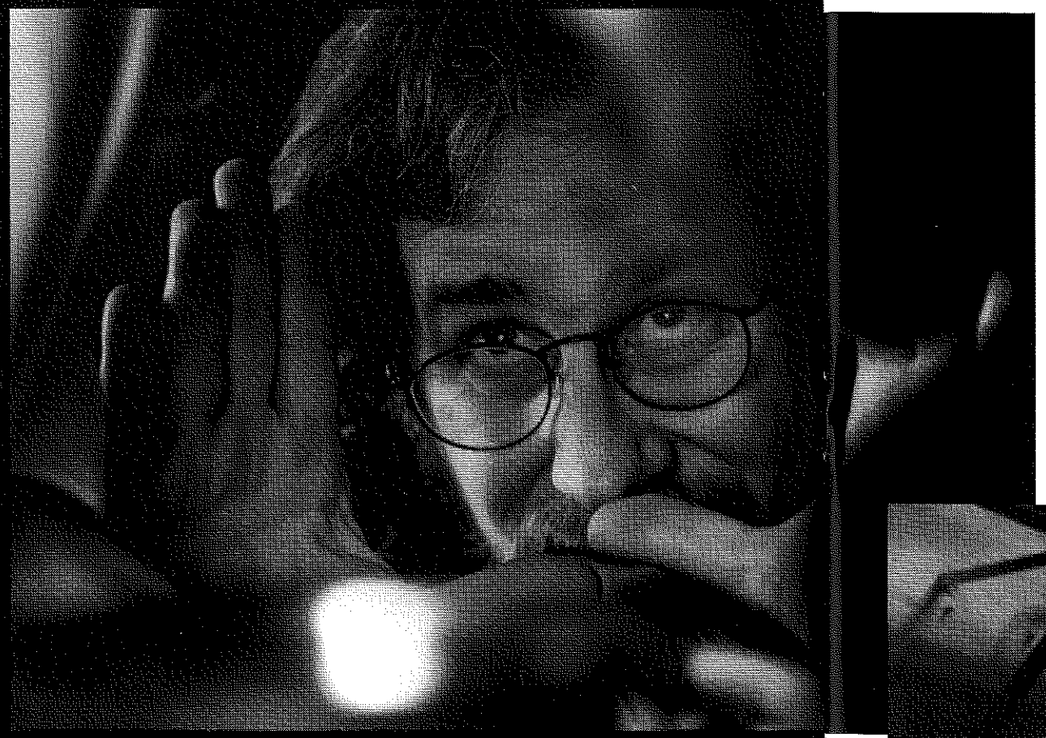
Spielberg – is he or isn't he an artist?

by Daniel Reynaud



So, Spielberg is now an artist, a great director. All on the strength of one movie: *Schindler's List*. Hollywood and the film critics seem inclined to forgive him for making so much money on *E. T.*, *Jurassic Park*, *et al*, judging by the praise emanating from them about his new film. And it is a fine film, fully deserving of much praise. The problem lies not in the attitude to *Schindler's List*, but in the attitudes to all his previous work. David Hay, in a recent article, says that Spielberg's confidence about his latest film is "...because for the first time, his life and his filmmaking have coincided..."[1] Behind this statement is the implication that Spielberg has been until now something of an artistic lightweight. Hay is not alone in voicing such opinions. While Spielberg's technical wizardry is acknowledged, his earlier films are also written off as being merely high-tech children's fare. Typical criticism says of Spielberg: "The image he projects is like nothing so much as the wide-eyed wonder of Cary Guffey, the four-year-old at the hot centre of *Close Encounters* who takes such pure pleasure in the phenomena that frighten and consternate the grownups."[2] Another says, "His films may not be art but they represent the peak of craftsmanship, perfect machines in which all the parts – story, actors, special effects, editing and music – all mesh together in a seamless whole."[3] In the same vein, Hollywood has not yet awarded Spielberg the "Best Director" Academy Award; he has been seen as nothing but a clever yet empty filmmaker, and possibly too successful financially to be respectable in "artistic" circles. In short, despite his popularity with his audiences, he has not been taken seriously as a filmmaker by either the majority of his peers or his critics.

One needs to take issue with this assessment of the pre-*Schindler's List* Spielberg at three levels: of the definition of art by which Spielberg is measured; of the supposedly superficial content of his films; and of the value of his emotional vision as seen in the body of his works.

The qualities which make film "art" are generally assumed, and therefore not much discussed. Part of the reason for this is that film, being a newcomer in artistic mediums as well as being exceedingly popular with the masses, has had to fight hard against the established arts in order to achieve recognition. To this end, critics have often touted the works of philosopher directors such as Bergman and Antonioni as evidence that film is just as serious an art form as the novel or the theatre. On the other hand, a considerable amount of American cinema in particular has been written off as the film equivalent of pulp fiction, mass produced for mass consumption, and of little artistic merit. Now these generalizations may or may not be right, but the point is that film critics have developed a snob mentality sometimes more exclusive than is evident in the older arts, as a defence against the inferior status awarded to film as an art form. This has led to occasions of throwing babies out with the bathwater, and Spielberg is just such a case. In their passion for profound content, the critics forget that art is not merely content but also form. The major art forms, less prone to inferiority complexes, each have recognized masterpieces in which form is dominant and content is minimal. Take for instance the plays of Oscar Wilde, in particular *The Importance of Being Earnest*. This play is entirely form; it has virtually no content at all, yet it is rightfully given a significant place in English drama. It is illuminating to note on what grounds. Indeed, Brosnan's description of Spielberg would apply very well to *The Importance of Being Earnest* – for it too is the peak of craftsmanship, a perfect machine meshed in a seamless whole. However, the literary arts accord it much higher status than just craftsmanship; it is rightfully considered art, for art is not just deep meanings but also a perfect realization of technique, as well as a celebration of style, polish and elegance. In the same way, Spielberg's mastery of form recommends him as an artist in spite of any limitations of content.

At the level of content, criticism of Spielberg is somewhat unfair for two reasons. First, he has demonstrated the ability to handle serious topics on at least two occasions prior to *Schindler's List*, in *Empire of the Sun* and *The Color Purple*. Secondly, the technical brilliance of his films provides an intellectual counterweight to the acknowledged superficiality of the content of such films as *Jurassic Park* and the Indiana Jones trilogy.

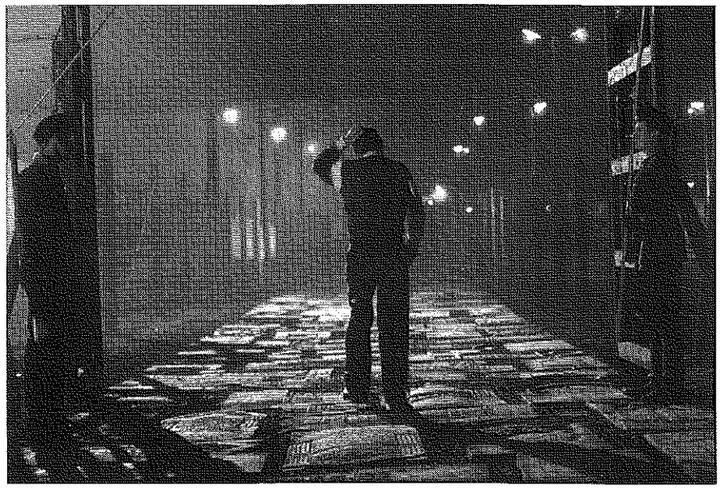
Empire of the Sun and *The Color Purple* are two obvious earlier attempts by Spielberg to show that he can meet the criteria of the art establishment in Hollywood. In *Empire of the Sun* he follows a young English boy, Jim Graham, through the war in China. Separated from his parents, Jim graduates from a small boy to a young man through the varied experiences of his internment. There are a number of points to note about this fine film. Its episodic construction could be dangerous in a film so long; the lack of a strong plot could lose an audience long before its 152 minutes are up. The fact that it doesn't is a tribute both to the strength of the individual episodes, which provide the drama and tension lacking in the absent plot, and to Spielberg's ability to make Jim an intriguing character in his own right. This point is significant, for Spielberg is notoriously shallow in characterization. Jim is his best portrayed character, and while *The Color Purple*, and arguably *The Sugarland Express* and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* have characters of some psychological depth, most of the others are not very complex. Deep or shallow, Spielberg nevertheless has the ability to make his audiences identify with them. The film is also tied together thematically through the use of motifs such as aeroplanes and the random bicycle rides that Jim takes, in aimless weaving that reflects his own lack of an anchor and direction. This wandering movement is picked up by the movement of the crowds at various points in the film, suggesting that even the adult world has lost its bearings as well. All in all, it is a profound commentary not only on the development of a lost boy, but on the nature of war as a highly personal, confusing experience even at the corporate level.

The Color Purple shows Spielberg handling two sensitive adult issues with dexterity, that of black society and of feminism. He navigates around



Above: Steven Spielberg
Right: Oskar Schindler (Liam Neeson) and Itzhak Stern (Ben Kingsley)

the potential pitfalls of stereotyped images of blacks (although naturally he is unable to please all critics), particularly in relationship to women and sexuality, to create a film that is not at its first level of consciousness either



about racism or sexism, but primarily about the triumph of its central character, Celie, over the forces that would destroy her identity. The issues of sexism and racism are allowed to make themselves evident through her story and that of her sister Nettie, and friends Sofia and Shug.

Celie's characterization is notable in that she achieves some depth, for we see her develop from a shy, repressed teenager into an autonomous woman; but that depth is achieved more through the emotional force with which Spielberg invests his story than through the more traditional methods of psychological plausibility. While Celie is given encouragement from Shug and Sofia to develop individuality, in purely intellectual terms her transition from submission to defiance of Mr. is implausible. But as with nearly all Spielberg's characters, we believe Celie because we identify with her emotionally. This fact is overlooked by many critics of his characters, whose strength lies just in their emotional attraction rather than their psychological plausibility or complexity. Indiana Jones, Bobby from *ET*, even E.T. itself may be shallow but they have a powerful emotional pull. This ability to imbue things with emotion is best portrayed in *Duel* even more than *Jaws*, where an inanimate truck develops such an aura of menace.

It is interesting, in the light of Hay's statement that *Schindler's List* represents the first time that Spielberg's life and filmmaking have coincided, that Spielberg in the very same article says "I felt I was qualified [to make *The Color Purple*] because of my own kind of cultural Armageddon..."[4] He adds: "Of all the movies I've ever made, this [*Schindler's List*] was the closest to my own experiences, including *ET*, I would say."[5] While this places *Schindler's List* on the top of the pile, it also clearly demolishes the notion that it is the first of his films to relate to his own experiences.

For those who insist on intellectual content from his work, there is always the technical side to examine in depth. A hallmark of his work is its lack of obtrusive technique. As he himself says, "my job is to take that [film] technique and hide it so well that never once are you taken out of your chair and reminded where you are."[6] I have on several occasions sat down deliberately to watch a Spielberg film from the point of view of technique, as I do often with other directors, and found myself an hour later, totally absorbed in the story which I already knew well, oblivious to the techniques. *Raiders of the Lost Ark, E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* are all such films. Interestingly, in his more serious films the technique is easier to follow. Perhaps this is the problem – his lighter films are so well constructed that the critics fail to notice; in a film less well made it is easier to recognize and therefore admire the craftsmanship. Critics who have written him off as a mere entertainer, only operating at the emotional level of children, need to stretch their minds with some analysis of his "breathless mastery of the medium"[7]. It is difficult to imagine a more perfect realization of the action adventure genre than the Indiana Jones series, whose completeness can make similar modern efforts such as *King Solomon's Mines* and *Romancing the Stone* seem predictable and flat by comparison. Similarly his work in science fiction has expanded the genre and given it a fullness that it lacked – compare *Close Encounters* with *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

At the final level, Spielberg should have been given the status of artist on the strength of his emotional vision of the world, as expressed in the body of his works. Taken individually his earlier films do seem to support often repeated criticism of childlikeness, if not childishness, and he is chided for not dealing with "pain, exultation and emotional compromise" and the "grown-up compulsions of power and...sex"[8]. It is true that his films bear the marks of a child's view, with their emphasis on physical forces rather than human relationships, plot over motivation, adventure, heroism, the relative absence of romance and sex, and the simplicity of characterization. *Hook* is worth considering at this point. It has been rightly criticised for its overt and heavyhanded treatment of the child-versus-adult world; ironically it is one occasion where he tries to say something about the adult world of power and emotional compromise. It is rare for Spielberg to be this clumsy, for his common theme of childhood innocence is usually done with greater restraint. However, other themes in *Hook* are integrated with true artistic skill. Examine the way in which Spielberg invites us to ask which is the real world and which the shadow, through his frequent emphasis on shadows, and through the fantastic and lavish sets of Never-Never-Land. While from a distance they have dreamlike qualities, in closeup they are generally very realistic, inviting the judgement that perhaps Never-Never-Land, seen closely, is in fact the real world.

Above: Itzhak Stern (Ben Kingsley)



While *Hook* may only be a partial artistic success, there are two reasons why his childish view should not be held against him. First, his collected films do reveal a world view: simplistic, naive, benign, and sweet though it be, it is nevertheless a picture of the world which must be taken seriously. Why must a director's vision portray gritty, seamy, even cynical or negative views of the world before critics accord it serious recognition? Why can't Spielberg offer us a world view through the eyes of a child and be taken seriously? Many vision-of-children films fall into maudlin sentimentality, but Spielberg repeatedly creates warm, very sweet endings without being tacky. The sense of redemption at the end of *E.T.*, *Close Encounters* and *The Color Purple* are examples of this. His delight in awesome forces finds refreshing expression in a variety of ways. In *Duel*, *Jaws*, *Poltergeist* , *Jurassic Park* and parts of *E.T.* and *Close Encounters*, the awesome forces are sinister and malevolent, whereas in other places, such as in *E.T.* and *Close Encounters* the supernatural is much more sympathetic. In films he has produced such as *The Goonies* and *Back to the Future* the same view is reflected. There is a place in serious art for an examination of the view of the child, and Spielberg does it with instinctive skill, refusing to lay over the naivety of the child the superior understanding of the adult. Thus he restores to adults, for at least the duration of his films, the energy , adventure, joy, and simple vision of the child.

Secondly, Spielberg is not a cerebral filmmaker. His vision is through the heart, not the mind. His films carry much greater emotional force than they do intellectual. His concern with simple things and the world of the child could be interpreted as an attack on the way adults automatically confer great status on the analytical and intellectual modes of living. The zany comedy of *Back to the Future*, the nonstop action adventure of *Indiana Jones* are reminders that fun and adventure have value in their own right. In every art form there must be recognition of the value of a primarily emotional view of the world, as exists for example in the poetry and music of the nineteenth century Romantics.

It is typical of some critics that they should find something to praise in a rare Spielberg failure. In its muddled plot lines and slightly tired gags, some critics see a satirical look at American attitudes in *1941*. Let them find it; the film really is just what it seems – a Spielberg failure at comedy. If the critics would redirect their efforts into recognizing his real merits, they would discover in his earlier films unique technical virtuosity to challenge the intellect (in itself the hallmark of an artist), as well as a pomposity-deflating, childlike, emotional view of the world. They would admit his giftedness, as they already do, but add that his childlike view is a strength rather than a weakness, and that his films, while very entertaining, are much more demanding to the serious film scholar than mere, sheer, entertainment. No, critics. Serious Spielberg did not start with *Schindler's List*; it is merely the latest quality instalment.

Footnotes

1. David Hay, "Steven Spielberg in black and white", *Good Weekend January 22, 1994*, p27
2. James Monaco, *American Film Now, The People, The Power, The Movies*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1979, p175
3. John Brosnan, *Future Tense, The Cinema of Science Fiction*, New York, St Martins Press,1978, p274
4. Hay, 25
5. Ibid
6. Quoted in Brosnan, p274
7. Monaco, p175
8. *Time* July 15, 1985, p57