



Steven Spielberg

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Shortly after The Sixth Sense became a global sensation, its director, M Night Shyamalan – hailed on the cover of Newsweek in 2002 as “the next Spielberg” – told an interviewer that, years earlier, he had realised the one ingenious trick that made Steven Spielberg movies so spectacularly successful. Like a soft-drink manufacturer who had stumbled on the secret recipe for Coca-Cola, Shyamalan could not believe his luck. What was Spielberg’s killer formula, Shyamalan was asked. He would not say. Merely by understanding it, he had struck commercial gold and he did not plan to share it.

It didn’t quite work out that way for Shyamalan, who has never matched the heights of that first hit. But I thought of his imagined revelation as I watched Spielberg’s latest film. The Post stars Meryl Streep and Tom Hanks as Katharine Graham and Ben Bradlee of the Washington Post, the duo who took on the Nixon White House in 1971 to publish the Pentagon Papers, the US Department of Defense’s own secret history of the Vietnam war that laid bare decades of government dishonesty.

It is a timely, absorbing story, beautifully acted and masterfully told. But what is the essential ingredient that makes it a Spielberg movie? Where is the neat narrative trick that Shyamalan thought he had spotted, the trademark device that means The Post sits in a canon that includes Jaws, Indiana Jones and Schindler’s List?

Two days later, I am sitting opposite Spielberg – now 71 and looking like a kindly college professor, a sweater over his shirt and tie and under his jacket – about to ask the man himself. He is the most commercially successful director in cinema history, the man behind ET, Jurassic Park and dozens more. So what makes a Spielberg film?

He answers by noting that he recently saw Spielberg, a two-hour documentary by Susan Daly, detailing each stage of his storied career. “Even having looked at that documentary about myself, I still cannot

“And I saw the documentary. And it didn’t help.”

As he told Daly, he doesn’t like to overanalyse his own work too much, for fear that the attempt to understand the source of all this creativity might cause it to dry up.

As it happens, The Post has a couple of Spielberg hallmarks. There is the familiar clash of idealism against pragmatism, the brave soul (or souls) ready to stand up for what’s right, against the vastly bigger forces pressing them to back down. In Bridge of Spies, Hanks was a

lawyer pressured to cut corners who insisted, instead, on the primacy of the constitution. In The Post, Hanks is a journalist taking the same stand. (Both films join Lincoln as hymns to the virtues of the US constitution.) And – like those fleeing the shark, the dinosaurs, or the relentless truck in Spielberg’s debut movie, Duel – the good guys have to face down an implacable bully.

But The Post has an added quality that some earlier Spielberg movies may have lacked: an uncanny topicality. That is not wholly coincidental. The director first read the script for The Post just 11 months ago, deciding instantly that he wanted to make this story of a Republican president at war with the press – and he wanted to make it right now, assembling screenwriters, crew and A-list stars (including Streep and Hanks making their first film together) in a fraction of the usual time.

honestly tell you what attracts me to a project and what presses my buttons and what gets me to say yes. I can’t tell you.”

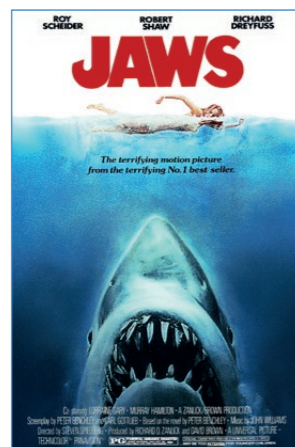
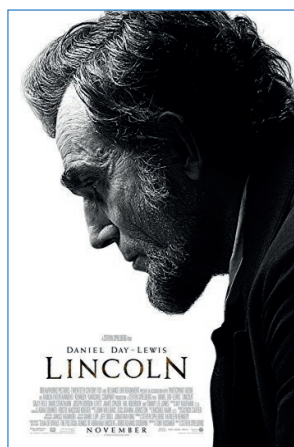
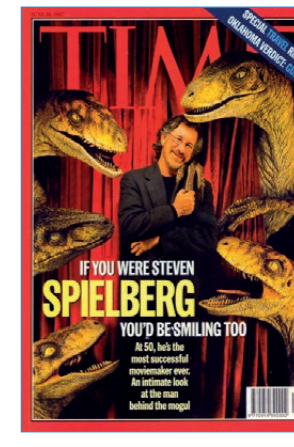
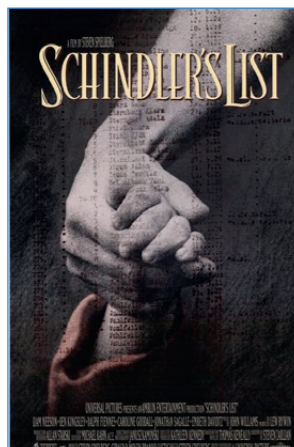
Really? No clue as to what the common thread that connects his work might be?

“There’s a couple of movies that, yes, I see my dog tags around the neck of the film, like anything that has to do with dinosaurs or intrepid archaeologists.” But more widely? He shakes his head and smiles.



ph. Gage Skidmore

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"The level of urgency to make the movie was because of the current climate of this administration, bombarding the press and labelling the truth as fake if it suited them," Spielberg tells me, recalling the sense of offence he felt at documented, provable events being branded fake news. "I deeply resented the hashtag 'alternative facts', because I'm a believer in only one truth, which is the objective truth."

So The Post shows a silhouetted Richard Nixon pacing the White House, while we hear the disgraced former president's voice – taped on his own, notorious recording system – as he tramples on the first amendment, seeking to use the might of his office to hobble the free press. No one needs to mention Donald Trump for his shadow to loom over this movie.

Journalists will lap it up, of course. Like James Graham's stage play Ink, it features one sequence lovingly recreating the old process of hot metal – the clanging of heavy, blackened machines – once necessary to produce a printed newspa-

per. For those who were inspired to go into the trade by Alan J Pakula's All the President's Men ("arguably the greatest newspaper movie ever made," says Spielberg), with its heroic tale of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein exposing Watergate, The Post is a delicious prequel: it argues that the victory over the Pentagon Papers emboldened the Washington Post to keep fighting Nixon, all the way to his resignation in 1974. (For anyone who knew Bradlee, Hanks does not disappoint: he gets the macho swagger of the walk, the growl in the voice, just right.)

But Spielberg insists his film is no nostalgia piece looking backward to the days when US journalism was in its pomp. "I think there's a higher standard of journalism today than there even was then," he says. For that he credits today's competitive landscape, with the Post and the New York Times jostling daily for exclusives on the Trump White House. Back in 1971, that duel was, the director says, "a one-way street". Bradlee was furious that the New York Times had beaten him to the Pentagon Papers, publishing them

first. But to the Times, the Post was a provincial, local paper – barely a rival at all.

These days, says Spielberg, the old obstacles he details so painstakingly in his film – the need to have enough coins in your pocket to call a source from a payphone or the rigmarole of booking two seats on a plane to accommodate boxes filled with secret papers – have gone. But the inky hassles of what he calls the "analogue era of hard copy" have been replaced by new challenges, chiefly the sheer number of breaking stories and the speed of the news cycle, "which is less than 24 hours. Sometimes it's 24 minutes. The intensity is tenfold what it used to be."

If The Post feels timely, it is not solely because Americans are witnessing anew a pitched battle of president v press. The central human story of the film is the transformation of Graham, the Post's owner – who had taken the helm of the paper only after her husband's suicide – from a hesitant, self-doubting Washington society hostess, into a decisive, steely woman who refuses to be pushed around.



Accordingly, Spielberg repeatedly shows us Graham/Streep as the only woman in a room full of besuited men, interrupted by men, talked over and down to by men, even those supposedly junior to her. We watch as she develops the strength finally to turn around and say: "Enough."

When, in February 2017, Spielberg picked up The Post's script, originally written by 31-year-old Liz Hannah, he can't have known how resonant it would become.

"I didn't know because the sexual assault tsunami hadn't happened yet. Of course it had been happening for decades and decades, but this particular 8.2 earthquake had not yet occurred."

Was he aware of what certain men were doing in his industry?

"Certainly aware of the existence probably all the way back to William Shakespeare's time of the casting couch, and the prevalence of sexual abuse and sexual intimidation in the old Hollywood of the 1920s, 30s and 40s."

But he has been a player in Hollywood for nearly 50 years. Surely he must have seen something?

"There was some inappropriate behaviour years and years ago inside my own company, which we dealt with and dismissed the person involved in that. But I've always had small companies with no more than 70 employees, and my companies have always been run by women. I find when companies are run by women, there's less of a chance for men to get away with that kind of behaviour."

And what about Harvey Weinstein himself? Surely that was not a surprise?

"I knew that he was a bully, and I knew that he was a very intimidating competitor. But I learned for the first time about his sexual proclivities when I read the [New Yorker] story by Ronan Farrow."

There is one scene in The Post that Spielberg tells me he improvised on the day. Graham is leaving the supreme court after the fateful ruling in the newspaper's favour. A huge crowd of anti-Nixon protesters has



gathered and, as she goes down the stairs, several young women spontaneously form a kind of guard of honour, lining her route. It rams home the point that Graham should be seen as a feminist role model, blazing a trail for the next generation.

Some have found that scene a little over-egged, as if Spielberg couldn't help but lay on an extra coating of sentimentality. It is a familiar accusation against the director, one that has dogged him for decades. But these days he leans into it. He owns it. That becomes clear when I ask him why he thinks the Spielberg biography by film critic Molly Haskell was published in Yale University Press's Jewish Lives series. Has his been a Jewish life? Does his work have a Jewish sensibility?

"Well, Jews by and large have a sentimental quality. We also love high drama. I think both of those things are evident in most of my work."

There's another way of looking at this question of sentimentality. Somehow Spielberg manages to peer quite hard into the dark and nevertheless find a point of light. It is wrong to think he shies away from the darkness: his subjects have included the Holocaust, slavery and domestic violence. (In 1994, he founded the Shoah Foundation, which is committed to recording on video the testimonies of survivors of the Nazi Holocaust, as well as of genocides in Rwanda, Cambodia and elsewhere.) But he also ensures that audiences leave every Spielberg film with their spirits lifted. What is that about?

He smiles. *"Well, look. To be Jewish, you have to be optimistic, because if you're not we would have perished in the desert. We'd never have reached the end of that 40-year hike. We would all have perished without optimism."*

Spielberg has plenty of it, planning for the release of sci-fi blockbuster Ready Player One, the film he interrupted to make The Post, and scanning scripts for the countless other movies he wants to make after that. Correction: not necessarily movies.



"I'd like to do a 10-hour miniseries very much," he says when we talk about the current surge in top-quality television. He has been looking, *"but I haven't found one yet"*. With excitement, he volunteers the titles of his current three favourite shows: The Crown, The Handmaid's Tale and Big Little Lies. I suggest that The Crown is not unlike The Post: the story of a woman thrust into a powerful role she never expected. Another smile: *"I see some of the echo between Her Majesty and Her Majesty of The Washington Post."*

We talk about the nerdy, "nerdy" boy Spielberg was as a child; the way he was bullied, singled out for particular abuse as one of the few Jewish kids in his Arizona suburb; about the 8mm movie camera he discovered aged 12 or 13, which became *"the antidote to being bullied"*. But, before long, we are talking once more about his country.

He is excited about the prospect of an Oprah Winfrey run for the presidency. He thinks she would be *"absolutely brilliant"*. Indeed, he refuses to sink into the bleak despair of so many of his fellow Hollywood liberals.

"Our country has gone through all kinds of crises, and we've always bounced back from them. We are going to bounce back from this, no doubt. This is something we will look back on, we will make movies about. We'll tell these stories. These will be lessons to our children of what not to do and how not to comport oneself. But we will absolutely bounce back and we will recover. All the damage being done today is reversible."

He doesn't fear for the republic?

"At this moment in my life right now, with all my experience behind me, no, I do not fear for the republic."

Our time is up, we shake hands – but not before he has checked to make sure my machine has recorded our conversation (*"I've got your back"*) – and we say goodbye. And it takes me a while to realise that with that last, hopeful glimpse of life after Trump, he has done it again. Even now, in a 45-minute interview to promote his new film, Steven Spielberg has supplied a Spielberg ending.

Jonathan Freedland