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Social Encounters between Frank Capra and Steven Spielberg

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Abstract: *This article is about a social and human issue. Historically, film critics have recognized Frank Capra as a humanist filmmaker. The findings will attempt to show how Steven Spielberg works also evidence his humanistic spirit after an almost finished PH.D research. This study illustrates the interest of both authors comparative. The body of this exhibition exposes in a general point of view that which is synonymous to both filmmakers and that which is unique in each of these master filmmakers.*

This study also presents a comparative analysis of the subjects around three general aspects: human excellence, individual ethical behaviour and the privilege of individual freedom before the submission to another being or State.

Great human subjects compose the conclusion of this paper whereas the common themes and the original and unique characteristics of each director are underlined. In conclusion, the research tries to prove that Spielberg is also worried about social issues and creates a humanist culture.

1 Introduction

We meet here on this occasion with the consideration of the American Jewish film director Steven Spielberg being a humanist, author as much by the extension of the treatment, as by the depth of the subjects about human dignity in his films.

We will compare him with a film director who has already been recognised as a classic: Frank Capra. It is true that there are other American directors that we can consider like humanists, but we decided to choose Capra as an object of investigation which appears to be interesting. We have read many interviews about him, he also had an autobiographical book, but mainly we considered that it was possible to compare him with Spielberg because of their

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mutual affinity. However Capra is a recognized humanist as much by critics as by academics without discussion. Further more, Spielberg himself admires this italoamerican and he refers to him as a reference to humanism in the cinema. Coincidentally both admire the same great film directors: John Ford and Howard Hawks. We found many aspects in common and some differences that turned the comparison of interest at the time of studying humanism.

In addition this investigation considers it interesting because from the beginning we considered that it would become clear that Spielberg as much by Jewish education as by his thematic inclination he follows his own humanism, following his own thoughts, experiences and feelings. Further away as it was expected by his generational influence. Although he in a parallel way follows a filmic conception as Frank Capra has, filmmaker to whom he admires, when the italoamerican film director postulates in a well-known declaration close to *It's a wonderful life* in 1946: "the films must be the positive expression in which exists the hope, the love, the compassion and the charity... It is the responsibility (of the cinema) to emphasize the positive qualities of the humanity by the sample of triumph of the person in adversity."

The interest of this article consists of evaluating the perspective of this contemporary American film director, Steven Spielberg, considering the accumulation of American and European academic studies, like several doctoral theses, and several monographic books written by specialists. In this research it has been revised a wide bibliography in English, Spanish, French and Italian about S. Spielberg. In addition, we consider him as a film director that counts with a consistent filmic career, and has an important popular influence, and therefore, also cultural.

The methodology that we will use to demonstrate the consideration of S. Spielberg as an humanist creator consists in an analytical thematic study of the films of both film directors on the subject of the human dignity present in the narrative (plots and its subplots) and through the personages (especially of the protagonist). In order to give a

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first approach of the subjects surrounding human dignity we have to consider three main aspects of its human excellence (sense of life, transcendental sense, hope, dignity of the individual, roll of the women, etc), individual ethical behaviour (friendship, love, tolerance, honesty) and the privilege of the individual freedom versus the submission of another person or State (individual against the mass, peace, solidarity, idealism, utopia, etc).

We will analyse a similar number of films by both filmmakers with the selection criteria by choosing the films that began to have wide range of these two film directors. The sample of Spielberg includes films from *Sugarland Express* (1974) to *Munich* (2005). Altogether there are 23 films which include 31 years of direction. The sample of films of Frank Capra includes 30 years of direction and twenty films of which two are remakes. Therefore we have not considered some films of the initial career of the italoamerican film director. The films extend from *The miracle woman* (1931) to *Pocketful of miracles* (1961). We will not consider documentary military series and television series.

Next, in the centre of the exhibition to begin with are exposed the points in common and divergent of these film directors in a general way. Later a thematic and comparative analysis of the subjects will appear about the three general aspects that we already have stated about human dignity.

2. Points in Common between Masters

First of all, we set out the points in common in both filmmakers. As far as the biographical factors, we found two similar points, and as far as the professional factors, we found surprisingly many points of similarity, because we found at least fifteen points in which they both converge.

The analogous personal factors are that both had failed marriages and a second marriage that permits them an emotional stability. The second point is that they both enjoyed the fame in their career relatively early on and while they are alive. Capra from *It happened one night* (1934) when

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he was 37 years old. Spielberg soon wins success with *Jaws* (1975) when he was 29 years old.

As far as professional factors they both enjoy their profession. They have had a consistent filmmaking career because they have directed so many films. Frank Capra thirty five, Steven Spielberg twenty six, so far.

As we said before both share the admiration of John Ford and Howard Hawks. Capra admits that his films have the influence of these film directors (Leland A. Poague, *Frank Capra interviews*, (University Press of Mississippi: Jackson, 2004), 120-121). They both know the production process completely and not only the task of direction. Capra began as a prop man, publisher, inventing gags, personal assistant and scriptwriter. An important factor is that both have experience of scriptwriting. Capra had more than Spielberg, who has three films and two other stories. Spielberg wrote, directed and produced his own documentaries when very young, and also directed also a film series on television. So, both have previous experience in direction and scriptwriting which are two important landmarks on the production control. Capra also directed silent comedies (the series of Harry Langdom), documentaries of military and scientific propaganda. Both have a lot of experience in production. Both take part in the process of script construction in collaboration with the scriptwriters; Spielberg every week, Capra daily. We respect the point of view of some academics that maintain the suspicion that F. Capra copied ideas from the scriptwriter R. Riskin. We will not deepen here in this question. We will consider here the authorship of Capra because of the unity of content in his films and the consideration of the audience as creator and humanist. They both give importance to the main idea of the story and from it they create a story with their own values. Both are experts in leading the audience's emotion. Capra reveals: "You've got to appeal to basic emotions as a general guideline. It's the basic tale that counts, and by that I don't mean that the screen can't convey a message." (Leland A. Poague, *Frank Capra interviews*, (University Press of Mississippi: Jackson, 2004) 71).

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Moreover both filmmakers have abilities in the direction of actors, both can and will improvise when such is their control on the product, because we understand that they have an intentional landlord of content, and in the form they look for creativeness guided by their own inspiration. They make good use of the advantages of the human factors, very important in the production like the contribution of the actors, or other members. They have directed famous actors, and some several times. Both directors think in detail of the interpretation, for example, the nervousness of Mr. Smith in *Mr. Smith goes to Washington* when he is speaking with the daughter of the senator (because he likes her so much), it is reflected in the focussing of the hands' gesture with the hat. This gesture is parallel to the one from the father and the son in *Catch me if you can* when they embrace each other where only the hands tightening in their backs are focused. Finally they both take part in the editing process, so this means they have control of the product through to the end.

Almost all the films that they have directed are based on stories, tales, news, etc. They use the initial idea, but they construct the personages, they direct the plot and the subplots towards other constant content within their conception on certain subjects. Both recognize that they introduce biographical elements or valuations in characters, so this sample shows the intent and the control they have on the story.

Both filmmakers tend to use realistic details, but in the end they tend to idealize. They usually give a happy, optimistic end. Both believe in the common citizen, his individual leadership and the popular power that he may possibly get. In their films a common citizen appears in an unusual situation.

Both directors have social consciousness. They are worried about contemporary social issues (as with the women's role socially because the social and economic changes, of how women have tried to adapt; as the benefits of the American melting pot, their adaptation and integration and proud to be part of America.... Both sympathize with the contemporary problems of their time and for that reason

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they please the audience (F. Capra representing the feelings of the real people at the time of the Depression, Spielberg expressing the feelings after the events of September 11th). Both contribute to the conception of the American myth, but at the same time they are critics and highlight negative aspects of the society. They are accustomed in portraying stories of the American society except on a few occasions (F. Capra in *The bitter tea of general Yen* and *Lost Horizon* and S. Spielberg in *Amistad*, *Empire of sun*, *Schindler's list*).

Both masters spin the perfect plot with narrative ability. F. Capra after *American Madness* accelerates the shooting process and gives a continued suspense to the film. The perception of the movement for Capra means life; for that reason it is the frequent use of transport within this dynamic way in order to give a greater optimism (Leland A. Poague, *Frank Capra interviews*, (University Press of Mississippi: Jackson, 2004) 93). Spielberg is more simplistic in narrative to facilitate the reception, but he is also original when he uses the props as narrative connectors (for example, the bottle without label in *Catch me if you can* suggests the presence of Frank Jr. Abagnale).

Both are able to captivate the spectator through the characters, because they succeed in attracting the attention visually towards them. Both have been recognized by the public and the union. Capra with many Oscars and some as Best Director (*It happened one night*, *Mr. Deeds goes to town*, *You can't take it with you*). He was President of the AMPAS and the Screen Directors Guild. He received the Film Institute's Life Achievement Award.

Spielberg has collected more Oscars and he also has got other important prizes. He was first nominated as best director with *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977). He again was to be nominated for *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) and *E.T.: the Extraterrestrial* (1982). He finally received the prize for *Schindler's list* (1993) and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). He received honours such as the "Lifetime Achievement award at the directors Guild" in 2000, and other civil honours such as "the National Humanities Medal"

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given by President Bill Clinton, and he was named as Sir by Great Britain's Queen Elisabeth.

3. Divergent Points between Capra and Spielberg

Between the factors that differentiate them, we found one important factor: the historical one, several personal factors and only one professional. The historical factor in broad strokes locates F. Capra at the end of century XIX throughout XX century (1897-1991), and S. Spielberg from middle of century XX to the beginning of the XXI. The italoamerican lives at the time of the American Depression, and the two World Wars. Spielberg was born after the Second World War.

As far as personal factors F. Capra is a catholic Italian immigrant, nationalized later as an American, however S. Spielberg was already born in the USA called "first generation American" with a Jewish background.

F. Capra has a humble social origin. His family underwent as much economic shortages in Sicily as in California. He started working when he was just a boy, in this sense he is a "self made man". Perhaps for this reason that makes him more sensitive about social issues and explains why he insists in portraying the humble classes. More importantly he has got more contradictions in his starting career as a filmmaker than Spielberg.

The italoamerican had a qualification in Manual Arts (High school) and he graduated from the technological institute of Chemical Engineering (Caltech). He has a practical qualification in Arts and Sciences. He participated in an investigation project and recognizes that he would like to be a university professor. Other events that we can underline are that he was in the army in World War I and that he also lived through the second. He also learnt to become a film director in a self-taught form. About the other filmmaker, Spielberg, he comes from the middle-class; he did not have economic shortages. He only dedicated himself to get a self-taught formation as film director and he didn't have as much interest in his university studies in

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Humanities because of his dedication to the practice and formation in cinema.

Other factors that caught our attention are that Capra has a case of depression after the success of *It happened one night*. He had a greater psychological instability. We do not know if Spielberg has had any or not. Capra underwent the loss of his small son. He has 3 children altogether and one deceased. Spielberg has four biological children, two adopted and his wife has a daughter from a previous marriage. He has the responsibility of seven children. We think that in this sense the italoamerican underwent major personal suffering, and this made him consider the subject of the meaning of life. The greater suffering that he could have had Spielberg is the unstable marriage of his parents which ended in and also his own divorce from his first wife.

Capra considered himself a Republican; however Spielberg is Democratic according to his position on summer of the 2007 in supporting Hillary Clinton, and nowadays president Barak Obama.

The professional factor that differs between them is that F. Capra has many comedies (he creates “screwball comedy”), although he also considered melodramas. Spielberg treats all sorts of genre.

4. Comparative Analysis on Human Dignity

This article now presents a comparative analysis of the subjects around three general aspects in both filmmakers: human excellence, individual ethical behaviour and the privilege of individual freedom before the submission to another being or State.

a. Human excellence

Subjects in common

Their humanist force is based on the solid idea of the human dignity’s respect that they both maintain. Both filmmakers maintain the uniqueness of the person and the transcendental or religious affirmation of men. F. Capra has

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more declarations where he relates in a more explicit form a philosophical truth about men to the corresponding religious declaration. They both consider the individual in an optimistic and comprehensive way. They both speak of human happiness from different approaches.

Original contributions

The exposition of Spielberg on the supreme value of the individual is realised from another point of view than Capra. It is worth the risk of a person, Oskar Schindler, of saving a few, while others (thousands, millions) are eliminated in the Holocaust, and at the same time it is worth the pain that a military unit offers for the life of a soldier (in *Saving Private Ryan*).

The originality of Capra as far as the sense of the life consists when a man discovers and is conscious that his love, service and solidarity has served so much for other men and women of his community; simultaneously it appears the counterpoint of the temptation of the suicide when there is desperation in many of his films. In S. Spielberg it is understood that the life has a sense, nevertheless, it is more contemplated the program what a man must do to be happy in a structured way.

As far as the transcendental sense of a person, F. Capra has a sense more clearly providential of the daily events than Spielberg. He affirms that the value of the person and the value towards others fellows fortify the religious sense and fights the atheistic sense. In the italoamerican director the declarations of hope are clearer when he declares that if he tries to give a message then it is that there is hope. Capra also has a clear intention, when he says that the emotion must help to raise the moral of the audience.

Spielberg insists more in other aspects of the person, for instance, he defines humans in their essence and qualities as in the spiritual quality (the man is spirit; he has fantasy capacity, to persecute dreams...). It is important that he emphasizes the practical necessity of the person who

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poses love and that he formulates a Metaphysical answer: the person is love (in *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*). Other important elements for the personal accomplishment, therefore, are the convenience of communication in the familiar and social relations, to get a home and a stable family by a paternity exerted with responsibility.

It is a capricious subject to properly criticise the high class and the defence of the value of the middle-class by ways of social positive construction. It is suggested that the money, the high social status and a high life-style does not give happiness. The myth of Cinderella is a constant as materialization and expression personified of the American Dream. He explains in an interesting way in *You can't take it with you* the convenience that each person develops and applies her own talents at work, and actually enjoys her work. Another peculiar subject is the right's defence to the fame and the image. As far as the woman he talks about the change of the women's role in the twenties insisting on the limits that she finds by social class, by institutions or moral conventions. He characterizes some women as professionals as they appear in many of his films. Also it is frequent that women are crucial support to a man at a certain time so that he fights for the right cause.

b. Human ethical behaviour

Subjects in common

They deal with the subject of tolerance in a similar form, but for Spielberg it is a central subject and he develops more characters and situations within it. In Capra the tolerance appears with special relief in the personage of Mr. Smith. Just when he is named as senator, Mr. Smith accounts the importance that the children became conscious of the tolerance's necessity. Also for that time it is remarkable the tolerance that he admits in the loving relation between different races, cultures and religion between Mss. Megan and general Yang in *The bitter tea of General Yang*.

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With both film directors the action pauses to show the inner battle of the characters' conscience. Also it appears the overcoming of the characters' errors and the insecurity that makes them more human in the end. Both consider issues like the accomplishment of the person, the love, the friendship; the freedom, the honesty and solidarity, but they emphasize some aspects more than others.

Original contributions of each filmmaker

Perhaps in Spielberg the subject of the initiatory way of love to reach the maturity and the connection with the tolerance is a personal note. In contrast the myth of Peter Pan frequently appears, the boy who never wants to grow up. Perhaps in addition, F. Capra observes the honesty and the necessity of friendship like personal accomplishment while he is still alive, like true possession and wealth. The subject of the honesty is especially more developed as central by the italoamerican in many of his films. Also he gives importance to the fact of admiring and enjoying small things of daily life.

Frank Capra comments in several ways the aspects of love. The marriage is broken when there is no respect for the other's freedom. It also appears with own relief the subject of the sincerity of a couple that makes strong their relationship. It deserves a special commentary the familiar conflicts that appear in many of Capra's films. Mainly it appears the filial revolt towards the parents.

In Steven Spielberg the redemption of the person is through love in all forms exposed: the love of friendship, the love of parents to son, or among brothers. Parents and son relationship is specially described, or among brothers for being a subject of special interest to the American Jewish film director. He is interested in underlining the necessity to exert a responsible paternity by giving a moral example to the children. We only have a case of filial revolt in both children of Ray Ferrier. The representation of marriages recovered or stable nearly predominates on the unstructured families.

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Perhaps the professional picture of unions is more limited in Capra than Spielberg that includes an ampler fan.

Spielberg has the peculiarity that freedom and conscience are two central subjects with relation that he develops and deepens throughout several films and culminates in two films at the end of his journey (*Minority Report* and *Munich*). He is interested in showing that the recovery of mans spirit when his conscience is at peace because he has decide ethically his action in the right way.

Both filmmakers raise human solidarity like advisable in the social coexistence. Capra is remembered by this subject because he insists on the necessity of value in some important films like the trilogy of Mr. Deeds, Mr. Smith and with greater maturity the social thought to help the neighbour in *Meet John Doe* and in *It's a wonderful life*. Nevertheless, Spielberg gives a ampler treatment to this issue. The peculiarity of Spielberg is that it is exposed within his programmatic plan of a person's maturity. The person is realised in her projection towards the donation (the exercise of love to others) contained in her happy thought, or own reason (happy thought), and the acquisition of conscience's formation through universal values towards and with a reference of ethic goods and objective basic truths.

The subject of money with a moral approach is a peculiar subject of F. Capra. Money is good if it is not used for good things because nor money nor high social status does give happiness. Happiness is also reached knowing how to enjoy small things of daily life and having the correct feelings towards the neighbours.

c. Individual freedom in relationship of others or the State

Subjects in common

About the respect to the individual, they give supreme dignity to him, but they treat different aspects. They both criticize the capitalist society, but also from different angles. They have an exposition of the necessity about the ecological

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care on the part of the industrialized society. They are both worried about the North American society. They are simultaneously interested in formulating what a perfect society would be and they take care of the dangers that can present the future. They both agree that social solidarity and peace will be two values needed for modern society.

Original contributions

F. Capra defends the individual freedom versus the behaviour of the masses. He is against the trend of uniformity or systematization of the individual. The citizens must have the right to think for themselves. The characterization that occurs to the masses at some times can be negative (egoistic, hypocritical, distrusted and easily manipulated), but always triumphs the idea that it is better to maintain confidence in others. Other treatment of individual is that the nation's concept comes sustained by the individual. It appears in numerous occasions denounced the judicial and political corruption.

S. Spielberg defends and grants privilege to the individual freedom defining it like free will, for example, like freedom's self control of each person versus the slavery, the marital submission, etc. He exposes also with optimism the inner freedom. He defends the individual freedom (according to the liberal conception) in front of the State that does not respect some freedom or is totalitarian. The man is the one that builds the society through the constitution of a family, if the initiative comes from the system and not from the individual, and then it will not be fair to the individual. About the North American national identity he is interested in indicating that it is a social progressive work with a multicultural interactional factor that is defined in the inner relationships of the ones that compose and coexist.

The critic of Capitalism in Capra tries to show the consequences of this system for instance, when it is rampant it leads to economic crisis. Spielberg exposes it from the rejection to the individualism, the utilitarianism, the materialism, the corporativism, etc. The preoccupation of the

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future society according to the technologic advances is a peculiar issue of the American Jewish director.

The subject of the idealism in F. Capra is original. He relates it to the honest action of civic and social life. On the other hand, he is realistic because he discovers the real difficulties, and does not diminish them, but he is interested in emphasizing the good, in order to give optimism and hope to the public. S. Spielberg does not display the subject of the idealism with priority, although some characters when adapted are transformed with the quality of idealism and are idealist (for instance, Oskar Schindler, Victor Naborski).

In the subject of the perfect society Capra shows realism when he portrays the dangers of the democracy. Another one of the political ideas for North America that he encourages is the necessity of freedom, courage, his capacity of growing more economically in the future and the capacity to help in many nations in several ways. The utopic idea is the faith in the brotherhood of men, and United States like a nation that can secure the World-wide disarmament, and the union of the countries. Spielberg shows certain elements suitable for society. He especially insists in two values: tolerance and peace.

5. Revision of Steven Spielberg's Humanism

We believe that F. Capra in the three points in which we have divided the thematic analysis set out deep human truths on which he insist on his films, and he gives hope in times of crisis and recovery of his contemporary society. As he repeated some subjects the seal humanist on the matter was very clear to the critics. Another factor that contributes to this statement is that he was valued in this sense for the success and support of the audience that he received. Also we thought that he repeated certain subjects because they assured him certain successful content formula with the audience.

Spielberg also exposes these truths like the first aspect that we reviewed, then, as we have seen, they share them in common, and from this moment we could consider the

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American Jewish film director like a humanist. Like we have seen the American Jewish filmmaker before exposes these issues early on his films, but his characteristic is that he continues developing these subjects from other points of view and contributes with other different shades with so much richness as contributed the predecessor film director. We think that the variety of the film genres of the American Jew contributes to the fact that the thematic analysis is more heterogeneous because it raises diverse situations. In this sense, for example, Spielberg includes an ampler sample of professional pictures. This also allows us to consider that his human picture in this sense is ample and rich.

We will even say more in this sense like a second aspect. The three humanist points that permit us to value like the peculiarity of Spielberg are that first he raises an ethical route of values, and not only the necessary coordinates like F. Capra, but instead a structured process of development of the person to reach the maturity and the happiness. The second landmark is the Metaphysical definition of the person: the person is spirit with certain qualities, and in *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* he defines it more advanced: person is metaphysically "love". He insists on the practical necessity of the person to possess love, and outlines some of these elements. The third point is that he defines the essence of the freedom like free will.

In a third aspect, as far as social consciousness in the films of Frank Capra, this filmmaker considered advanced future dilemmas for his contemporary time as was the change of the women's role. Spielberg does not hold back respect to the italoamerican. Spielberg is very avant-garde as well in his thematic exposition with respect to future social dilemmas where he considers many present subjects from the technological advances and the climatic change. In addition he is original and deep because he is interested in indicating what is an important thing about mankind, as we have seen in the previous paragraph, what is basic for the men's happiness even if the times changes.

We could value both film directors like humanists by the subjects that they already have in common in an

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objective way. Peculiarly this fourth aspect of the subjects that they have in common, although they treat them from a different point of view they agree in dealing more the subjects on human the ethical behaviour with eight subjects in common (the tolerance, brings back to consciousness and the personal accomplishment, the love, the friendship, the freedom, the honesty and solidarity) and the subject about the freedom in relation to others or the State with eight subjects (the supreme dignity of the individual versus another social unit, the criticism to the capitalist society, the convenience of the ecological awareness, the preoccupation of the North American society, characteristics and dangers of the perfect society, the necessity of solidarity and social peace). The subjects on the human excellence that they expose in common are six (solid idea on the human dignity, uniqueness, transcendental affirmation of the man, optimistic and comprehensive vision of the person).

With surprise Spielberg shows to be more original than Capra by six subjects in which they display an original approach to issues. In the human excellence subject Capra has seven (the sense of life, the hope, the myth of Cinderella, to adapt the work to the person qualities, the right to the fame and image, criticism to the high class and the new role of women) and Spielberg eight (spirit, fantasy capacity and to sound, the person is love, necessity of the communication, necessity of home and stable family, responsible paternity); in the subject of the ethical behaviour Capra has three (the sense of money, freedom and sincerity in marriage) and Spielberg five (the free will, maturity, the myth of Peter Pan, the happy thought or happy thought, formation of conscience); in the subject of the individual freedom in relation to others or a State Capra shows four (idealism, utopia, individual versus mass, relationship between individual and nation) and Spielberg seven (the family like social cell, the necessity of the multicultural coexistence for the national identity, the four isms of Capitalism, the social risks of the technological advances). So, with this fifth aspect of originality in favour of the Jewish American, what we have left to say is, in conclusion, that we valued positively Spielberg as a humanist.

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