Steven Spielberg’s first feature-length film *Duel* is a Hitchcock inspired thriller

By Oliver Spivey

Staff Writer

Shot in just 12 days, Steven Spielberg’s *Duel* (1971) is the kind of movie Hitchcock would have been proud to have made. In this, his first full-length film, Spielberg shows that he is definitely an adept student of the master, who, once remarked how he liked to “play the audience like a piano.”

The movie opens with a car leaving a tranquil suburban neighborhood. From there we see it entering the noisy and congested city and at last appearing on a desolate stretch of desert highway.

The common sounds of civilization fade. The radio channels begin to lose frequency. Spielberg draws us into a story that becomes a primal battle—albeit with modern machines—in a mythical infernal wasteland.

The protagonist is a wily, itinerant salesman named David Mann (Dennis Weaver) who makes the regrettable decision to try and pass a test for his life insurance. It is a beautifully filmed scene. Could one of them be his enemy? It is a brilliant, nerve-rattling foreshadowing.

On the DVD interview, Spielberg discusses that when the film was later released theatrically in France it was as an ABC TV movie of the week. Critics went wild for it, thinking it was a statement about class warfare. Spielberg insists that he was making a film that was meant to be a personal exercise in Hitchcockian style. Well, he may not have intended symbols, but there are some fairly metaphoric moments nevertheless.

There are definitely sexual overtones dealing with male impotence in the film. We hear Mann arguing with his wife on the phone earlier in the film about his lack of fortitude in dealing with a man who was coming on to her at a party the previous night. Later, Mann comes across a stuck school bus filled with kids.

The bus driver asks if Mann would try to push them out from behind with his small car. While attempting to do so, the children inside taunt him for his ineffectiveness.

There’s something going on here whether Spielberg intended it or not. It may have found a place in the movie by way of Richard Matheson who adapted the screenplay from his story.

Matheson is an intelligent writer who gave us several classic episodes of “The Twilight Zone,” as well as a handful of screenplays for Vincent Price vehicles including the sci-fi favorite *Last Man on Earth* (1957) that was recently remade as *I am Legend* (2007) starring Will Smith. The sexual suggestion in *Duel* seems more valid when one considers Matheson’s writing of *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957), a movie that irrebuttable is a story of male impotence.

In the early 70’s, films about men from a modern, sheltered world entering a more primitive and savage one seemed to be the rage. Films like Sam Peckinpah’s *Straw Dogs* (1971), or John Boorman’s *Deliverance* (1972) were also about men digging deep in search of their inner machismo in order to survive.

However you want to read it, *Duel* is a great little movie. Some of the edge-of-your-seat action sequences remind us that this is Spielberg’s film all the way.

While watching the movie, I couldn’t help thinking of all the other exhilarating action extravaganzas Spielberg has made: *Jaws* (1975), *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), *Jurassic Park* (1993), *Minority Report* (2002) as well as a handful of *The Twilight Zone* episodes that exemplify the reason we read it, watch it, or listen to it. So does this one.

Classic French short film is a magical experience

By Oliver Spivey

Staff Writer

Alfert Larousse’s *The Red Balloon* (Le Ballon Rouge 1956) is one of the most beloved short films of all time. If you attended an American elementary school during the 1960s, you may fondly remember being shown the 34 minute film on 16mm prints.

It is a beautiful and simple story you are not likely to forget: a young boy finds a red balloon tied to a lampost on his way to school. The balloon soon assumes a life of its own, following the boy through the streets of Paris. The world’s cruelty and intolerance find a way in, however, and threatens the boy’s imaginative relationship with the balloon.

The balloon faces discrimination, exclusion, and even violence from public transit conductors, the boy’s mother, a little black dog and vicious schoolboys. One thing a child admire about the film is how Larousse leaves its meaning open for multiple interpretations.

This film is a possible political message about tolerance and the acceptance of diversity (perhaps a commentary on foreign immigrants), or a Christian allegory, with the balloon as a Christ figure whose ultimate sacrifice assists in the restoration of imagination and innocence to the world; or the notion of childhood fantasy as the only real defense against an adult world consumed with aloofness and preju
dices.

Besides the film’s interesting thematic ideas, it is no less a pure joy to watch. It is filled with many memorable scenes, such as the one where the balloon stops to admire itself in a mirror or the endearing action of the boy when he and his balloon pass a young girl with a blue balloon and we watch the two balloons go after each other with mutual attraction.

The post-war streets of Paris have never looked so good and the little cafes and shops along cobblestoned streets are a quaint delight for the eyes. Winner of an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay, *The Red Balloon* is a shining example of visual storytelling with hardly any words spoken.

If you had the pleasure of watching Pixar’s masterful animated film *Up*, from last summer, you may notice more than a few parallels once you watch *The Red Balloon*.

For instance, Maurice Lenox’s score for *The Red Balloon* is followed closely in style and mood by Michael Giacchino’s score for *Up*—with both giving off sentiment and wonder.

One of the other obvious similarities is the depiction of multi-colored balloons floating our heroes away to far-off places of the imagination.

This film is much more than a children’s story; it’s a human one.

There are so many imaginative films we don’t need to see in our lifetimes in order to feel more complete as human beings and moviegoers. *The Red Balloon* is certainly not one of them.