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- » LATEST INTERVIEWS
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- » CONTRIBUTORS

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Super 8 (2011)

By [Douglas Keeseey](#)

Douglas Keeseey, author of the Neo-Noir Kamera Book, writes about JJ Abrams' Super 8. Please note that this article contains spoilers.

Orson Welles once said that directing a movie was like playing with the biggest toy train set a boy ever had. Though born twenty years apart, budding boy filmmakers JJ Abrams (writer/director of Super 8) and Steven Spielberg (executive producer) both started out by making home movies of their model trains in staged crashes. When he was fifteen, Abrams even restored some of Spielberg's early films, and now the neophyte has paid homage to the master by making a 'Spielbergian' film for a younger generation, one in which a train crash releases an arachnid-like alien which at first seems like the hostile ones in War of the Worlds and Falling Skies, but which eventually proves to be a throwback to the more kid-friendly creatures in Close Encounters of the Third Kind, ET, and AI: Artificial Intelligence. In fact, the conclusion to Super 8 is uncannily similar to that of AI because the alien in each film facilitates a boy's simultaneous reunion with and separation from his dead mother.

Super 8 has received praise for being both an emotionally involving story and a film with exciting special effects that work to frighten its teen audience. It is, you might say, 'horror with a heart'. Indeed, Abrams himself has noted that 'The goal of Super 8 was to try to make a movie that was not just a comedy, not just a horror movie, not just a science fiction film, not just a love story, not just an emotional family trauma or a weird sort of paranoid thriller, but all of them.'⁽¹⁾ Some viewers, though, have criticized the film's plot elements for being disjointed, arguing that the horror and science fiction parts keep interrupting the love story and the family drama, preventing these latter parts from developing, so that when the film finally reaches a happy ending this resolution seems unearned. I think the big thing that such viewers are missing is that the film tries to work through its mother issues by means of its monsters.

It's no mere coincidence that Joe, the boy whose mother has just died, must contend with a flesh-eating arachnid alien who rises from a subterranean lair right next to the cemetery where his mother was buried. Abrams has described the alien as 'a way to externalize and make physical this thing that this kid was going through internally, the idea of the loss of his mother. ... This creature sort of represented the thing that was the most frightening to him, which is the idea of never getting past it... the loss of this person.'⁽²⁾ After dying in an inexplicable accident, the woman who gave birth to Joe now represents the threat of imminent death, figuring the fact that he could be swallowed up again at any time. After hanging humans upside-down like meat and chomping on one of their limbs, the alien enfolds Joe in 'her' spidery arms as if to take him back into a womb that has become a tomb. The boy must face down his fear that accident means doom, that the only explanation for the loss of his mother is the imminent end of the world. In telling the alien that 'Bad things happen, but you can still live', the boy comes to an adult understanding that not everything can be explained and that this unpredictability can lead to life and not just death. When the boy releases the locket containing a picture of him with his mother so that it can become part of the spaceship allowing the alien to fly heavenward back to 'her' home planet, he frees himself from despair over his mother's death and from a morbid attachment to her mortal remains, envisioning instead the possibility of her life's continuance in another form – and in Joe himself as her son.

It's not only the alien but also Alice, Joe's 'zombie' girlfriend, that enables him to deal with the death of his mother. Abrams has linked the alien and Alice as the two-fold 'catalyst for the movie': 'one is the sort of mysterious creature that escapes from the train; the other is the sort of equally mysterious creature, at least for the boys, which is this girl named Alice.'⁽³⁾ Alice is older than Joe and the other boys, old enough to drive them – as a mother might – to the train depot for location shooting of their home-grown horror movie.⁽⁴⁾ Alice's role as a flesh-eating zombie in the film – who like the alien threatens to take a bite out of the boys – seems to figure Joe's fear of his mother as a monstrous revenant from the grave. However, the fact that Joe serves as the film's make-up man, putting the finishing touches on Alice's 'living dead' face as a mortician might to a corpse, suggests that he is trying for some control over his fear. It's interesting to note that back when Abrams was a teen director of amateur horror films, he would borrow his mother's make-up and apply it to the 'dead' bodies of 'anyone who was available,' including his 'sister' and his 'mother.'⁽⁵⁾ For a while Alice remains a 'mysterious creature' to Joe: will he find his mother's loving spirit in her, maternal to marital, or will she necromantically pull him down to death? Thus Alice flickers between abhorred and adored, between ghoul and dream girl, but eventually through the compassion that she shows for Joe in his grief over his mother, love prevails. As Joe releases the alien 'mother' to the heavens, he is holding hands with Alice, who becomes the mother's revenant in a positive sense as the one who will lead him on to renewed life. And, in the horror film they are making, the 'zombie' Alice is cured by a loving injection from a needle wielded by her boy-husband – a role that Joe surely desires to play.

1: www.slashfilm.com/film-interview-jj-abrams-talks-super-8-bad-robot-lens-flares-lost-spielberg-mystery-box

2: Bloody-disgusting.com News

3: www.youtube.com/watch?v=nTtc-gjLmR0

4: My thanks to Bozant Katakian for this insight.

5: [j-j-abrams-the-super-career-of-a-movie-crazed-kid](#)

Douglas Keesey's Neo-Noir: From Chinatown to The Dark Knight has recently been published by Kamera Books.

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