As the floating group of coffins is interrupted by the giant nose of an Imperial Japanese ship, the film cuts to the ship's flag, filling the frame, as it billows away to reveal a Shanghai defined by its (disjointed) suburban British architecture. The layers of political irony in these opening shots elegantly introduce the shifting notions of loyalty and political identification that become a large part of the film's intellectual explorations. This no-man's-land becomes a floating burial ground, which is then squashed by the proudly Japanese metallic ship, which in turn reveals the dominant Western influence in Shanghai. With these introductory shots, Spielberg articulates the degree to which subtle changes in framing can completely reshape an apparent reality. This will come to be one of Spielberg's central filmmaking concerns throughout the film—how the borders of the film frame, as well as one's own frame of reference, come to define reality.

The first shot of Jamie alone appears during the opening montage, after he is first introduced as the soloist leading a boys' choir in *Suo Gân*. The montage begins when he is being driven home from practice—his chauffeur and nanny in the front seats, he alone on the backseat



(fig. 9) Jamie in his vehicular fortress

bench. Jamie is seated in the center of the bench, the camera roughly level with his stomach, looking up from a slight low angle (fig. 9). He appears engulfed by the luxury car's plush leather on all sides, alone in his temporary fortress. He is engrossed in a comic book series called "Wings," the cover of which shows a jacked-up version of Jamie's soon-to-be surrogate father, Basie (the cap and glasses are identical). When Basie does eventually arrive, his character's reality is subtly colored by this image. The fact that he is first introduced as this comic-book cover hero tempers our ability to accept him in 'real life.' Spielberg is subtly familiarizing the audience with the pop-culture symbols that color Jamie's life so that we can become fully immersed in his subjective experience of the war. He is reading about the open skies, suffocated by his claustrophobic privilege. As he is driven to his family's home inside of a gated community within the city's International Zone, Jamie sees out the window an elderly beggar. They lock eyes

and hold this contact until the car turns the corner. Separated only by the car's window, Jamie is faced early-on with the fragility of this fortress.

As soon as we enter the house, we hear and see Jamie's mother playing a Chopin nocturne on a polished grand piano covered with framed family photos. She is an ideal image of maternal beauty—between her white silk robe and her hair and makeup (light-red lipstick with clear borders, subtly defined eyebrows in a clear arch, and hair straight at the top and curly as it cascades down), she looks like a 1940s studio starlet lounging at home. Her gentle piano playing and the softness of her white house-gown suggest a Platonic ideal of motherhood. The film cuts to Jamie, riding his bicycle in circles around the backyard swimming pool, pretending to fly a model plane that he has set on fire. His Chinese nanny tries to stop him as his father, barely bothered by the boy's antics, continues playing golf. Jamie approaches his father, curiously inquiring as to which side he thinks will win the war. "Us, of course," the father says. Jamie replies, "No not that war." He continues, "I think the Japanese will win. They've got better airplanes than the Chinese, and braver pilots... I was thinking of joining the Japanese air force actually." The father, stunned, hits the golf ball into the pool. Jamie is expressing sympathy with and admiration for the Kamikaze pilots that are supposedly his enemy. For him, the only measures of value are bravery, loyalty, and skill. Loyalty to whom, however, is another matter entirely. The bravery of pilots is noble and beautiful no matter their political allegiance. And Jamie has no trouble switching allegiances—late in the film, he watches through a fence as Kamikaze pilots carry out their pre-flight ceremony. Moved by what he sees, Jamie sands tall, raises his hand to salute the pilots, and begins singing his Welsh lullaby. Despite knowing that they are his ostensible enemy, all Jamie sees are men courageous enough to fly for their people.

Early in the film, before going to sleep, Jamie goes to the kitchen for a late-night snack. The scene opens on a close-up of the fridge door, dimly lit and barely identifiable until it flings open, revealing a brightly lit and robust selection of cakes and fruits and cheeses—perhaps the fullest of Spielberg’s many refrigerators. We cut to a wide shot of the kitchen as Jamie sticks his finger into a custard and licks it clean, then grabs a bottle of milk and walks away from the fridge, leaving its door ajar. To any viewer attuned to Spielberg’s motifs, seeing Jamie take for granted this robust fridge is a striking moment of foreshadowing. No fridge this full is sustainable. Spielberg, in the film’s opening sequences, is presenting a world colored by the frailty with which its opulence is protected. The current world order is in Jamie’s favor, but Spielberg hints throughout the first scenes that this is unsustainable and already bursting at the seams. When his nanny comes into the kitchen and goes to close the fridge door, Jamie tells her to go make him buttered biscuits. She replies, in her broken English, “Your mom not want you eat before bed.” Jamie, sipping his milk, seems genuinely puzzled. He puts the glass down and looks at her quizzically before saying, with absolute earnestness and an upward inflection, “You have to do what I say.” His tone suggests an insecurity in the command. While he is not fully aware of the implications of his situation, he can begin to see it fraying.

Jamie gets in bed to go to sleep, and his mother and father come to tuck him in and kiss him goodnight. After a brief series of close-up shot/counter-shots while Jamie and his mother discuss dreams of God playing tennis, the film cuts to the scene’s master shot. Jamie is lying in bed, his mother is leaning over to kiss him, and his father is standing above them both, creating a diagonal line that traces their heads across the frame. The shot directly alludes to Norman Rockwell’s ominously titled painting “Freedom from Fear” (fig. 10-11). Rockwell’s original



(fig. 10) *Freedom from Fear*, Norman Rockwell,



(fig. 11) Jamie is tucked in by his

painting will be introduced later in the film, on a postcard that will come to represent Jamie's grasp of his childhood. But here, the visual reference provides the scene with a layer of dramatic irony. Rather than simply create a cozy home environment, Spielberg articulates that this opulent world presents merely the image of coziness and stability as defined by cultural signposts. He is capitalizing on the subtle irony of Rockwell's title and image—the father in "Freedom from Fear" holds by his side a newspaper whose headline reads: "BOMBINGS...HORROR." They have created for themselves the illusion of stability in the midst of chaos. Seeing this kiss goodnight in wartime Shanghai through the lens of Rockwell's loaded sentimentality creates yet another layer of foreshadowing. It is through this intertextuality that *Empire of the Sun* begins to play with notions of perspective and representation, of the truth of an image.

With this film, Spielberg fully develops and perfects his vocabulary for capturing the perspective of the adolescent. Committed exclusively to Jamie's perspective, the film is beholden only to subjective experience. The film captures the world as Jamie understands it. In the car

with his parents en route to a costume ball for the elite of Shanghai's British community, Jamie is introduced to a side of the city of which it seems he was previously unaware. As the car drives through the crowded streets, and Jamie's gaze becomes the focal point of Spielberg's camera, the counter-shots of what is outside the car become more grotesque and overwhelming. A bloody chicken is flung against his window, an elderly nun beckons to him, a teenage boy knocks on his window and is thrown aside by a policeman. This sequence is shot and edited so as to represent the harsh reality of the city, but is in fact extremely selective. The camera moves through the cluttered streets and around the camera, but in each counter-shot the lens appears to get longer, cutting out the surroundings of the objects of Jamie's gaze. The lens forms a direct line between Jamie and what he sees and finds unnerving outside the window. The focal length here is crucial to understanding the scene's subjectively mediated reality—its shallow depth of field renders foggy what might put into perspective the survey of grotesquery that we see. This sequence builds as the world outside the car grows more chaotic and immediate—Jamie watches through the rearview window as the teenager gets clubbed by the policeman. Jamie's claustrophobia dominates the tone of the scene, as Spielberg withholds the very wide crane shot until the car reaches the military checkpoint, marking the end of the International Zone.

At the checkpoint, the scene's chaos becomes reality across the board and so we are no longer limited to Jamie's subjective collapsing of space. The rest of the scene unfolds in wider shots, the camera on a crane, that provide a vivid sense of the city in turmoil, showing us at points what Jamie could not conceivably see from the car. It begins with a harrowing sequence: several large black luxury cars, with opulently costumed Europeans in the backseat and Chinese drivers at the wheel, nervously try to plow through the crowd swarming the checkpoint. John



Williams' score here resembles that of a horror movie—dissonant notes screeching in a high register over a muffled piano softly playing a sweet melody. The contrast between the scared, costumed Europeans in their black cars and the erupting masses in the street further accentuates the fragility of Jamie's situation, framing his own narrative and experience as a sort of microcosm of this fraught political moment.

Shortly after they reach the costume party, Spielberg provides the film's most foregrounded instance of purely subjective filmmaking—where the technical craft completely and seamlessly enters and reflects the consciousness and experience of, in this case, a child. Spielberg's commitment to Jamie's perspective is best discussed in terms of 'focalization'. Coined by French narratologist Gerard Genette, focalization refers simply to the perspective through which a narrative is presented. Genette does, however, distinguish three modes of focalization: a narrative can be internally focalized (character), externally focalized (camera), or unfocalized (omniscient narrator). *Empire of the Sun* collapses the dichotomy between internal and external focalization, achieving a unique effect that is exemplified by the following scene:

At the costume ball and bored by his parents' friends' schmoozing, Jamie wanders outside to the giant yard to play with his balsa-wood toy plane. As he enters the yard, he sees a real plane flying low overhead and tries to run along with it as fast as he can before tossing his own model plane into the air. When he does, it catches flight with the gusto of a fighter jet. Chasing his model plane to the far side of the field, Jamie leaves the area of the party and, as if in a mirage, comes across the intact wreckage of a genuine fighter plane. The music begins to swell as Jamie traces his fingers along this discovery, circling the entire plane. Jamie, awestruck, cautiously hoists himself into the cockpit and immediately disappears from the frame as he sits

back—the camera points head-on through the cockpit window, and Jamie is too short to fly the plane so once he reclines, all we see of him are the feathers from his Aladdin turban. After a beat, the camera reorients itself so as to reflect Jamie’s experience—now inside the plane, the camera shoots closeups of every detail (and from a higher angle), and it looks as if Jamie fits the cockpit perfectly. He begins testing all the buttons and dials, pushing and turning each one as if preparing for takeoff. The fact that they are all broken does not lessen the stakes of how the scene is filmed and cut. The camera does not merely observe Jamie and his antics, but rather accepts the high-stakes reality of his game as the film’s own. It is as if Jamie’s mind is at points controlling the camera, controlling how we view the role he plays in his own life.

Jamie spots his model plane still in the air, flipping and turning with the wind, and ascribes to it the status of “enemy aircraft approaching.” He pulls down his aviator sunglasses, flips a switch, and begins ‘firing’ at the ‘enemy jet.’ The camera, with a wide lens and a low shutter-angle, moves with the model plane as it zooms past Jamie’s bomber, creating the illusion that the two planes pass each other by. Filming the model plane such that its movement looks real, intercut with the close-ups of Jamie firing in the cockpit, creates the sweeping sensation that he is actually flying and shooting. There is a direct line tying together Jamie’s gaze, the game he is playing, and Spielberg’s filmmaking. The sound-effects that Jamie makes, imitating the planes’ gunfire and whooshing, become the dominant audio track, and the swelling of Williams’ score serves only to bolster their immediacy and intensity. This is the film’s most significant instance wherein each element outside of the diegesis reflects Jamie’s emotional and psychological

experience within it. The entire sequence is beholden to Jamie's subjectivity, to his experience of the world.

His fantasy ends when the model plane, his 'enemy fighter,' flies over the conspicuously vaulted grassy hill and out of Jamie's sight. Walking over this grassy hill, Jamie finds himself standing above an Imperial Japanese Army base. The soldiers and other military personnel, milling about, all fall silent and shift their collective gaze towards Jamie. In his bright and extravagant Aladin costume, he starkly contrasts the gray sky and dead grass and dark green Imperial uniforms.

This use of high-stakes imagination to color and thereby affect reality seems to have been developing in Spielberg decades before *Empire of the Sun*. In the seventh grade, around age twelve, he made a WWII film called *Fighter Squad*. His father Arnold, who had been an Air Force radio operator in Southeast Asia during the war, arranged access for him to film in a decommissioned bomber jet at a nearby Navy base. To execute his dogfight sequences, the boy Spielberg intercut close-ups of his friends in the bomber with newsreel footage of the planes in action. He used harshly real context to give shape to his imagination games, magnifying the stakes of his own footage. In *Empire of the Sun*, Spielberg is again playing this game, but with one difference—we see that Jamie's plane is grounded. Once he is settled in the cockpit, the camera and editing shift into dogfight mode. The camera moves alongside the stationary plane, paralleling the shots of Jamie's model flying through the air, swooping and turning with the wind. The editing gradually speeds up and gives shape to the moment's narrative—intercutting between POV shots from the model airplane and Jamie hurriedly pressing buttons and turning dials creates a direct relationship between the two elements. But whereas in Spielberg's

childhood the goal of this device was to imagine that the kids in the cockpit were in fact flying the planes, here it brings us deep into Jamie's experience of the world. Spielberg shows us the mechanism by which these scenes would be cheated in other films. He is illuminating the seam, bringing us into the mind behind the magic tricks—both his own and Jamie's.

This focalization extends into Jamie's first encounter with Basie, the American hustler who takes him in as a surrogate son. Lost in the streets of Shanghai, Jamie is found and coaxed into a truck by Basie's assistant, Frank. They drive to the nearby canal, where they board a small boat to reach the gigantic decaying ship in which Basie lives. The sequence of their arrival features several ominous shots of them traveling through the port—decaying infrastructure, smog-filled skies, dirty streets. But through this, we hear Jamie excitedly talking to Frank, asking first if he knows his father, assuming that all Westerners in Shanghai are connected, and then asking if he believes in psychic abilities. He is forcing himself to get comfortable around Frank, growing to trust him, such that he is able to see this decrepit port as a sort of pirates' haven. The camera allows for Jamie to romanticize the decay, colored by the comics and culture he consumes, while remaining a more distant observer than in other scenes—closer to what Genette would call unfocalized. The film cuts to two wide shots that reveal the dark grey skies and rotting ship carcasses to which they are headed. Jamie is romanticizing something that we understand to be quite bleak—the contrast in this sequence expresses his own cognitive dissonance.

After Jamie and Frank board the decaying ship, the film re-enters Jamie's subjectivity and cuts to a close-up of a radio atop a messy side-table, a soft jazz melody spilling out. This sound carries over to the next shot: in the foreground, we see Basie, framed chest-down, stirring rice

and meat in a frying pan. This introduction to Basie's home alludes to our introduction to Jamie's family home in the film's beginning. There, as Jamie and his nanny and chauffeur pull up to the house, we hear strains of a Chopin mazurka being played on a piano. The film cuts to Jamie's mother, wearing a white silk house-robe, seated at a grand piano and revealed to be playing the music. Jamie's initial domestic stability is introduced through a parent playing the soft, sweet music of the old world. After being separated from his parents, his surrogate father Basie is likewise introduced through soft, sweet music—here, though, it is modern and coming from a likely stolen radio. Whereas Jamie's mother represented a stable and delicate past through her command of classical music, his new father represents a perverted, wartime version of this stability. In Jamie's new life, his notions of parental comfort and authority must be adapted to the trying times.

After a moment of watching Basie's hands stir the contents of the frying pan, from the back left of the frame enter Jamie and Frank. Jamie's eyes immediately gravitate towards the skillet. This sort of focalization allows us to see the scene through Jamie's eyes before he has even entered the picture. With or without Jamie, we are in his head. The camera frames Basie and his home as warmly mysterious—the shot of him cooking cuts below his face, suggesting an ominous figure, but the pan's sizzling makes the food enticing, and we are cautiously excited along with Jamie. Framed any other way, this scene would be frankly disturbing—Frank has kidnapped Jamie and brought him to a dangerous and filthy lair for god-knows-what. But because our desires are Jamie's, we see the world filtered through this naively hopeful lens—we understand things on *his* terms. Therefore the magic and mystery in how this environment is introduced do not romanticize Jamie's situation, but rather express his own romanticization of it.

Spielberg is drawing a parallel between Jamie's subjectivity and the mechanisms of the magic of cinema.

“Neither attempting manipulation through striving for total empathy, nor resorting to the crude distancing of much polemical cinema,” Nigel Morris writes about *Empire of the Sun*, “[the film] makes full use of the ambiguities inherent in focalization” (145). This is the core of Spielberg's project in the film—by fully immersing the viewer into Jamie's perspective, he provides us with a version of reality that proudly embraces ambiguity. This is unique for Spielberg in that the film's profound sincerity and its layers of meta-textuality do not provide each other with a counterpoint, as in *E.T.* for example, but are rather one and the same. Any attempt at fully and earnestly portraying war and atrocity through the eyes of a boy must embrace its inherent limitations and exclusions. Charges of sentimentality, cheap romanticization, and simplistic moral clarity become moot when discussing *Empire of the Sun*<sup>7</sup>. Its project is to engage with how all of those qualities manifest in the psyche of a boy raised on the Western culture of the mid-20th century.

When Jamie is introduced in the beginning reading the comic book *Wings*, his car drives past a giant billboard for *Gone with the Wind* (dir. Victor Fleming, 1939). Surrounded by cultural signposts, these become his primary frames of reference. His experience of the war is filtered through the lens of the culture he consumes, and is therefore authentically represented by the

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<sup>7</sup> This view is crystalized by Desson Howe's review of the film, published in *The Washington Post* upon its release, which utterly disregards the complexities of the project at large: “Behind the trademark fancy package is a troubling sensibility, too. Spielberg seems unable to come to terms with anything real: A hobo hangs outside Jim's house, but he's more theatrically done-up than a Henson Muppet. Jim magically avoids bullets rushing through pitched street battles. British children, chauffeured to a masquerade party, look at the rioting crowds from Rolls Royce windows (one child is even dressed like Marie Antoinette). As a plane drops its bombs in front of him, Jim delights himself in the aircraft's features. The war is just a comic strip for him, just as the movies (and quite possibly life) are for Spielberg.”

experience Spielberg puts on film. In an interview for the DVD release of *Empire of the Sun*, J.G. Ballard, on whose memoir the film is based, says that even he cannot be certain which of his memories are real and which are imagined. The film's sugar-coating of certain harsh realities that define much of Jamie's experience of the war are its primary exploration. Its starting premise is that any film attempting to portray these experiences is inherently limited, filtered through a cultural lens, and so why not confront this upfront and commit to portraying that experience as such. It is precisely by committing so fully to the artifice that informs Jamie's filter that the film achieves a profound psychological realism. It collapses the distinction between objective reality and subjective experience, oscillating between the two and using each to inform representations of the other. We are at once enmeshed in Jamie's experience and aware of its dissonance with the surrounding reality. This collapse also endows the film with greater artistic possibility—the possibility of achieving realism through impressionism.

This is perhaps most evident when Basie and his fellow Americans, betting on whether an explosion near the fence came from a mine or a grenade, coerce Jamie into sifting the reeds for explosives. They tell Jamie he is being sent in to set up a rabbit trap, never disclosing the risk (though Basie seems convinced the path is safe). Jamie slowly gets down on all fours, crawls into the marsh and reeds, and begins shuffling through the barbed wire. As he crouches, the camera comes down to his eye level, flush with the ground, and this visual perspective dominates the scene. From this position, half-underwater and obscured by the reeds, Jamie seems to be effectively hiding. But Spielberg withholds a wide shot, the birds-eye-view that would reveal the impossibility of the scene. He is crawling through a wide open field, barely blending with the reeds—the guard tower should have no trouble spotting him. The camera, dollying at ground

level alongside Jamie, frames the marsh and reeds and barbed wire as a dense jungle.

A Japanese guard just beyond the fence spots Jamie's shoes where he entered the marsh and becomes suspicious. As he enters through the barbed wire to look for the intruder, the camera again moves down to ground level, but here the guard is standing tall—all we see are his boots. From this point on, it is a stealthy game of cat and mouse between the guard's boots and Jamie. The threat of big boots squashing the little hero is somewhat cartoonish, but is played completely straight. Jamie acts and sees as if in a comic book. The film cuts back to Basie and his fellow Americans watching the scene unfold, betting on the outcome—will Jamie be shot?



(fig. 12) Jamie's audience

They are framed as an excited audience, all angling to see the scene through the big, round window (fig. 12). The camera is exposed for the interior light so that, in this shot of the audience, they appear to be gathered around a bright movie screen, betting on the film's plot points.

Spielberg's articulation of the scene's layers of audience and diegesis furthers the suspense and





(fig. 13) Jamie hides in the reeds

allows us to watch, excited, without intimately fearing for Jamie's life—we are reminded that this scene we are watching is a fiction, an impossibility.

The film cuts back from the audience to Jamie in the reeds, level with the ground, and the camera angled slightly up such that his face is foregrounded. Right behind him, partly obscured by the framing of the reeds, the Japanese guard seems to spot Jamie when suddenly a Japanese boy about Jamie's age calls out for the guard's attention. He points in Jamie's direction, and we think his mission has been compromised. But as the tension builds and the guard walks closer and closer to the boy (in the ground level shot with Jamie's face foregrounded), he simply steps over his body, apparently not noticing him (fig. 13). The Japanese boy continues calling out and pointing—not at Jamie, it is revealed, but at a model airplane that had flown over the fence. Once the guard retrieves the plane and walks away, the Japanese boy looks straight at Jamie and they exchange a knowing smile—the boy had thrown the plane over the fence so as to divert the guard's attention from Jamie.

This scene establishes the counterpoint to Jamie's character. This Japanese boy, roughly Jamie's age, not only has fantasies about flying but also exhibits loyalties that transcend political and national boundaries. Just before the boy turns and walks away, he looks straight at Jamie and salutes him. Jamie, smiling, his face caked with mud, salutes back. He goes back across the fence and, covered head-to-toe with mud, walks through the internment camp with confidence and poise. When a small British girl runs up to him, Jamie repeats a gag he learned from his American mentor: he asks her if she would like a Hershey's bar, she eagerly says yes, and he replies with a smirk, "So would I, kid." Jamie, having succeeded in his mission, is now one of the guys. When he returns to the bunks, he enters through a door made of a giant round window—centered in the door, Jamie is encased in a divine halo. The camera, at a low angle and exposed for the dark interior, presents Jamie as a religious symbol, light flooding in around him. The camera tracks along with him as he walks through the bunk—we see just about every American stand up and salute the boy as he passes them by. He has proven his worth as a gofer and a soldier. The heartbreaking irony of the scene, however, is what was established at the outset—Jamie was used as a guinea pig minesweeper for Basie and his crew. But, faithful to Jamie's perception of events, the scene is exhilarating, a pure victory for Jamie, who is yet unaware of the cynical survivalism and cheap valuation of life that motivated his mission.

As thanks for Jamie's big risk, Basie arranges for Frank to switch beds with the boy—Jamie is upgraded to a single bed, tucked in a corner, with privacy screens and walls. As soon as he gets to his new bed, he opens his suitcase and pulls out the postcard featuring Norman Rockwell's "Freedom from Fear" (the image Spielberg references early on when showing Jamie being tucked in by his parents). For Jamie, family is defined by the memory of moments of



(fig. 14) Devil on one shoulder, angels on the other

safety and comfort. These are retained, in times of unrest, through cultural symbols and references. Jamie tacks the postcard to his wall and sits on his bed to relax. The frame and his posture are such that the Rockwell image, just above his left shoulder, suggests his parents are watching over him (fig. 14). The divider on Jamie's right slides open and Basie pokes his head through, saying, "Don't let me down, kid—you're an American now." This shot is framed with Jamie's head in the center, Basie looking down on his right shoulder, his 'parents' (in the painting) looking down on his left. The tension between these two versions of parental authority is articulated through this shot's allusion to another widely familiar cultural image—devil on one shoulder, angel on the other.

After the liberation of the internment camp, Jamie, with nowhere to go, rides a bicycle through the shattered and mostly abandoned grounds. This sequence reminds us of his bike-ride through his abandoned childhood home before he encounters Basie. In the beginning, however, the cycling is an act spurred by freedom and exhilaration. When the sequence is mirrored in the

vacated internment camp, however, he is not testing the limits of his freedom but rather lamenting the loss of a home he had built. He cheers and wallops, but his energy is more manic and depraved than jovial. The film is a chronicle of the various homes Jamie builds for himself through the war, his attempts to create comfort and stability. This fundamental aspect of the film is a preoccupation of Spielberg's—*Munich* likewise tells its story by chronicling its protagonist's attempts to build for himself a home wherever he finds himself.

The war has so upturned Jamie's life that, as far as he knows, this life he built in the camp is the next-best thing to his upbringing. So the loss of this temporary home creates a terrifying unknown for Jamie—he is at once more prepared to face the future and yet no longer able to engage with it in the eager way that colored his adolescent perspective. If the initial bike ride through his empty family home marked the beginning of his adolescence—his coming of age which would last through the war—this final bike ride through the camp marks the end of his adolescence, the beginning of adulthood. He has experienced too much to be able to simply delight in his liberation. He has become jaded, but rides nonetheless, bursting with anger and yearning and exuberance and fear.

Following this final bicycle ride is the death of Jamie's Japanese counterpoint character in one of the film's most strikingly self-aware moments. Jamie, sitting with the Japanese boy on the wing of a downed fighter jet in the liberated camp grounds, tries unsuccessfully to peel a mango. He approaches and offers to help. Jamie gladly accepts, and the Japanese boy lifts up his sword to cut the fruit. Off in the distance, however, are Basie and his cronies looting supplies dropped by the Allied forces. They see the Japanese boy lifting the sword to cut the mango, but from their vantage point it looks as if Jamie is in danger. Trying to save their friend, one of the

Americans shoots the Japanese boy—we see his blood spill onto the mango as he falls and dies (fig. 15). The angle from which the Americans saw the scene led them to shoot an innocent boy. This tragic killing is a result of the Americans' limited perception of events—limited not by the movie camera but by their own poor judgement and well-meaning.



(fig. 15) Jamie's counterpoint is killed

Jamie starts attacking Basie and his crew, furious that they killed his friend. Basie pulls Jamie and yells, “He was a Jap!... There are frigid-airs falling from the sky, it’s kingdom come!” Jamie runs to the body of his friend and begins to administer a vigorous but futile CPR. The film stays on a low-angle of Jamie’s face as he frantically tries to resuscitate a lost cause. Jamie’s pumping gets more and more intense as the camera slowly pushes in and the music begins to swell as this one shot lasts for a full minute. When we cut to the reverse shot from Jamie’s shoulder, we see that the body in the grass is that of his younger self, wearing his red school uniform, his hair parted down the middle. He is trying and failing to resuscitate himself. Spielberg brings the film’s formal exploration of focalization into the diegesis itself, making it

central to both the narrative and character, articulating the profound human implications of these issues. This sequence, which is followed only by Jamie's bike-ride through the camp and reunion with his parents, flips the film's focalization onto the audience, revealing our own role in its distortion of events—"a mirror, not a lamp" (Amis).

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Directed by Spielberg:

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*Always*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. By Jerry Belson and Diane Thomas. Perf. Holly Hunter and Richard Dreyfuss. Amblin Entertainment / United Artists / Universal Pictures, 1989. DVD.

*Amblin*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. By Steven Spielberg. Perf. Richard Levin and Pamela McMyler. Sigma III Corp., 1968.

*Catch Me If You Can*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. By Jeff Nathanson. Perf. Leonardo DiCaprio and Tom Hanks. Amblin Entertainment / Dreamworks Pictures, 2002. DVD

*Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. By Steven Spielberg. Perf. Richard Dreyfuss and Teri Garr. EMI / Columbia Pictures, 1977. DVD.

*Duel*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. By Richard Matheson. Perf. Dennis Weaver. Universal Studios, 1971. DVD.

*E.T. The Extra Terrestrial*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. By Melissa Matheson. Perf. Henry Thomas. Amblin Entertainment, 1982. DVD.

*Empire of the Sun*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. By Tom Stoppard. Perf. Christian Bale. Amblin Entertainment / Warner Bros., 1987. DVD.

*Hook*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. By Jim V. Hart and Malia Scotch Marmo. Perf. Robin Williams and Dustin Hoffman. Amblin Entertainment / Tri-Star Pictures, 1991. DVD.

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***Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom.*** Dir. Steven Spielberg. By Willard Huyck and Gloria Katz. Perf. Harrison Ford and Kate Capshaw. Lucasfilm Ltd. / Paramount Pictures, 1984. DVD.

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***Jurassic Park.*** Dir. Steven Spielberg. By Michael Crichton and David Koepp. Perf. Sam Neill and Laura Dern. Amblin Entertainment / Universal Pictures, 1992. DVD.

***Lincoln.*** Dir. Steven Spielberg. By Tony Kushner. Perf. Daniel Day-Lewis. Dreamworks Pictures / Twentieth Century Fox / Reliance Entertainment / Participant Media / Amblin Entertainment / Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2012. DVD

***Minority Report.*** Dir. Steven Spielberg. By Scott Frank and Jon Cohen. Perf. Tom Cruise. Amblin Entertainment / Cruise/Wagner Productions / Dreamworks Pictures, 2002. DVD.

***Munich.*** Dir. Steven Spielberg. By Tony Kushner and Eric Roth. Perf. Eric Bana. Amblin Entertainment / Universal Pictures, 2005. DVD.

***Raiders of the Lost Ark.*** Dir. Steven Spielberg. By Lawrence Kasdan. Perf. Harrison Ford and Karen Allen. Paramount Pictures, 1981. DVD.

***Saving Private Ryan.*** Dir. Steven Spielberg. By Robert Rodat. Perf. Tom Hanks. Amblin Entertainment / Dreamworks Pictures, 1998. DVD.

***Schindler's List.*** Dir. Steven Spielberg. By Steven Zaillian. Perf. Liam Neeson and Ben Kingsley. Amblin Entertainment / Universal Pictures, 1993. DVD.

***The Adventures of Tintin.*** Dir. Steven Spielberg. By Steven Moffat and Edgar Wright and Joe Cornish. Nickelodeon Movies / Amblin Entertainment / Paramount Pictures, 2011. DVD.



***The BFG***. Dir. Steven Spielberg. By Melissa Matheson. Perf. Mark Rylance and Ruby Barnhill. Walt Disney Pictures / Amblin Entertainment / Reliance Entertainment / Walden Media / Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures

***The Color Purple***. Dir. Steven Spielberg. By Menno Meyjes. Perf. Whoopi Goldberg and Danny Glover. Warner Bros., 1985. DVD.

***The Lost World: Jurassic Park***. Dir. Steven Spielberg. By David Koepp. Perf. Jeff Goldblum. Amblin Entertainment / Universal Pictures, 1997. DVD.

***The Terminal***. Dir. Steven Spielberg. By Sacha Gervasi and Jeff Nathanson. Perf. Tom Hanks and Catherine Zeta-Jones. Amblin Entertainment / Dreamworks Pictures, 2004. DVD.

***Twilight Zone: The Movie***. Dir. John Landis, Steven Spielberg, Joe Dante, and George Miller. Warner Bros., 1983. DVD.

***War Horse***. Dir. Steven Spielberg. By Lee Hall and Richard Curtis. Perf. Jeremy Irvine. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2011. DVD.

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***Batteries Not Included***. Dir. Matthew Robbins. By Brad Bird and Mick Garris. Perf. Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy. Amblin Entertainment / Universal Pictures, 1987. DVD.

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***Gremlins 2: The New Batch.*** Dir. Joe Dante. By Charles S. Haas and Chuck Jones. Perf. Zach Galligan and Phoebe Cates. Amblin Entertainment / Warner Bros, 1990. DVD.

***Jurassic Park III.*** Dir. Joe Johnston. By Alexander Payne and Peter Buchman and Jim Taylor. Perf. Sam Neill and William H. Macy. Amblin Entertainment / Universal Pictures, 2001. DVD.

***Poltergeist.*** Dir. Tobe Hooper. By Steven Spielberg and Michael Grais and Mark Victor. Perf. Craig T. Nelson and JoBeth Williams. Amblin Entertainment / MGM/UA Entertainment Company, 1982. DVD.

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***Au Revoir les Enfants.*** Dir. Louis Malle. By Louis Malle. Perf. Gaspard Manesse and Raphael Fejtö. MK2 Diffusion, 1987. DVD.

***Cinema Paradiso.*** Dir. Giuseppe Tornatore. By Giuseppe Tornatore. Perf. Philippe Noiret. Les Films Ariane / Miramax Films, 1988. DVD.

*Elevator to the Gallows.* Dir. Louis Malle. Perf. Jeanne Moreau and Maurice Ronet. Lux Compagnie Cinématographique De France, 1958. Film.

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*L'argent de Poche.* Dir. Francois Truffaut. By Suzanne Schiffman. Perf. Jean-François Stévenin. United Artists, 1976. DVD.

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