A Cinema of Loneliness

This is an essay that reviews and discusses Robert Kolker's book on cinema: A Cinema of Loneliness.

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A Cinema of Loneliness is a book written by Robert Kolker, a professor of Film Studies and Digital Media. Along with A Cinema of Loneliness, he has written Film, Form and Culture, The Altering Eye (a book on European Cinema) and an online article, The Moving Image Reclaimed. While he has taught at three different schools in his career (University of Maryland, University of Virginia and Georgia Institute of Technology), his goal in teaching film has been the same: “Getting control of the image and handing that control over to students” (McGraw-Hill, 1). Kolker continues this statement by explaining that an audience cannot pause a film while it is playing at a cinema but with the technology of VCR and DVD, it is possible to become intimate with a film to allow a deeper analysis of it. This is an idea discussed by Kolker in the introduction to his book, A Cinema of Loneliness.

Kolker begins with an introduction that discusses the decline of assembly-line film production in the late 1950s and early 1960s – a system where major studios would have their own resources of producers, directors, writers and actors to quickly and efficiently make films. Television was a factor during this decline, which forced studios to experiment with Cinerama, Cinemascope, 3D and epics. While this time period included important films such as Vertigo (1958) and Touch of Evil (1958), it had economic issues by producing big budget films with no profit. This prompted studios to take low-cost risks on young filmmakers who, influenced by art cinema, delivered critical and challenging films. Kolker’s brief history of the studio system up to this point conveniently introduces the content of his book: an analysis of film directors who emerged and survived from this transitional state of the studio system. The directors in discussion are mainly Arthur Penn, Oliver Stone, Stanley Kubrick, Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, Robert Altman and David Fincher. While Fincher did not emerge from the same time period as the directors listed, Kolker introduces him in the book’s recent edition as another filmmaker who develops expressive and complex narratives. The author closes his introduction by writing that the technology allows him to view and analyze films like a book – having control of when to stop, look, or go back, which prepares the audience for a critical and deep analysis of cinema.
To briefly summarize the content of *A Cinema of Loneliness*, Kolker’s analysis of the directors is organized into five chapters: One: Penn, Stone, Fincher; two: Kubrick; three: Scorsese; four: Spielberg, and five: Altman. The author explains their styles by examining selected films and connects them with the subject of loneliness in films and our culture. Kolker describes a film noir-influenced Arthur Penn as having characters that are paranoid, trapped, and vulnerable as in *Mickey One* (1965) and *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). The author attributes similar qualities to Oliver Stone and David Fincher in the same chapter. Stanley Kubrick is discussed as a filmmaker who is disconnected from commercial American cinema, which is why he was able to develop such complex narrative and cinematic space with his camerawork as Orson Welles did. His characters also deal with isolation, especially in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Kolker relates Martin Scorsese to Arthur Penn as having psychologically driven character studies such as Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (1976), another connection to the term in discussion of loneliness. The author describes Steven Spielberg’s films as “absorptive and distributive” (Kolker, 325) meaning that he forces the spectator into his worlds and satisfies the audience, a world that is often built with special effects, a topic he also discusses alongside Spielberg’s films. While his characters can experience isolation, the author also suggests the isolation of the viewer within the realm of cinema. Finally, Kolker concludes with Robert Altman, a filmmaker who provides loose narratives with wide perspectives, demanding the audience to pay close attention, much like Douglas Sirk’s trust on the viewer’s imagination.

Kolker’s book is well structured. He begins with a historical introduction to lead into the start of the filmmakers’ careers and each chapter is dedicated to a certain approach to film and the directors’ styles. While they have stylistic differences, Kolker finds ways to connect them and he does so by exploring communication theories of ideology by Louis Althusser and encoding/decoding by Stuart Hall. A *Cinema of Loneliness* introduces these theories because they are important to how Kolker will examine his films without solely looking at form. Ideologically, films are embedded with social needs of a certain culture or group of people. These ideas are coded by the filmmaker and are open to be decoded by the audience. Along with communication theory, film theory is also discussed when explaining films in order to discuss their influences. For instance, Kolker writes about film noir and German expressionism when explaining Arthur Penn’s films and Sergei Eisenstein when discussing Oliver Stone’s way of cutting film. Expanding on film history, he discusses many films outside a director’s work. For example, he explains how Martin Scorsese’s *Goodfellas* (1990) emerges from Raoul Walsh’s *The Roaring Twenties* (1939).

From the explanation of Kolker’s writing approach to *A Cinema of Loneliness*, it is evident that there is a lot of information in this book, making it a dense reading. I believe it is because the author analyzes most of the major films of seven directors along with film theory, film history, and concepts of ideology. Taking an enormous amount of information and condensing it makes the book a challenge to follow. It was challenging to follow because the directors have different approaches to film and it is difficult to read a heavy analysis on Kubrick, move on to Scorsese, and then to Spielberg – three different directors who each deserve their own book. Albeit the challenging read, I appreciated Kolker’s attempt to connect each director’s work through the idea of loneliness. The connection is valid with the filmmakers having had a portrayal of these paranoid, self-centered characters in their work.

I enjoyed the addition of David Fincher in the author’s fourth edition of the book. Being one of my favorite directors, it was interesting to read an academic analysis on *The Social Network* (2010) for the first time. A minor aspect I found disappointing was the inclusion of Oliver Stone’s *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (2010) and the disregard of *The Doors* (1991). Although the film did not have a true rendering of Jim Morrison, I found it more interesting than the *Wall Street* (1987) sequel, especially in the way it was edited (this could have been an interesting analysis with Eisenstein in discussion).

Martin Scorsese is the only filmmaker with a reported one-line review of the book that states *A Cinema of Loneliness*, “Brings the films into clearer focus for film-goers. The filmmakers themselves will find Kolker’s analysis of their works extremely accurate” (Oxford University Press, 1). While the information is dense, Kolker demonstrates a great understanding of film history, theory, and the movies in discussion.

### Bibliography


http://global.oup.com/academic/product/a-cinema-of-loneliness


Cloud Tank Effects

This essay is a short analysis of the atmospheric effect of Cloud Tanks, and its use and innovation in Steven Spielberg’s 1977 film Close Encounters of the Third Kind.

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Anyone would find a tank of water and imagine what kind of fish would swim in it. A visual effects artist, however, would imagine what kind of Cloud Tank effect he or she could create. A Cloud Tank is a water tank that is used to create the atmospheric effect of the formation of clouds. The cinematic effect is consequently named the Cloud Tank effect. The effect’s process begins with filling a water tank halfway with saltwater which is then layered with a thin plastic sheet. Fresh water is poured over the thin layer of plastic to fill the rest of the tank. This leaves the visual effects artist to remove the thin layer of plastic to reveal what seems to be a single body of water, but is really two layers of different densities: salt water and fresh water. Finally, paint is injected into the tank and it flows through the water, forming an organic cloud figure (Bjerre, 1). This is an effect and process first developed by special effects artist Douglas Trumbull during his work on Steven Spielberg’s 1977 film Close Encounters of the Third Kind.

As Douglas Trumbull explains in The Making of Close Encounters of the Third Kind (Bouzereau, 2001), it was Steven Spielberg’s idea to have the clouds as a hiding space for UFOs until the Mothership would emerge out of the clouds. Trumbull and his team began by adding white paint into a full tank of water. Experimenting with this concept, they determined the effectiveness of filling the tank with both fresh water and salt water. Trumbull explains that this enabled a difference in gravity that was invisible to the camera, which allowed the paint to develop a flat bottom and cloud-like atmosphere when forming through the fresh water. This process is described as laborious; Trumbull and his team only managed to shoot one Cloud Tank effect per day, maybe two if they were lucky. Scott Squires, an assistant to Douglas Trumbull in Close Encounters of The Third Kind, expands on the difficult process in recent personal accounts (Squires, 1). A 2000 gallon glass tank was used that was approximately seven feet tall, seven feet wide and four feet deep which would have to be emptied and refilled after every shot.

After the Cloud Tank effects were captured on film, they were composited onto the rest of the film, a process of layering multiple images from separate sources as one (Prince, 59). As Douglas Trumbull expands on this procedure, he states that while most of the film was shot on 35mm Anamorphic, all the visual effects, including the Cloud effects, were shot on 65mm. If the visual effects were shot on 35mm, the film would degrade when composited with the film. To compensate for this, the Cloud Effects were shot on film double the size and they optically combined the visual effects with the film on 65mm. Later, they reduced the composited film to 35mm Anamorphic.

The success of Cloud Tank effects as an atmospheric quality in Close Encounters of Third Kind inspired Steven Spielberg and other filmmakers to continue utilizing the effect for intense, climactic and dramatic scenes in Raiders of the Lost Ark (Spielberg, 1981), Poltergeist (Hooper, 1982), and Independence Day (Emmerich, 1996). Although Independence Day used this technique, it was manipulated by computer technology that was developed in the late nineties (Bjerre, 1), technology that ultimately ended the practical effect and began the CGI rendering of Cloud Tank effects, a process that would be less laborious and more controlled. Although the practical effect is obsolete in the industry, a young-generation of filmmakers, including myself, is seen experimenting with Cloud Tank effects and posting tutorials for other aspiring filmmakers on the Internet. Like most practical effects, the pure joy of experimenting with Cloud Tanks is something a computer cannot match or take away.

Bibliography


“Jurassic Park: Evolving the Movie Industry” is an essay that explores the production conditions of Steven Spielberg’s 1993 blockbuster film *Jurassic Park* by analyzing its exhibition, marketing, and technology.

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A billionaire philanthropist and a group of scientists successfully cloned dinosaurs and situated the prehistoric creatures in an amusement park on the remote island of Isla Nebula. They called it Jurassic Park. Of course, this is a fiction, depicted in the 1993 film *Jurassic Park* directed by Steven Spielberg. From previous accomplishments at a blockbuster level that include *Jaws* (1975) and *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), Spielberg is one of the few directors that can create a unique big-budget film that is, “visually spectacular, narratively straight-forward, stylistically innocuous [meaning inoffensive], and compatible with the parent conglomerate’s global marketing and franchising strategies” (Schatz, 51). Like the impact the fictitious world of *Jurassic Park* had on its characters, its impact on the film industry was likewise extraordinary and significant to the film’s success – success based on its exhibition tactics, marketing, production and technology.

*Jurassic Park* adopted a new trend in film exhibition, which was tele-ticketing: a form where audiences purchased tickets over the telephone (*Jurassic’s Mark*, 13). Audiences did have to pay the extra dollar or so to purchase the ticket with this system but they were guaranteed seats for films with high-demand (Other, 8). During the film’s release, some questioned the longevity of this technology, but this concern would not last long when the system was proven successful for *Jurassic Park*. MovieFone sales were responsible for two-thirds of *Jurassic Park*’s opening weekend sale in New York and Los Angeles (Marketing News, 11) and cinema tele-ticketing sales grew 60% because of *Jurassic Park*, which became the biggest telephone order to a movie (Jurassic’s Mark, 13). The popularity of this technology grew from its financial performance and is significant to contemporary film exhibition as discussed by author Charles Acland: “The film industry and cultural practices is bending to economic and technological change” (Acland, 85). MovieFone is an example of Acland’s statement, as it spawned online purchasing of films on Movielink, Apple iTunes, and Amazon.com. Certainly, studios do receive more than merely the big-buck of the audience through tele-ticketing. With access to the ticket buyer’s information, studios have the opportunity to send film merchandise advertisement (Marketing News, 11), a feature to *Jurassic Park*’s campaign.

Media conglomerates, the merging of film and other media industries (Schatz, 45), had an impact on *Jurassic Park*’s ability to spark synergies with companies and develop extensive merchandise, including interactive media, theme park attractions and miscellaneous products such as Jurassic JuJu Dinosaurs Concession Pack candies directly marketed for theater concession stands (New Products, 23). Conglomerating was an early objective for *Jurassic Park*, as during post-production, Amblin and Universal announced 100 companies that would launch 1000 products of the film that included a theme park, toys, Milton Bradley board games, Nintendo video games, and cross-markets with McDonalds, a frequent marketing collaborator with Spielberg films (National News, 24). These products illustrate Charles Acland’s statement that film business extends outside of the film presentation (Acland, 85). *Jurassic Park*’s attraction at Universal Studios Florida offered a water ride that MCA described as a ride that “takes you into Jurassic Park, just like in the movie” (Variations, 18). The true thrill ride, however, still lies within the film celluloid, where Spielberg’s use of computer-generated imagery, animatronics and digital sound...
turn the dinosaurs into believable creatures on screen.

The progression of technology offers synergies with multimedia, but it is also offers new software to produce realistic computer-generated imagery. Co-founder of VIFX/Video Image Greg McMurry praised Jurassic Park, a film that gave rise to a new age for digital imaging for its use of CGI, by stating, “That was really the turning point for the medium, when filmmakers began to see the possibilities and to want to use them” (Loewenstein, 72). Author Geoff King argues that although contemporary blockbusters use too many effects that ultimately distract the filmmakers from story and character development, there are still spectacular Hollywood blockbusters that do invest their craft on narrative (King, 119). King uses James Cameron’s Terminator 2 (1991) as an example of well-motivated use of CGI, and the same can be argued for Jurassic Park. Spielberg gives great detail to the characters and because of this, we feel emotionally attached to them. When they are in danger by the dinosaurs, we are scared, and when they are in awe, we are too. With CGI, Spielberg also incorporates animatronics technology from the past, only heightening its realism.

Juxtaposed with its visuals, the sound of Jurassic Park is just as grand, and was deservedly played with DTS (Digital Theater Systems). A thousand US cinemas were equipped with DTS specifically for its release (Hazelton, 7) and offered an overwhelming experience. The enhanced audio playback offered a high-fidelity range that can truly capture the sounds of a dinosaur’s footsteps from afar to the menacing sound of their roars, complementing their realistic appearance on screen.

In conclusion, Jurassic Park’s exhibition standards, merchandising and digital imagery lead to its worldwide financial success. The power of its production and marketing, with the technology available at the time, seized the industry, and lead the way to industry standards we are accustomed to today.

List of Works Cited:


Steven Spielberg accepted no money for his work on Schindler's List, and instead donated his salary and all of his future profits from the movie to The Shoah Foundation. Did You Know? Steven Spielberg is the godfather of both Drew Barrymore and Gwyneth Paltrow. **Place of Birth.** Cincinnati, Ohio. **AKA.** Steven Spielberg. **Full Name.** Steven Allan Spielberg. **Zodiac Sign.** Sagittarius. Steven Spielberg is one of the wealthiest and most powerful moviemakers in Hollywood. The director of such elaborate fantasies as Close Encounters of the Third Kind and E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial, he is regarded as a man who understands the pulse of America as it would like to see itself. **Early years.** Steven Spielberg was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, on December 18, 1947. He was the oldest and the only son of four children. His father, Arnold, was an electrical engineer.