

PREFACE

IN EARLY 1993, Steven Spielberg is in Kraków filming *Schindler's List*. By day, he shoots a scene in a work camp: children are being herded onto trucks for deportation, singing as if on a jolly field trip. A few run away to crouch in cellars and boxes, and when there are no more hiding places, one jumps into a latrine. By night, he is talking via satellite with the crew at Industrial Light and Magic in northern California, discussing the final editing of *Jurassic Park*, listening to John Williams's score, maybe fiddling with the elbow of a velociraptor. The juxtaposition—as if dread and anxiety could thus be halved, one film allaying the stress of the other—seems almost inhuman as well as superhuman.

In December 2016, Spielberg turned seventy. In his eighth decade on earth, he is still making movies as fast we can see them. What keeps him going? The answer, or rather the mystery, begins with the outsize fears of a little boy who began

biting his nails while still in knee-pants. A little boy who was spooked by everything, by the static on the radio, by Disney films, by the tree outside his New Jersey window that turned sinister in a storm, its branches weaving and waving like some otherworldly monster.

What makes him unusual is not just the size of the fears but his manner of hanging onto them. Rather than bury those shaming moments of childhood vulnerability, as most of us do, he nourished their memory, translated them into bold cinematic images, and projected them onto a terrified audience as he had once relieved his own anxiety by terrorizing his younger sisters. So powerful was the urge—and so successful an exorcism—that as a director he would aim for nothing less than whole theaters full of spectators biting their nails, or blissed out with shock and awe at close encounters with the paranormal.

In the weeks leading up to the 2014 Academy Awards, one of the factoids that newscasters dished out to whet viewer appetites was a statistic on who Oscar winners thanked most. The top two names, according to NBC's Lester Holt, were Steven Spielberg and God, with the latter receiving only nineteen mentions to the former's forty-two. What did this mean? That he has touched more lives and boosted more careers than the Almighty, let alone L. B. Mayer, David Selznick, Irving Thalberg, Lew Wasserman, and assorted agents, parents, and spouses? Or perhaps that the popular populist has simply become a lodestar to would-be filmmakers, like the celestial light in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, or the extraterrestrial pal E.T. Or even that his philanthropic work, like the establishment of the Shoah Foundation, with its archived testimonies from Holocaust survivors, has granted him a transcendent place among mankind's beneficiaries.

The output is staggering; his fingerprints are everywhere, as producer as well as director, in video games and television as well as feature films. In his forty-two years of making movies—

fifty-two if you count his childhood efforts—the wunderkind has given more pleasure to more people than any other filmmaker in history. If he hasn't touched every heart and mind with every picture, it's a guarantee that he has touched even the harshest critic with one, or two, or three. For some, the early movies centering on childhood—*Close Encounters* and *E.T.*—have never been bettered. For others *Jaws*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and *Jurassic Park* are the greatest adventure movies ever made, and even their weaker spin-offs and sequels have a way of earning, with time, the revisionist honor of “underappreciated gems.” For still others, like myself, the later films with their dark edges—*Empire of the Sun*, *Schindler's List*, *A.I.*, *Minority Report*, and the melancholy-tinged *Catch Me If You Can*—give a greater and very different kind of pleasure.

Other action movies and franchises may equal or outperform his at the box office, but no filmmaker has combined profits and prestige the way he has, with multiple Oscar nominations and wins, while at the same time having directed—with figures adjusted for inflation—two of the top ten grossing films of all time, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* and *Jaws*. The box office flops are few, and generally the artistic failures and underperformers go on to recoup their investment in global release or on DVD. Financial success is also part of the story, offsetting to many and a critical liability, but something that has enabled him to follow his conscience into less crowd-pleasing movies and accomplish a great deal as a philanthropist.

When Yale University Press came to me with the idea of writing a short biography of Spielberg for its Jewish Lives series, I hesitated, for obvious and less obvious reasons. I didn't worry about not being Jewish—let others do that. I believe strongly that there should be no bars of race, ethnicity, or gender to writing, and I think it's particularly important in the case of Spielberg, for one of his greatest traits has always been a kind of natural ecumenism, a generosity of spirit. He grew up

in mostly gentile suburbs in New Jersey and Arizona and belatedly found his own path to Judaism, coming to terms with the faith he'd denied and the insults he'd suffered, but remarkably free of rancor or a retributive agenda.

More to the point, I had never been an ardent fan. We both had our blind spots. The problem was, Spielberg's blind spots were my *see* spots, and vice versa. He readily acknowledged that he had no feeling for European films. 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 gray."

Nor was I—nor had I ever been—the adolescent boy whose fears and anxieties were the gnawing, liberating center of his films, who would respond passionately to his oeuvre, resisting, with him, the ordeal of growing up and moving on. I had been born a different gender and six significant years earlier, a war baby as opposed to the boomers of which he (born in 1946) was an entry-level member. Mine was an in-between sensibility: although I would rebel and make a break for broader pastures, adults were still figures of fascination and respect.

I worried more about my biases, my inherent lack of sympathy as a woman, as a person, for the genres in which Spielberg had enjoyed his greatest successes. I was never susceptible to the wonderments of fantasy or the supernatural, whose delights, like the cacophonous thrills of car crashes and train wrecks, belonged to a boy's world. Yes, fangirls, many of you respond to vampires and werewolves and dystopic science fiction, as *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* have demonstrated, and

conversely, many men are indifferent to its charms. Still, the fears that Spielberg played with so brilliantly struck me primarily as men's fears—of women, of maturity, of sex.

Some of us were hard on his early films. (So hard that, looking back, I was shocked at the intemperate tone of our reviews.) I was a True Believer, in something more magical than UFOs, a crusader in what would later be called the great age of “cinophilia,” seeing and reevaluating the glories of the past, rushing to see and talk about exciting new auteurist films from Europe and America.

This sense of peril and a certain foreboding is what we felt when suddenly (somewhere around 1973) the conversation was all about money: “saturation” marketing, must-see summer films, the advent of the blockbuster, and then the high drama of the weekend opening and the box office intake.

Trying to come to terms with this man who has had such an outsize influence on our lives seemed like a worthy challenge. In grappling with Spielberg I would be confronting my own resistance. Moreover, there were many Spielberg films that I did love and looked forward to seeing again . . . and came to admire even more the second or third time around. And the man has worn extraordinarily well. Naysayers have been turned into yea-sayers as critics have come to appreciate the sheer versatility of his moviemaking skills. He's a deft deployer of the latest in CGI techniques and video, but is a deep-in-his-bones lover of the look and texture of classic film. If he and George Lucas were responsible for catapulting science fiction into the big-budget stratosphere, Spielberg's movies displayed a feeling, lacking in the efforts of many of his followers, for actual human beings. His instincts—the way his genre and period films resonate with present-day anxieties—have proved so unerring as to be uncanny. There is nothing ironic or “cutting-edge” about him, and that has proved refreshing: his history epics are told in straightforward fashion and celebrate an old-fashioned sense

of virtue, transmitting the best of a tradition we've come to appreciate in its absence.

Oddly enough, there were certain common points between Spielberg and me. We were both squares come to the big city, products of fifties suburban America, repressed in different ways, looking for something. If we weren't exactly apolitical, neither of us was inflamed by radical activities or attitudes. Spielberg's middle America was not the circle of hell favored by most filmmakers, nor was he biased against "the establishment," so when his films did become more concerned with human carelessness and criminality, the darkness was earned.

Would Spielberg speak to me? I made inquiries. No, his assistant emailed me, he had a policy of not granting interviews to biographers. It was true he hadn't given an interview to Joseph McBride, who seems to have talked to everybody else and to whose superb biography I am deeply indebted. Still, I felt stung, a little red-faced, like a girl angling for a date and being rejected.

There also may have been a bit of a grudge: While watching clips of Spielberg on YouTube, I came upon one from 1978 where he is speaking with directorial aspirants in a master class at the American Film Institute. He looks as young as or younger than his audience members but has chalked up two monster successes, of which they seem quite suspicious. Is he in it for the money? What will he do now? He has said earlier that he is not a director who imposes his style like Orson Welles, but rather a craftsman like Victor Fleming, the studio go-to man for big pictures like *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone with the Wind*. Then, smiling from under his baseball cap, he says, "You just have to have confidence. You can't worry if critics like Andrew Sarris and Molly Haskell don't like your movies."

I winced. But I also fell a little in love with him at that moment, with his charm and quick-wittedness, his playful faux-modesty, and—most erotic to a movie lover—his obvious

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knowledge of and passion for films. His spurning of me personally came to seem a relief. I'd have been compromised. Either through natural sympathy or good manners, I'd have felt inhibited, seduced into his point of view, unable to maintain a critical distance. The sense of personal liking was strong, and buoyed me while slogging through massive amounts of material and trying to figure out how to write a "short" biography of a man still dauntingly alive and around whose career the (critical) dust was far from settled. I wanted to do justice to the life, and the fascinating issue of his Jewishness—denied, then embraced. But because of who he was ("Everything about me is in my films") and who I was, I needed to tell it through the movies. I take it as by now axiomatic that film criticism is personal, never "objective" or unbiased, and biography can evaluate as well as report. To tell the story of Spielberg through his films is to take into account one's own engagements, and the way time and context—politics, world events, other films—alter everything. We and the films age and change. Considerations of box office and marketing and hyperbole recede in time, the glories of art endure.

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STEVEN SPIELBERG

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