Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-
speaking world

17 | 2018

Paysages et héritages de David Bowie

David Roche (ed.), *Steven Spielberg: Hollywood Wunderkind & Humanist*

Julia Echeverría-Domingo

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/14731>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.14731

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Julia Echeverría-Domingo, "David Roche (ed.), *Steven Spielberg: Hollywood Wunderkind & Humanist*", *Miranda* [Online], 17 | 2018, Online since 02 October 2018, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/14731> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.14731>

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David Roche (ed.), *Steven Spielberg: Hollywood Wunderkind & Humanist* (Montpellier: Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2018), 348 p, ISBN 978-2367812649.

- 1 This collective work provides an engaging and deeply respectful approach to Steven Spielberg, one of the most commercially successful and at the same time critically despised filmmakers of his time. As its editor David Roche acknowledges in his introduction, he himself was reluctant at first to deal with a filmmaker who is recognized for his emotional manipulation and popcorn blockbusters (11). This initial reticence, which is probably common to many other scholars, is soon dispelled by a thought-provoking collection of essays that situate Spielberg not just as a studio director in the classical sense but also as a gifted *auteur*. The book's—mostly—European contributors, the majority of whom belong to French universities, bring to mind the similar endeavor that the 1950s French critics of *Cahiers du cinéma* undertook with some of the most popular entertainment directors of the time.
- 2 Indeed, the book can be inscribed within a relatively recent current of scholarly work that has claimed Spielberg as a subject worthy of study, especially since the mid-2000s, when his more “serious” films made him acquire “a new degree of artistic respectability” (Courcoux 247-249). However, whereas most of the previous literature focuses on individual questions such as genre (Buckland 2006; Friedman 2006; Gordon 2008) and philosophy (Kowalski 2008) or offers an exhaustive analysis of his filmography (Morris 2007), this work adopts a multidimensional perspective on the director that ranges from the most biographical, stylistic and generic aspects to the most philosophical, political and ideological.

- 3 The volume is accordingly divided into five sections, followed by a useful chronologically ordered filmography listing Spielberg's films, television productions and feature movie productions and a select bibliography, also organized in themes. Even though each of the five sections follows a distinct methodology, with each chapter generally focusing on individual film analyses, the book works perfectly fine as a unit, since it provides a predominantly linear picture of Spielberg's career and evolution. Thus, parts one and two mainly cover Spielberg's early work from his beginnings as a precocious television director at Universal (Upton 23-32) to his first 1970s feature films: the critically successful television film *Duel* (1971) (discussed by Roche 94-98, 107-109) and his countercultural *The Sugarland Express* (1974) (both discussed in Antoine Gaudin's comparative analysis, 53-73), *Jaws* (1975) (Roche 98-107), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) (Krämer 35-46) and the underexplored *1941* (1979) (Souladié 75-89). Through these—some of them lesser-known—films, the authors delineate young Spielberg's profile as an incipient prodigy—a wunderkind and technical virtuoso—who soon realizes, thanks in part to his beginnings in the television studio business, the importance of making films *for* the audience, thus contravening the New Hollywood current of secular and taboo-free cinema with his family-friendly blockbusters (Krämer 41-43).
- 4 Part three—and Roche's last chapter in part two—undertake a generic approach to Spielberg's cinema by focusing especially on his 1980s and 1990s films. David Roche highlights Spielberg's long-standing relation to horror, a relatively uncharted territory so far, through the in-depth analyses of a wide assortment of films which participate in some way in the horror genre through visual strategies of progressive revelation of, and confrontation with, a monstrous presence. Part three underlines the way Spielberg imprints his personal seal on the science-fiction genre by combining it with the fairy tale (Achouche); on the combat movie by combining it with the melodrama (Chinita); and on his remakes by incorporating some of his trademark themes such as family, childhood and his fixation with flying (Stubbs).
- 5 Finally, sections four to five offer an ideological and philosophical reading of Spielberg's cinema. Part four focuses on identity politics, exploring issues of race (Charlery), Jewishness (Lipiner and Giansante) and masculinity (Courcoux), which the authors point out by analyzing the subtexts of several of his films. Section five closes on a high note by attempting to elucidate one of Spielberg's most criticized traits—his lack of political commitment. Sébastien Lefait calls attention to Spielberg's evolution from escapism to a more critical and self-reflexive cinema. Meanwhile, Julie Assouly contends that, however critical his more politically committed films may be, "they never condemn the American system" (274). Assouly acknowledges that Spielberg does not fully disregard the negative aspects of American society, but she argues that his idealist and hopeful worldview, characterized by a penchant for 1950s nostalgia and "his faith in core American values, institutions and ordinary heroes" (274), ends up resurfacing in his films at the expense of any cynical ideological drive. Pascal Couté, whose chapter revealingly serves as closure to the book, develops this idea further by inscribing Spielberg within the humanist philosophical tradition. According to Couté, Spielberg does not negate the inhuman, but he attempts to demonstrate that "the human can be born of the inhuman" (303). What critics have branded as sentimental, manipulative and politically friendly, Couté assigns to Spielberg's relentless faith in

humanity, an idea that pervades the whole book and that tellingly serves as part of its title.

- 6 The other half of the title, which refers to Spielberg's ingrained virtuosity, epitomizes one of the book's major contributions—its search for the formal and stylistic qualities of Spielberg's cinema, a task that is principally carried out in section two on the "Poetics of Steven Spielberg" but that becomes a connecting line throughout the whole volume. Several authors reveal the kinetic power of Spielberg's mise-en-scène (Upton 26; Gaudin 65; Souladié 89), through which he efficiently manages to convey emotion (Gaudin 56-57). This dynamic, at times chaotic, diegetic energy is countered by his mechanical approach to filmmaking (to editing and rhythm), a clockwork craftsmanship that Vincent Souladié compares to "the aesthetic principles of classic Hollywood cinema" (76). His dexterity in the use of space and composition—especially the interplay between offscreen and onscreen space (Roche 101-105)—and his technical preciseness and personal signature—usually materialized in wide-angle shots, deep focus and harsh backlighting—make Spielberg come across as a masterful director with a solid stylistic and thematic identity.
- 7 Especially relevant in technical and thematic terms is the emphasis that is placed along the book on the eyes and the gaze. Most of the authors underscore Spielberg's frequent use of POV shots, eyeline matches and reaction shots, a fact that heightens spectatorial identification and that has been commonly branded as manipulative by Spielberg's critics. Souladié reads Spielberg's reaction shots under a mechanical paradigm, describing them as "switches being set on" (79), triggered by "a burst of energy" (79). Meanwhile, Roche associates his reaction shots with emotion and subjectivity, a way of singling out—for instance in *Jaws*'s dolly zoom of Brody's alarmed face (111)—a character's paralyzing horror and awe in the face of the sublime. Hélène Charlery analyzes how Miss Millie's (Dana Ivey) subjective and hysterical reaction to "harmless black men" (194) in *The Color Purple* (1985) has a distancing effect on the audience, as it deconstructs, thanks to its use of lighting, cinematically-created racial stereotypes (193-195). For her part, Fátima Chinita brings attention to the innovative use of internal focalization in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), a generic novelty with respect to classical combat movies where sentiment or "self-reflexive subjectivity" (181) was not allowed for ideological purposes. In discussing this film and *Minority Report* (2002), Pascal Couté provides a satisfying reading of Spielberg's fixation with the gaze. Couté states that "it is always through the gaze that the human emerges" (300). The gaze is a symbol of identity and self-consciousness which, as Couté claims, characterizes humanity (301), an interpretation that he extrapolates to Spielberg's philosophy as a humanist author.
- 8 Additionally, Spielberg's emphasis on the gaze is used as a metafictional trope. As Mehdi Achouche asserts, Spielberg's characters are, more often than not, "mere onlookers" (137), spectators of the film's action. Achouche foregrounds Spielberg's use of frame-within-the-frame compositions (138, 141) that place characters in an external spectatorial position peering through screen-like frames like doors or closets. The characters become, like us, outside witnesses to the story being told. Moreover, characters are also commonly portrayed as television viewers (Gaudin 66; Krämer 38). Charles-Antoine Courcoux claims that, in *Munich* (2005), the male character's passive position when watching the mediated and viral (reproductive) images of television puts him in a feminine role of subjection and "loss of manliness" (244) which he needs to

outgrow. Courcoux relates this, self-reflexively, to Spielberg's own perceived necessity to mature as a filmmaker (247-248).

- 9 In fact, in Spielberg's later films, especially in his post-9/11 works, characters are not only watchers but frequently become the element being watched and surveilled (Lefait 277-289; Courcoux 242; Couté 298). Lefait compares *The Terminal*'s (2004) airport, where Viktor (Tom Hanks) is constantly monitored, to a movie set that allows the protagonist "to live within a Spielberg film of the popcorn type [...] [The airport] becomes an ideal place of escape where things work just fine and dreams come true" (285). This metafictional component unveils Spielberg's progress towards, if not a darker, at least a more mature and committed cinema with respect to his early wish-fulfilment and escapist fictions, a self-reflexive evolution highlighted by most of the authors (Achouche 143; Assouly 271-274; Courcoux 247-249; Lefait 277; Stubbs 157-161).
- 10 As a whole, this work provides a compelling and relevant window through which to peer through Spielberg's filmography. The suggestive essays bring to mind the reasons why we love—sometimes despite ourselves—Spielberg's cinema and, by extension, cinema in itself. Even if some of his movies are not analyzed, especially his most recent ones, and some others are analyzed more than once, this does not prevent the book from offering an inclusive outlook on the filmmaker as *auteur*, with every chapter establishing an organic relation with one another. After reading it, one cannot help but think that Spielberg's formula for success may indeed be a mixture of classical filmmaking and an outstanding capacity to adapt himself to new genres, discourses, technologies and to the advent of new times, always assuming a humanist perspective and keeping the audience in mind. As Courcoux nicely puts it, Spielberg can be compared to his character Frank Abagnale (Leonardo DiCaprio) in *Catch Me if You Can* (2002), a chameleonic genius who "shows an ability to look like anything society expects him to be without ever losing his identity in the process" (249). It is this identity that the book succeeds in grasping and delivering to its readers.

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Mots-clés: Steven Spielberg, cinéma américain, Nouvel Hollywood, cinéma populaire, esthétique, travail d'artiste, genre cinématographique, identité, idéologie, autoréflexion, humanisme, théorie d'auteur

Keywords: Steven Spielberg, US cinema, New Hollywood, mainstream cinema, film aesthetics, craftsmanship, film genre, identity politics, film ideology, self-reflexivity, humanism, auterism

AUTHORS

JULIA ECHEVERRÍA-DOMINGO

Maître de conférences

Université de Saragosse

juliaed@unizar.es