FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Grader of the Lost Sharks:
Warren Buckland Considers Spielberg's Overlooked 'Monster'
Movies

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Review: Warren Buckland (2006) *Directed by Steve Spielberg:
Poetics of the Contemporary Hollywood Blockbuster*
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Warren Buckland opens his perceptive monograph on Steven Spielberg's blockbusters by explaining what it is not. Neither biography, production history, nor even an interpretative analysis of Spielberg's work (unlocking 'hidden' meanings), Buckland's book involves, rather, a clear and concise analysis of Spielberg's 'poetics'—his choices in terms of film style and narration—in order to prove or disprove whether his blockbusters contain a 'higher unity.' That is, whether they have an 'added value' that renders the whole greater than the sum of the parts. As such, the book is an invaluable resource for both students and fans of Spielberg's work, as well as for budding blockbuster filmmakers. Furthermore, Buckland's clear explanations of how Spielberg is a master of efficient and effective storytelling make of *Directed by Steven Spielberg* a good introduction to film analysis in general.

After Buckland's promise not to interpret Spielberg's work, a task that has recently been undertaken by Nigel Morris and Lester D Friedman (both 2006), Buckland then promises to argue that 'successful filmmaking is not about "genius," but about a director's combination and transformation of a set of stylistic and narrational norms' (p 5). Buckland achieves this aim

thanks to the accurate analysis of the formal elements of those of Spielberg's films that many critics overlook and/or dismiss on account of their 'blockbuster' status. Taking in Spielberg's earliest work and subsequent blockbusters *Duel* (1971), *Jaws* (1975), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *E.T.* (1982), *Jurassic Park* (1993), *Minority Report* (2002) and *War of the Worlds* (2005), Buckland looks at how Spielberg's choices, in terms of shooting and editing, establish him as a 'magician' director whose work more often than not involves great skill, since those choices are motivated not for their own sake but in order appropriately to propel his narratives with clarity, economy and maximum effect.

Buckland contextualises Spielberg's career by historicising the origins of the contemporary Hollywood blockbuster (Chapter 1): as antitrust laws led to the production of fewer films, so, too, did the rise of television lead to more money being spent on those fewer films and to an emphasis on their specifically 'cinematic' elements (CinemaScope, 3-D, colour), in order to entice audiences out of their homes and into the theatres. In effect, movies became 'events,' with increased sums spent on production and, importantly, marketing, together with a simultaneous nationwide and, latterly, worldwide release. Without critiquing the logic of the 'high concept' blockbuster (the concept of which is so 'high,' apparently, that it can be summarised/pitched in 25 words or less!), Buckland does insightfully explain how, in the age of the media conglomerate, a Hollywood director must possess not just filmmaking skills, but also immense business acumen, something that Spielberg seems to possess in spades.

In Chapter 2, Buckland describes what he means by 'poetics': an attempt 'to reconstruct the artistic reasoning behind the creation of an artwork' (p. 30). Any artwork should aim to achieve an elusive 'organic unity,' whereby each constituent part contributes to the whole, which, through the very unity of its parts, takes on an 'added value.' Following the rationale that technique should be subservient to a film's story, not vice versa, Buckland lists visualisation, shot flow, blocking (*mise-en-scène* and choreography), and filming (choice of angle, camera movement, lenses, shot length, editing, shot rhythm, etc) as the major skills that filmmakers should possess, before discussing how critics similarly consider *mise-en-scène* (e.g. VF Perkins, Adrian Martin, Noël Carroll), poetics (David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson), and significant form (Clive Bell and Stefan Scharff) in their own search for unity in a film.

'Narration contributes to organic unity and significant form by assessing how narrational strategies function in relation to one another,' says Buckland (p. 43), before

examining how a filmmaker can and will employ different strategies to tell a story—and how the combination of these strategies can reveal a filmmaker's skill or otherwise. For example, it is important in a detective story that the audience only knows as much as the detective, otherwise the surprise element of the 'whodunit' is destroyed. Sometimes, however, it is important for the audience to know more than the characters; for example, suspense is created by our superior knowledge of the danger in which a hero has unwittingly placed herself. The efficient and economic delivery of only as much information as the audience should or needs to know, therefore, is central to narrative filmmaking—and the skilful or otherwise alternation between omniscient or restricted narration, point-of-view shots, timing, delaying, foreshadowing, the use of on- and off-screen space, reversal of expectations, and the employment of a single ('syntagmatic') or multiple ('paradigmatic') plot thread(s) all help to determine a filmmaker's worth.

Having established a paradigm of good filmmaking (the efficient and fitting revelation of only as much information as the plot demands), Buckland turns his attention to Spielberg's films themselves. The early works analysed include the 1968 short *Amblin'* (from which Spielberg's first production company would take its name), his TV work for Universal (an episode of *Night Gallery* and the pilot for *Columbo*), and the TV movie, *Duel*. Quickly Buckland establishes through working examples what will become familiar to the reader in later chapters: the deft and detailed analysis of scenes, how they are constructed, and whether Spielberg's use of technique is 'strong' (for being in the service of telling the story), or 'weak' (because 'style dominates over theme,' p. 57).

I shall question Buckland's criteria for determining what constitutes good or bad filmmaking later; but first I shall provide a synopsis of Buckland's various analyses. In Buckland's estimation, *Amblin'* is on the whole visually creative (the film has barely any dialogue and follows the simple plot of a boy and a girl hitchhiking to the coast), but occasionally heavy-handed; Spielberg's episode of *Night Gallery*, *Eyes* (1969), shows promise but is inconsistent; his *Columbo* pilot (*Murder by the Book*, 1971), shows greater confidence but is still not quite masterful; and *Duel* marks Spielberg's first genuine success as an efficient filmmaker. Considering this latter film as a thriller, that is a film that relies upon mystery, suspense, and a hero overcoming a conspiracy, Buckland highlights the various moments where Spielberg either restricts or expands what the audience sees/knows in order to raise the levels of suspense and surprise—be it because we can see the oncoming truck that main

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character Mann (Dennis Weaver) cannot (creating suspense), or because the dastardly truck appears as if from nowhere (creating surprise). The analysis of *Duel* also sees Buckland engage for the first time in an extended consideration of camera positions, shot numbers, and average shot lengths (ASLs—after Barry Salt, 1992). Through these calculations, Buckland dispassionately 'measures' Spielberg's poetics and allows us to understand, for example, that by increasing the rate of cutting during a chase scene (something that will become a commonplace in Spielberg's blockbusters), so too is drama and tension increased.

In Chapter 4, Buckland analyses ten key scenes from *Jaws*, including the film's opening scene, the scenes that introduce the major characters, and the all-important shark attacks, both those that take place on the beach and during the hunt for the shark. Buckland explains how Spielberg skilfully reveals information at the most appropriate moment, nowhere better than in his analysis of the film's second shark attack. Here, Spielberg uses the long opening shot to link Brody (Roy Scheider), who has already tried to warn swimmers about the shark, to the second victim, Alex Kintner (Jeffrey Voorhees)—although the audience does not know why at this point. Thereafter, the scene is told mainly from Brody's attack-wary point of view: we think several different people will be the shark's next victim—they are not; characters block Brody's (and the audience's) view of the sea; a woman screams off screen—only for us to discover that she is safe; and so on. Spielberg then switches suddenly to the shark's point of view as it approaches Alex, only for us not to see a graphic version of the attack, but an understated long shot of the busy beach, with Alex obliquely being dragged under in the background. The next shot shows the reaction of some beach-goers, although this shot also includes Alex's mother who continues reading, unawares. Spielberg finally releases the tension that he has built up through his delaying tactics by showing a longer, clearer and more graphic shot of the attack on Alex. Spielberg then returns to Brody with a simultaneous track in and zoom out shot, which registers in content not only Brody's reaction, but also explains in form his psychological state (that 'sinking feeling'). A reference to Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), this shot, and the suspenseful scene in general, are exemplary of 'a quantum leap in Spielberg's craft' (p.108).

In Chapter 5, Buckland analyses key scenes from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, including the opening scene's dramatic use of a sandstorm to create off-screen space within the film's frame, together with Roy's encounter with a UFO whilst driving. This latter scene is of interest for its comparison to the previous car scene in *Duel*: here Spielberg uses similar

multiple camera positions, but to greater effect than in *Duel* thanks to his variation of angles, which 'intensify the events without distracting the spectator' (p. 121). Buckland ends the chapter by comparing Spielberg's use of off-screen space to that of Jean Renoir in *Nana* (1926), although Buckland contends that Spielberg's final revelation of the UFOs is 'nothing more than an extravagant overabundant spectacle' (p. 128).

Looking at the opening of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (the topic of Chapter 6), Buckland analyses how placing the camera 'within the circle of action' (we do not view events from afar/outside the circle of action, but are placed among the action *with* the other participants/characters) heightens the spectator's excitement by involving her more intimately. Furthermore, Buckland efficiently analyses how suspense is created through that now-staple of the blockbuster, the *deadline*: Indy (Harrison Ford) must cross the bottomless pit before the portcullis descends and traps him in the temple; he then has to leave the temple before being crushed by the giant marble; Indy must then escape before rival archaeologist Belloq (Paul Freeman) has him killed. The chapter also looks at the mechanics of another car chase scene (Spielberg here shows his growing confidence as a filmmaker by fragmenting the chase into numerous shots that intensify the action), as well as the director's continuing and effective use of off-screen space (in particular withholding information the final revelation of which is pleasurable—for example, not disclosing the presence of Indy in Marion's bar until Marion (Karen Allen) is about to succumb to marauding Nazis). Finally, the chapter also involves the first clear example of Spielberg's tendency to try to inject humour into his films. In Buckland's estimation, the quasi-slapstick kidnapping of Marion in a basket, which is suddenly rendered serious by her apparent death in an exploding truck, 'puts the film out of balance' and is an example of 'inappropriate humor' (p. 152).

Chapter 7 analyses *E.T.*, which was a surprise hit for Spielberg ('a blockbuster because of box office takings rather than by design', p. 155), and *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hooper, 1982), which, in the estimation of many, is a Spielberg film. By comparing the structural composition of the first 30 minutes of *E.T.* and *Jurassic Park* to that of the first 30 minutes of Hooper's films *Salem's Lot* (1979) and *The Funhouse* (1981), Buckland provides evidence for and against each director's claims to the authorship of *Poltergeist*. In terms of camera movement (there is little camera movement), shot scale (more medium close-ups, fewer long shots), and shot duration (more shots of shorter duration), the film more closely resembles Hooper's other work than it does Spielberg's; the predominance of low camera angles and the short duration of the

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medium and medium-close shots, however, would suggest the hand of Spielberg. Based on this evidence, Buckland concludes, in accordance with what both directors have said in interviews, that the film is most likely a Tobe Hooper film.

Contrary to popular opinion, Buckland suggests in Chapter 8 that *Jurassic Park* is not a mere special effects spectacle, but that it relies on the skilful use of on- and off-screen space in order to create a sense of anticipation, not least in the scene where, 19 minutes into the film, we finally get a clear look at some dinosaurs (although we have already 'witnessed' an attack on a park warden in the opening scene—in which a velociraptor is teasingly kept hidden by not only a crate, but also by Spielberg's choice of camera angles and his use of camera movements and extreme close-ups, which prevent us from seeing the monster/animal in its entirety). Revisiting a scene that he analysed with dexterity in his more general work on contemporary American film (Elsaesser and Buckland, 2002), Buckland describes how, rather than simply showing us the dinosaurs, Spielberg first registers the gobsmacked reaction of Doctor Grant (Sam Neill) in two shots: one of him looking off-screen right, and then a second in which he jumps out of his seat and takes off his hat and shades. Rather than showing us what Grant sees, though, Spielberg delays this revelation by instead showing us Doctor Sattler (Laura Dern) looking at a leaf, before inserting yet another shot of Grant turning her head so that she is looking off-screen as well. Finally, we get to see what has attracted their attention: a grazing brachiosaur. 'The shot is focalized around the collective gaze of Grant and Sattler, since they are present in the shot of the brachiosaur, thereby emphasizing the narratological [as opposed to merely/emptily spectacular] status of the shot' (p. 183).

Jurassic Park features several moments of paradigmatic storytelling (cutting between different plot strands so that we follow several stories simultaneously), as well as long takes and deep focus filming, which help to take Spielberg's blockbuster work in new directions in terms of complex but narratively-coherent storytelling and individual shots. With the exception of some unbelievable twists ('intelligent' velociraptors and a T-Rex making an improbable *deus ex machina* appearance), Buckland feels that the film provides perhaps 'the best illustration to date of Spielberg creating organic unity by combining standard filmmaking techniques to their utmost effectiveness' (pp. 191-192).

The same cannot be said for *Minority Report* (Chapter 9) and *War of the Worlds* (Chapter 10). The former has numerous plot holes and, worse, inappropriate humour. In spite of a very strong opening two-thirds, strong because, as per HG Wells' 1898 text, they powerfully involve

the audience in the confusion of the characters by not letting us outside of the circle of action/explaining why the alien attack is happening, Buckland feels that the suspense created in the latter film then 'unravels' (p. 222) following an overlong basement sequence in which, thanks to a mirror, the aliens improbably fail to find the human refugees, who themselves move from their hiding place without detection and with no explanation from the filmmaker(s). That said, Buckland does point out the arrival in Spielberg's blockbuster *œuvre* of 'extreme shots that bypass the scale of humans—from computer-generated shots of microscopic bacteria in a drop of water to the Earth suspended in space' p. 214). Furthermore, he provides an excellent analysis of a similarly computer-enhanced scene involving a 150-second single take of a conversation in a car. During this scene the camera manages to circle the characters, moving in and out of the car as if the camera had no physical or material reality—an approach that is a reversal of his earlier trend to film car scenes through faster cutting between different camera positions. As Buckland explains, the comparison of these car scenes and other, equally 'overlooked moments' allows us to 'chart the evolution of his solutions to such filming problems' (p. 221).

Buckland concludes his book by describing Spielberg as an 'indirect magician,' who manipulates audiences, who in turn enjoy being manipulated. Following extremely brief analyses of *The Lost World* (1997), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001), Buckland signs off by declaring that Spielberg's status as an *auteur* is located 'in the set of compositional norms he adopts, manipulates, and transcends… Whatever else one discovers in Spielberg's films, we certainly find a *well-told* story' (p. 228).

Buckland's analyses are themselves 'well-told,' although, like Spielberg, Buckland's mastery can on occasion slip. The introductory chapters are thorough and excellent in execution, as are the chapters on *Jaws* and *Jurassic Park*. It is unfortunate, therefore, that Buckland decides to end on the analysis of two of Spielberg's poorer films (*Minority Report* and *War of the Worlds*) and the too-brief and arguably redundant micro-analyses of three others (*The Lost World*, *Saving Private Ryan* and *A.I.*). For, Buckland's evident antipathy towards these films (*Minority Report* and *War of the Worlds* in particular) creates in the reader a disappointing sense of anti-climax, which are not even contextualised through an overview of Spielberg's career (for example, these 'weaker' recent films are not explained as a waning of Spielberg's talents after an early 'learning' period and 20 years of sustained success). After 228 pages of engaging analysis, to conclude that Spielberg's films are merely 'well-told' also seems

a rather damp squib. Unlike Spielberg's blockbusters, Buckland's brilliant investigation into the poetics of the filmmaker's work leads not to the scholarly equivalent of a revelatory UFO or dinosaur, but to… a non-committal and already accepted pronouncement (Spielberg tells stories well).

This is a pity, because it appears that Buckland is in fact champing at the bit to offer us the political insight of which he is more than capable. He alludes, for example, to *The Lost World* being Spielberg's Vietnam movie and *War of the Worlds* as his 9/11 movie (p. 215)—but offers no further investigation. He points out repeated references to Hitchcock in Spielberg's blockbusters, without linking them together in any way. And even though there is a fairly regular discussion of the actors in Spielberg's films, Buckland does not investigate how stars, their personae, and casting in general might also contribute to the creation of a blockbuster. Or indeed how Spielberg, like Hitchcock, arguably used François Truffaut as a springboard to *auteur* status by casting him in *Close Encounters…* (in much the same way that Hitch got the Frenchman to write a book on him).

The above comments are perhaps unfair given that Buckland does not set out to provide a politicised analysis of Spielberg or his films. However, whilst there is much excellent and empirical analysis of Spielberg's work (which, on account of Buckland's vivid prose style, avoids the potential pitfall of being as dry as the proverbial 'salt pan'), Buckland's personal tastes (and therefore his politics) do begin to creep into his analyses. On page 80, for example, Buckland criticises Spielberg for including shots in *Duel* that do not advance the narrative, arguing that these are examples of 'weak' filmmaking. Since Spielberg openly admits the influence that New Hollywood had on his work, a movement that was itself influenced by the unconventional and challenging narratives of the French *Nouvelle Vague*, one senses that Buckland is inserting his own narrative-driven criteria into his analysis. Buckland says that these 'superfluous' shots are weak, but we might conversely contend that the frustration they cause by *not* advancing the narrative instils in the spectator a keener desire for the narrative to progress (we want something to *happen*!), which in turn makes it all the more rewarding when something *does* happen (because we were worried for a moment back there that it would not). In other words, the very moments that Buckland feels are 'weak' could conceivably be interpreted by another scholar as 'strong.' That Buckland has a criterion of 'strong' and 'weak' filmmaking is no bad thing in itself, but becomes noteworthy when we remember that Buckland purports to provide a disinterested and empirical analysis of

Spielberg's work. (Furthermore, to say that Spielberg's humour is weak because it is inappropriate is arguably like dismissing the porter's scene in *Macbeth* because comedy should not intrude on tragedy. Admittedly, Spielberg is not very *funny*, but that does not mean that humour per se is bad in a 'serious' film, which seems to be Buckland's argument.)

Personal taste also seems to manifest itself when Buckland praises *Jurassic Park* for building up anticipation by delaying the revelation of the dinosaur, whilst simultaneously condemning *Close Encounters…* as 'an extravagant overabundant spectacle' for revealing the aliens after a build-up that has lasted the entire length of the film. Some viewers no doubt find the ending of *Close Encounters…* immensely satisfying. Furthermore, Michele Pierson (2002) argues that special effects cinema has involved a history of increasingly revelatory moments of monsters. For example, Pierson says that the commercial failure of *Godzilla* (Roland Emmerich, 1998) could in part be attributed to the film's *failure* to show the monster in its entirety. The decision not to show Godzilla may have allowed the remake to be in keeping with the aesthetic of Ishiro Honda's 1954 *Gojira* original, in which Godzilla is only seen in part or in long shots, but it fares badly in an era of photorealistic and whole dinosaurs interacting with humans in the same shot. By this rationale of 'revelation,' the spectacular ending of *Close Encounters…* is a success, not a failure. (And we might extrapolate from this that the blockbuster is potentially a 'monstrous' cinema in which monsters are de-monstrated/shown (*montré*) in their entirety. Nude portraits of monsters, if you will.)

Finally, if we are to consider Spielberg as an *auteur*, which is one of the book's explicit aims, then perhaps Buckland ought to have made greater reference to some of Spielberg's other works (if *E.T.* merits attention for its box office returns, not its design, then *Schindler's List* (1993) and *Saving Private Ryan* are surely both 'blockbusters,' too). Alternatively, if we are to establish a 'poetics' of the blockbuster (a phenomenon that is not the domain of Steven Spielberg alone), then Buckland might have usefully made reference to other contemporary blockbuster 'auteurs' like Michael Bay, Tony Scott or Roland Emmerich.

Directed by Steven Spielberg is without question a milestone in our understanding of both Spielberg, particularly his overlooked blockbusters, and in our understanding of the blockbuster itself as a phenomenon and as a 'genre.' It is informative and well told, setting a high benchmark for future scholars to strive to meet. We might note that which is absent from the book, but that which *is* included is most valuable and insightful.

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