

STEVEN SPIELBERG

David Lusted

The Boy Wonder', 'The Spirit of Childhood', 'The Man Who Put Profit Back in Hollywood'; copy-editors' hyperbole aside, is it any surprise that a film maker associated with six of the 10 all-time cinema box-office hits is considered a phenomenon? His latest film as director, *Back to the Future*, threatens to top previous chart-leaders *Jaws*, *Close Encounters . . .*, *ET*, and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

It's tempting to join in the sense of collective awe at a record of regular connection with audiences for popular films, and leave it there. Clearly, conventional ideas about the power of the creative artist don't begin, nor aspire, to provide explanation. And, sure enough, there is a strong lottery element in a competitive entertainment industry like cinema. Spielberg's one mammoth box-office flop, the relentlessly unfunny *1941*, proves there can be no guarantee of popularity. The game is no science.

But neither the journalism of film reviewers nor more serious film criticism advance much beyond celebration or disapproval of the finger Spielberg seems to have on the public pulse. Rather than evaluating the phenomenon, how can it be accounted for?

It's important, first, to stop thinking about Spielberg as a man with a beard and a line of sentimental stories for interviewers. Since the success of *Jaws*, he's commanded his own film projects and collected around him notable talents in collaboration. Drawing on a generation reared on Hollywood memories, recycled on tv and in repertory cinemas around universities, he is the focus for an incomparable pool of knowledge and experience about film story-telling and advances in technical and special effects.

Like Roger Corman, king of exploitation in every sense, he gives his name to projects generated by others, like *Poltergeist* (producer) and *The Twilight Zone* (co-director). He backs film-school graduates and promotes from servicing roles, especially - and surprisingly in a relentlessly male industry - women; *Jaws* had a rare woman editor, his one-time secretary now produces many of the films.

If Spielberg is at the centre of a creative



Time is running out for Doc Brown (Christopher Lloyd) in Spielberg's *Back to the Future*. E.T.

activism, his name signals a certain kind of entertainment produced from it. Like 'Disney' or 'Hitchcock', the name 'Steven Spielberg' over a film poster promises a particular range of pleasures to a potential audience (and even if the promise is not always fulfilled). His name, then, represents a kind of experience many different social groups recognise as having something to say to them. 'Spielberg' means very different from, say, 'Coppola' or 'Bogdanovitch', names that sell critical value, not bums on seats.

Much of the writing assumes a 'mass' audience for 'Spielberg' films, everyone responding like Pavlov's dogs to exciting story-telling about child innocence in a nostalgic past or romantic future. Thinking about it this way is a political act. It leads to despising people for their presumed complicity in being manipulated. It masks the very different pleasures films provide for particular social groups in the total audience.

True enough, *ET* makes every audience weep in distress at the final parting of Elliot and the latex foam-rubber from outer space. But even apparently universal

moments like this call up tears for a variety of reasons. Kids, obviously, lose a playmate, but general familial separation is signified for parents, and men talk of a reminder of 'buddy'-separation characteristic of the shift from school to work.

What's important is to identify the politics of the positions encouraged by particular moments and examples of Spielberg films, and to identify the power and quality of the identifications these positions actually make with particular social groups. Such a project is no mean task but some of its contours can be suggested here.

Spielberg's romantic populism is often remarked by critics but it contains a range of political meanings. Chris Auty has argued that the suburbanite male is lauded as the man (of conscience) in the street in *Close Encounters . . .* but cuts a destructive figure in *Poltergeist* and a hapless victim in *Duel*. Similarly, in the US of *Jaws*, the post-Watergate establishment is corrupt and cynical, but in *Indiana Jones'* overseas adventures, the populist hero is all gung-ho imperialism among Third World imagery drawn as much from *National Geographic* and charity appeals as the villainy of

1930s Republic serials. 'Populism', in its anti-authority and pro-community appeal, can range from the New Deal Utopian dreams of Frank Capra's little people, invoked in *Gremlins* and *Back to the Future*, right through to a Reaganite racist, sexist and chauvinist distaste for women and foreign cultures in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*.

But all of this is analysis of the movies in the abstract. Whether accurate or not, it only has power when actual groups among audiences *engage* in the experience of the films. Very different possibilities emerge when this happens.

Spielberg's films are often not just directed at children's fantasies, for instance. They often replicate a child's social experience of an adult-centred world in their very form. Cameras at child eye-level and child-centred subjective camera set-ups position Elliot's equivocal relations to members of the family and the threatening Keys in *ET*, thereby constructing a child point-of-view. Similarly, the 'feminisation' of action around man-abandoned women in *Close Encounters . . .* and *ET* form a powerful address to many women's sense of their role in the family.

All this is a politics of cinema - and of culture generally. Understanding how Spielberg's films inscribe positions for many different social groups can begin to account for their popularity. The films call up vast numbers to their audiences through their varied addresses to the different dreams and desires, the different social experiences and recognitions, of a range of social groups.

Spielberg's popularity can be understood as one of many cultural sites - *Dallas*, Madonna, even *The Sun* - where experiences and beliefs can be confirmed, but also troubled and challenged in a range of contradictory political directions. In Spielberg, as elsewhere in popular forms, 'populism' is a floating concept and our identifications are multivarious and volatile.

What's important is not so much 'reading' films but, rather, adopting ways of questioning their work with audiences. Such a procedure promises changes in consciousness, making sense of our experience, an absolutely essential prerequisite for political change of any substance. For that reason alone, the Spielberg phenomenon commands attention.

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