

# A discussion with film historian Joseph McBride about Steven Spielberg: A Biography? Part 1

By David Walsh  
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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.

Spielberg is one of the most prominent American filmmakers of the past several decades, responsible for some of the greatest commercial successes in movie history—*Jaws*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, *Jurassic Park* and others—as well as works more highly regarded for their artistic merit and social insight, including *The Sugarland Express*, *Empire of the Sun*, *Schindler's List*, *Minority Report*, *Catch Me If You Can* and *Munich*. *The Color Purple* and *Amistad*, although both seriously flawed, in my view, were ambitious efforts.

Spielberg is a complex figure, whose career reflects some of the intense contradictions of American society and cultural life in the recent period. On the one hand, Spielberg is obviously a genuinely gifted—and humane—filmmaker, with a remarkable technical grasp and intuitive feeling for the medium and its vast possibilities; on the other, his work has been markedly weakened by the generally stagnant climate in which he and others have worked, reflected in the complacency, conformism and shallowness of too much of his filmmaking.

Spielberg's weakest side finds consummate expression in his role as a major champion and fundraiser for the Democratic Party and highly visible supporter of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama.

These are not individual difficulties. As a whole, American filmmaking in the past third of a century has failed to hold a mirror up to society in a meaningful manner. Hollywood has always been a business, but directors, writers and producers in an earlier day felt some responsibility to reflect on the way people lived and their difficulties. There was a closer resemblance between life for the vast majority and the best movies.

The long-term consequences of the purge of left-wing elements in Hollywood; the concentration of the entertainment industry in the hands of a few conglomerates who must obsessively pursue the “blockbuster” hit; the enrichment and shift to the right by considerable sections of the upper middle class “protest” generation; the growing indifference of the latter to matters of social class and the generalized fate of the population, in favor of issues of gender and race—all of this has helped shape the circumstances in which Spielberg has functioned and, in fact, to a certain extent helped create.

It must be said to Spielberg's credit that he has attempted to reflect on large social problems, usually in a historical setting, more than nearly any other major Hollywood film director.

Joseph McBride, who worked as a journalist and screenwriter in Hollywood for years, is the author of numerous works, including *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success* (1992, 2000), *Searching for John Ford* (2001) and *What Ever to Happened to Orson Welles?: A Portrait of an Independent Career* (2006). He is Associate Professor of Cinema at San Francisco State University. [See Part 1 and Part 2 of a 2009 interview with David Walsh]

The updated edition of the Spielberg biography includes four new chapters, taking the filmmaker's career up to 2010.

The book is meticulous, perceptive and honest. One of the best contemporary writers on film and film history, a writer from whom one actually *learns something*, McBride effectively and engagingly brings together a wealth of material, intertwining biographical details and informed comments on Spielberg's numerous and varied film projects. The author is unusual in the current intellectual and academic atmosphere for the seriousness with which he treats both his chosen subject and his audience. This is a writer who strives to make complex artistic and social processes comprehensible.

The newly expanded work is invaluable for anyone seeking to make sense of Spielberg's own development, and more generally, American filmmaking over the past 30 years or so.

Having said that, as the previous comments and following conversation make clear, I differ sharply with some of McBride's overall conclusions about Spielberg's artistic significance. He terms Spielberg a “great popular artist” and argues that he is the most important figure in American film over the past several decades, and that if the filmmaker “were to stop tomorrow, his career would stand as one of the most important in the history of film.”

What this leaves out of account, in my opinion, is the actual character and achievements of American film over the past 30 years in particular. Spielberg may be the most important mainstream figure in recent decades, but, one is obliged to ask, what have those recent decades produced? In our view, the last 30 years have been the weakest in the history of cinema, for definite social and historical reasons. American filmmaking in particular has undergone a deep degeneration.

Popular resistance to the current war on the conditions and lives of the working population, a new optimism among the best artists about the possibility of altering the world, a spirit of irreconcilable opposition to the artistic and political status quo, these will contribute to the rejuvenation of American and global cinema.

In any event, the following, posted in two parts, is a record of the substance of our discussion.

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David Walsh: I think the book is quite extraordinary in many ways. It's deeply honest, meticulously researched—I do believe you spoke to 327

people at least, as well as apparently read every article ever written about Steven Spielberg.

Joseph McBride: That's the great fun of writing a biography, talking to the people, and the hard work is the writing part. In this case, it was particularly entertaining because of all these interesting people. Before I came along writing biographies of filmmakers, hardly anyone ever spoke to "ordinary" people, they only spoke to movie stars and such. I make a point of interviewing everybody who knew the person, going way back—if I can find them. So Spielberg's friends and schoolmates and neighbors, and people like that, were the most fascinating interviews I did.

DW: It's an educational book, about the period, the film industry and Spielberg personally. I must say I have a somewhat more sympathetic view, more all-rounded view of him and his dilemmas as a result of reading it.

When I pay tribute to the book I'm not simply or primarily flattering you, I'm encouraging readers to read it and think about the issues the book raises, and also encouraging critics to adopt an equally serious tone and approach. It's much easier, and more common at this point, to issue sweeping and facile statements. It's time-consuming to watch a body of films and to examine them, film by film, and work through the implications of each one. That's an enormous mental and physical labor.

JM: The new edition was challenging because Spielberg has been involved in innumerable projects in recent years, being both a studio "mogul" as well as a filmmaker. I had to cope with this dual story of an individual running what you could call a "studio" [DreamWorks]—perhaps more of a boutique operation now—and directing his own films. Spielberg has also been in countless documentaries, mostly about his own work—he's everywhere. So, in addition to everything else, I had to sit through a lot of generally terrible DreamWorks productions—and the occasional good one.

One thing I wrote in the first edition of the book, and it remains true, is that Spielberg's record as a producer is mainly deplorable, compared with his record as a director, which I think is very admirable, by and large.

DW: Let me plunge in. How did the idea for the book originate?

JM: It goes back to 1982 and Spielberg's *E.T. [The Extra-Terrestrial]*

The first biography I wrote—actually it's hardly a biography, more of a critical study and portrait—was a little book on Kirk Douglas that came out in 1976 [*Kirk Douglas*, Pyramid Books]. It got my feet wet.

I started thinking about writing lengthier biographies in the early 1980s. I thought it might be interesting, and Steven Spielberg was one of the people who occurred to me. I had liked his work since 1972, when I first encountered his television movie *Something Evil*, which has a visually brilliant and flamboyant opening. I immediately recognized that this was an exceptionally talented filmmaker, and I was aware that he was very young. Back in those days it was extremely unusual in Hollywood for someone in his twenties to be making films.

When *E.T.* came out, I thought: There has never been a full-length, seriously researched critical study of Spielberg, and little serious thought has been applied to his body of work. And I thought as well, this is a director who has already made some great films—*Close Encounters of the Third Kind* [1977] is still perhaps my favorite of his films.

It is a very personal film, which only Spielberg could have made. *Schindler's List* [1993] is a remarkable film, but other people might have been able to make a film of comparable quality on this subject, such as Roman Polanski or Martin Scorsese, who were considered at different times. But no one else in the world could have made *Close Encounters*.

However, Spielberg was only 35 at the time I started considering him as a subject, and I thought he was too young for a biography. I put it in the back of my mind, and then I wrote the Frank Capra biography and that occupied me for seven and a half years. By the end of that time there still hadn't been anything important written about Spielberg, so I thought it was a major gap in American film historiography. I was also becoming

angry that he was being maligned by a lot of people.

In that regard, there's a quote from John Ford I like very much. Ford was asked by an interviewer, Emanuel Eisenberg from *New Theatre*, in 1936, "Then you do believe, as a director, in including your point of view in a picture about things that bother you?" Ford replied, "What the hell else does a man live for?"

That's my credo as a biographer too. In other words, I need to get angry about or bothered by something to write a biography, a project that involves a considerable effort. I need to feel passionate about something that's been neglected or some injustice that's been done, either toward some person or toward the truth.

In the case of Capra, a director I admire, his life story was falsely portrayed by him in his autobiography, *The Name Above the Title* [1971]. An engaging book, but I'd call it a novel about Hollywood. Writing the Capra biography was a depressing undertaking, because it's a tragic story, although it was creatively stimulating enough to work on.

So I wanted a happier story to work on for my next biography. I also wrote a biography of John Ford. Only after writing all three did I realize why I had chosen them as subjects. Each involves someone who, how shall I put this? It has to do with ethnicity, origins.

I had a bit of a complex when I was growing up, being from Wisconsin, oddly enough. Many people on the two Coasts condescend to people from Wisconsin and the Midwest, they call it "flyover country," as you know. I internalized some of that because I had a desire to do something in the wider world, and yet I was being patronized because I was a kid from Milwaukee.

So I started feeling ashamed of that. It sounds kind of silly, in a way, but I guess Spielberg had the same problem with his Jewish identity, and Capra had the same with being an immigrant from Sicily; Ford had some of that being an Irish-American kid growing up in a WASP [white Anglo-Saxon Protestant]-dominated city in Maine.

They all dealt with it in different ways. That intrigued me. Ford became defiantly proud of his roots at a time when that was not fashionable.

Capra dealt with it by becoming a reactionary and a terrible bigot himself. He was anti-Semitic, he was anti-black, he was anti-his own people, he was hostile to just about every group you could imagine.

Spielberg's evolution was the opposite of that, in my view, in that he became more generous toward others as the result of his problems. I found out that as a teenager in the early 1960s Spielberg and a friend of his cared very passionately about the Civil Rights movement, and they both decided they wanted to be black. It was not a stretch for Spielberg to make films such as *The Color Purple* [1985] and *Amistad* [1997]. A lot of critics mistakenly derided him for those efforts.

DW: Could you perhaps summarize Spielberg's background and indicate what impact that had on him?

JM: The biography was a challenging research project, partly because Spielberg grew up in several different places, but that made it interesting. I had to interview five sets of people. He was born in Cincinnati in 1946, then the family moved to suburban New Jersey, then to Phoenix, Arizona, then he moved to northern California and wound up in Los Angeles.

Spielberg first lived in a Jewish neighborhood in Cincinnati called Avondale, which is now predominantly African American. It was a very settled, prosperous Jewish neighborhood when he was growing up. He was only there for three years. The family lived right across the street from the synagogue, which is still there, but it's a Protestant church now. His first memory is of a red light burning before the ark of the Torah inside the synagogue, which is interesting, because this image brings to mind his films.

Then the Spielberg family moved to Haddon Township, New Jersey [near Philadelphia], which is a pleasant suburban area. Steven had to adapt to being a Jewish kid in a more gentile area. His father was upwardly mobile, a successful postwar person. He is a computer genius, a

fabulous man. I got to interview Arnold Spielberg, one of the most fascinating parts of my research. He helped invent computers, so he moved his family in line with the needs of the computer industry.

The Spielberg family then relocated to Phoenix. Steven remembers being the only Jewish kid in the neighborhood. Actually there was a Jewish family right behind the Spielbergs, but he suffered some real bigotry growing up there from kids who were anti-Semites. But that reached its worst point in Saratoga, California, which is a posh community in northern California. Spielberg was beaten up by some kids one weekend, and kids in the school hallway would throw pennies on the floor in front of him when he passed, and they would cough “Ahh-Jew,” as he walked by. He was very unhappy there. I did find someone who witnessed such things, and Spielberg himself wrote to the local newspaper about it in later years. That was traumatic for him.

Then Steven moved to Los Angeles and got in with the film community there. He had his well-documented problems with his family breaking up, which I don't think he will ever get over. It's his perpetual subject for filmmaking: the divorce of his parents, which happened in the mid-1960s. Of course, he blamed his father for the divorce for many years. They only reconciled after my book came out in 1997, and I was pleased that the book may have played a role in their reconciliation.

Spielberg's *Catch Me If You Can* [2002] has autobiographical overtones, although it's someone else's life story [con man Frank Abagnale, Jr.]. It's the story of an individual who has problems more with his mother than his father. At the time of the Spielbergs's divorce, however, as I was told by someone close to Steven, he was really angry at his mother. He goes back and forth in his work between dealing with irresponsible father and mother figures.

His mother, Leah, is a wonderful woman, something of a bohemian. She was a pianist, an artist, she was eccentric and very funny. She didn't care what people thought of them, she allowed Steven to cut school and allowed him to turn their house into a film studio.

Spielberg told his mother not to talk to me; I guess your mother knows the really bad stories about you. She was quoted a lot in other interviews, so I was able to use that material. The father had never been interviewed, though, and I was very fortunate to speak to him.

DW: In the book you debunk some of the mythology Spielberg has spread about his sneaking on the Universal lot as a young person. It's not entirely clear to me even why he maintains some of this.

JM: I think he believes it by now. Let me make a comment on the mythmaking, because as a film biographer it's an interesting thing I run into. Part of my *raison d'être* as a biographer is to debunk falsehoods of various kinds. That's one of the reasons I became a writer, because I get very impatient and angry about all the lying and hypocrisy that surrounds us. I greatly value honesty in people.

But when you deal with these kinds of legendary figures, they've often created a mythical persona that you then have to sort out. Some of these myths really die hard. Directors are prone to this, because that's their job, after all, creating imaginative stories. Most directors have a creation myth about their origins as filmmakers.

Frank Capra, for example, claimed that he was offered a job making a film in San Francisco in 1921 by an entrepreneur, and that he had never made a film and knew nothing about filmmaking. He was such a genius, the story goes, that he was able to master the craft without any training, which is complete poppycock. I found out, in fact, that he had been working in films for about six years by then, in all different capacities.

In Steven Spielberg's case, the story is that he walked into an empty office at Universal Studios, set up an office for himself, and crashed the gate every day. I knew from my experience in Hollywood in the 1970s that the Universal lot was very hard to get into. It was very regimented, like a prison or something. You couldn't just walk past those guards. I knew there was something fishy about Spielberg's story.

In reality, Spielberg's father knew the guy in charge of computers at Universal and asked him to help Steven get some kind of entrée there. This individual put Steven's father in touch with Chuck Silvers, the head of the film library—a wonderful man, he became Steven's true mentor—who was smart enough to recognize immediately that this was a talented young kid with a great passion for film.

Spielberg, contrary to myth, didn't have his own office, he had a chair in Silvers's office, working with a lady named Julie Raymond, for whom Steven worked as an assistant. Steven would run errands for her. I interviewed her, and she said Spielberg's story about the empty office and so on was a lot of “horseshit,” in her succinct description.

From the creative point of view what's important is that Spielberg, I think, actually believes that story now. When he made *Catch Me If You Can*, he said the story appealed to him because he himself had conned his way onto the Universal lot. Actually, Steven is conning us about this and evidently himself as well. That's his real con that he still won't or can't admit.

The training Spielberg received at Universal was unorthodox, but in those days there was no organized way to break into the industry. The Directors Guild later had a program for assistant directors, which I tried to get into, and couldn't. But if you were accepted in that program, you'd wind up being an assistant director for the rest of your life. Back in those days, they were trying to exclude people from the industry.

Almost the only way you could break into the industry was to go to USC [University of Southern California] film school and, ironically, Spielberg was rejected by USC because of his poor grades in high school. UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] also rejected him. He went to Cal State Long Beach, and they didn't have much of a film program, and he was a half-hearted student. He went to college to avoid the draft, Spielberg said in an early interview. He was more candid in those days.

Spielberg was going to Universal every day, which was an extraordinary opportunity, to hang around film and television sets, and meet people. He had a lot of *chutzpah* as a kid. He would walk up to Cary Grant on the studio street and say, “Hi, could I have lunch with you?” Grant, Rock Hudson and people like that had lunch with him. Charlton Heston was another, and, by the way, Spielberg felt Heston was very pompous. Many years later, Heston wanted to play the police chief in *Jaws* [1975], and Spielberg had the pleasure of rejecting him.

John Cassavetes befriended Spielberg when he met him on the set of some television show, and Steven got to be a production assistant on *Faces* [1968], which was a remarkable experience, a very different kind of filmmaking from what they did at Universal. Universal was very much an old-fashioned factory. It was not the most progressive studio by a long shot. It was a television factory for the most part, producing formulaic material, as well as *Airport* [1970] and films such as that.

Spielberg was able to take advantage at Universal of some of the vestiges of the Hollywood studio system, which was crumbling at the time. They had excellent craft departments. Universal was still a functioning major studio, and there were not many of them left at the time. As for disadvantages, if you see Spielberg as too conventional, you could say he started out in a conventional environment, but I don't particularly believe in that criticism of him.

DW: I wanted to raise something you've already referred to tangentially, Spielberg's concern with irresponsible mothers and fathers, his coming to terms with his Jewish roots, and so on—in other words, to what extent can one identify such interests with the emergence of the general phenomenon of “identity politics” in the US in the 1970s?

JM: Yes, I think he was influenced by it, but one of the things about Spielberg is that he was not an academic. He was only in school because he had to be, so he sort of avoided or escaped the influence of film schools. Film schools were getting very involved with identity politics in that period. But living in the culture you can't avoid getting affected by

certain trends.

DW: It was a mood within certain social layers, it's not a matter of his conscious participation in a movement, or his attendance at a university or not.

JM: Yes, but I was referring to the degree to which he was conscious of such influences. I don't think he was. *Roots* of course had a big impact at the time. It was a popular success as a book and then an unexpected success as a television miniseries in 1977. It made being proud of your ethnic background fashionable for many millions of people. Spielberg must have been influenced by that.

His interest in the fate of minorities obviously expressed itself in the making of *The Color Purple*, for which he was vehemently attacked by certain people. Alice Walker, the author of the book, suggested that the subtext of this was, "What makes this Jewish boy think he can direct a movie about black people?" And this is one of negative features of identity politics, that only certain people are allowed to make films about certain questions or certain groups.

When I teach films, I include films, for example, by African Americans as part of the general subject, not some subdivision. It's part of the overall history of filmmaking.

DW: A radical approach these days.

JM: There are people who object to a white professor teaching a course about a black subject, although I personally haven't experienced this. To me, that is very limiting, because we should all be interested.

When I went to a synagogue in West LA to talk about *Schindler's List*, there was a very nice audience, but one person put up her hand and asked, "Why are you as a gentile interested in the Holocaust?"

I was somewhat flabbergasted by the question. Why wouldn't I be? I said to her, "This was the most horrible event of the 20th Century, obviously we should all be deeply concerned by it." I've studied the Holocaust since I was a teenager and I still read books about it. It's part of the fabric of our world, unhappily. You don't have to be Jewish to care about the Holocaust.

I ran into the same question when I originally wrote the book about Spielberg. "Why are you as a gentile interested in Steven Spielberg?" and even, from some people, "What right as a gentile do you have to write a biography of Steven Spielberg?"

I found those questions a little flabbergasting too.

DW: That stuff is simply horrible. On that basis, one could eliminate much of world literature. How did Shakespeare dare write *The Merchant of Venice*, or *Othello*, or *Julius Caesar*, for that matter?

JM: When I was a screenwriter in Hollywood and writing a lot of parts for women, some people would ask the same thing: "Who are you to write about women?" I would say, "Didn't Tolstoy write a book entitled *Anna Karenina*?"

Spielberg has been pilloried for his films about black people. To his credit, he continues making the films he thinks are important. He's going ahead with his film about Abraham Lincoln, which everyone assumes will be a commercial flop. "Why bother making it, blah, blah, blah?" Tony Kushner wrote the script, who wrote *Munich* [2005].

It's sad. In the 1930s and 1940s, Hollywood made films about that sort of subject, great historical events and personalities, and today it's assumed that the target audience, which is subteens to twenty-five, doesn't care or know anything about a Lincoln. That's part of the decline of our educational system, if that's true. But Spielberg plows ahead. One of the virtues of his commercial success is that he's able to make that type of film, and not worry it will fail at the box office.

*To be continued*