

# A discussion with film historian Joseph McBride about Steven Spielberg: A Biography—Part 2

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Steven Spielberg: A Biography, Second Edition, by Joseph McBride, originally published 1997, University Press of Mississippi, second edition 2011

I recently spoke to film historian Joseph McBride about the second edition of his critical study and biography of American film director Steven Spielberg, published by the University Press of Mississippi. Part 1, with an introduction, was posted May 4. The following is the second and concluding part.

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David Walsh: Let's get into somewhat more controversial or problematic issues, so to speak. You write in a number of places about Steven Spielberg's concern for the "common man." My response to that is, yes and no. I don't believe he's treated the problems of ordinary Americans in a serious fashion.

His historical works, in my view, tend to be more sociologically penetrating than his works about contemporary American life. There has been relatively little concern expressed in his work with the fate of the wider working population in this country, with its dilemmas and big problems, and none with the historic decline in standards of living in recent decades, for example. That is not something present in his work. It tends to be his own social type that is "Mr. Everyday Regular Fella."

Joseph McBride: This is a big issue, with a lot of facets, I'll talk about a couple of things. It depends on how you define these things. I'm thinking of Richard Dreyfuss in *Close Encounters*, who is a telephone lineman. In *Jaws*, the three principal characters are working people, more or less. Tom Cruise plays a crane operator in *War of the Worlds* [2005].

DW: Yes, I'm not suggesting that his characters come from the elite. I'm suggesting that one of the most significant trends, most pressing problems in American life over the past thirty years, for example, the vast social chasm that has opened up, has not been present in his work—or virtually any other filmmaker's, for that matter. It's not a problem limited to Spielberg.

JM: Yes, the decline in people's conditions and lives because of the financial straits they've been subjected to, the fact that people have to work multiple jobs, the decline of the educational system, and so forth ... Spielberg's work has reflected some of that, but certainly not front and center like some filmmakers might.

I would say that *The Terminal* [2004], for example, which I think is one of his best films in recent years, and which is slighted because it's a comedy, is compelling in that regard. It's a film about an immigrant, in

effect, and Viktor Navorski [Tom Hanks] is surrounded by working class people in that airport terminal who rally to his side, it's very Capraesque. People like to make fun of this kind of theme, but I think it's actually very inspiring that the ordinary workers in this big terminal shelter this stranded man from Eastern Europe and help him survive.

*The Terminal* itself is a kind of satirical paradigm of American capitalism, with all the product placement going on. People attacked Spielberg for that, but it was part of the point of the film, that the terminal is this big commercial enterprise where Navorski is living, it's a shopping mall.

In any case, I think your criticism is a valid one, all in all. Spielberg could do more of that, certainly.

DW: But I don't make it as a criticism of Spielberg, it's a criticism of the entire film industry and culture. If one were to ask, who has made such a film or written such a drama or novel? In fact, almost no one has.

JM: You've written very eloquently about how the American film industry has declined precipitously in the last thirty or so years. I could talk about some of the reasons and how Spielberg might be part of that, or not.

DW: We can get back to that in a minute. As I indicated in an email, I'm quite happy to form a bloc with you against some of the so-called "Marxists" and left critics, some of whom you quote, who often denounce Spielberg in unthinking terms. These are blockheads, in my view. When we published a review praising *Schindler's List* in early 1994, we came in for some of the same thing from a number of quarters.

The people you cite have nothing to do with Marxism, in my view. We're talking about a postmodernist, academic, morbid, misanthropic standpoint. And, you know, another element of it is simply jealousy and envy.

JM: Oh, sure. Now when I was railing against "elitists" I was aware that when you use that word you sound like a reactionary, like a Spiro Agnew. But there was a kind of a snobbism that I discerned among critics at the time; it's lessened over time, but I felt they were looking down on popular culture. And I've spent my entire career as a film historian fighting that battle. I thought we'd won that battle twenty or thirty years ago.

When I started in the 1960s, American films were generally looked down upon as worthless trash, even the great directors such as Alfred Hitchcock and Howard Hawks were sneered at. So members of my generation, following [French filmmaker and critic] François Truffaut and [American critic] Andrew Sarris, had to redeem these works as serious works of art. John Ford was not taken seriously. We succeeded beyond our wildest expectations. We created a kind of a Frankenstein monster,

although that's a different topic.

But back to the leftism we were speaking of. A great deal of the academic writing in the 1970s on film was just appalling. The field was taken over by people ... it's difficult to characterize them in one sentence ... but, for example, I remember reading one book on film theory that after thirty pages hadn't mentioned a single film yet. I stopped reading the book. In the introduction of another book on film theory the author said, more or less, "I don't have time to go to movies anymore because I'm spending all my time writing about them."

Film studies became a field populated by people who were not particularly interested in films, they were interested in something else, a fact that was not especially healthy for film studies. Many of the film theorists in the 1970s identified themselves as Marxists, which was fine, as long as they didn't make the field too narrow, which I felt a lot of them, unfortunately, did.

Spielberg seemed suspect to people because he seemed to be, as *New York Times* critic Vincent Canby called him, "the poet of suburbia."

I try not to psychoanalyze Spielberg's haters too much, but it's clear that a lot of them were in flight from their own suburban, middle class origins. What they missed was that Spielberg often portrays suburbia in a very negative light. He is by no means uncritical of suburban life—if anything, it's the opposite—he portrays it as extremely constricting. I think you just have to watch *Close Encounters* to see that.

And I do think many of his most vociferous opponents were simply jealous. You hit the nail on the head. They were academics or film critics making a modest living, and they saw this guy who was worth billions, and they thought, "Why can't I be doing that? I'm smarter than he is, I'm more sophisticated, why aren't I making that kind of money?" It's the sort of irrational mindset of some people, and it's not a very becoming trait.

Steven's rabbi, Albert L. Lewis, who taught him in Hebrew school in New Jersey, made a very striking comment to me, and he was a very distinguished man in rabbinical studies. He had thought about this long and hard, and he thought some of the hatred of Spielberg was anti-Semitic in origin. I think there's some truth to that. Of course, not all of his ferocious critics are anti-Semites, I'm speaking of a certain type, who claim he's "greedy," "manipulative," "vulgar," or "overly emotional," who denounce his supposedly pernicious influence on American culture, and so on. He's been referred to as "the antichrist." These are familiar anti-Semitic tropes. Some directors are disliked, but very few are hated with the passion with which Spielberg is hated.

DW: The postscript to that point, however, is that while I'm happy to form a bloc against "left" stupidities, the fact that Spielberg is attacked doesn't prove that he's a great artist or a genius. That still has to be proved on the basis of the films themselves.

JM: That's a good, logical point. Although it was said of Grover Cleveland's supporters that they "love him most of all for the enemies he has made."

DW: Let me get to the nub of the matter, as I see it, and you can respond or not, as you see fit. My general feeling about Spielberg—and, as I say, your book has filled out my understanding and made him a somewhat more sympathetic figure to me, both as a filmmaker and a human being—is that he's a significant artist, a gifted figure, but I don't believe he's a great artist, I don't believe he's a genius. Genius is not something that is simply willed, or the result of a combination of certain artistic, technical skills. It's also a product of historical conditions. (Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Bolsheviks' Commissar of Education after the Russian Revolution, once quipped, "be born a genius by all means—but the most important thing is to be born at the right time.")

The essential area for discussion between us is how one evaluates the last thirty years of American culture and filmmaking. For a variety of reasons, which are complex, American filmmaking has suffered an

enormous decline, in my opinion, and while Spielberg may have stood for a certain classical tradition of story-telling, which is all to his credit, I think he's been deeply affected by those processes as well. I don't see how he could *not* have been.

Spielberg has, unquestionably, a body of interesting work. But when you consider the films of a certain period—and I'm not being nostalgic, I think the greatest films lie ahead—let's say, Chaplin's *Modern Times* [1936], Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* [1940], Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* [1941] and films of that order, in such works you had figures, characters—and, to a certain extent, performers—who came to embody, to one extent or another, the great dramas of the time. World-historical characters, figures who expressed the important conflicts of the epoch.

You have, in fact, within the limits of a commercial film industry, the convergence of these characters and the great problems of a people, a class. At their best the films give expression to the fate of entire peoples and classes.

Now, I don't think Spielberg has done anything like that, I don't think it would have been possible, all things considered, for him to have done that. As I say, no one has. The conditions for that have been extremely unfavorable. And it hasn't been done, in my view, in American fiction or drama either, by and large. Relatively trivial, self-involved material has dominated.

So, one of the critical questions is, not so much how you evaluate Spielberg as an individual, but how you evaluate the era itself.

If you conclude—and I'm setting up a bit of my own straw man, but for the sake of making the point, even if in an exaggerated form, I'll do it—if you conclude that the decisive questions of the past three decades in American life have involved matters of personal identity, finding one's roots, sorting out one's family responsibilities, responding to gender and racial prejudice, rejecting or criticizing suburban alienation and stultification, working through the problems of adolescents and children caught in certain unstable and unhappy circumstances—then, well and good, Spielberg has concerned himself effectively with these issues, embodied them to a certain extent. Then it would be possible to identify him as a world-historical artist, as having spoken to the great problems of our time.

If, however, you see things differently, if you identify the malignant growth of income inequality, the vast social polarization, the enormous accumulation of wealth at one pole of society, the decay and decline of American industry and American economic life in general, the growth of parasitism and criminality within the upper echelons of society, the relentless attacks on democratic rights, the establishment of the foundations for authoritarian rule, the endless neo-colonial wars and invasions, the sharp shift to the right by both parties and the entire establishment, its abandonment of any, even nominal attachment to democratic rights ... if you see these as the central questions, with all their implications for the population, then matters stand in a different light.

Then, one might say, Spielberg, perhaps more than any other mainstream filmmaker, has reacted to some of these problems, sometimes with considerable feeling, but in the end, very inadequately, filtered through his own social position and outlook, and inevitably through his own immense wealth and privilege.

In other words, I have no ax to grind with Spielberg. You paint him as a generally appealing and humane human being. He is someone who comes across both from your book *and from his films* relatively sympathetically, but the accusation we level against the American film industry or American culture in general is that it has given a very pale and weak and inadequate, even often sharply misleading, view of contemporary life.

Let me give you a concrete example. There's a famous poll that was done, about how Americans view social inequality. The survey found that

people think in an ideal society the bottom 40 percent of the population should own about 20-25 percent of the wealth. And they think that the poorest 40 percent in America actually own at present 8-10 percent of the wealth. In fact, incredibly, the poorest 40 percent of the population, 120 million people, actually owns less than one percent of the wealth. I had to check that myself.

I'm making an overall point here. Why is it that Americans have such a misestimation of their own society? There are many factors, the political establishment, the media, the education system, etc. But I would also suggest that art and film also have, to a considerable extent, failed to provide an accurate picture, an accurate accounting of American life. And this has consequences.

JM: These are a number of important issues. Noam Chomsky makes the point that most Americans think 300,000 Vietnamese died in the Vietnam War, while actually 3 to 4 million died. The decline in the education system began in the late 1970s, with the so-called tax revolt. The powers that be are trying to keep the people dumb, so they don't understand their own dilemmas. All that is beyond the control of Spielberg and filmmaking.

DW: Of course, but the point I was trying to make is this. Let me give an example: Russian literature in the 19th century, Tolstoy, Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Goncharov, Ostrovsky, etc. The artists held up a mirror to the society, and the population who followed their works had some notion of the poverty, backwardness, misery of Russian society, the rottenness of the social order. They had an insight into the nature of their society. Where is that mirror in contemporary American filmmaking?

JM: I would agree with you, but let me make a couple of points. One of the artists who has tried to deal with some of these issues over time, with some success and some failure, is Oliver Stone. He has made some powerful political films.

DW: Yes, but I'm not simply speaking about "political films," but films that provide some feeling for the texture, the fabric of life, whatever their immediate subject matter.

JM: Stone's *JFK* was a big success, despite the best attempt of the media to destroy it. But then he made *Nixon*, an extraordinary film in many ways, but it was a disaster at the box office. Since then, the studios won't let Stone make his political features. He made *World Trade Center* [2006], which is a remarkable film in that it sheds almost no light whatsoever on what happened on 9/11.

Stone couldn't get his films on [former Panamanian strongman Manuel] Noriega or Martin Luther King, Jr. made, and he is still trying to make his feature on the My Lai massacre during the Vietnam War. He's been making political documentaries instead, provocative low-budget films. He's been thoroughly marginalized in the industry.

Hollywood is the problem, the media are the problem. The media are a major enemy of the people at this point, because they lie systematically and mislead people. At the extreme, you have something like the Fox Network, which deliberately misinforms its viewers. They are being fed propaganda. But the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* are not much better.

When you consider Hollywood, Steven Spielberg has managed to be very successful, and part of it is that he's a popular filmmaker. I compare him to Charles Dickens as a popular artist. Though Dickens dealt with poverty and ordinary people in a major way. Spielberg has not shown that same level of interest, there's no doubt. I'm not disputing that.

I think, however, that his very unusual concern with minority issues distinguishes him from a lot of the people in Hollywood, who deal with fantasy and escapism. *The Color Purple* and *Amistad* are powerful films about abuse and injustice. *Schindler's List*, of course. He's dealing with issues that are uncomfortable for people (just look at *Munich*) and making us face these issues.

I would argue that he's the American artist who deals most

systematically with the post-9/11 world we live in. His work is almost obsessively concerned with that since 2001. Imperfectly, to some extent, but you could make a case that almost all of his films since then reflect 9/11 and the suppression and taking away of civil liberties that we have experienced.

*Minority Report* [2002], *War of the Worlds*, and in its own way, *The Terminal*, which is directly about Homeland Security. Even the fourth Indiana Jones in 2008, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, which someone dubbed "Indiana Jones and the Terrible Title," deals with the Cold War in a different manner from the others in that cycle. I actively disliked the first two Indiana Jones films.

DW: Your comments about *Raiders of the Lost Ark* [1981] are more scathing than anything I've ever written about a Spielberg film. \*

JM: There he was blindly, ignorantly following Reaganism. And *Indiana Jones and The Temple of Doom* [1984] is an incredibly racist film. So is that famous moment in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* when Indiana Jones shoots the sword-wielding Arab. It's an appalling moment. Lawrence Kasdan, who wrote the script, also found it appalling. Kasdan didn't write that, it was improvised. He said he didn't think it was good to get laughs out of killing people.

In any event, Spielberg has been dealing with important issues, the George W. Bush administration, democratic rights, even in his slighter films in the past decade. "Are we inclusive, or are we excluding people?" *Minority Report* is all about civil liberties. He made that before 9/11, and as I explain in the book, he became uncomfortable after 9/11. He issued this horrible statement to the *New York Times* when the film came out, saying he'd be willing to give up some of his civil liberties in exchange for safety.

Spielberg also supported Bush's criminal war in Iraq at one point, and then he saw the light after things went bad for the US, which is typical of liberal Democrats, isn't it? They mostly supported the Iraq war until it didn't go well, that is, from the American government's point of view. So they weren't opposing it on principle, but because it didn't work out as they had thought it would.

Last night, Barack Obama was in Los Angeles, and Spielberg was there helping to schmooze with Obama at a cocktail party. He still thinks, I guess, that Obama is pretty terrific. Spielberg helped get Obama elected. This shows the limitation of his political viewpoint.

You're probably right that his privileged position living the life of a rich man isolated from the public also limits him. Bob Gale, who helped write *1941* [1979], made a very interesting comment to me in the 1990s. He said that he felt that by the time Spielberg made *Empire of the Sun* [1987], he was that kid in the film, that he was kind of in a prison, because of his lifestyle. Spielberg has had some terrible experiences with stalkers and crazy people. He lives a very restricted life, surrounded by bodyguards in a high-security environment. He doesn't really have a lot of contact with ordinary people. It's unfortunate, he's a victim of his success to some extent.

Of course, when you're talking about *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Citizen Kane*, well, they don't make movies like that anymore. To me, perhaps the golden age of Hollywood was the 1920s. And in the 1930s, they were making films that had considerable social content.

DW: But if you acknowledge that, then, it seems to me, you're acknowledging one of the key points. Then acclaiming Spielberg as a great artist, in my view, becomes an impermissible case of "marking on the curve." He's the best, let's say for the sake of argument, *but the best of what?*

JM: I was a screenwriter in Hollywood for a long time, and I was somewhat ignorant of the anti-communist blacklist at first, and then I began studying it, and I now feel that the blacklist was what ruined the

American film industry, at least in part.

DW: I would agree with you.

JM: Hollywood generally is very timid about social issues and has been ever since that time, because they're terrified. But the other thing that happened was the divorce of the studios from their theater chains—when the government broke up the monopoly, which was a good thing in a lot of ways. However, it helped destroy the studio system, which was good in some aspects and bad in others. It's a very different world we live in, very different.

In the studio days, you would have an executive such as Darryl F. Zanuck. There's a great story about him. When John Ford made *The Grapes of Wrath* for Zanuck, they screened the answer print for him, and Zanuck simply turned to his staff and said, "Ship it." Could you imagine a studio chief saying that today? They would have twenty previews, and the public would object to the ending, and they would tinker with it, but Zanuck had the power and the smarts to say, "Ship it." That couldn't happen today, it's inconceivable.

To jump ahead to Spielberg and George Lucas, who are usually blamed for ruining American films. You read this all the time in film commentaries. I was there at the time. I went to the first Hollywood preview of *Jaws* and I went to the first Hollywood screening of *Star Wars* [1977], and I think it's simplistic to blame these two guys for ruining Hollywood by inspiring the "blockbuster syndrome."

DW: Again, I would agree with you, and I've been guilty of making statements like that in the past.

JM: There are at least two major culprits. One is the cost of filmmaking, which has skyrocketed for a lot of reasons, including filmmakers' natural distrust of the studios' "creative bookkeeping," but when you have a film that costs \$100 million or \$200 million to make, the studios are going to dumb it down and remove things that could offend any particular segment of the audience, and that homogenizes films.

The other thing that's happened to movies is television advertising. What they did on Spielberg's *Jaws* that was really innovative was take out a lot of television advertising before the film's release, \$700,000 worth, out of an initial advertising outlay of \$1.8 million—which was a lot of money in 1975. It made the film a national phenomenon, and suddenly Hollywood realized that this was the way to sell a film if you wanted to have a blockbuster.

Now, when you have to be able to reduce a film to a thirty-second spot, you need a film that you can explain in that time, and therefore the film itself has to be simplified. It has to appeal to a wide audience, it can't be a fringe kind of film. Then the cost of advertising also skyrocketed. Now it costs \$20-\$30 million to open a film.

So blaming Spielberg and Lucas for ruining Hollywood because they made enormously successful films is silly, but their films did have something to do with the prevalence of widespread television marketing and going after the biggest possible audience. They showed that there was an almost unlimited potential for films, that hundreds of millions of dollars could be made on films, which in the case of *Jaws* and *Star Wars*, did not cost that much. The return on those films was gigantic.

You could also argue, by the way, that the great reliance on television advertising in modern political campaigns has contributed in a large way to corrupting and coarsening our political environment. But that's another story, if related to this one about our movie culture.

A producer once told me there were plans afoot to remake *Gone With the Wind* [1939]. And I said, what a stupid idea. Despite the flaws in the original, a remake would be a disgrace. He agreed with me. But, he added, it doesn't really matter because everyone will come out and see it just so they can say what a bad film it is, or that they saw it. That's the attitude in Hollywood, it doesn't matter whether a film is a disgrace or not, as long as everybody goes to see it. It's difficult to work in that environment.

The old moguls, who died out in the 1960s, started out in exhibition,

they knew the public, they were showmen. Tyrannical and arbitrary as those guys were, and as limited in their education, they would make judgments by the seat of their pants. "I think this film will go over, let's do it," even though it might have seemed dicey, or whatever. Today, it's all MBAs running the studios.

I was shocked when I arrived in Hollywood. Naively, I assumed everyone was there because they loved movies, and I found that very few people in Hollywood actually love movies. What they're there for are money and sex. That's a big difference from the 1930s and 1940s. Those people liked movies and they wanted to make good movies in the best way they knew how. Now those running the business just want to make money.

Spielberg stands out as kind of an old-fashioned figure in this world, I think, because he's a serious filmmaker trying to deal with serious issues. You can fault him, as you do, for the limited range that he might have, but he is trying to deal in his own ways with serious subjects. He's also a classical stylist. Every cut is not a two-second cut. He says he believes in geography as a director, you need to know where you are in the scene, which is very old-fashioned, in a sense, but praiseworthy.

DW: We're not going to have a meeting of minds on some of this, but this is an important discussion.

JM: One of the reasons I wrote the book was that I wanted to start a discussion on Spielberg, and I don't think he's perfect. We can agree to disagree on a lot of this.

DW: I would certainly recommend the book to anyone who's serious about American filmmaking in the last several decades, because I think the reader does derive an education, not only about Steven Spielberg, but about the Hollywood process and important aspects of American social and cultural life. I hope it is widely read.

JM: I appreciate your interest and your challenging me on these points, because it makes me think more deeply about things. I'm sure I'll be writing another edition in ten years, and I will incorporate these issues; in fact, I'll think about them for the next ten years.

*Concluded*

\* These are the passages in question on *Raiders of the Lost Ark*: "Indy's two sides never add up to a coherent whole. A scholar who loves adventure and physical danger, he behaves in a casually amoral and brutal way whenever it suits his purposes. He loots Third World cultures and slaughters the natives with the abandon of a mercenary from colonial days. and yet the contemporary audience throughout the world was skillfully manipulated into identifying with this ruthless figure and finding him heroic. ... *Raiders of the Lost Ark* was the perfect film to mark the beginning of the Reagan era." (317-318) McBride characterizes the work, finally, as "a soulless and impersonal film." (321)



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