



## E.T. and Me

### Saturday, June 4, 2016

*Of all the films I covered for the [Spielberg Film Society](#) newsletter, I was curious to discover that I never wrote a cogent review of one of the films that meant the most to me. And so, I decided to rectify that here. This one's for you, Judy and Don.*

*E.T. and Me*

By Joe Fordham (June 2016)

Every year, around Halloween, there's a movie that I like to take down off the shelf and revisit, even though it's not necessarily a Halloween or a horror film. That movie is *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*.

*E.T.* was a mystery to me when I first saw it at the Empire Leicester Square in London, September 9, 1982. By that time, the film had become a global sensation. The film had



reportedly received a phenomenal standing ovation in reaction to its screening, out of competition, at the Cannes Film Festival May 26, and then the June 11 opening, in 1,100 theatres across the U.S., ignited a phenomenon that surprised everyone, the filmmakers included. *E.T.* was everywhere – not only news media, and advertising, but also in unauthorized merchandizing, knock-offs and bootlegs, which proliferated across the Atlantic Ocean. This was the heyday of pirate video, and just about anyone could get hold of a copy ‘from a bloke

at the pub.’ But I averted my eyes. After *Jaws*, *Close Encounters* and *Raiders* I was already a pretty hardcore Spielberg fan, and I’d heard that Spielberg kept the alien in *E.T.* shrouded in mystery for the early part of the film, so I was not going to let some trashy tabloid or a blurry amateur pirate video spoil that for me.

That’s all backstory to explain how amped I was for this film. It may be hard for a young filmgoer today to imagine what it’s like to see a film where none of the secrets have been teased, critiqued and spoofed in images on your phone. But that is how we rolled in 1982, and it was a memorable experience. It took a lot of imaginative people to put *E.T.* up on screen, and when the little squashy guy came waddling out of Elliott Taylor’s laundry shed, shrouded in mist and backlit by moonlight, it was a heart-stopping moment for me. I’d seen every Ray Harryhausen monster movie and alien invasion film I could get my paws on, but I could tell this was different. This was real. And it spoke to me.



Another Ray, author Ray Bradbury, described *E.T.* as ‘a warm embrace’ – I can’t find that review now, but I always found that apt, and I know he was a fan, as he had been a big proponent for Spielberg’s earlier extra-terrestrial film (Bradbury wrote a glowing introduction to Ballantine Books’ *Close Encounters: A Document of the Film* where he called Spielberg’s UFO epic ‘a religious film’). I had been worried after seeing the first teaser trailer for *E.T.* that Spielberg was revisiting old ground with spaceships and roiling



clouds over suburbia, and that this movie would be a rehash of his 1977 UFO *magnum opus*; but I was wrong. There was mystery and suspense in *E.T.*, especially in the early part of



the film, but the beauty of the film was how that melted away and blossomed into something else entirely. It was about loneliness and longing, and a broken family. It was a love story. The warm embrace snuck

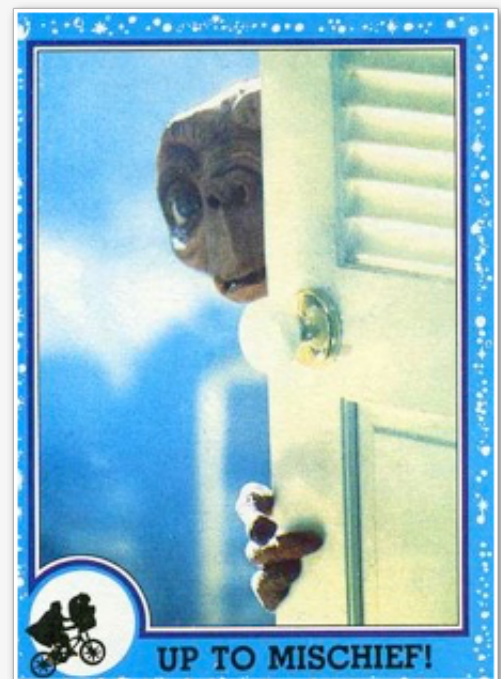
up on you the way good and lasting relationships tend to do.

At the center of the story, Henry Thomas as young Elliott Taylor was a revelation. Another critic whose name escapes me now compared the performances of the children in *E.T.* to J.D. Salinger's writing. These were not Hollywood brats. These were nasty little punks making poor decisions, they were innocent and complicated because they did not understand the world. When Elliott fakes his illness so he can stay at home with his new 'imaginary' friend, I was exactly like that. And that understanding of seeing the film through Elliott's eyes was electrifying and funny.

Humor is a vital part of the film. There is intelligence at work, which any adult can see and appreciate in the way Spielberg directs the single-parent mother, lovely willowy Dee Wallace as Elliott's mom, Mary. She is a gentle, hard-working soul somehow managing to keep it all together, wrangling three children while her absentee husband is 'in Mexico with Sally,' as her youngest son cruelly reminds her at the dinner table. It's a charming part of the film that remains truthful and undated, three decades later. And it's wonderfully astute.

When E.T. finally meets Mary, peering out at her through the eyeholes of a bed sheet of his 'cowboy ghost' Halloween costume, he growls a little salaciously – it's never clear if E.T. is boy, girl, or vegetable – but we know he appreciates this taller being. We know that from the tender scene, earlier in the film, when E.T. is still a secret living in Elliott's closet, and boy and alien peer out through the slats of the closet door to watch Elliott's mom reading *Peter Pan* to his dumpling little sister Gertie (Drew Barrymore). The scene works on multiple levels – foreshadowing E.T.'s later fate ('clap your hands if you want him to live...'), strengthening the bond between Elliott and E.T., and gently letting audiences know E.T. is wise and appreciates wisdom.

The magic of *E.T.* is in its relationships. The boy and alien are connected through a bit of science fiction that Spielberg cooked up with his screenwriter, Melissa Mathison – at first, it's a bit clumsy and confusing when the story cuts back and forth between Elliott at school and E.T. getting trashed on Coors. But it escalates into delirious humor (especially as John Williams gets in on the act, scoring a rhapsody of frogs with a piece of Victor Young's music from *The Quiet Man*) and it establishes the bond between the characters. The





connection is physical and emotional. It's not telepathic, as Elliott's elder brother (Robert MacNaughton) tries to explain to the man from NASA (Peter Coyote). Elliott *feels* E.T.'s feelings -- and so do we, thanks to the empathy that Spielberg builds between this scruffy boy and the ugly alien botanist.



There are so many moments of unbridled joy and ecstatic visual poetry in the film – Spielberg's now-trademark moon and bicycle

perhaps being the most indelible – it's almost unbearable when the third act darkens and Spielberg breaks our hearts and then restores them again. The final act of *E.T.* is a masterpiece of operatic filmmaking.

As key contributor to that opera, composer John Williams weaves a grand visual rhapsody with a perfectly orchestrated accompaniment that zings and takes wing, soars you up high and then gently bumps you down for a sweetly sentimental goodbye. The final images of E.T.'s leave-taking are beautiful in their simplicity, especially the alien's benediction 'ouch' and then – as Richard Jameson pointed out back in his 1982 *Film Comment* review – the final image of E.T. is incredibly telling, as the spaceship airlock closes like a camera lens iris around E.T.'s glowing heart... \*sniffle\*

I managed to wax rhapsodic about much of this about a year ago when a friend of *Cinefex* invited me to speak about *E.T.* on his pretty wonderful [Optical Podcast](#). But it's



good to get this down in writing because it was just too much for me to express very easily when the film was in theatrical release. Back then, my overriding impression was how such a little film could be so powerful. It was a rare combination of ingredients, lightning in a bottle. Today, I remain impressed that the man who made it refused to make a sequel. I'm guessing his fee could feasibly have furnished several more of his children with college educations. But, bravo, he did not. And the film remains a perfect cinematic gem.

I'll look forward to the next time Halloween rolls around.

*I'll be right here....*



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