

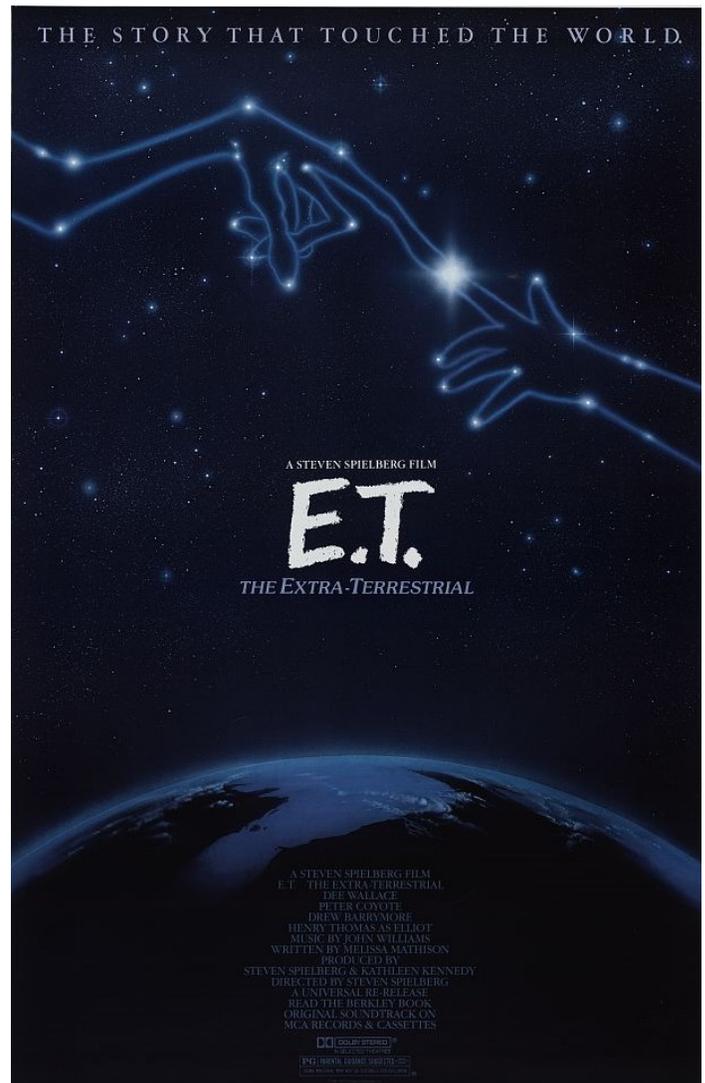
E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial

By David Gibson

“E.T. The Extra Terrestrial” may be one of the most personal blockbusters ever made. Inspired in part by director Steven Spielberg’s suburban upbringing and his parents’ divorce, the film tells the story of a suburban boy named Elliot, himself a child of divorced parents, who becomes the caretaker of a wise and gentle alien creature, stranded on Earth and desperate to find a way back to its home planet. It is the story of two lost souls, both longing for the comfort and security that only a true home and family can provide, who ultimately rescue each other through the power of love and friendship.

With its small cast and domestic setting, “E.T. The Extra Terrestrial” practically seems like an independent feature, particularly in comparison to Steven Spielberg’s two previous films, the big budgeted, under-performing “1941” and the serial-inspired, smash-hit action adventure “Raiders of the Lost Ark,” a co-production with Spielberg’s fellow blockbuster-producing wunderkind, George Lucas. Even Spielberg’s “Close Encounters of the Third Kind,” which deals with similar themes related to mankind’s encounter with a peaceful alien intelligence, is a story told on a global scale. “E.T. The Extra Terrestrial” never leaves the confines of the suburban neighborhood in which it is set, centering much of the action in Elliot’s cluttered bedroom. Spielberg’s creative choice to position the camera from the point of view of the children in the film only adds to the intimate atmosphere. Even the film’s most sweeping cinematic moments, particularly Elliot and E.T.’s flight through the air on Elliot’s bicycle, which would go on to become one of the most iconic film sequences of the last forty years, possess a sense of innocent wonder that helps to distinguish the film from many of its louder and brasher contemporaries.

Though it is a timeless story, “E.T. The Extra Terrestrial” is also very much a product of its time, perfectly capturing the atmosphere of a suburban home and neighborhood in the early 1980s. From Elliot’s “Star Wars” figures to Gertie’s Speak & Spell, the snippet of an Elvis Costello song sung by older brother Michael, to the BMX bikes which allow the children to elude E.T.’s government captors, the film is filled with cultural signifiers of the time. Even the Reese’s Pieces which Elliot employs to lure E.T. into the house seem very much part and parcel with the era in which the film is set. As a child of the 1980s, and someone who spent hours in my own suburban backyard swinging a stick as though it were a lightsaber while



Original release poster. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Collection.

my older brother endlessly rode his BMX bike in circles around our cul de sac, “E.T. The Extra Terrestrial” represented one of the first times that I recognized aspects of my own life in a cinematic story, which is likely why it still resonates so deeply with me as an adult.

Another aspect which distinguishes “E.T. The Extra Terrestrial” from other alien “invasion” films dating back to the 1950s is the simple fact that the story’s alien being actually does “come in peace,” a trait the film shares with Spielberg’s earlier feature, “Close Encounters of the Third Kind.” Unlike the Cold War-inspired tales of alien conquest which dominated much of the science fiction landscape in decades hence, it was Spielberg’s desire to bring the sense of wonder he felt while gazing at the stars as a child to the big screen. E.T. is portrayed as an intergalactic botanist, a vegetarian whose very touch can heal the wounded and bring dying plants back to life. The United States government agents are ostensibly the

villains of the piece. Their cold detachment and treatment of E.T. as a specimen to be studied stands in stark contrast to Elliot's own psychic link and emotional attachment to the creature. Spielberg has said that the story was partially inspired by federal cuts to the space program at the time during which the film was made, and it is a film very clearly designed to inspire awe in the universe that surrounds us. Decades later, Spielberg would go on to produce a more standard alien invasion scenario with his 2005 adaptation of "War of the Worlds," a film greatly inspired by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, but it is "E.T. The Extra Terrestrial" that seems to best represent the director's view of our place in the universe and the curiosity which has driven the human race to explore worlds beyond our own solar system.

The story of "E.T. The Extra Terrestrial" is not entirely unique, reminiscent as it is of countless Disney or Children's Film Foundation films that precede it. Even screenwriter Melissa Mathison had covered similar territory with her adaptation three years earlier of Walter Farley's "The Black Stallion," a film which also explores the bond between a boy and a creature who must rely on one another for friendship and survival. It is Spielberg's direction, the intimate lighting and photography, and the design of the creature itself that truly distinguishes "E.T. The Extra Terrestrial" from the standard Saturday morning fare.

Critical response to "E.T. The Extra Terrestrial" was incredibly favorable and the film would go on to earn the highest box office ratings of the 1980s, spawning both countless imitations and a wide array of merchandise, including an ill-fated Atari video game, the failure of which nearly bankrupted the company. Looking back, however, it becomes clear that the story of "E.T. The Extra Terrestrial" is far too intimate to have inspired a thrilling video game adaptation. E.T. is simply a lost child, attempting to make it back home, a task that can only be accomplished through the love and friendship earned from Elliot and his family. "E.T. The Extra Terrestrial" is a film that will long live in the hearts of those who see it, a story which serves as a reminder that it's a small universe after all.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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