

Reappraising Always

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Steven Spielberg's 1989 film *Always* represents one of the director's few critical and commercial disappointments. This essay examines the extent to which the film's failures are attributable to its formal, stylistic, and narrative features. The essay offers a defense of *Always* against specific reproaches. It also pursues more positive aims. Following Warren Buckland, the essay pinpoints organic unity as Spielberg's primary compositional principle; it tracks the development of motifs, tactics of foreshadowing, and other internal norms to demonstrate the formation of a structurally unified text; and it posits contrasts with a pertinent antecedent, *A Guy Named Joe* (Victor Fleming, 1943), so as to set Spielberg's artistic achievements in relief. The essay goes on to isolate some putatively troublesome manoeuvres at the film's internal level. Certain of these problematic aspects, I argue, force us to recognise that important narrative effects can be yielded by modulated *deviations* from organic unity. The collective aim of these arguments is to suggest that *Always* is apt for critical reevaluation. Over this hovers a secondary objective. The essay seeks to disclaim two interrelated faults ascribed to Spielberg: a characteristic supplanting of narrative coherence by spectacle; and an indifference to subtlety and sophistication.

Keywords: Spielberg; organic unity; storytelling; narration; film style

Few films in Steven Spielberg's oeuvre are as enigmatic, troublesome, and taxonomically slippery as *Always* (1989). The film uneasily straddles the twin flagpoles of Spielberg's output, refusing easy alignment with both the popular event movie (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Jurassic Park*, *War of the Worlds*) and the prestige picture (*The Color Purple*, *Schindler's List*, *Saving Private Ryan*). Moreover, *Always* constitutes one of Spielberg's few critical and commercial failures. I explore the principal critical grievances below. Commercially, the film's box office gross fell considerably short of the Spielberg benchmark, amassing a modest \$77.1 million worldwide (Freer 2001, 181).¹ The failure of *Always* has prompted some critics to reflect on the precise nature of its shortcomings. Nigel Morris has deftly shown that

the film's commercial prospects were hampered by an ambiguous and confusing marketing campaign (Morris 2007, 161-2). One critical refrain posits casting errors as a central flaw (Maslin 1989; Travers 1990; McCabe 1999). My broad concern in this essay is to explore how far the failure of *Always* can be attributed not to extrafilmic factors but to the constructional form and style of the film itself. Is the film – to borrow a phrase from Warren Buckland's study on Spielberg – a 'well-told story'? Is its failure traceable to some problematic compositional devices or effects?

I begin by limning the key premises upon which *Always* has been attacked. Some of the imputed misdemeanours with which Spielberg is charged are, we shall see, defensible in terms of the canonic principles of storytelling. Mounted on this defense is an attempt to demonstrate that *Always* withstands broad organicist scrutiny. I argue that Spielberg's film makes the organic fusion of narrative, style, and form a privileged aesthetic principle. This argument is underpinned by a confutation of two fallacies consistently applied to Spielberg: first, that the filmmaker's work subordinates narrative coherence to the corrosive demands of spectacle; and second, that the corollary emphasis on attractions forecloses the possibility of ambiguity, complexity, and nuance. Lastly I identify ostensibly problematic aspects at the internal level of *Always*. While certain of these aspects are recoverable as instances of fairly adventurous storytelling, others remain problematic if subjected to too rigid an organicist criterion. In any case, these troublesome internal elements are not sufficiently injurious to account for the film's disappointing reception. More broadly, the essay's overarching contention echoes a verdict summarised succinctly by Morris: '*Always*...is more interesting, complex and sophisticated, but also problematic, than most reviews suggest' (Morris 2007, 160). It is a film, in short, that warrants detailed critical reappraisal.

It will be useful at this point to rehearse the film's plot. A remake of Victor Fleming's World War II drama *A Guy Named Joe* (1943), *Always* is focalised around Pete (Richard Dreyfuss), an aerial firefighter killed while rescuing his colleague Al (John Goodman) from a forest fire. Before he can proceed to Heaven, Pete must fulfil two cosmically decreed tasks: he must mentor an aspiring young pilot named Ted (Brad Johnson), and bring closure to his own romantic relationship with Dorinda (Holly Hunter). Pete's tasks are complicated by the fact that death has divested him of corporeal materiality; now only the fellow deceased can see and hear him. By the

film's denouement, Pete comes to accept both Dorinda's ability to live without him and her burgeoning romance with Ted.

Critical reproaches

Much of the negative critical reaction to *Always* has centred upon Spielberg's decision to shear away his source material's World War II setting. Typifying a prevalent broadside, Peter Travers argues:

Spielberg makes several miscalculations, none more calamitous than updating the story for the Eighties. The screenplay...removes the wartime setting and substitutes pilots battling forest fires for daredevils in combat. [*A Guy Named Joe*] spoke to a nation's sorrow; *Always* lacks a similar sense of scope or urgency. (Travers 1990)

Similarly Joseph McBride asserts that 'Spielberg's decision to transpose the story to the present day...robbed [the film] of the social context that had made its self-sacrificial fantasy acceptable and meaningful in 1943' (McBride 1997: 407). In Spielberg's hands, Pete is a deheroicised incarnation of Spencer Tracy's courageous war pilot in *A Guy Named Joe*. If Tracy's intrepid actions signify the courageousness of a soldier at war, Spielberg's protagonist puts his life at risk for no comparably worthwhile cause. Expunging the World War II context deprives *Always* of social significance and its male protagonist of heroic stature.

This reproach is not necessarily wrongheaded but it does obscure other narrative effects. Spielberg's decision to discard the war-torn locale enables him to intensify the focus on the human drama: *Always* furnishes characters that are of central interest in their own right, not merely in relation to a wartime context. Spielberg's abdication of a wartime setting may result in a lack of contemporary social resonance, but it gives fulcrum to the narrative in other ways – serving, most explicitly, to sharpen a character trait: Pete's recklessness. Spielberg can bring Pete's inherent irresponsibility into sharp focus by abandoning the wartime milieu. What Spielberg sacrifices in social resonance, then, he gains in terms of character delineation. Moreover, this well-marked character trait is a wellspring of important narrative effects, working upon character relationships (e.g. eliciting the disapproval of Dorinda and Al) and ratcheting up narrative suspense (we expect a tragic event to spring from Pete's strongly signposted recklessness). Shedding the World War II framework thus allows Spielberg to spotlight storytelling elements other than social

commentary: psychological traits are crystallised which in turn pushes suspense to a higher pitch of emphasis.

Another widely-expressed charge against the film may be contested. Several of the film's detractors complain that it relies prosaically on 'hackneyed' and anachronistic dialogue. Phrases such as 'You big lug' and 'That's my girl, pal' evidently proved nettlesome for some reviewers. Several critics dismiss the film's use of period slang as a clumsy superimposition of 40s-style dialogue over contemporary idioms and argot. But to dismiss the obsolete dialogue as hackneyed and trite is to ignore its fulfilment of certain variegated tasks. *Always* self-consciously memorialises an earlier era of filmmaking, not least in its respectful reworking of Victor Fleming's *A Guy Named Joe*. Hence Spielberg steeps his film in the iconography of the forties' World War II drama: aviator uniforms, World War II airplanes, uniformed figures stranded amid blazing vegetation and so forth. Anachronistic dialogue of the sort that critics find troubling is simply one more allusive device in Spielberg's wider program of memorialisation.

A second problem with criticising the film's archaic dialogue is that the critic downplays the temporal ambiguity that characterises the film as a whole. In *Always* narrative time is explicitly disarrayed. Thus Pete believes he's been dead for a matter of minutes, but *de facto* six months have passed; the film is set in the contemporary 80s, but the characters invoke predominantly anachronistic cultural references (John Wayne, James Cagney, James Stewart, Henry Fonda). *Always* evinces a studied temporal slipperiness, as Spielberg indicates when he speaks of his desire to create

...a timeless feeling. It's a contemporary movie. It feels like it's set in the forties, but in fact it is set today. (Quoted in Brode 1995, 190)

Overall, time in *Always* becomes labile and unfixed, as if Spielberg is overlapping and dissolving the boundaries between distinct decades. Against this background of temporal ambiguity, anachronistic speech should not properly strike us as obtrusive and vaguely justified; on the contrary, it is conceptually integrated within a thematic of temporal displacement.

Lastly, portions of the film's antiquated dialogue are assigned motivic purpose. One reviewer laments the inclusion of 'flip' lines like 'That's my girl, pal!' (Ebert 1989). But to complain about this line of dialogue in particular is to overlook its function as an important motivic element in the film. Here Spielberg takes a standard filmic device – the recurring verbal motif – and demonstrates its capacity for range

and flexibility. Over the course of the film, Spielberg spins minor variations on the phrase. When Pete encounters Dorinda shortly after his death, he whispers to her affectionately: ‘That’s my girl.’ Yet despite Pete’s putatively affectionate tone, the viewer is encouraged to detect an undercurrent of possessiveness – Pete, we infer, is retentively laying claim to Dorinda’s romantic affections. Spielberg corroborates this inference when Pete remarks, ‘Don’t forget, you’re still my girl.’ What begins as a declaration of affection transmutes into a proprietorial statement (‘That’s *my* girl’). The motif assumes its more threatening permutation when Ted emerges as a legitimate rival for Dorinda’s romantic desires: now Pete growls, ‘That’s my girl, pal!’

Rather than merely reviving old-fashioned movie talk, Spielberg deftly yokes this motif to character goals and action. Pete must learn to relinquish his hold on Dorinda; he must come to accept that Dorinda is no longer *his* girl. Once established, the motivic phrase performs varied repetitions, enabling us to track Pete’s changing attitudes as he develops greater self-knowledge. By the closing scene, Pete can intone the phrase ‘That’s my girl’ with unadulterated pride and affection: his negative traits of possessiveness and jealousy have finally been vanquished.

We might be sympathetic to the critics’ contention that the timeworn dialogue in *Always* seems oddly juxtaposed against the film’s modern setting. The datedness of the dialogue ironically undermines Spielberg’s intention to create a ‘timeless’ atmosphere. Yet we should qualify these criticisms by acknowledging that Spielberg provides internal and external justification for the dialogue’s deployment. Ostensibly hoary phrases perform crucial motivic functions; they undergo minor rephrasings to indicate character change; and they assimilate into Spielberg’s large-scale memorialisation of a past era of film history. Far from a mere recycling of movie clichés, *Always* anchors its evocative dialogue to the concerns of plot, theme, and authorial commentary. Moreover, the motivic arrangement of ‘hackneyed’ phrases is one means by which the film unifies itself – and in this regard, as we shall see, Spielberg’s verbal motif epitomizes a more general robustness of narrative integrity and coherence.

A well-told story: Spielberg’s organicist aesthetic

In *Directed By Steven Spielberg*, Warren Buckland convincingly demonstrates that such films as *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Jurassic Park* (1993) and *Minority*

Report (2002) are skilfully crafted artworks exhibiting subtlety and sophistication. More specifically, Buckland shows Spielberg's blockbusters to manifest organic unity, the harmonious and irreducible integration of story and style. As Buckland states, 'an organic unity is a whole that is more than the sum of its parts, for the whole possesses an added value not contained in any of its parts' (Buckland 2006, 31). The parts of the artwork are coalesced into a perfect synthesis. It is inconceivable that an organically unified sequence will function as effectively without one of its constituent elements, because 'the parts [have reached] their highest degree or best possible level of integration' (Ibid.). Organic unity, Buckland suggests, is a rudimentary feature of the 'well-told story.' Style, story, and narrative form achieve a strong interdependency (an organic unity) in the well-made film, with significance resonating across each of these interpenetrating levels.²

Buckland's insistence on Spielberg's organicity radically butts against the postmodern conception of high-concept cinema as piecemeal, fragmented, and 'purposefully incoherent' (Schatz 1993, 34).³ This critical tradition situates Spielberg as the exemplar of spectacle-driven cinema, distinguished by a devaluation of narrative unity (e.g. Dixon 2001). My analysis of *Always* will serve as a kind of negative instance, for even Spielberg's critical and box-office failures can be shown to exemplify, to a large degree, classical norms of coherence and unity. A contiguous accusation pitted against Spielberg (and the blockbuster ethos in general) is capsulized by one review of *Always*. Janet Maslin mounts her critique of the film on a tireless assumption: Spielberg, we often hear, sacrifices subtlety and nuance on the altar of excess, bombast, and handholding redundancy. Of *Always*, Maslin writes: 'Gentle and moving as it means to be, there's barely a scene that wouldn't have worked better with less fanfare' (quoted in Freer 2001, 189).⁴ In what follows, I aim to demonstrate that such assumptions scarcely do justice to a filmmaker whose flaunting of spectacle belies a discreet and intricately patterned synthesis of style, theme, and narrative form.

Indeed, what the foregoing section has sought to indicate is that *Always* displays the organicity of characterisation and structure that is ingredient to a well-made narrative. Narrative causality and long-range motifs function to unify the film. Character traits are sharply delineated (as in the case of Pete's well-marked recklessness). Even the film's overt use of coincidence – a much maligned device for motivating story events – can be justified at a diegetic level. One coincidence in

particular is especially flagrant: at the airbase, Ted pursues a runaway vehicle which, after tracing a mazy trajectory, ploughs into Dorinda's rented house – a *deus ex machina* that improbably causes the paths of the eventual romantic couple to intersect. Yet such brazenly acausal events find diegetic justification in the film's narrativisation of fate and the hereafter: apparently random encounters are to be reconfigured as the purposeful manoeuvrings of destiny.

As a value of artistic excellence, organic unity mandates that the synthesis of 'form and content is natural and perfect' (Münsterberg 1970, 82).⁵ Accordingly, *Always* organically unifies plot and character with stylistic techniques. At the level of pictorial style, the film displays Spielberg's characteristic visual ingenuity. After Pete is killed partway through the story, Spielberg and screenwriter Jerry Belson employ various *narrative* tactics to foreground affinities between Pete and Ted. This explicit comparison is dramatically motivated: Pete's tragic death has endowed him with celestial powers; now he is able to channel his own thoughts and mannerisms through Ted. Consequently the two characters are made to intone identical stretches of dialogue, perform rhyming gestures, and articulate common desires. Spielberg also finds *visual* ways to hint at the characters' similarities, although strikingly he puts these strategies on display well in advance of both Pete's demise and subsequent mentoring of Ted.

An early sequence in *Always* yields a couple of exemplary instances. In the airbase barroom, Pete and Dorinda dance together to a (predictably anachronistic) romance ballad. They stray into the path of Ted, aligning for the first time the spatio-temporal paths of the two male characters. A medium shot places us behind Ted as he faces the couple dancing in the mid-ground; Pete is similarly turned away from camera, while Dorinda, in Pete's arms, is framed frontally. Spielberg visually alludes to affinities between the two men by synchronising their movements. As Pete turns his head to follow Dorinda's gaze, so Ted turns his head toward the camera. A reverse shot switches their positions in the frame, making them pictorially parallel and hinting at their similarities. Long before the two characters are brought into an *explicit* comparison, Spielberg exploits standard resources of figure movement and framing to tacitly foreshadow their subsequent interchangeability.

Anticipating character relationships in this way not only augurs the echoic behaviour that becomes so pronounced later in the film; more generally, it helps knit together distinct phases of story action, so that a generally tight cause-and-effect

narrative is supplied still greater cohesion by a web of visual motifs, echoic gestures, and parallel actions. This is one mark of a well-told story: significant actions are discreetly anticipated by bits of foreshadowing which, in turn, lend coherence and unity to the overall architecture of the film. So much, then, for postclassical ‘incoherence.’ Moreover, visual narration – such as the manipulation of figure movement at work here – is assigned clear storytelling tasks, in this instance rehearsing character affinities not yet acknowledged in dialogue.

Other plot elements find imagistic expression. In the scenes preceding Pete’s demise, Spielberg furnishes visual images that announce self-consciously that the protagonist is marked for death. As Dorinda warns Pete that his ‘time is up,’ an open refrigerator door issues diffuse blue light to lend Pete a spectral hue. Spielberg also hints at impending narrative action in more subtle ways. One portentous composition in the barroom sequence provides an instance. A densely populated long shot shows Dorinda in a white dress, dancing near the center of the frame; to her right stands Ted; and Pete, overlooking the action from a flight of stairs, is positioned high in the left corner of the frame. Pete’s oblique position in the image sets up a pictorial tension, his elevated position unbalancing the image, which places all the other partygoers at ground level. Spielberg’s creation of pictorial tension here is felicitous, intensifying the narrative’s sense of foreboding around the central couple.

Moreover the shot is graphically emblematic, anticipating the character relationships as they will develop subsequently in the film. Pete is positioned apart from, and above, the partygoers (prefiguring his heavenly vantage point, and his subsequent isolation from the sphere of human action); Dorinda represents the shot’s focal point, just as she will remain central to both Pete and Ted’s concerns; and Ted observes Dorinda with interest, waiting patiently for an opportunity to approach her. Spielberg here exceeds the scene’s denotative requirements, orchestrating the pictorial field to portend, diagrammatically, future interplay among the characters. The criticism that Spielberg repudiates subtlety and nuance holds little water here. Subtlety derives not only from the delicate expressiveness of the *mise-en-scène*, but also from the shot’s precise placement in the overall narrative. Through ‘anticipatory’ shots such as this, Spielberg creates a visual texture dense with narrative echoes and forward-pointing connotations.

A comparable density and subtlety informs Spielberg’s sonic techniques. *Always* opens with diegetic sound laid over a black screen (a favourite opening

gesture in Spielberg, as Buckland has shown). Initially the sound is ambiguous: a series of distended wails evokes the noise of a siren, but the fading in of the film's opening image forces us to revise our initial assumptions. A long shot shows two anglers boating on a lake: now the noise we hear must be denotatively understood as the intermingled calls of loons on the water.

But the initial, less communicative use of sound ought not to be dismissed as irrelevant. Evoking siren noises lets Spielberg adumbrate later scenes at the airbase, in which alarms ring out to signal an aerial firefighter in distress. Just as Spielberg freights his pictorial strategies with narrative significance, so his use of sound anticipates upcoming action. Moreover, this evocative and misleading sound effect serves an intertextual purpose. It summons to mind nothing so much as the air raid sirens sprinkled throughout *A Guy Named Joe*, thus constituting one more allusion to the wartime setting that Spielberg's film jettisons. In all, Spielberg enriches his stylistic techniques by assigning them wide-ranging functions: his stylistic strategies outreach the role of narrative denotation to perform narrational tasks (such as foreshadowing), connote expressive or symbolic significance, and evoke extrafilmic points of reference.

Spielberg's achievement of formal integrity comes into still sharper focus when we compare parallel scenes in *Always* and *A Guy Named Joe*. Both films furnish a barroom sequence in which Pete presents Dorinda with the birthday gift of a dazzling white dress. A spectacle of feminine display provides the scene's apogee in both films, as Dorinda emerges wearing the sparkling dress to command the gaze of the (predominantly male) crowd of revellers. Spielberg's interpretation of the sequence in *Always* resulted in, as Lester Friedman notes, 'the film's most consistently criticised scene' (Friedman 2006, 16), principally due to its old-fashioned, chauvinistic gender depictions.⁶ But contemporary sensibilities checked at the door, Spielberg's sequence is, as we'll see, a model of narrative and stylistic unity.

Partway through the barroom scene in *A Guy Named Joe*, Pete instructs Dorinda (Irene Dunne) to put on the dress, at which point she dutifully leaves the field of action. Dorinda is seemingly forgotten as the scene develops. Dramatic conflict diverts our attention to other matters, as Pete and Al (Ward Bond) lock horns with their superior officer, Lieutenant Colonel Nils (James Gleason). After Nils leaves, Pete and Al sit down to discuss their futures. A medium shot frames Pete slightly off-center in three-quarter profile, with Ted at the left of frame turned away from camera.

As Pete interacts with Al, his eyeline drifts into an area of offscreen space; his gaze fixes, and suddenly Pete is compelled to suspend his speech in mid-sentence. Fleming withholds visual access to the object that mesmerises Pete. Al turns his head to follow the direction of Pete's gaze; now both men are turned toward camera, gazes fixed into offscreen space. At this point, Fleming provides the communicative shot that reveals the locus of their attention: Dorinda, framed in long shot to accent her attractive 'girl clothes,' stands at the top of the barroom's flight of stairs. A tightened reverse shot emphasises Pete's breathless reaction. Once Dorinda reaches the bottom of the stairs, she is framed once more in long shot. Finally, to indicate Dorinda's captivating effect on the barroom's clientele, Fleming arrays a soldier or two, in back-to-camera positions, across the shot's foreground.

The parallel sequence in *Always* retains key stylistic gestures from *A Guy Named Joe*, yet Fleming's setpiece looks quite pedestrian alongside Spielberg's treatment of the scene. The latter is at once more elaborate and dramatically charged. As in the earlier film, *Always* initially presents Pete and Al seated at a table in medium shot. Throughout their conversation, Pete's eyes dart past the right edge of the frame, anxiously surveying the offscreen space for Dorinda's return. Spielberg rivets his camera on Pete as the protagonist's speech breaks off abruptly and his gaze becomes magnetised by an out-of-shot spectacle. Like Fleming, Spielberg defers the communicative shot of Dorinda, but whereas Fleming lingered on Pete and Al's surprised faces, Spielberg pads out the sequence with reaction shots. A low-angled composition shows an assembly of rubbernecking firefighters, heads turned to face the offscreen heroine. Ambient sounds dissolve into a chorus of jumbled gasps. In the following shot, the lower frameline crops the bodies of other male firefighters, but they move helpfully into a legible framing by uniformly rising from the floor in amazement.

Next a long shot returns us to Pete and Al, Pete rising silently from his chair. A repressive close-up then juxtaposes the grubby boots of firefighters, retreating backward down the stairs, with Dorinda's spotless white shoes which come elegantly into frame. Spielberg introduces Dorinda into this phase of action gradually: a high-angled shot is slightly more communicative, but Dorinda is nevertheless framed from behind and out of focus. Pete shuffles toward the camera (and hence toward Dorinda), finally walking into a pronounced close up, the better to convey his facial expression of astonishment. In a new composition, the node of our visual attention is blocked by

a circle of firefighters in back-to-camera positions. Now Spielberg provides the payoff: suddenly the circle separates and the obstructing bodies retreat to the frame's margins. Dorinda is revealed at the center of the shot, and as in *A Guy Named Joe*, a distant framing highlights her physical transformation. Spielberg provides us with another reaction shot of Pete, who now summons the appropriate (albeit anachronistic) word: 'Gosh.'

Spielberg's staging of the scene manages not only to achieve fidelity to its primary intertext but also to turn the ingredient elements of Fleming's sequence to greater artistic advantage. Most obviously, Spielberg mines the sequence for suspense. A string of successive reaction shots dilates the action, building suspense by delaying the revelation of spectacle (Dorinda's glowing physical appearance). Pete's frequent glances offscreen as he awaits Dorinda's return similarly function to create anticipation. These suspense tactics are justified and reinforced at a narrative level. As the anxious glances offscreen make clear, narrational suspense radiates from Pete's own anticipation and curiosity about an impending event. And just as Spielberg's montage of reaction shots suspends the moment of Dorinda's 'unveiling,' so does the *plot* postpone Dorinda's re-emergence, by interpolating Pete's protracted conversation with Al. To attend to this scene's style (e.g. repressive compositions, distended montage) and story (e.g. Pete's apprehension) is to discover how both are organically fused to engender a specific narrational effect: suspense.

Spielberg takes several cues from the Fleming sequence and intensifies them for dramatic purpose. The deferment of Dorinda's entrance derives from *A Guy Named Joe*, but whereas Fleming distills the revelation into two shots (Pete's offscreen gaze/ the ensuing cut to Dorinda) Spielberg furnishes eight shots to amplify suspense. Spielberg also borrows Fleming's conceit of lining foreground planes of action with back-to-camera figures. Yet Spielberg makes more productive use of this technique than does Fleming. As in *A Guy Named Joe*, the back-to-camera figures in Spielberg's sequence convey *story* information (e.g. that Dorinda occupies the center of attention in the bar); but Spielberg goes further by putting these laterally-arranged figures to narrational use. Under Spielberg's aegis, the foreground bodies function as part of a generally repressive visual design, retarding our perceptual access to a crucial story element (Dorinda). Spielberg thus adopts a compositional tactic from *A Guy Named Joe* and, without sacrificing its denotative story function, assimilates it into the narration's wider mechanisms of suspense. In such ways, Spielberg's film swells

beyond its classical counterpart, adapting and transcending Fleming's techniques to invest the sequence with added value.⁷

In the process Spielberg sustains an internal norm. Dorinda's first appearance in *Always* is visually characterised by a similar principle of blockage and revelation. We first see her in the watchtower. A foreground figure passes across the width of the frame, initially concealing her from view; as the obstructing character leaves the frame, we clearly see Dorinda sitting in a chair, though the narration is characteristically restricted: Dorinda is turned away from camera. Next, however, she spins on the chair and slides into a communicative close-up – an emphatic entrance that, as Nigel Morris has noted (Morris 2007, 165), recalls a similar gesture performed by Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane* (1941). By reprising the principle of blockage and revelation in the barroom sequence, Spielberg sustains the discursive pattern of introducing Dorinda via a communicative shift from restricted to unrestricted narration.⁸

Overall, Spielberg's barroom sequence plumbs and works fresh variations on its classical counterpart. Suspense is amplified and distended, narrational restrictedness becomes more salient, and figure positioning is ascribed narrational functions. As we've suggested, moreover, Spielberg is not concerned only with intensifying Fleming's stylistic gestures. Rather his formal and stylistic choices are governed by the principle of organic unity: suspenseful narration is motivated by a protagonist's psychological apprehension; figures in the diegesis adopt a nondiegetic narrational function; and compositional tactics of blockage and revelation establish an internal norm that coheres distinct phases of the plot. Controversy around its sexual politics notwithstanding, the barroom sequence in *Always* serves as a small-scale paradigm of well-made storytelling.

Flaws, difficulties, ingenuities

If *Always* is *generally* well-told at the levels of style and story, are there more fine-grained or small-scale passages of the film which seem potentially troubling or problematic? In other words, can we point to internal qualities in the film to account for its disappointing critical and audience reception? Lester Friedman (2006, 16) has noted one striking idiosyncrasy in the film's narrative development. *Always* flouts Hollywood convention by inverting the generic romance trope: contrary to the norms of the genre, Spielberg's romantic couple must learn to live apart from each other. It's

plausible that audiences found this plot trajectory unsatisfying – though as we’ve suggested, the plot itself is tightly woven and demonstrates a careful imbrication of story, style, and motivic elements.⁹

Joseph McBride has pointed to the characterisation of Ted as an especially weak element (McBride 1997, 408). Spielberg’s interest in the character indeed seems negligible; it is Pete’s posthumous relationship with Dorinda that is most central to the director’s concerns. Further, certain specific storytelling limitations and complications spring from the figure of Ted. As already noted, Pete’s angelic abilities include that of funnelling thoughts, mood states, and physical gestures through his pliable young ward. From one angle, this story conceit helps the plot cohere by generating parallelisms. For example, in the film’s second reel Dorinda observes that Pete laughs ‘like a donkey’; four reels later, Ted laughs in precisely the same way, attracting Dorinda’s attention. In reel three Pete nervously tweaks his eyebrow; by reel eight Ted develops the same nervous tic. Spielberg’s dramatic premise – that Pete can manipulate Ted’s behavioural patterns – is particularly apt to sprout proliferating echoes, parallels, and repetitions, all of which can lend cohesion to large-scale blocks of action.

From another angle, though, the cost of so much motivic play is a diminution of character individuation. Pete’s and Ted’s individualised personality traits, including their discrete goals and desires, are conflated. Most problematically, Ted becomes less a discretely individuated character than a fuzzy manifestation of Pete. Consequently the film equivocates as to whose psychology governs Ted’s actions at different junctures: are Ted’s actions and desires his own or those of his spiritual mentor? The difficulty here arises because a narrative conceit and a norm of the well-told story are put into conflict. In *Always*, the uniqueness and singularity of living human beings is attenuated because mortals inherit personality traits (‘inspiration’) from the dead. This theme of ghostly inspiration thus generates a tension with the principle of character individuation – one of the most basic norms of a well-made story.¹⁰

A further weakness may be found in Spielberg’s maintenance of a verbal motif assigned to Pete: ‘That’s my boy,’ invoked throughout the film in reference to Ted. Spielberg appropriates the phrase from the Victor Fleming film, though *Always* will depart from its source in its handling of the motif. Again, a comparison of the two films is instructive. *A Guy Named Joe* has Spencer Tracy’s wartime pilot eliciting

eager admiration from a clique of local children. However, Spielberg excises these moments of schoolboy adulation, partly, I would suggest, because such scenes run counter to his aims to deheroicise Pete; also, the schoolboys' reverence for Pete in *A Guy Named Joe* carries a propagandistic motive inappropriate for Spielberg's depoliticized romance story. Spielberg also repudiates an ironic character trait seeded early on in *A Guy Named Joe*: Pete's professed dislike of children. Across the Victor Fleming film, Pete's ambivalence toward children becomes paralleled in his relationship to Ted, his younger protégé and love rival. By the end of *A Guy Named Joe*, Pete utters the verbal motif earnestly in regard to Ted – thus attesting to his newfound acceptance of paternal responsibility.

From this standpoint *A Guy Named Joe*'s early scenes, showing Pete's ambivalence toward younger male characters, set up an arc of character development that Pete will trace across the duration of the film. In Fleming's film, then, the repeated phrase 'That's my boy' becomes a dramatically motivated and emotionally charged motif. By contrast, Spielberg attenuates the motif's expressive power by removing the scenes that elucidate its purpose and supply its dramatic impetus. As a result, the 'That's my boy' motif, as intoned by Spielberg's protagonist, merely traces a schematically expressive arc from mild sarcasm to a barely motivated paternal pride.¹¹

Further criticisms cluster around Ted's oafish personality traits. One critic argues that '[Spielberg] imbalances the drama...by making Ted a cartoonish oaf' (McBride 1997, 408). Moreover, others have argued, if Ted is such a bumbling figure, how can he plausibly rival Pete for Dorinda's affections? Yet this aspect of Ted's characterisation seems to me quite straightforwardly justified. Ted's buffoonery should properly be seen as the initial phase of a long-range character arc. Spielberg confines Ted's blundering actions to early phases of story action; as the film progresses, and as Ted unknowingly falls under Pete's tutelage, his traits of ineptness recede; finally, by the film's denouement, Ted's maladroit qualities are eradicated altogether. Spielberg shows Ted to have inherited Pete's attributes of competence and self-assurance. Furthermore, Ted's imperfections provide crucial motivation for the mentorship plotline: possessed of personality flaws, Ted requires Pete's tacit guidance to trace an arc of character improvement. A fixture of the well-made Hollywood narrative – character change – thus underwrites Ted's lumbering qualities. By initially

foregrounding Ted's clumsiness, Spielberg establishes a baseline against which the character's subsequent proficiency stands out in relief.

Significantly, moreover, Dorinda's deepening affection for Ted coincides not with the latter's inelegant behaviour in the story's early phase, but with his gradual assumption of more conventionally masculine traits. The turning point occurs when Dorinda sees Ted resuscitate a stricken bus driver: now Ted's emerging traits of poise and composure (a marked reversal of his earlier awkwardness) persuade Dorinda of his suitability as a romantic partner. Character development here helps facilitate a desirable plot trope – Dorinda's romantic pairing with Ted – which comes to feel increasingly apposite as the plot progresses.

We can isolate at least two other ostensibly problematic manoeuvres. Crucially the manoeuvres in question become problematic because they challenge the organicity of the text. Yet as I will argue presently, Spielberg's strategies here are by no means detrimental to storytelling concerns and, on the contrary, function to create important narrative effects. The first apparent difficulty arises from Spielberg's occasionally bold disdain of narrative redundancy. Hollywood films, as Kristin Thompson states, 'tend to convey information about...character traits, and indeed any sort of story factors redundantly' (Thompson 1999, 16). Yet Spielberg sometimes refuses to underline significant story action, thus demanding that the viewer be especially alert and attentive. Minimising redundancy, moreover, allows Spielberg to achieve certain narratively apposite effects. Consider Pete's first encounter with his celestial cynosure, Hap (Audrey Hepburn). On a patch of hallowed earth, Hap subjects Pete to a haircut – an apparently inexplicable and outré action devoid of plot significance. We shouldn't be surprised to find that, in fact, Spielberg foreshadows the haircut motif in an earlier scene (Dorinda mutters the word 'haircut' in her sleep). What *is* surprising is the insufficient degree of redundancy with which Spielberg establishes the motif. On the first occasion, 'haircut' is merely one item on a mumbled litany of mundane tasks (along with shopping for cat food, green apples, and chicken wings). Given that the motif is underdetermined, it is likely that the viewer will fail to link Pete's haircut with Dorinda's earlier enumeration of chores. Consequently, Hap's hairdressing activity is apt to appear both idiosyncratic and unmotivated.

Yet the bizarre and incongruous tenor of this scene is entirely appropriate for a first foray into the unknown and fantastic. Stressing the action's apparent randomness is one way in which Spielberg marks this fantastic scene off from the reality of

preceding action. More precisely, it is Spielberg's attenuation of redundancy and causal motivation that generates the action's ambiguity – ambiguity that fully befits Pete's disorienting situation. As often in *Always*, apparent inadequacies at one level of storytelling turn out to buttress other dimensions of story and theme.

Spielberg also risks a putatively troubling play with character goals – the second of our apparently problematic manoeuvres. The first of Pete's seraphic objectives is to provide Ted with divine inspiration. A second goal, as Hap explains, is 'to say goodbye' to Dorinda. The difficulty here is twofold. Neither of Pete's goals is self-directed; rather, in contrast to the purposeful Hollywood protagonist, goals are 'thrust upon' him by his omnipotent counsel (Thompson 1999, 14). More importantly, the late-arriving second goal is antithetical to Pete's (autonomous) desire to 'never leave [Dorinda] again.' It's not only that Pete's goals here undertake an abrupt volte-face, but also that the narration is revealed to have withheld a crucial character goal from us. As Spielberg has noted, '...now that [Pete has] gone, his mission – so to speak, *even though he doesn't know what his mission is* – is to come back and say all the things he was never able to say as a living human being' (quoted in Friedman and Notbohm 2000, 146, my italics). In contrast to Hollywood convention, whereby character goals are consciously pursued and redundantly underscored, a key character imperative is here kept latent until Spielberg's narration becomes more communicative. Moreover, the goal itself may frustrate audience expectations. If the plot has been pressing toward some kind of desirable reunion between Pete and Dorinda, the instalment of the second goal effectively denies fulfilment of this anticipated trope.

Nevertheless the revelation of Pete's second goal resolves a narrative tension. Heretofore, the viewer's desire for Pete and Dorinda to be reconciled is paralleled by a growing consciousness of *Ted* and Dorinda's compatibility as a romantic couple. Until the second goal is disclosed, allegiance with Pete prevents the viewer from regarding Ted and Dorinda's courtship as a wholly desirable trope. Revealing the second goal thus dispels a central plot ambiguity and dissipates the spectator's conflicting desires.

Still another effect emerges from Spielberg's deferred revelation of the second goal. Now the viewer is forced to re-evaluate previous action involving Ted. During the early barroom sequence, for instance, Ted's attempts to dance with Dorinda are retarded, an eventuality that, on initial viewing, elicits the viewer's approval. For at

this early narrative stage, Ted is perceived to threaten the central romance between Pete and Dorinda, the figures with whom we are most closely allied. Retrospectively, however, we must reconfigure Ted's thwarted overtures as so many false starts in a cosmically destined romance. In all, Spielberg's purposive distribution of character goals undercuts conventional goal-orientation, derails expectations, compels the viewer to retread prior action, and discloses the narration's restrictedness. Frustrating for a mainstream audience this may be; but there is no denying the bold ingenuity of Spielberg's narrational tactics.

These two apparently problematic aspects of Spielberg's film – partial redundancy and late-arriving, antithetical character goals – are perhaps not disruptive enough to qualify as *disunities*, but neither do they assimilate neatly into the film's overarching system of internal unity. Both tactics pose difficulties. Spielberg primes the haircut motif (albeit in oblique fashion) during Dorinda's somnambulistic itinerary, but the motif remains hermeneutically opaque. It is not perspicuous at the primary level of story denotation. Nor is the revelation of Pete's second goal seamlessly absorbed as an increment of organic unity, since it seems not only to thrust against Pete's goal-oriented trajectory but also to be tenuously primed by foregoing action. However, these problematic qualities perform effective narrative functions (e.g. facilitating an appropriate level of defamiliarisation; resolving a central hesitation between prospective narrative pathways). The point is that such detours from organic unity can function nevertheless to advance, inflect, or deepen the narrative in important ways. Filmmakers may slacken the precepts of organic unity in order to pursue other effects no less related to storytelling. (For example, while the haircut motif is causally impoverished and enigmatic in hermeneutic terms, it nonetheless generates a narratively apt effect: strangeness.) Moreover the filmmaker may swerve from organic unity at a local level, without structurally destabilising the film as a whole. Such small-scale 'digressions' as we are describing in *Always* may be subordinated to a wider structural framework in which compositional unity is the primary organising principle.

Although we can accurately characterise *Always* as a *generally* well-told story that on the whole manifests organic unity, we need to acknowledge that the film occasionally deviates from the lockstep rigour of organicity – and furthermore, that such deviations are not necessarily antithetical to the demands of story, character, and theme. Does this admission render *Always* 'incoherent', as some postmodernist critics

would have it? Not in the least – for these moments of ‘disturbance’ take place within a stable, overriding framework that privileges organic fusion, synthesizing its salient parts into a single expressive whole. Moreover, as we’ve said, such deviations ultimately serve story functions, contributing circuitously to the narrative’s overall *coherence*. Even a well-told story governed by aesthetic unity permits a certain degree of structural looseness. The best way to grasp the film’s organically tenuous elements is to recognise these elements as *motivated* by some other storytelling concern, i.e. some motivation apart from the keynote principle of tight causal patterning. Spielberg may generally be pledged to an organicist aesthetic, but he is not intractably beholden to it. A film such as *Always* can slacken its unifying principles yet still evince the hallmarks of a well-told story.

Given that the problematic aspects of *Always* are contained within an overarching unifying structure, it is doubtful that they engendered the film’s critical and commercial failure. As inadequacies, difficulties, and latent ingenuities, they are hardly flagrant.¹² If contemporary critics worried that the creative vision that distinguished such films as *Duel* (1971) and *Jaws* (1975) had deserted Spielberg, a more careful inspection of *Always* would have assuaged their fears. As I have argued, Spielberg orients his formal and stylistic strategies to the requirements of storytelling: his shots may exceed narrative denotation to serve symbolic purpose; he makes expressive and portentous use of blocking and figure movement; and he achieves a studied unity of style and narrative, harnessing aural and visual techniques to the denotative and expressive demands of the story.

If some critical traditions have faulted Spielberg (and other so-called postclassical filmmakers) for elevating spectacle above narrative coherence, I have tried to show that *Always* carries forward an organic conception of filmic parameters, and moreover, instantiates its unifying strategies with considerable tact.¹³ Spielberg discreetly packs *Always* with bits of foreshadowing, recurring motifs, and internal norms, engendering the kind of intricately-wrought coherence that is endemic to the well-made film.

Apart from its internal coherence, *Always* exhibits a unifying engagement with Spielberg’s authorial body of work. Favourite themes nest on the film’s surface: the narrative trope of separation and reunion¹⁴; a protagonist forced to reconcile juvenile impulses with adult responsibility; and the recurrent commitment to fantastic

narratives. Allusion calls forth pertinent precursors, as in the closing scene's visual citation of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977). Evocations of World War II and an emphasis on flight recall most immediately *Empire of the Sun* (1987) and *1941* (1979). The symbiosis linking Pete and Ted evokes the somatic connection between Elliott (Henry Thomas) and the alien in *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982). And both the casting of Richard Dreyfuss and the orchestral score by John Williams inevitably summon to mind *Jaws*, as well as *Close Encounters*. Just as *Always* internally overflows with organically unifying elements, so it abounds with authorial continuities that assimilate coherently into an ongoing body of work.

As we have seen, *Always* is defensible against the most salient of its critical reproaches. Relinquishing the wartime context makes character flaws come forward with a great deal of force. And Spielberg's apparently troubling use of dusty movie dialogue conforms to canonic principles of construction. Far from slavishly reviving hackneyed movie dialogue, Spielberg molds the film's anachronistic speech into material apt to create organic unity. In Spielberg's hands, exhausted phrases become meaningful motifs, unifying discrete blocks of action and expressively conveying changes in character psychology. Thus even the manoeuvres that most trouble the film's critics can be seen to obey coherent compositional norms. In all, this enigmatic and intriguing film warrants reevaluation within the Spielberg canon. At the very least, *Always* demonstrates that a gifted filmmaker can handle standardized – one might even say 'hackneyed' – storytelling devices in deft and inventive ways.

Notes

¹ Cf. *Jaws* (1975): \$458m worldwide gross; *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982): \$701m; *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989): \$494.7m (McBride 1997; Friedman 2006; Nathan 1999).

² Aristotle writes that a plot must represent ‘a complete whole, with its several incidents so closely connected that the transposition or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole. For that which makes no perceptible difference by its presence or absence is no real part of the whole’ (Aristotle 1984, 2322). The importance of organic unity as a criterion for *film* art dates back at least to Hugo Münsterberg (see Münsterberg 1970, especially Part II: ‘The Esthetics of the Photoplay’).

³ The contours of the incoherence argument have been well explicated elsewhere (see for example Krämer 1999). Like Buckland, others have cogently rebuked this conventional wisdom. Counterarguments to the incoherence thesis are advanced in Bordwell 2006, King 2000, and Thompson 1999. With respect to Spielberg, see Buckland 1998 and 2006.

⁴ A corresponding attack is set forth by Pauline Kael: ‘[Spielberg] has caught the surface mechanics of ’40s movies [but has] no grasp of the simplicity that made them affecting. He overcooks everything, in a fast, stressful style’ (Kael 1990).

⁵ For Münsterberg, writing in the silent era and disdaining the prospect of talkies, organic unity involved the harmonious cooperation of ‘plot and pictorial appearance’, not sound. (See Münsterberg 1970, 82.) In contrast to the organicist perspective, David Bordwell has argued that an organic theory of film style ignores the decorative function that some filmmakers (such as Ozu Yasujiro) assign to stylistic devices. He writes: ‘we need not adopt either an organic or an ornamental definition of style a priori. We need only say that in some cases, style may work “organically” to convey meaning or expressive qualities, and that in other cases, it may seem “applied,” or laid over other components or structures’ (Bordwell 2008, 378).

⁶ This sequence markedly puts on display Dorinda’s tomboyish traits and her ambivalence toward conventional femininity – an amalgam of traits that recalls Holly Hunter’s earlier role in James L. Brooks’ *Broadcast News* (1987). It seems probable that Spielberg’s adroit casting of Hunter was inspired by the actor’s role in Brooks’ romantic comedy.

⁷ My argument that *Always* intensifies Fleming's compositional and narrational tactics ought not to be conflated with David Bordwell's concept of 'intensified continuity.' Although *Always* can be shown to adopt the idiom of intensified continuity (e.g. comparatively fast cutting, close framings, extreme lens lengths, and restless camera movement), my main concern here is to suggest that Spielberg appropriates specific tactics of delay and revelation (e.g. character reactions, foreground figures) and accentuates them. For intensified continuity, see Bordwell 2002.

⁸ This norm seems to be applied in particular to major turning points involving Dorinda. Spielberg repeats the pattern immediately after Pete's death. A close view of the watchtower door announces a restricted narration; the shift to unrestricted narration occurs when the door is opened, revealing Dorinda positioned obliquely in the background. Recall also Pete's first posthumous glimpse of Dorinda. Here an airplane wing blocks Pete's view of the heroine; as Pete crouches to look beyond the wing tip, Spielberg's camera reframes and racks focus to present Dorinda more legibly.

⁹ Radical as an inversion of Hollywood norms sounds, the film's story is in fact emphatically conservative in its ideological underpinnings. For instance, the film's inverted romance trope only serves to reinforce mainstream values: dispossessed of one heterosexual romance, Dorinda simply forges a new heterosexual relationship with Ted. *Always* also decisively circumvents a 'subversive' physical romance between Dorinda and her deceased lover.

¹⁰ This conflation of traits also muddies a conventional romance trope: namely, that a romantic couple is destined to be together on the basis of fundamentally compatible traits. Yet many of the personality traits that Dorinda finds attractive in Ted are those somatically channelled by her late paramour. The romantic suitability of Dorinda and Ted, so crucial to their union being a desirable outcome for the spectator, is not therefore *unequivocally* established.

¹¹ It is ironic that this theme in particular should be underdetermined in *Always*, given the salience of father-son relations within Spielberg's oeuvre.

¹² Nor can one fault the conception of the project itself. Spielberg's idea of remaking a 1940s movie about the afterlife had a prestigious precedent in *Heaven Can Wait* (1978), a reworking of *Here Comes Mr Jordan* (1941). With *Heaven Can Wait*, Warren Beatty showed that modern filmmakers could remake a classical film with

subject matter strikingly similar to that of *A Guy Named Joe*, and achieve substantial critical and commercial success. In the year following *Always*, moreover, *Ghost* (1990) employed a similar story premise with outstanding box-office results – ironically and indirectly vindicating Spielberg’s choice of story material, and confirming his savvy market awareness.

¹³ Consider the host of visual parallels in *Always* that yoke together distinct stretches of story action. The film’s opening shot is evoked near the end of reel one, when two foreground figures (Pete and Al) are frozen in the path of an ominously descending plane (advancing through the background planes of space, now piloted by Dorinda). Pete smears oil on Al’s cheeks in the first reel, an action that is recapitulated (this time thanks to the power of suggestion) in reel four – a slapstick routine that supplies both comic relief and intertextual allusion. (Spielberg inherits and reworks the oil gag from *A Guy Named Joe*.) Yellow-outfitted firefighters clamber down the steps of the watchtower to make way for Dorinda, furious at Pete’s haphazard flying; during the ensuing party sequence, they peel away in awe as Dorinda descends the staircase dressed in a shimmering white dress – a motivic juxtaposition that embodies the contrasting facets of Dorinda’s psychology. Character dialogue, as we’ve seen, provides a further unifying element. In the bar, Dorinda implores Pete to articulate his love for her, pleading: ‘Please, please, please’; in the previous forward-cleaving sequence, she breathlessly utters the same phrase as Pete’s plane begins its precarious descent.

¹⁴ Peter Krämer argues that this trope, so central to *Always*, can be seen to thread through several of Spielberg’s films since *E.T.* (Krämer, ‘Steven Spielberg, Oskar Schindler, and the Holocaust’, paper delivered at the Spielberg at Sixty International Conference, 21 November 2007).

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