

STEVEN SPIELBERG:

The Vision and the Nightmare

by Michael Ventura

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“Indiana, we are simply passing through history. But this [the Ark of the Covenant] – this is history.”
-Indiana’s rival in Raiders of the Lost Ark

Stephen Spielberg has said that Indiana Jones isn’t like Errol Flynn, he’s like Fred C. Dobbs, the Bogart character in *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. Spielberg hadn’t seen *Treasure* in a while when he made that statement, because the resemblance between Jones and Dobbs goes no farther than the facts that their pants are baggy, they wear beat-up Panamas, and they both need a shave.

True, both go scrambling for treasures in jungles far from home, but Indiana Jones gets paid for it as a famous archeologist, while Fred C. Dobbs is a working stiff on the bum who’s taking a desperate chance at grabbing the good life. More importantly, Fred C. Dobbs doesn’t know himself very well. He thinks he’s strong, smart, and good. Actually, he’s gullible, and, though he tries to be good, when the temptations get too great he simply isn’t strong enough to be decent. He goes mad, tries to kill a friend, and is finally left for dead by a couple of greasy bandits whom Indiana Jones could have beaten while looking the other way.

So much for the perspective Spielberg has on Indiana Jones. But it leaves the question: who *does* Indiana Jones resemble, if anyone?

He resembles Spielberg, is who. Which explains why Spielberg has little perspective on him. Like Spielberg, Indiana is famous in his own world, and his fame has been inflated into legend. Like Spielberg, he gets paid well to take on audacious tasks

which he brings off with a technical virtuosity that is astonishing and constant. But this is surface stuff. He has a much more profound resemblance to his creator, and it is this:

Both the real Steven Spielberg and the fictional Indiana Jones grapple with portentous and ancient mysteries. In fact, mystic mysteries are their stock-in-trade. It is their business to go where these mysteries are and to bring them back into the Western frame of mind -- for the mysteries they seek, even when they literally occur in a suburban backyard, are decidedly unWestern in nature. For Jones, the mystery is an artifact; for Spielberg, it is a concept. Both share the same attitude toward these mysteries: they are attracted to the mystery, they grapple with it, they fight for or against it, fight the mystery itself, draw others into their obsession -- and then both insist that it's all just fun-and-games, the mystery doesn't really exist, it has no meaning except to sell as entertainment.

You and I and Spielberg live in a culture that will allow anything to be trivialized in the name of "entertainment." But there is an archeology of words, too, and the psychologist James Hillman has excavated the word "entertainment": *enter-tain* means "holding between," it is something that is held between two parties -- in this case between the ones who make the creation and the ones who consume it. What entertains us is part of what we hold between us, and it might be best not to pretend that this is unimportant.

What has Spielberg offered for us all to hold between us in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*? To answer that question we have to go far back to the beginning of his work, because we're on a journey with him whether we like it or not. Even if you've never seen a Spielberg film, the mass imagination of your culture has felt his influence, making him one of the most important artists of our day.

So here is a critical filmography, if you will, beginning with *Duel*, made for television in 1971: Dennis Weaver is driving across the desert on a business trip, and manages to infuriate a trucker. Or rather, a truck. We never see the trucker, only his arm sticking out of the cab. The truck pursues Weaver, first tauntingly, then murderously, insanely -- a primal beast whose need to kill is voracious and all-consuming. Weaver gives the performance of his life as the businessman, especially in his whiny bafflement that this thing is happening at all -- why should it be happening to *him*?

It is a very brave film, not only because of the audacious technique of the 24-year-old director, but because there's never any reason for us to like Weaver. His character

isn't attractive at all. So instead of identifying with his character *we identify with the dream that is the film*. As in a dream, where every participant is also you, both Weaver's car and the mysterious truck seem to be part of the same world, to emanate from the same source, with a peculiar and compelling bond. Wonderfully, the film never explains itself. It edges off into true mystery. When it's over, it's as though we've had a dream, and it lives in us, resonating: a dream about an average man who had no choice but to grapple for survival with a menacing mystery.

Spielberg's next film (his first theatrical release) was *The Sugarland Express* (1973), based on the true story of a Texas woman (Goldie Hawn) who helped her husband escape from jail in order to abduct their child from foster-parents, and then was chased to hell-and-gone by very nearly every police car in East Texas. True story or not, this was precisely the dream of *Duel* in more specific, more everyday terms. Like *Duel*, it's told completely from the viewpoint of the people being chased, and the pursuers are massive in number and very powerful. Well-done though it was, *Sugarland Express* was too easily understood to be long remembered. We are only haunted by stories that keep begging for us to understand them.

Jaws followed in 1975. The *Duel* dream again – again the numinous pursuer who is at once insensate and voracious, but with new gut-wrenching twists: it is not human, and it arises from the sea, which in myth and dream is always an emblem of the subconscious. Ahab had once pursued Moby Dick, and that was primal enough; but in *Jaws* Moby Dick, as a great white shark, turns around and pursues Ahab, and his crew, and his women, and his kids. Spielberg is in a class by himself now – no one who films variations of the same dream three times in a row can be called a “Hollywood” director, no matter how high-tech his work. This is a man whose imagination, consciously or unconsciously, has been pulled taut between two poles: on one side, the pursuing inchoate mystery; on the other, the everyday human being frantically trying to maintain normality in the face of this all-powerful intrusion. It's as though the mystery is part of the character, as though the character is dragging the mystery behind him everywhere he goes, and *that* is why he can't seem to escape. It is the *story* – the element which the character *within* the story can not see – that is the invisible bond that connects the

character with the pursuing mystery. In Spielberg's case, the need to tell the story connects him with the unspeakable mysteries he postulates.

As an artist he avoided this fact then, and continues to avoid it now. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Spielberg's next film was *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977). It is still his greatest film, one of the handful of truly great films we've had from Americans in the last 25 years. There is still the numinous mystery, and it is still a mystery that pursues us and seeks us out, even if we try to hide – it gets inside our minds, changes even the nature of our love (wrecks Dreyfuss's marriage). Yet now it is a mystery that holds a transcendent promise. Spielberg doesn't reveal the promise, because he's too honest here to pretend to know or understand it. But he senses it deeply, and in sight and sound he gives us what might be its dimension: a full twenty minutes of *The Special Edition* of *Close Encounters* is an audio-visual fugue to rapture. Nothing like it had ever been attempted in a film before, by anyone.

Yet this is a rapture balanced by an unflinching look at how Americans live. *The Special Edition* cut everything that was cute and sit-com about *Close Encounters*. It emphasized how the family of Richard Dreyfuss and Teri Garr is utterly unable to assimilate a spiritual experience. Their family fights are as harrowing as any in Cassavetes' films (and the similarity of these scenes to Cassavetes is no accident – Spielberg spent some weeks as a production assistant on *Faces*). Like the great Spanish novelist Cervantes, Spielberg in *Close Encounters* blends the fantastic and the down-to-earth so that they reveal each other – and we see that each is incomplete without the other. The film transforms that thought into a feeling, and we leave the theater with that feeling in our hearts. It remains as the after-image of the film, for years – a magnificent achievement. New ground had been broken.

The director who went from *Close Encounters* to *1941* (1979) was an artist seeking relief from a heart-breaking, mind-bending task, the task of delving deeper into the almost unbearable split in American life between spiritual hunger and everyday demands. Should he do that, or would it be ok to do nothing but laugh, guffaw, turn the ferris-wheel so fast that it spins off into the sea? The laughs rang hollow. The man who

had understood the place of comedy within drama didn't understand the place of drama within comedy, so there wasn't a moment when anyone could care about the outcome of *1941*. For the first time he was making a film that was cut off from the source of the obsession that had fueled his first four films. It's not that *1941* is such a bad film, it's just a film that doesn't matter; but it's filmed in a visual style in which every shaft of light is made to matter. The film couldn't stand the contradiction between no story-content and Spielberg's loaded visual style. It fell flat in between, a tricky film, uninspired. At one time it would have been said that Spielberg's single commercial failure came as punishment for failing what the ancients would have called his "gods."

Not too surprising, then, that *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) begins with Indiana Jones robbing a god. From here on we're looking at an artist in complete command of his technique (no more flat films) and in absolute panic about his subject. It's odd, in fact, that no one has yet connected the manic visual intensity of Spielberg's films since *Close Encounters* with a profound inner panic. It's not that his sense of color and composition have changed; it's his sense of rhythm, his editing, which is faster, edgier, more dependent on flash than flow, more dependent on surprise than on the nature of character. Not that he's lost either flow or character, but that they determine the movement within a scene less than the compulsion to surprise.

Everything dark, unresolved, and undeveloped in Spielberg's vision comes to the surface in *Raiders*. He begins by robbing a god, for profit, from a people who've done no one any harm as far as the film is concerned. They're brown people, so most American audiences never question Indiana's (or Spielberg's) right. In fact, Indiana Jones in *Raiders* never fights any genuine white people; he battles brown tribesmen, Arabs and Nazis (who are by definition monsters), all of whom are fair game for most white Americans.

What is he battling them for? The Ark of the Covenant itself! We are talking about the holiest artifact (along with the True Cross) in the Western Bible. "A radio transmitter for talking to God," one of *Raider's* characters calls it. A great mystery. And isn't it a little odd that Indiana Jones is always risking his life for a religious artifact? And

that his sole professed motive is to study and sell them, profiting from their mystery while draining them of mystery?

There are millions of people for whom the Ark of the Covenant is now a prop in a Spielberg movie. The history and faith of an entire people have been dispensed with, made comic and chintzy. Which is to say, the Indiana Jones inside Spielberg *did* find the Ark, the image of the Ark, and did bring it back, and put it in a gaudy celluloid sideshow, trivialized beyond recognition.

What is interesting is that in *Raiders* Spielberg for the first time sides with the *pursuing* principle of his obsessive *Duel*-dream. Now it's Indiana Jones who's the implacable one who will not give up chasing – he shares this quality with the truck and the shark and the U.F.O. It makes him not quite human. Indiana ends up chasing an entire Nazi military unit single-handedly, so much has Spielberg invested him with the cold aspect of that numinous pursuer of *Duel* and *Jaws*. Spielberg has entered deep into his dream, and come out of it in a humorously wrathful chase against the gods themselves. Rather than face them, he, as Indiana Jones, will exploit them.

Then Spielberg writes and produces *Poltergeist* (1982), which Tobe Hooper directs in a style that is an exact copy of *Close Encounters*. Almost simultaneously, Spielberg produces and directs *E.T.* They're released within weeks of each other.

Poltergeist is an extraordinary work, underrated by most critics (including this one) at the time. It places an average suburban American family squarely between the lights and darks of what Australian aboriginals would call the Dreamtime and what Western mystics sometimes call The Other World. Of course, this American family isn't *quite* average. The bonds between them are stronger and deeper than the family of *Close Encounters*, but there's nothing wrong with postulating a healthy family as long as Spielberg steers clear of any Capra-like hoke, and he does. Spielberg's family is caught between the old, Gothic visions of the devilish supernatural and the New Age vision of the Other World. Both *visions* try to take over the family. Will they shake in terror before the spirits that have abducted their daughter, seeing the spirits as wholly evil; or will they accept the psychic's explanation that the spirits are lost and pitiful and needy, and are doing evil because they have gotten lost and they've been violated?

Between the film's psychics and para-psychologists, the family is given a description of what I prefer to call the Dreamtime that jibes very well with what researchers like Kubler-Ross have described as after-death experiences, and what mystics have been trying to tell us for several thousand years. This is a cosmology entirely new to mainstream Western thought. The story – Spielberg's best script, line for line – is a process of exposing the family to this cosmology, and then teaching them to survive within its realities.

Like *Close Encounters*, *Poltergeist* ends at its true beginning (a fine place for films to end, leaving the story to develop in the audience): what will the *Poltergeist* family be like in, say, two years, when they've had a chance to assimilate the experience? This is a film that uses American *manners* to challenge American *values* and America's numbingly literal interpretation of existence. Spielberg has again used the chase as his paradigm for what goes on in the psyche, but for the first time there is a dialectic: the Dreamtime spirits first haunt and chase the family's little girl, and then the family and the psychic chase the spirits, back and forth until the apocalyptic resolution. For the first – and so far the only – time in Spielberg's films, both ends of the pole are empowered, both can act with something like equal force.

Conceptually, this is as far as Spielberg has gotten – and it's a lot farther than any of his contemporaries except Peter Weir (who seems to conceive his films on the interface of the Dreamtime itself, and who isn't afraid of portraying characters as complex as himself). *Poltergeist* hasn't the scale and power of *Close Encounters*, nor its sense of transcendence, but it encounters both the Dreamtime and the obsessive *Duel*-dream more specifically, in more exacting detail, than any of his other films.

Poltergeist was successful, but not wildly successful; while *E.T.* was the most profitable and popular film of all time.

It is difficult to discuss *E.T.* now because it's difficult to separate the film from its merchandising. Spielberg – who had control over merchandising – turned his film into a toy factory, trivializing the movie almost beyond recognition. Here he was his own Indiana Jones robbing his own temple. He had created a transcendent figure, a character bathed in an openly spiritual aura – very Sufi-like, this extra-terrestrial critter who

comported himself with a demeanor somewhere between slapstick and prayer, much like the Sufi “fools of God.” Everyone whom E.T. comes in contact with is affected by his goodness and shares in his strength – which is as good a definition as we’ve got of a “spiritual teacher.” Then Spielberg does to E.T. exactly what Indiana Jones wants to do to religious artifacts. Gorged with greed, he sells and sells and sells, until the name “E.T.” no longer conjures a marvelous surprise that uplifted us in a huge dark room, but a lot of dolls and bumper stickers and Michael Jackson records and games and candy bars, all sticky with sentimentality.

So the film has been lost. Indiana Jones stole the idol, and it quickly lost its power. It’s as though Spielberg needs *not* to believe in these images he creates. He sets out to betray his most popular (if not quite his best) creation before it was released; before, I suspect, filming was begun. Again, he is chasing himself now. *He* is the truck, and his work is the car, in the *Duel*-dream paradigm, as far as *E.T.* is concerned. He obviously, on the level of work, believes deeply in his imagination’s material – he is obsessed with the fantastic and the spiritual, can’t avoid them. But he won’t stand beside the conclusions of his imagination; he insists they’re just toys.

They might be, for all we know. Still it is strange to watch an artist discount and minimize his own work to such devastating effect. What is he afraid of?

Like most Americans, Spielberg seems afraid to consider the possibility that his imaginings, his feelings, and his thoughts, have a moral weight; that they indicate ways of life, standards of conduct; and that there is nothing for an artist but to follow the path of his imagination into its outcomes, its consequences. Only in this way does the artist’s work deepen. And while you may tell yourself that one work is an entertainment and another is a serious film, your psyche doesn’t buy those distinctions. It’s going to express itself in whatever you do. If you deny your own psyche, it is going to combat denial with an intensity that will edge over, sooner or later, into some genre of madness. Depend on it.

When a whole culture denies its psyche en masse, the effects are monstrous, like napalming children in distant lands. When an artist chooses to run from his own psyche, the effects are far less disastrous for everyone but him, but his work will bubble with

nightmares. I think this is what happened to Spielberg with *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*.

Spielberg is in a bad way. In *The Temple of Doom* he's no longer playing with images of horror, he's wallowing in them. A huge, seemingly dead snake is brought to the dinner table and cut open; live eels slither out of the dead creature, all over the table, and men eat the live eels. This has nothing to do with the story. It is the indulgence of a powerful image-maker who is losing his taste and his restraint and *is trying to make us lose ours*. There is no other reason to try to shock us so thoroughly. It is a morbid, crazed scene, followed by a sequence of morbid, crazed scenes. He hopes to overwhelm you with his visual rhythms, to get you so caught up in the action that you swallow the images as readily as the men swallowed the eels. He's hoping that your psyche will be so overworked assimilating these primal images that it won't have time to judge.

In *The Temple of Doom* Indiana Jones is confronting another god, the great Hindu figure Kali. Spielberg presents Kali as a goddess slaving over human sacrifice and imprisoned children. But in the Hindu spectrum of gods and goddesses, Kali is a profound figure that casts off many meanings and realities. She does not require human sacrifice and has a positive place in Hinduism as a whole, which doesn't postulate good and evil as opposites the way Christianity does. We should also remember that this goddess Spielberg is vilifying is part of a living religion still worshipped by many more people than those who worship Judaism's and Christianity's gods. [Note, 2008: *Judasim, yes; Christianity, I was way overboard. Hinduism is the world's third largest religion, following Christianity and Islam.*]

But then, Spielberg has always been lily-white, and has only been able to take middle-class white reality seriously. The families of *Close Encounters*, *Poltergeist*, and *E.T.* live in safely all-white neighborhoods; *Close Encounters* has a black air traffic controller, and there is perhaps one other black face in the entire film – certainly no blacks or browns are called by the U.F.O.s; and it's taken for granted that while the U.F.O.s leave signals in Mongolia, Mexico and India, only white people are smart enough to interpret them – the governments of those places have apparently acquiesced to American control of the phenomenon.

The Temple of Doom surrounds two white people – Indiana Jones and his female foil Willie – with either helpless or savage dark people. Or rather dark creatures. They are not, in any way, people. The only white is, fittingly, an officer of the British Empire, who leads some more dark creatures who carry rifles and shoot at other dark creatures. Their personalities, their religion and culture are desecrated, in the name of good clean fun. We are back to the racial standards of Hollywood 50 years ago, and I doubt that there is anything more disgusting that can be said about a contemporary American film.

It is no accident that the story *needs* these various darkies, and that both *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Temple of Doom* are set against them. Indiana is only human by contrast to their lack of humanity. If he were up against people as human as he is, then the filmmakers and the audience would be forced to deal with the motives of all sides, and these stories would evaporate under that kind of scrutiny.

Though, strictly speaking, there is no story here. As my friend Robert Fieldsteel pointed out to me, this is not a film – it's a video-game: the figure (as opposed to the character) goes from one "board," or level of difficulty, to the next, taking on all comers, racking up points, without character development, without story – which is to say, without purpose. Even the ending is arbitrary. The picture ends when it's gone on long enough to be a movie.

The chase-dream that was expressed with such stark power in *Duel* has taken over *The Temple of Doom* so completely that there is nothing here but implacable forces chasing each other, back and forth, compulsively, through every element of air, water, earth and fire, through every sexual and spiritual symbol, through the young and the old, through the very ages of humankind, in a world – an imagination – that can now do nothing but run. It stops only long enough to indulge in fits of disgust or fantasies of fear.

It's been necessary to go through all of Spielberg's work to see what a degeneration *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* really is. Critics in general right now seem to relish having something bad to say about Spielberg. They're tired of praising him. Most are behaving like something out of the film itself, a lot of wide-eyed dark creatures with big swords. But this is the director who's given us some of the few genuinely transcendent moments of the last two decades of American film; a man of

astonishing range who's worked more purely out of his imagination than any other American filmmaker. We owe him. We owe him at least an analysis of why we're so appalled at this picture.

The only hopeful sign in *Temple of Doom* comes at its end, when Indiana, instead of taking the holy stone with him for "fortune and glory," gives it back to the village priest, who places it back in its shrine. "I think I understand its power, now," Indiana says. It is a moment that has nothing in common with the rest of the film, but is welcome nonetheless.

We can hope that the Indiana Jones inside Stephen Spielberg may one day understand that the only adventure worthy of an artist is to follow the implications of his best work wherever they may lead. Otherwise, if Spielberg continues to feel no responsibility to his own best images, then, very much like his idol Frank Capra, he will stop being a major filmmaker and become the prisoner of his fantasies, unable to make a film that has the sure mark of a great work, the power to question its own premises as it goes along. Capra ended awash in false sweetness. Spielberg could get stuck in films like *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* – films which don't express the richness of his dreams but instead prey on the vulnerability of our nightmares.

They say he's going to re-make *Peter Pan*. It would be a waste. Looking at his films as a whole, the last thing Spielberg needs is to spend a year or more on fantasies of how to remain a little boy forever. As an artist, he needs plainly and simply to grow up, to face his own imagination, to grapple with where he's been and what he's made of, and then climb back up on the scaffolding and continue to paint his part of the mural that may well be our new cosmology far into the next millennium.