



Spielberg's Filmmaking Style and Techniques

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Abstract. Spielberg has managed the nearly unachievable position of one of the most successful directors by ensuring that his films are iconic, which means that any person will see that every possible element of his film is usually very well thought out and implemented excellently. Even the production designs in his films have a unique role, whereby he uses a prop or set piece in not only introducing scenes, but also in contextualizing them to the audience accordingly. These elements make his work unique, as indicated in how many of his films are iconic and have made him one of the most renowned, successful and influential directors in the world. The director also uses performance blocking to move actors in the scene so that his film has kinetic energy, and communicates sub-textually to the audience. Multiple compositions in shots are also used generously in Spielberg films as a means of introducing elements like emotion, attracting attention, and keeping the overall film entertaining enough. By applying these elements Spielberg manages to keep his audience engaged so that they do not miss the point he is attempting to make in the narrative of his various films. Camera movement is another element in which Spielberg takes a unique approach, whereby he understands the importance of moving the camera in all directions at all speeds at the same time as a means of enhancing the cinematic value of the film. While new and upcoming directors need not copy Spielberg's style because he has established himself as the expert in this respect, they could greatly benefit from studying his approach to filmmaking.

Keywords: Scene · production · style · technique · blocking · subtext

1 Introduction

Steven Spielberg is one of the most important and successful directors in modern-day Hollywood, whereby the success of his films has made him the most commercially successful director ever. He has won a wide range of awards and honours for his work and is generally considered one of the most influential people in the world due to his impact on the film industry and other aspects of modern-day society. His most successful films include the Indiana Jones film series, *The Colour Purple*, *Empire of the Sun*, *Jaws*, *E. T. The Extra-Terrestrial*, *Jurassic park*, *Schindler's List*, *Lincoln*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *The Sugarland Express* among many others [1]. Due to his characteristics as an artist and as a director, Spielberg has been able to redefine whole genres due to his creative approach to working on various films. Understanding the work of Spielberg can be instrumental in driving filmmaking in the future, especially as the world of filmmaking

becomes more dependent on CGI rather than practical effects [2]. As he was able to be highly successful with minimal to no use of CGI in films like *Jaws* when the technology was not yet advanced enough to be used in detail, his solutions can be a lesson to aspiring modern-day directors. Spielberg has cinematographic techniques and filmmaking styles that are only characteristic of him, such that his works stand out and remain film classics long after they were first released [3]. In this assessment, the objective is to examine the elements of Spielberg's works that make him one of the most interesting and the most commercially successful directors in history.

2 Analysis

Spielberg does not just start his films, whereby he prefers to use a production design like a prop or piece on the set that serves to put the audience in the context of the film instead of just throwing them into it. In all his best films, he starts the film itself by presenting the audience with production design elements so that they can appreciate the visual elements of the setting before they can dive into the narrative [4]. By so doing, the audience receives a visual reset so that they can know that a new set is starting, which makes his films episodic and easy to follow for the audience. In addition to setting the scene, the opening shot of the scene can also be used as a means of contextualizing the whole narrative, particularly if this element is combined with the scene that came before the element. At the start of *Jurassic Park*, he introduces the scene by presenting all the characters and the setting in which they are interacting so that the audience can know the role of the scene and the people they are about to meet [5]. Presenting the audience only with the setting without introducing dialogue or narrative, confusion is avoided, and the film becomes more enjoyable because people can follow. With his understanding of the importance of contextualizing and setting the stage, it is evident that Spielberg is unmatched in his talents as a storyteller. In his understanding of his audience, Spielberg does not focus on the spectacle, but on how the audience perceive and consume his films, which is the reason they are favourites among audiences.

In addition to avoiding the issue of disorienting the audience by presenting too much information, Spielberg follows each of the characters on the screen so that the audience can know who is the most important character that needs to be followed. By applying blocking of subtext and kinetic build-up, Spielberg can move his actors in a scene so that the audience gains a clearer understanding of the film beyond what is being said. In this case, if the stakes or mood in the scene are changing, then Spielberg will change the position of the actors in the scene so that the audience can understand the subtext even more [6]. These visual choices set Spielberg apart from other directors as he can communicate emotional information that other directors typically depend on music and sound to reproduce. In *Lincoln*, starting a scene with a letter but working on how the scene is blocked communicates the relationship between the characters of Stephen who was disrespectful, and Grant who was polite [7]. In addition, Spielberg ensured that he included more men on the Union side as a means of telling the audience in the subtext that the Confederate side was not doing well in the war. In this film, he knew that just telling the audience that the North had more people and was winning the war was not enough, as many people miss the words in a film. As such, he opted for the visual element that

greatly enhanced the extent to which the audience enjoyed his film and learned what he wanted them to learn about the protagonist. While films are inherently visual, Spielberg is able to introduce unique visual elements in his work such that the story is told using subtext that the audience does not perceive immediately.

While it is easier to build single shots, great directors like Spielberg take the more complex approach in which a shot has multiple compositions, whereby a single shot tends to have many shots that alternate across different compositions. By adjusting a single element like the size of the shot, Spielberg is able to direct the attention of the audience, evoke an emotional reaction in the audience, and keep the shot interesting even if it is long. Varying shots this way enables Spielberg to achieve the objective of getting the audience to suspend their disbelief so that they can focus and enjoy the film without drifting [8]. Spielberg can achieve excellent fluidity in this cinematographic technique that requires lots of rehearsals and practice, as well as an excellent film crew. The complexity of such kind of shots and their effectiveness is evident in Munich, whereby he used the compound shot as part of the film's first assassination, which he wanted the audience to pay more attention because it was an important plot driving scene in the film [9]. In this shot, the black September member is followed by Avner, after which the former is killed in an elevator lobby in a series of shots that employs a combination of camera movement and zoom shots to make the compound shot. The compound shot and the complexity of the process of making it made an impact on the audience even if they know nothing about cinematography. Getting people to appreciate the technical elements of a work without them knowing the actual details of the work is evidence of talent and expertise like the ones possessed by Spielberg.

In addition to using compound shots that combine approaches like medium close, medium shot, full shot, and long shot without cutting, Spielberg also uses the XYZ space movement of the camera in order to improve the perception of movement in the film. While many directors will crane a camera up or down, dolly it in, or track laterally, Spielberg has a way of ensuring that his cameras do all these movements at the same time [10]. Combining this movement with background elements, production design, and performance blocking, Spielberg is able to improve the quality of his cinematic adventure films immensely. In addition to moving his camera in the XYZ space, he also employs a change in speed and complex equipment, as indicated in his refusal to use a techno-crane in Schindler's list as he wanted the audience to experience the tragic events from the inside [11]. The scenes with concentration camps and ghettos required the audience to see them slowly and in an immersive manner to avoid disorienting the audience or cheapening their impact on the narrative. Instead of the consequent tone-deaf outcome that could result from fast camera movement, taking the time to compose the scenes made Spielberg look thoughtful to his audience. His use of space was not just for his convenience or the convenience of the characters in his narrative but was done for the benefit of his audience who appreciate a director who points out on what they need to focus their attention. The additional attention paid by Spielberg pays off in the form of the appreciation that the audience gives his work, even if many have no idea why they think his films are fascinating and different from the works of others.

Spielberg's movement of the camera extends beyond the use of space, to using the motivations of the characters as a means of informing how he moves his camera to capture

the action. The motivated movement of the camera means that the camera is not separate from the action, but is part of the action so much that it drives the elements of the action to which the audience pays attention. For instance, if a character was picking something from the ground, the director could tilt the direction of the camera downwards in order to focus the audience on this specific part of the action [12]. In addition, if there is a side character who attracts the attention of the main character, instead of ignoring the side character, Spielberg may pan the camera to show this character to the audience. Another related technique is how he can use eye trace as a means of directing what the viewer focuses on the screen instead of merely viewing the whole film as a single item [13]. Spielberg has perfected the art of using colour, light, and movement in order to move the attention of the audience so that important elements of the film are not missed as he needs to tell his story. Similarly, he has a practice in which all his characters tend to enter and leave the frame, which is important because it not only punctuates his scenes but keeps the narrative going in an episodic manner. The conventions he has established for his films give them character and inform the audience on what they should expect when watching his work, as they know any decision he makes has some relevance. While the conventions may have been challenging even for the audience when they first appeared, they have become such an integral part of the experience of watching a Spielberg film that the works would look strange without them.

3 Discussion

Spielberg has an approach to filmmaking that seems to be unique only to him that many directors would not attempt, as his techniques are usually the result of his own creativity and decades of filmmaking in which he perfected his art. Most of his techniques primarily involve getting the audience to pay attention to the characters and the story he is trying to tell, whereby the tools used seem directly targeted to the viewer. While the eventual outcome of the filmmaking techniques and cinematography used by Spielberg is that the film ends up looking good, his focus is on the artistic element first. He wants the audience to appreciate the story he is trying to tell and is willing to take risks in order to do so in the most effective way possible regardless of existing conventions [14]. For instance, the typical practice is to move the camera on a single axis using existing equipment, but Spielberg would rather do the more complicated approach because it gives his work something that the works of others may lack. It makes sense that he would do this, as he always has his audience in mind when making a film, and his work involves more than enough planning and practice to perfect his shots. Without the perfection of shots, he would not be able to create iconic works that are enjoyed by audiences decades after they were first made. His camerawork makes these works so unique that they are appreciated multiple times, as there is always something new to learn about Spielberg's filmmaking upon a rewatch of his work. The rewatch value of work contributes to not only its current earnings but also the likelihood that future works will be considered interesting by viewers, thus establishing the position of a director in the industry and history.

Based on how Spielberg incorporates similar elements across multiple films, an important element of being a successful world-renowned filmmaker is consistency in

how the work is designed and implemented. The work has to have a signature with which people can identify it, including elements that would otherwise be impossible to replicate for the unpractised and inexperienced director. Consistency is the reason most of the aspects of his style and techniques are included in this project, as they tend to appear consistently in Spielberg films, even if they include a few variations. For instance, Spielberg will always attempt to drive the gaze of the audience to the aspect of the scene he thinks to be most important by using colour, movement, and other elements. Additionally, he will always introduce a scene with a setting or character that is most important to the scene, which serves as a tool for introducing and contextualizing the scene before the audience actually gets to see the scene. The lesson from Spielberg is that any up-and-coming director can be successful, but only if he or she is willing to break conventions and introduce a personal touch to one's work [15]. The personal touch element primarily includes getting the audience to understand more about the work than is said by the characters by adjusting various elements of the work like the speed or movement. The director would work with the frame in order to communicate more to the audience than is explicitly presented, which greatly improves the rewatch value of the film. For any director that wants to be as successful as Spielberg, paying attention to the film creation process itself is an important approach as it gives an element of excellence that is unmatched.

4 Conclusion

There is a reason Spielberg is one of the greatest directors ever, especially considering how his films have managed to earn more than the earnings of any other director in Hollywood history. Spielberg has managed this nigh unreachable feat by ensuring that his films are iconic, which means that any person will see that every possible element of his film is usually very well thought out and implemented in an unmatched way. Even the production designs in his films have a unique role, whereby he uses a prop or set piece in not only introducing scenes, but also in contextualizing them to the audience accordingly. The director also uses performance blocking to move actors in the scene so that his film has kinetic energy, and communicates sub-textually to the audience. Multiple compositions in shots are also used generously in Spielberg films as a means of introducing elements like emotion, attracting attention, and keeping the overall film entertaining enough. Camera movement is another element in which Spielberg takes a unique approach, whereby he understands the importance of moving the camera in all directions at all speeds at the same time as a means of enhancing the cinematic value of the film. In order to be able to use the camera movement to the effect that Spielberg does, it is important to understand how and why the movement is being used instead of merely using it for its sake. Camera movement is an important part of filmmaking for Spielberg, as it is used to attract attention to specific actions, movements, and items so that the audience can follow his work even more actively. Spielberg does not seem to believe in leaving anything to chance, as indicated in how all his filmmaking approaches are deliberate instead of being used because they are the latest available filmmaking techniques.

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