

E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial Film Summary

E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial by Steven Spielberg

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Context

If you were to rank the most influential directors in Hollywood today, Steven Spielberg would certainly be in the top five. In terms of money, only George Lucas has amassed a larger fortune from his work in films. However, if you had this same discussion in the early 1980's, Spielberg would have been hard pressed to have made the top 50.

During the mid 1970's Spielberg had a solid string of box office hits that included such films as, *The Sugarland Express*, *Jaws*, and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. But Spielberg's reputation was badly damaged in the late 70's when he decided to follow up his mega hits with a film called *1941*, a comedy with an all star cast that became a pseudonym for box office failure. Production costs for *1941* soared during filming and the project was plagued with constant delays which resulted in the film being well over budget when it was released. During its U.S. release, *1941* didn't sell enough tickets to even cover production costs and the film became a professional failure for Spielberg that almost derailed his career. For nearly two years after the release of *1941*, offers to direct dried up and Spielberg was considered a "has been." His success in the 1970's was considered a fluke. If it hadn't been for Spielberg's friend George Lucas tapping him to direct *Raiders of the Lost Ark* in 1981, Spielberg's career could have ended. Even with this show of confidence from Lucas, Spielberg was still considered damaged goods and *1941* was regarded as such a failure that when the advance teaser trailer for *Raiders of the Lost Ark* was made, it listed all of Steven Spielberg's previous films except *1941*.

The box office success of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and Spielberg's efforts to bring the production in under budget and on time gave him the clout he needed to get financial backing for his next project about a child's encounter with an extra-terrestrial. *Raiders of the Lost Ark* helped to reestablish Spielberg's reputation but it would be a "kids" film about a little alien wanting to go home that would build the movie making empire that we associate with Steven Spielberg today. The film that would become *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* began as a script called "A Boy's Life" and was written on location of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* during breaks in its filming. Spielberg dictated the story to Melissa Mathison a screenwriter who was hanging around the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* set so she could be with her husband at the time, Harrison Ford.

Initially Spielberg and Mathison were developing their project for Columbia Pictures, but at the same time another script about an alien visitation were being developed in house. The studio did not want to make both films, so the head of the studio had to choose which film to make; he decided to let *E.T.* go and make a film called *Starman*. When *Starman* was released, it barely broke even for Columbia; but *E.T.* went on to set box office records for Universal Studios.

In an interview, Steven Spielberg once confessed that "I always like to think of the audience when I am directing. Because I am the audience." Spielberg knew that the key to selling *E.T.* to the audience would be casting the right actor in the key role of Elliott, the young boy who befriends the alien. Spielberg only rarely held open auditions,



preferring cast actors based on their performance in other roles. *E.T.* was no exception and Spielberg found his Elliott in a made for TV movie called *The Steeler and the Pittsburgh Kid*. A young actor named Henry Thomas was a standout in the role of the kid and Spielberg wasted no time in casting him in the role of Elliott.

With the role of Elliott cast, Spielberg started filling the rest of the roles. For the role of Elliott's mom Spielberg chose an actress best known for her work in horror films, Dee Wallace. She had been outstanding in *The Hills Have Eyes*, *The Howling*, and *Child Bride of Short Creek*. For the role of Gertie, Elliott's little sister, Spielberg cast Drew Barrymore, who was coming off of the standout role of William Hurt's daughter in *Altered States*. To round out Elliott's family, Spielberg cast Robert MacNaughton, a well known TV child actor, to play the big brother. When it came to casting the role of E.T. and Elliott's nemesis, a mysterious scientist referred to only as "Key Man," Spielberg tapped Peter Coyote, an actor he remembered from the tryouts for the role of Indiana Jones. With his principle actors cast, Spielberg began filming *E.T.* on September 8th, 1981 and completed the entire project in less than 120 days.

When Spielberg began filming *E.T.* in September 1981, he was simultaneously editing the final cut of *Poltergeist*, his second film scheduled for release in 1982. The idea for *Poltergeist* was actually spawned during the writing of the script for *E.T.* when Spielberg and Melissa Mathison abandoned one of the original story plotlines. The original concept used in early drafts of *E.T.* was a much darker movie in which a family was terrorized in their house by aliens. When Spielberg decided to go with a more benevolent alien, the family-in-jeopardy concept was recycled as *Poltergeist*. In interviews after the release of both films, Spielberg was fond of saying that *E.T.* represented suburban dreams, and *Poltergeist* represented suburban nightmares.

When *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* premiered on June 13th, 1982, it brought in enough profits in its first weekend to pay for the production costs alone. *ET* was a runaway hit that dominated the summer movie season. When Oscar night in 1983 arrived, Spielberg's film had set box office records around the world and received nine Oscar nominations. *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* received Oscar nominations for Best Picture; Best Director; Best Writing: Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen; Best Film Editing; Best Cinematography; Best Music: Original Score; Best Sound; Best Effects: Visual Effects; and Best Effects: Sound Effects Editing. Unfortunately, for Spielberg on Oscar night, the little extra-terrestrial was up against *Gandhi*. The Richard Attenborough film about the life and times of Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian political leader who managed to free his country from British rule, beat out *E.T.* in the five categories in which they went head to head for an Oscar. *E.T.* did end up winning four Oscars: Best Effects: Sound Effects Editing; Best Effects: Visual Effects; Best Music: Original Score, and Best Sound.

The success of *E.T.* allowed Spielberg to reestablish himself as a major force in the Hollywood film industry and gave him the financial freedom to build the media empire he oversees today. There is one interesting side note about *E.T.*, the film that started it all for Spielberg is also the source for one of his few criticisms.



After *E.T.*'s release and unexpected mega success, Spielberg made it clear that he was not interested in doing a sequel even though he and Melissa Mathison had worked on ideas for a follow up film. However, in 2002 Spielberg agreed to release a 20th anniversary version of the film to theaters. Spielberg used the opportunity of the re-release to use some of the technical advancements in digital technology to enhance some of the scenes he had not been happy with when the film was originally released in 1982. One of the changes that Spielberg made resulted in some criticism. Spielberg reportedly spent \$100,000 to digitally remove all the guns carried by the government agents who are chasing E.T. and the children in the famous bike scene.

In earlier interviews he stated that he had regretted using the scene and said he would remove it if he ever re-issued the film. Many fans of the film accused Spielberg of bowing to the pressures of political correctness in removing the guns from a very realistic scene. The removal of the weapons did result in one anomaly in the scene, the government agents and police who had their hand guns replaced by walkie-talkies are shown with extended trigger fingers for no apparent reason. Whether it is the original version or the 20th anniversary special issue there is no denying the impact that *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* had on fans around the world.

Summary and Analysis

The Visitation/Left Behind

E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial opens with a shot of some type of vehicle sitting in the deep woods and something is heard moving around in the woods. As the scene expands, the audience sees red lights moving around what appears to be a spacecraft. The source of the red lights are soon revealed to the audience when a group from the spacecraft walks into the light coming from the spacecraft and the silhouettes show the outline of very unearthly short creatures. One of the aliens is shown moving farther from the spacecraft than the others. Topping a small rise, the alien sees that there is a large city located just beyond the woods.

Suddenly a group of trucks begin to stream into the area and the aliens are shown trying to run back to the spacecraft. At this point, Spielberg introduces E.T.'s and later Elliott's main nemesis "Key Man." Spielberg filmed the entire first part of *E.T.* from the angle of a child. No adults are shown above the waist. To distinguish the character of "Key Man" from the other adult torsos, Spielberg clips a large set of keys to the character's belt giving him the semblance of someone with authority. "Key Man's" appearance with the trucks has cut off one of the aliens from the spacecraft and he is forced to hide instead of joining the others running back to the spacecraft. When the other aliens reach the safety of the ship it is discovered that one is missing.

An alien who appears to be in charge, sends out a final recall signal from the red light that is in its chest. The recall signal reacts with the red light in the chest of the alien who is hiding from "Key Man." This results in the men discovering the alien and flushing it out of hiding. With "Key Man" and the others in hot pursuit the little alien makes a mad dash for the departing spacecraft but it unable to make it in time and is left behind by his fellow visitors. With "Key Man" and the other pursuers distracted by the departing spacecraft, the alien no longer needs to run and it is able to evade his pursuers by slipping out of the woods toward the lights of the city.

A Boy's Life/Something in the Shed

When we are introduced to Elliott, we learn that he lives in a typical but comfortable suburban home with his older brother, a younger sister and his mother. As the scene opens, Elliott's older brother and friends are playing a game and trying to ignore Elliott who wants to join in the fun. To get rid of him for a while his brother sends Elliott out to wait for the pizza man with the promise that he can join the game when he returns. As Elliott is bringing the pizza back in the house he hears noises coming from the shed beside his house. Thinking it is his dog, he goes to explore. When his dog doesn't answer his calls, Elliott throws a baseball into the shed to frighten what he assumes is a stray animal. To Elliott's surprise, the ball flies back out of the shed toward him. Frightened, Elliott runs into the house to get the others. When the others go out to the shed they decide that Elliott must have surprised a coyote. They refuse to believe his



story of the ball being thrown at him. After they leave, the audience sees the alien looking and reaching out of the shed.

Boy meets Alien/A New Friend

Elliott is awakened later that night by sounds coming from the shed. He ventures out to explore what has been haunting him from the shed. When he arrives at the shed he finds a trail leading from the shed to a cornfield that is behind his house. As he moves through the cornfield he encounters the alien. Elliott surprises the little alien who runs in fright along a path leading through Elliott's backyard and up into the hill towards the deep woods. The next morning, Elliott takes his bike and rides up into the hill and into the deep woods looking for signs of the visitor from last night.

Shortly after entering the woods, Elliott sees "Key Man" walking around the large clearing where the spaceship had landed. Not wanting to be seen, Elliott moves away from the clearing and out of the woods. Unknown to Elliott or "Key Man," the little alien has been watching both of them and judging them by their actions. That evening Elliott decides to sleep out in the backyard with the hope of encountering the strange visitor. Late in the night Elliott is awoken by noises from the shed again. This time he is prepared and tries to lure the creature out by leaving pieces of candy outside the shed. Slowly the alien is drawn out into the open by the lure of food. By leaving a trail of candy, Elliott leads E.T. into the house and up to his bedroom. Elliott soon learns that the creature is very intelligent and has an uncanny ability to mimic many of Elliott's actions and gestures.

Very quickly Elliott feels at ease with the little alien and decides to keep the creature in his room. Feeling safe, the creature very quickly slips into a deep sleep and Elliott soon drifts off to sleep. The film then cuts to a scene back in the deep woods where "Key Man" and a small army of men are searching the clearing where Elliott had seen him earlier in the day. Suddenly "Key Man" is called over by one of the searchers who have found evidence of Elliott's visit. They follow the trail left by Elliott which leads them to the top of a hill that overlooks the houses near the cornfield. The next morning Elliott is able to stay home from school by faking an illness. With his family out of the way, Elliott is free to get to know his visitor better.

Elliott's Alien/Home

After spending the day with the alien, Elliott decides he must tell his brother Michael about his discovery. When Michael returns home from school, Elliott calls him to his room to surprise him with the little alien. As he shows the alien to Michael, his little sister Gertie runs into the room and is so shocked by what she sees that she starts to scream. The children's mother soon arrives and the three youngsters are just barely able to hide the alien from her.

Once they are alone again they decide to keep the alien and hide his existence from their mother and any other grown ups. At this point the film switches to a scene showing



"Key Man" and the others taking photos from the same hill from where E.T. had first looked down upon the many lights of the city. Without a word the scene conveys to the audience that the hunt for the alien is still on and that they are coming closer to finding where he has fled. On that same evening that Elliott first showed his new friend to the other children the three of them are playing with E.T. in Elliott's room. They are trying to decide what he is and where he is from when they make a breakthrough and discover that the alien can make objects float around the room. It is clear that he is not from this world.

While they are working with the alien, Elliott hears noises coming from the cornfield behind his home and goes out to investigate. Although he doesn't see anything he hears men and machines moving around the field like they are searching for something or someone. The audience is shown a scene of E.T. alone. He is looking through a book when he notices a dead flower in Elliott's room. As he looks at the flower, it suddenly starts to grow and becomes a healthy robust plant.

The Psychic Link/E.T. Phone Home

The next day Elliott must go to school. The family leaves the house and E.T. is alone all day. As the family is leaving, Elliott's mom thinks she hears something in Elliott's room and goes to investigate. As she searches the room, the audience is treated to the famous scene of the mother opening a closet and being fooled into thinking nothing is there because E.T. has buried himself in a large pile of stuffed animals. Left alone, E.T. begins to explore Elliott's house. While looking for something to eat, E.T. finds a beer in the refrigerator and drinks it. The audience is then given its first hint that a psychic link exists between Elliott and the alien.

Elliott, who is sitting in class, begins to be affected by what E.T. is doing and seeing. As E.T. drinks the beer Elliott begins to act like he has been drinking. E.T. continues to drunkenly explore the house and discovers the TV and a toy that speaks. Suddenly Elliott begins to act out the thoughts of the alien. When E.T. begins to think about being saved, Elliott begins to set the frogs free that are being used in his lab class. When the alien sees two actors kissing on TV, Elliott kisses one of the girls in his class.

During his time alone, E.T. comes up with the idea of building a device that will allow him to talk with his spaceship and begins to collect objects from around the house. He just barely escapes being caught by Elliott's mother when she and Gertie arrive home. Not long after arriving home, Elliott's school calls to talk with his mother about him being drunk while at school. As she talks she continues to find beer cans around the house. Gertie is watching television while waiting on her mom and discovers that E.T. can repeat different words. By the time Elliott returns home, E.T. is talking in partial sentences and tells the children he must "call home." The children find that E.T. has been trying to build a radio device to help him contact his ship.

The film cuts to later that night when the audience is shown a plain van moving up and down the street. Inside the van, men are using high-tech listening equipment to eavesdrop on the conversations going on in the houses along the street. The van taps



into a conversation between Elliott and Michael as they talk about the alien and how Elliott has started to talk like they are the same person. Later that evening when Elliott cuts his finger, E.T. heals the wound just like he had the flowers last night. As Elliott watches E.T. building his "phone," the boys note that the alien is sounding and looking weaker. The audience sees that the van is parked just out of sight and is listening to the boys' conversation.

Halloween

The next day is Halloween and Elliott has devised a way to get the alien out of the house in order to try his "phone." They are going to dress the alien up in his sister's ghost costume and walk him out. There is a humorous scene when E.T. meets a child dressed as Yoda from *"Star Wars"* and believes it is one of his 'own kind.' They meet up with Elliott's sister who has brought him his bike. E.T. and Elliott take the bike in to the deep woods while his brother and sister go trick or treating to cover for Elliott. Their mother has given them till an hour after sundown to be home.

When the two run out of road, the audience is treated to the famous flying bike scene. Once in the woods, E.T. tries out his phone. Because the trip has taken such a long time Elliott has missed his curfew and his mother leaves their home looking for the children. When she leaves, a black car pulls up outside the home and "Key Man" and some others break into the house. They search the house for signs of the alien. Meanwhile, E.T.'s "phone" begins to work. Even though they had been there for hours the ship has come. Elliott begins to show signs of being ill and so does E.T. After being in the woods all night Elliott awakens to find the alien gone and wanders home very ill.

Looking for E.T./Quarantine/Losing E.T.

When Elliott finds out that the E.T. is not at the house, he sends Michael back to the deep woods to find the little lost alien. While riding his bike to the woods he feels like a car is following him. When he gets to the woods he finds E.T. looking very gray lying by a stream. He returns the alien to his house but realizes that E.T. needs help and shows his mother the alien. When she sees the alien lying with Elliott she panics. As she runs through the house trying to get out she is stopped at the front door by a man wearing an environmental suit. When they try to escape out the back door another man is waiting.

Soon men in environmental suits are coming into the house from all points. An army descends on the house sealing it in plastic and quarantining the family. Once the home is sealed off, "Key Man" makes his entrance into the house to confront E.T., Elliott, and his family. It is clear that the alien is dying and Elliott is mirroring his condition. Elliott tells "Key Man" that the "phone" is a device to call the spaceship and that the alien must go home or die. As Elliott talks to "Key Man," E.T. tells Elliott that his must stay and cuts the link that is connecting them. Once the link is cut E.T. begins to die but Elliott improves. By the next morning, despite the efforts of the doctors caring for him, E.T. dies.



Back to Life/The Escape/Good Bye Friend

As a gesture of concern "Key Man" asks Elliott if he would like to spend sometime alone with E.T. before they take him away. Elliott says he would. After everyone leaves he is saying his goodbyes when he sees a flower in the house spring back to life. Elliott opens the package they have the alien in and finds him awake and very excited that his call home had worked. Elliott fakes that he is upset. When he is lead away he gets Michael alone and tells him E.T. is alive. The two then quickly plan their escape. Stealing a van, the two boys drive through the army of workers with the van pulling a section of the plastic tube connecting it to the house. They have planned to meet up with Michael's friends at the local playground and once there the group of children aide E.T. to lose the government officials chasing them by leading them on a long cross country bike chase.

When it looks like they have been cut off by police officers, E.T. allows the bike to start flying and guides them to the clearing where his spaceship had first landed. Soon after the children arrive, E.T.'s ship returns and the children are forced to tell their new friend goodbye. Elliott's mother and sister make it to the clearing just in time to say their goodbyes and E.T. thanks the children for all their help. The film closes with the tearful but happy family watching E.T.'s ship take off.



Characters

E.T., played by Pat Welsh, Debra Winger and Steven Spielberg (Voice)

Description

E.T. is the alien visitor that is the center of the movie's storyline. Elliott at one point identifies E.T. as a male creature. But in interviews with director Steven Spielberg during the film's initial release, Spielberg described E.T. as being like a plant and having no gender at all. The little alien stands about 4 feet but has an extending neck that allows the head to be raised and lowered to a desired height. Spielberg describes E.T.'s face as being modeled after the poet Carl Sandburg, Albert Einstein and a pug dog. E.T.'s voice was a compilation of Pat Welsh's voice, with help from Debra Winger and director Steven Spielberg. E.T. is humanoid in appearance in that it has two eyes, arms, hands and feet, but that is where the similarities end. E.T. has the ability to manipulate the environment. It has the power to heal plants and humans and is able to defy gravity.

Analysis

E.T. is perhaps the rarest form of a character that is central to the plot of a film. E.T. is a mystery. Because of the fact that for the majority of the film E.T. is unable to communicate with his fellow cast members, much of the audience's impressions of the alien are formed from interpreting the creature's actions and the reactions of the other cast members. Each member of the audience is allowed to form their own opinion of what the motives are behind the little alien's actions. The general opinion of Spielberg's alien is that it is a benevolent, non-aggressive and peaceful visitor to our world. However, in truth the reasons for E.T.'s and the other alien's visit are never revealed. Even though E.T. doesn't lead an invading army against Washington, D.C., we do know that his actions were causing Elliott's declining health. Neither the audience nor the other characters in the film are given any clear indication of why this alien suddenly is in their world.

Why has E.T. become such an enduring character with audiences around the world? Perhaps it is because of what the alien forces both the characters in the film and the audience to do, take a leap of faith. This leap of faith shows the people involved that unknown things don't always represent danger or something to fear. When Elliott first encounters E.T. his first reaction is fear, but as Elliott overcomes his initial reaction and begins to trust in the little alien he is rewarded with greater understanding. Bringing the alien into his home, he learns that E.T. is intelligent. When he spends the day with E.T. he learns to communicate. Each investment of trust by Elliott in the alien results in being rewarded with a positive outcome. Because Spielberg wraps E.T. in a cloak of mystery instead of letting the audience know everything about the creature, he forces the audience to travel along with Elliott on his journey of discovery.



Elliott, played by Henry Thomas

Description

Elliott is a young boy about 12 years of age and is very much the typical younger brother. He is too young to be accepted by his older brother and his friends but he deeply wants to fit in with them. Compared to others of his age he is smaller in size but is very forceful in his actions. He seems more thoughtful than his brother and sister. He is determined to succeed at any thing he attempts. One of his most outstanding traits is that he has a very curious nature. Once his curiosity is peeked nothing can stop him from exploring what has caught his attention. Spielberg uses this characteristic to move Elliott along his journey of discovery. It is Elliott's curiosity that drives him back out into the shed the first night he has his encounter and motivates him to spend the night in the backyard the following night. In most ways however, Elliot is a typical young teenager.

Analysis

The character of Elliott is the glue that holds the whole story of "ET" together and provides the deepest meaning for the film. Spielberg and scriptwriter Melissa Mathison go to great lengths to develop Elliott into a character that anyone can relate to and see some of them selves in him. Elliott's reactions are designed to mirror those of the audience and ensure the audience will be drawn deeper into the story. As the film unfolds, we see Elliott move from fear of the alien to a deep devotion to him. As Elliott moves along this emotional path, the audience also develops a strong attachment to the alien. By the time the true danger that "Key Man" poses to E.T. is revealed, the audience is so emotionally invested that their protective instincts for the little alien are heightened right along with Elliott's.

Spielberg and Mathison also use Elliott's natural curiosity to aid in moving the film's storyline along. They use his curiosity about the alien to provide a bridge to move the alien from a creature roaming the woods to an alien inside a suburban home. His desire to learn all he can about the alien enables the scriptwriter to tell the audience about the alien and show that there is more to the little visitor than meets the eye. It is Elliott that first sees the gentleness in the alien and draws out E.T.'s different abilities. In finding a way to communicate with the alien, Elliott enables the audience to discover his story and what he is thinking.

The most important contribution that Elliott provides to the film is serving as an example of how commitment plays a part in a friendship. Elliott and E.T. slowly develop deeper feelings for each other which finally become a deep friendship. Spielberg uses this friendship to examine the idea of commitment between friends. As with any friendship, E.T. and Elliott have periods of hardship resulting from their friendship. Elliott's decision to hide the creature in his home and hide it from his mother, leads to the incident of him becoming drunk and disorderly in school. His decision to help E.T. contact his spaceship leads to him breaking curfew and spending all night in the woods. During both of these events, the temptation for Elliott to abandon his new friend and turn him over to grown-



ups to deal with was overwhelming but Elliott continually demonstrates his dedication to protecting his new friend.

"Key Man", played by Peter Coyote

Description

Throughout most of the early portion of the film you never see the face of "Key Man" or any of the team that is pursuing E.T. and the other aliens. Spielberg for most of the film shows all of the adults from the waist down to give the film a child's eye level point of view. To distinguish Peter Coyote's character from the other adults being show at waist level, Spielberg had Coyote wear a large ring of keys attached to his belt hence the nickname of "Key Man." Later in the film, the audience learns that "Key Man" is the head of a scientific team that is trying to make contact with and research aliens like E.T. who are visiting the Earth.

"Key Man" appears to have an almost unlimited authority when it comes to using governmental agencies to pursue and catch one of the aliens. When the audience finally sees "Key Man" they learn that he is a man in his early 40's who is capable of showing great understanding and compassion with it comes to dealing with Elliott after the death of the little alien. "Key Man" is portrayed as a man having to do a job but wanting to conduct his duties with consideration for the feelings of others.

Analysis

For most of the film "Key Man" serves as E.T.'s and Elliott's nemesis. From his first appearance when he stops the little alien from making it back to his spaceship, this character is set up to be the evil force hunting down the fleeing alien. As E.T. and Elliott learn to trust each other and build a closer friendship, "Key Man" heads up the dark forces that always seem to be just one step behind the two friends. "Key Man" seems willing to do anything and go beyond any law in order to complete his mission of capturing the alien.

One of Spielberg's most powerful scenes in the film occurs when Elliott and Michael are searching the garage for items that E.T. can use to build his "phone." As the two brothers discuss the alien, the film cuts to a dark van moving slowly down the street, in the back of the van a man is shown using a powerful listening device to eavesdrop in on the conversations going on inside the houses the van is driving pass. When the van passes Elliott's house the man picks up the two brothers talking and by using this very illegal method is able to narrow his search for the alien down to Elliott and his family. Spielberg uses this scene to demonstrate the lengths that "Key Man" and his team will go to find their prey.

Due to the extreme measures the "Key Man" is willing to use, the audience learns to fear this powerful force hot on the trail of the little alien and his friend. One of the most bizarre twists of the film occurs when "Key Man" finally gets to meet Elliott and he talks



to the young boy about how lucky he is to have experienced something that "Key Man" has waited his entire life to see. Suddenly as "Key Man" is talking, the viewer has the impression that in many ways "Key Man" is an older version of Elliott. "Key Man" wasn't trying to harm the alien but was trying to help him just like Elliott had been trying to do. Many of Elliott's feelings for the little alien can be seen reflected in this character once his whole character can be seen.

Mary (Elliott's Mother), played by Dee Wallace-Stone

Description

Grown ups and parents are rarely treated well in Spielberg's family films of the 1980's and Mary, Elliott's mother, is no exception to this rule. Mary is a thirty-something single mom who has recently gone through a separation from her husband who left the family for another woman. Spielberg only rarely shows a modern family as a complete unit in any of his films during this period of his career. Even though the audience gets the impression that Mary loves her children, she doesn't actually seem to be a part of their lives.

Spielberg dramatically demonstrates this in the scene where Gertie is trying to introduce E.T. to her mother. When Mary arrives home E.T. is loose in the house and Gertie, seeing the alien walking around the kitchen where Mary is talking on the phone, tries desperately to get her mother to notice the creature. Mary acknowledges what Gertie is saying but is so busy talking on the phone and turning around as she puts up groceries that she never sees the alien as it walks around her. Mary is portrayed as someone who is busy because of her children but disconnected from their lives. It is not until Elliott spends all night out with E.T. that Mary suddenly seems aware of how little she really knows about the life of her child. In the end, Mary, like most adults in Spielberg family films from this period, is pictured as a well meaning but out of touch individual that doesn't have the insight her children have about how things really are in the world.

Analysis

Gertie, played by Drew Barrymore

Description

Gertie is everyone's little sister. She is too young to play with or even understand the games of her older bothers but wants to be a part of their world. Gertie's character plays a key role in the film in that she allows Spielberg to look at E.T. through the eyes of a child. At two points in the film Spielberg uses Gertie to convey the emotion of a scene to the audience. The first time is when E.T. first speaks. The wonder and the amazement of the moment are perfectly conveyed by this character. The second time is at the time of E.T.'s death. Instead of letting the audience watch the doctors fight to save the alien; Spielberg focuses the camera on Gertie and uses her to demonstrate the shock and



horror of the experience. Gertie also provides much of the comic relief in the film. The scene in the film where Gertie decides to play with the little alien by dressing it up in some of her mother's clothes is one of the more unforgettable scenes in the film.

Analysis

Michael, played by Robert MacNaughton

Description

Michael is Elliott's older brother and because of his age and the absence of his father has taken on the role of the man around the house. Michael is very much the stereotypical big brother. He takes pleasure in lording over his siblings and using his age and size to torment his brother and sister. However, as the film progresses Michael emerges as the voice of reason and as an advocate for action. It is Michael who first points out that both E.T. and Elliott's health seem to be weakening and encourages them to seek help. When Elliott loses track of E.T. he turns to Michael for help and it is Michael who finds the dying alien and seeks out help from his mother. At the end of the film it is Michael who works out the escape and insures that the little alien makes his rendezvous with his spaceship.

Analysis

Themes

Friendship

Friendship is a key theme in many of Spielberg's films. He enjoys showing how two individuals from very different backgrounds can overcome their differences to form a strong and lasting relationship. In *E.T.* he has his greatest challenge showing how an earthling and an alien can come together to the betterment of both. As the film progresses the audience watches as Elliott goes from thinking of the alien as a possible pet to accepting it as an equal. Slowly the two friends learn to compensate for each other's shortcomings and form a strong team. But the relationship goes beyond their ability to work together. In the end *E.T.* demonstrates his deep commitment to the friendship when he chooses to break his connection with Elliott, even though it means that the alien would die. *E.T.* was not willing to risk the boy's life in order to prolong his own. Spielberg allows the audience to witness the two overcoming the obstacles that separate them to forge a strong bond that is able to withstand the adversity that they must go through.

Fear of the Unknown

One of the major themes in *E.T.* is the lesson of dealing with the unknown. The world is always a turbulent place and it is filled with many unknowns. Often the many modern conveniences we have at our disposal today give us the illusion that there are no mysteries left in the world. The reality however is much different. In truth one of the greatest mysteries in the world is understanding people. We have the ability to have instant communication to any place in the world but only rarely do we understand how to talk with people. Television and movies give us the false impression that everyone is the same, so when we encounter anyone who is fundamentally different from us our reaction is very similar to Elliott's first reactions to the alien, fear of what we don't or can't understand. *E.T.* serves as a morality play to demonstrate that if people will move past the fear of the unknown, they may find that they share much more in common than they first thought.

Commitments

One theme that is central to *E.T.* is exploring the concept of the role commitment has in the lives of modern man. Many people today believe that terms like honor and commitment are old fashioned and indicate a level of dedication that doesn't exist outside of legends and old novels. The general belief is that nothing is permanent and that lawyers can undo anything. *E.T.* confirms this belief by showing that Elliott is a part of a family that had been shattered by a husband breaking his commitment to his wife and children. However, the film doesn't stop there. It goes on to explore how people affected by this type of action react when they are placed in a position of having to forge

and then keep commitments of their own. When Elliott's friendship with the little alien is tested with hardship and danger, Elliott doesn't walk away from his commitment he even risks his life to protect the little alien.

When Elliott loses E.T. in the woods and feels he is in danger he turns to his brother Michael to search for the alien. Michael diligently looks for the alien until he finds it and brings it home. All of the children protect E.T. and do all they can to keep his existence a secret. Spielberg uses *E.T.* to show his audience that commitment still has a place and is valuable in this disposable world.



Style and Cinematography

When asked during an interview if he did anything special to prepare for a directing project, Spielberg was quoted as saying, "Before I go off and direct a movie, I always look at four films. They tend to be: *Seven Samurai*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, *It's A Wonderful Life*, and *The Searchers*. It is interesting that Spielberg is so influenced with films that are considered story-driven films. In each of the examples that Spielberg mentions, the directors allow the scope of the story to drive the cinematic style that they use to bring the story alive on film. Spielberg does the same with *E.T.* Realizing that the majority of the story is told from the point of view of Elliott and E.T., Spielberg decides to let the camera give his audience the experience of witnessing the story unfolding from their point of view.

One of the most outstanding and noticeable cinematic choices that Spielberg made while filming *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* was to shoot most of the film from the eye-level of a child to allow the audience to further connect with Elliot and E.T. To further focus the audience on the children, with the exception of Elliot's mom, Spielberg allows no adult faces to be shown until the last half of the film. The reasoning behind this choice is very practical in nature. Spielberg understood that if the audience didn't develop an emotional attachment to the children and E.T. by E.T.'s death scene then the entire climactic chase would be lost on the viewers.

Spielberg made an interesting choice in the style he used in shooting the film. He decided to shoot *E.T.* in chronological order. Again this was for very practical reasons. Spielberg hoped that by letting the story unfold in a normal fashion it would help the children actors to become more emotionally attached to E.T. This would invoke a more real and believable response from them when E.T. departs for home at the end of the film. While filming the final scene, Spielberg simply let the cameras roll and captures his cast's real emotional responses. This choice also yielded one unexpected bonus for the director. While filming E.T.'s death scene, the reactions from both Henry Thomas and Drew Barrymore were so strong and real that it is considered one of the most touching moments of the film.

One of the aspects that set *E.T.* apart from many other "alien visitation" films that had come before is Spielberg's determination to give his audience a realistic feel to the world he has created. Starting with his choice to make Elliott's family a single parent home, he gives the viewer a very modern and familiar feel to the world in which his little alien finds himself. Perhaps Spielberg's efforts to make *E.T.* a believable film can be best illustrated in his attention to detail in E.T.'s death scene. In the scene the doctors are fighting to keep E.T. alive. In order to give the scene more realism, Spielberg uses real doctors instead of actors. None of the dialogue was scripted, the scene was just the doctors giving normal orders and performing normal procedures that would be required in a life threatening emergency room situation. The real doctors and nurses bring a sense of urgency to the scene that had never been captured on film prior to this. Another example is found in the fact that the communicator E.T.'s builds in the film actually worked. Spielberg hired Henry Feinberg, an expert in science and technology, to



construct E.T.'s communicator out of household items to prove the alien could do the same.

To handle the final editing of *E.T.*, Spielberg tapped Carol Littleton. She was an unusual choice because Littleton had just recently completed work on her first major Hollywood film, *Body Heat* the year before. Spielberg, who was known as perfectionist, usually only worked with experienced editors. Normally Spielberg worked exclusively with Michael Kahn, his editor from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, who had won an Oscar for his work on *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. But Spielberg had assigned Kahn to work on *Poltergeist* and Spielberg was forced to bring in Littleton. Littleton brought a lighter and fast paced touch to *E.T.* than had been seen in any of Spielberg's earlier films. Littleton was rewarded for her efforts by receiving the only Oscar nomination of her career.

Motifs

The Absent Father

One of Spielberg's favorite subjects, which he repeatedly returns to during his family film period of the 1980's, is that of an absent father. Spielberg, who was himself a product of a broken home, often depicts the modern family in many of his films, as being a single parent home. *E.T.* is the first of his films that touches on the idea of using a family that has been torn apart by a father that has abandoned them. One of the most emotional scenes in the film centers around the absence of Elliott's father and the effect it has on his family. Early in the film Elliott is trying to get the rest of his family to believe that what he has encountered in the shed the night before was something more than just a coyote.

To add weight to his point that he was not being taken seriously, Elliott begins to say that if his dad were there he would believe him, but halfway through the statement Elliott is silenced by a look from his brother. Elliott's mother tells him that if Elliott feels that way he should call his father. Elliott then blurts out that he can't because his father is in Mexico with his girlfriend. As Elliott's brother chastises him for saying too much you hear the mother complaining that their father had never liked Mexico when they were married. Before she completes her statement she breaks down into tears and a dead silence falls over the family. In this short but powerful scene Spielberg conveys the message to his audience that a father can't just walk away clean from his commitments to his family. Even though his life may go on his absence affects the family he has left behind.

Dare to Dream

Central to the plot of *E.T.* is the idea that all of us should dare to look beyond the everyday and dream. Human history is full of examples of one generation's dreams becoming the next generation's reality. When man had not even learned to fly, Jules Verne was writing about man going to the moon and traveling under the world's seas. Spielberg asks us to look to the stars and to ask what if? Spielberg best captures this idea during the scene in which "Key Man" is first talking to Elliott. "Keys" tells the young boy that he had been dreaming his whole life about doing what Elliott had been able to experience.

"Key Man" would have given anything to exchange places with Elliot and actually meet an intelligent life form from another world and be able to communicate with them and exchange ideas. In bringing "Key Man's" dream to life, Spielberg demonstrates to his audience that nothing is beyond the realm of possibility. The only real limits are the ones that we place on ourselves. If mankind stops dreaming of what could be, then they risk becoming stagnant. As long as man has dreams then he has direction and a goal.

Understanding Builds Bridges

When Elliot first meets E.T. his reaction is fear. He pulls back into the world he knows best, his home and his family. However, as he begins to reach out to the alien he finds out that as he gives trust he is rewarded with trust in return. As the two build trust in one another they begin to gain knowledge about each other. With that knowledge they gain understanding of each other's needs and with that revelation they begin to work together to obtain those needs. Spielberg uses his story of a boy and a little alien to teach the audience that only by gaining understanding of others can we begin to build bridges that allow us to cooperate and achieve goals. He shows the audience that reaching out to others shouldn't be a last resort. Only by opening ourselves to others can we learn what the true nature of a person is. Spielberg suggests that most fear is caused by ignorance and instead of retreating away from someone who is different we should reach out and strive to understand them.



Symbols

The Heart Light

The red glow in the chest, which is such a prominent feature of the aliens, is never fully explained in the film but it has come to be referred to as the Heart Light. This seems to be the source of E.T.'s power to control the environment and heal humans and plants. The film suggests that the heart light is connected with a central power source found in the aliens' spaceship. The longer one of the aliens is separated from the ship, the weaker they become. But the symbolism of the source of the little creatures' power flowing from where a human heart would be cannot be overlooked.

Each time E.T. uses his powers throughout the film it is for benevolent purposes. Whether it is healing a sick plant or a cut on Elliott's finger, the alien uses his abilities for peaceful and even caring reasons. Spielberg's choice of using a power source flowing from what most people would interpret as the alien's heart is designed to convey to his audience that E.T.'s motives are based on peaceful and loving reasons.

The Keys

As Steven Spielberg was facing the deadline for the beginning of filming on *E.T.*, he had a problem. His decision to film the first part of the film from the angle of a child's eye level meant that none of the adults would be seen above the waist. Spielberg needed a way to set E.T.'s nemesis apart from the other adult waists being shown. He needed a symbol that would convey to the viewer a sense of authority but would not be as threatening as a gun. He chose to place a large ring of keys on a belt hook on the leader of the search party looking for the alien.

The symbol of the keys proved to be so effective that Peter Coyote's character became known simply as "Key Man" or "Keys" and was never given a name in the film. The key ring proved to be such an effective choice because so many people associate a belt ring of keys with authority figures. Many school officials, employers and even government officials wear belt rings full of keys. The belt ring represents the authority they have in the position they are filling. By placing a simple ring of keys on Coyote's belt, Spielberg gave this character instant credibility with the audience as an authority figure.

The Bicycle's Flight

Although used as a means to facilitate speeding up the pacing of the film during Elliott's bike ride to the deep woods and then later in the film, as a method of escape, the flight of E.T. and Elliott on his bicycle also has a deeper meaning. It symbolizes the limitless possibilities that are available to someone who opens themselves to more than the

obvious. In his family films from this period, Spielberg often bemoans the loss of an individual's ability to have flights of fancy once maturity replaces the child in them.

The adults in his films are always shown as detached from reality and as being one dimensional. It is the children in Spielberg's films, who like Peter Pan, that have no limits on what they can achieve. Spielberg conveys the message to his audience that because no one has told a child that he cannot fly, he is not weighed down with doubts and is able to not only reach for the stars but also fly to them. It is no surprise that several years later when Steven Spielberg was looking for a symbol to represent his new production company that he chose the scene of Elliott's bike flying in front of the moon to symbolize the limitless possibilities open to his new company.



Essay Questions

Discuss the opening sequence of the film and what impression Spielberg gives the audience about the nature of the aliens.

How does Spielberg frame the character known as "Key Man" for the audience in order for them to accept him as a threat to E.T. and Elliott?

Discuss the impact the absence of Elliott's father has on Elliott and the family.

How does Elliott's opinion of E.T. change as he learns more about the alien?

Discuss the benefits and disadvantages of the psychic link between E.T. and Elliott.

How does the audience's view of "Key Man" change once he meets with Elliott?

What scenes in the film does Spielberg use to show the importance of friendship and commitment?

Discuss Spielberg's depiction of adults and children in the film and their relationships.

Explain the importance of E.T.'s decision to cut the psychic link with Elliot during the emergency room scene.

Discuss how E.T. touched the lives of each member of Elliott's family and how they were changed by their encounter with him.