

Steven Spielberg is an American film director. Born in 1946, he has directed Hollywood blockbuster films such as *Jaws* (1975) and *Jurassic Park* (1993). Spielberg has also directed science fiction films such as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001). In this essay, I am going to argue that Steven Spielberg deserves be regarded as an auteur director. This can be backed up through the process of viewing and analysing several of Spielberg's films, where reoccurring themes can be identified. These include: the absence of a strong father figure, representations of alien life forms, the lost child, and the frequent use of bright light. All of these themes can be traced back to Spielberg's own beliefs, childhood and personal life.

The auteur theory of film criticism can be traced back to French film critics in the years after World War Two. In 1954, Francois Truffaut published an article entitled "Une Certaine Tendence du Cinéma Français" ("A Certain Tendency of French Cinema"). His article was based on the concerning current state of French cinema. Truffaut says that French cinema was suffering from a "tradition of quality," and films were being made for festivals rather than for displaying the director's "artistic integrity" (Staples 2). Truffaut also went on to say that he was concerned that the film writer, as opposed to the director, seemed to be the more important figure involved in the completion of a film (Staples 2).

In 1957 another French film critic, Andre Bazin, wrote an article entitled "La Politique des Auteurs." According to Staples, it was in this article that auteur theory was first discussed in great detail (3). Bazin stated that auteurism involves "choosing the personal factor in artistic creation as a standard of reference" (Caughie 45). In other words, he believed that a director's personal vision should be evident in a number of their films. He also believed that the basis of the auteur theory was that the director should be the author of the film.

Both Truffaut and Bazin are widely regarded as being responsible for the development of the auteur theory. It was in their various works that characteristics of auteur directors were established. As mentioned earlier, a film should reflect a director's personal vision. In order to be considered an auteur director, this vision needs to be present in not just one, but a number of that particular director's films. As Cahillie explains, an auteur director's films are "likely to be the expression of their individual personality ... this personality can be traced in a thematic or stylistic consistency over all (or almost all) the director's films" (9). What Cahillie is saying here is that auteur directors have distinct styles and themes that can be recognised by analysing the form and style of their films. A director's films need to be consistent in this sense, and their personal life and beliefs should influence their work. Steven Spielberg fits this description.

First of all, from a very young age, Spielberg has been fascinated by the idea of extraterrestrial life. One reason for this was because of the influence of his father, Arnold. As Powers points out, Spielberg's father shared his interest in science and astronomy with him (10). Powers also mentions that once, when Spielberg was young, he and his father watched a meteor shower together, and that Spielberg "treasured that moment" (11). But there is another reason for Spielberg's fascination with aliens. Spielberg is Jewish and he initially refused to accept this. Mc Bride, in his biography on Spielberg, quotes him as saying "I never felt comfortable with myself ... because I was never part of the majority" (18). In other words, Spielberg felt like an alien because he felt out of place in society.

A reoccurring theme in Spielberg's films is that of a lost child. Spielberg has said that he "can always trace a movie idea back to [his] childhood" (Mc Bride 16). The idea of a lost child is strongly reinforced in similar but different ways in the science fiction films he directed. One of these films is *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*. The story is based around David, an android child

who has the ability to love. He is adopted by two parents, Henry and Monica Swinton. But after a moment in the film when David almost drowns their real life son, Martin, they abandon him. David then spends the rest of the film searching for the Blue Fairy, in the hope of becoming a real boy so his mom, Monica, will love him back.

This sequence of events is a great example of the idea of a lost child. David is physically and emotionally distanced from his mother throughout the film. His quest to once again find his mother is driven by his dream, a single goal: he wants his mother to love him (Morris 308). By the end of the film, 2000 years later, David is no longer a lost child. He gets to see a regenerated version of his mother for one day. He spends quality time with her by making her a cup of coffee, getting a haircut, and finally getting to hear her say that she loves him.

*A.I.* also provides an example of how Spielberg's films are reliant on character's emotions (Friedman 2). In the film, David shows emotion when he pleads to the Blue Fairy to make him a real boy, and also when he cries as his mother abandons him. These examples show that although David is not a real boy biologically, his emotions seem real. In other words, David's character is a great example of how Spielberg is effectively able to involve viewers in his films by expressing strong feelings in his characters.

*Close Encounters of the Third Kind* is another example of Spielberg's work that signifies the theme of a lost child. In *Mc Bride*, while discussing the film, Spielberg explains the how he wanted to apply the "naive wonderment" of childhood in the film:

"I really wanted to take a child's point of view ... the uneducated innocence that allows a person to take this kind of quantum jump ... a responsible adult human being probably wouldn't" (285).

Spielberg is referring to Barry, who is the young boy in film. Early on in the film he becomes fascinated by the moving toys. He gets out of bed and walks downstairs where he follows and smiles at the various noises he hears. He eventually runs outside laughing and follows the noises into the bushes, ignoring the call of his mom. This scene reinforces what Spielberg was saying. Unlike adults, children are unaware of the dangers around them. Barry does not even think about what could go wrong. His mind is lost and wandering in a world of his own.

*E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) presents another example of how Spielberg puts children at the centre of his films. The film revolves around Elliot Taylor, a young boy who discovers an alien in his backyard, who he names E.T. Elliot and E.T. become very close friends as they spend time together. As Gordon points out, E.T.'s progress on Earth resembles that of a child's (301). E.T. starts off with gestures, then learns the language and eventually builds his own device in order to "phone home" (Gordon 301). In other words, E.T. builds up confidence as the film progresses. This works in conjunction with Elliot, who also builds up confidence during the film. He changes from a "friendless loser into a heroic leader" (Gordon 302). Elliot helps E.T. escape from the humans who captured him, and helps him achieve his desire to return home.

*E.T.* presents another of Spielberg's reoccurring themes: the absence of a father figure. In this case, Elliot's parents are divorced and his father is living in Mexico. Elliot's father is first mentioned after his mother tells him that he probably just imagined the alien he saw. Elliot becomes upset and tells his mother "dad would believe me." Very soon we learn that his father is living in Mexico. The expression on Elliot's face allows us to understand how he feels. He misses his father and is upset that no one believes him. He believes that his father would at least listen to what he has to say, unlike his mother who seems uninterested, and

his older brother and younger sister who are making jokes about the alien he apparently saw.

As Friedman examines, the fathers in Spielberg's films either "remain forever distant, forsake the family, neglect their offspring, or have priorities outside the family" (33). There is a motivated reason for this. Spielberg's parents became divorced and his father, Arnold, was always busy with his work. In a biography on Spielberg, Jackson points out that Spielberg's family had to constantly move because his father kept getting promotions (2). This meant that Spielberg was never settled. In Mc Bride's biography on Spielberg, he is quoted as saying, "I always felt my father put his work before me. I always thought he loved me less than his work and I suffered as a result" (41).

One of Spielberg's films that strongly reflect his childhood is the 1991 film, *Hook*, which has been labelled "Spielberg's ultimate autobiographical project" (qtd. in Morris 179). In *Hook*, Peter Banning is the father of two young children, Jack and Maggie. Very early on we learn that Peter is not a caring father. During his daughter's play, he is talking on his phone organizing a work meeting for the next day. But Jack reminds him that he promised he would come to his last baseball game of the season. Peter replies, "my word is my bond." In the next couple of scenes we see Peter, at the meeting, asking one of his colleagues to go and film the game. We then see Jack at the baseball game, upset that his father has not turned up and therefore broken his promise. Therefore, Jack's emotions and feelings towards his father reflect those of Spielberg's when he was a child.

The character of Peter Banning also resembles Spielberg's feelings on being a father. In an interview about *Hook*, Spielberg explains how he can relate to Peter Banning:

“I have even experienced it myself when I have been on a very tough shoot and I’ve not seen my kids except on weekends. They ask for my time, and I can’t give it to them because I’m working. And I’ve been both guilty and wanting to something about it” (Bahiana 154).

So basically, *Hook* reinforces Spielberg’s status as an auteur director because it presents us with his personal experiences in two different ways: as a child and also as an adult.

In *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, Roy Neary is presented as the neglecting father. Before his encounter with the aliens, he hesitantly helps his son with his “fractions,” and goes against his kids’ wishes of playing “goofy golf,” suggesting they watch Pinocchio instead. The situation worsens after his encounter because of his odd behaviour. He builds a mountain shape out of the mashed potatoes on his plate and this upsets his kids and his wife, Ronnie. After a dramatic scene where Roy scoops plants and dirt through a window into his house, Ronnie decides to take the kids and leave him. These examples represent a dysfunctional family, which echoes Spielberg’s childhood experiences (Mc Bride, 282).

Another film that shows the theme of an unsupportive father figure is the 2005 film, *War of the Worlds*. Ray is divorced from his wife, Mary Ann, and they share custody of two children, Rachel and Robby. Early on in the film we realise that Ray is not a good parent. As Friedman examines, Ray arrives late to pick up his children and, instead of providing for them himself, tells them to order a takeaway dinner instead (153). These examples can be related to other father figures in Spielberg’s films. Ray shows an unwillingness to take on his responsibilities as a parent and does not pay much attention to his children.

However by the end of film, Ray has become a more capable father. This is an example of another theme that Spielberg has frequently used in his films. Their similar narrative

structures allow us as viewers to examine the ideology of being a male. Spielberg's male characters are filled with anxiety about their masculinity and they struggle with the idea of being a father. Only when physical challenges are forced upon them do they show any authority (Friedman 8). In *War of the Worlds*, the alien invasion has forced Ray to develop into a more responsible and protective father.

*Jurassic Park* also makes use of this idea. Dr. Alan Grant is, at first, reluctant to spend time with the two kids in the film, Tim and Lex. Just before setting off on their tour of the park, Tim asks Grant questions. We can tell he is annoyed by this because he shuts the jeep door on Tim while he is still talking. However, as is the case with other Spielberg films, challenges are forced upon Grant. A storm hits the park and a Tyrannosaurus Rex (T. Rex) escapes its enclosure. Gennaro, who was in Tim and Lex's jeep, abandons them by running into the toilet.

When the T. Rex attacks their jeep, Grant assumes control by distracting it with a flashlight. Shortly after this, he shows further authority when he climbs a tree to rescue Tim from the jeep. Both these examples show Grant's transformation into a strong, father like figure. As Morris points out, a "family formation" begins when Grant and the two kids are resting in a large tree (205). He laughs at Tim's dinosaur jokes and tells Lex that he will protect them while they sleep (Friedman 139).

*Jaws* presents this theme in a different way. At the beginning of their voyage to kill the shark, Chief Brody, Quint and Hooper do not get along. Friedman interprets this as a "dysfunctional family" of three men (163). They ignore each other and there is not much cooperation between them. However, they share some bonding time at night during the boat cabin scene, where Quint tells of his experience with sharks during World War Two.

The next day they do show some teamwork, and Chief Brody is the one who ultimately defeats the shark. As is the case with Dr. Grant in *Jurassic Park*, Chief Brody represents the anxious male who has to defeat the threats forced upon him. After Quint is eaten by the shark and Hooper is forced to hide on the seabed, Chief Brody has no choice but to take control of the situation, which he does successfully.

Another way that Spielberg expresses himself in his films is through his use of flight. Aircraft are frequently presented in various ways. Spielberg has stated that he is both fascinated and terrified of flying (Bahiana 153). His fear of flying is presented through Peter Banning's character in *Hook*. At the beginning of the film Peter and his family are in an airplane. His body is tense as he sits in his seat and he tells his wife, "I'm not going to make it to my next birthday."

Flight also functions as "central metaphors for freedom or the lack of it" (Friedman 7). A clear example of this can be seen in the final scene of *Jurassic Park*, as several characters leave the troubled park behind them in a helicopter. Spielberg's fascination with flight is also shown with regards to his interest in extraterrestrial life. In *E.T.*, E.T. becomes free after he successfully phones home and the spaceship arrives to collect him. A spaceship is also used in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Freedom is expressed in the final scenes when Roy achieves his goal and goes aboard the mother ship. The mother ship shows how, for Spielberg, flying is "synonymous with freedom and unlimited imagination" (Bahiana 153).

This imagination is emphasized through Spielberg's strong use of bright light in his films. In *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, bright blue light is frequently used. This is significant because, as Morris points out, blue is a "metonym for motherhood" (308). This idea is reinforced when David speaks with the Blue Fairy. There is a blue screen in the background and she is



strongly lit by a bright blue light. The blue light used throughout the film helps us to remember that all David wants is his mother to love him.

Many of Spielberg's characters are awestruck by, and attracted to, light (Morris 13). This occurs in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* when Barry looks through the door at the bright orange light. Spielberg has labelled this his "master image" (Gordon 273). The expression on Barry's face shows that he is amazed at the shining light. This particular scene also shows how Spielberg effectively involves the audience in his films. As Morris explains, the characters represent the audience: "they spend most of the film watching and listening to the lovely sights and sounds" (14).

The audience is also involved in Spielberg's films through his use of point of view camera shots. They help to create certain feelings and give a better understanding of characters' emotions. When speaking about *War of the Worlds*, he said his goal was to "put the audience inside the events of the film [to give a] man's or child's view" (Friedman 157). In this film, handheld camera shots are used from the characters' point of view looking up to the large, tripod-shaped aliens. This helps to create a threatening atmosphere for us as the audience. A threatening feeling is also created at the beginning of *Jaws*, when we are given the shark's point of view as it swims up to attack Chrissie. In *Jurassic Park*, when we are given Robert Muldoon's point of view as he looks in the side mirror of the jeep, we see the approaching, enlarging figure of the T-Rex.

Point of view shots are used effectively in *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*. This occurs after David almost drowns Martin. We are given David's view from the bottom the pool as he looks up at his adopted family. According to Morris, this shot symbolises how humanity is unreachable for David (305). Not long after this we see the diminishing figure of David in a

wing view mirror, from Monica's point of view, as she drives off after abandoning him. As mentioned earlier, this type of shot was also used in *Jurassic Park*. This is an emotional moment because it allows us to further understand how David is feeling. He sincerely wants to be loved and is devastated by his mother's actions.

Spielberg shows consistency in music between films. This is because, since *Jaws*, he has used John Williams to score nearly all of his films (Friedman 174). Spielberg has also described Williams as, "the only person I've had a perfect association with" (Royal 92). Williams' music adds to the visual and emotional impact of scenes, and creates lasting memories for the audience. Examples include the brightly lit spaceships that take off at the respective endings of *E.T.* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Another memorable image that is enhanced by music is the final scene of *Jurassic Park*. The helicopter takes off into the sunset, with the sunlight reflecting off the sea.

After researching and identifying characteristics of auteur directors, and viewing and analysing several of Steven Spielberg's films, I firmly believe that he deserves to be classified as an auteur director. His films do have a distinct style, and themes such as extraterrestrial life, neglecting fathers, lost children and flight, all appear in various ways in his films. In a biography of Spielberg, McBride, in his summary of the book, mentions how Spielberg "transformed his own fears and obsessions into films that have entertained millions of people throughout the world." This statement reinforces Spielberg's status as an auteur director, because it explains how he has applied themes from his own life, positive and negative, into the films he has directed.

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## Filmography

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