Close Encounters of the Third Kind

By Matt Zoller Seitz
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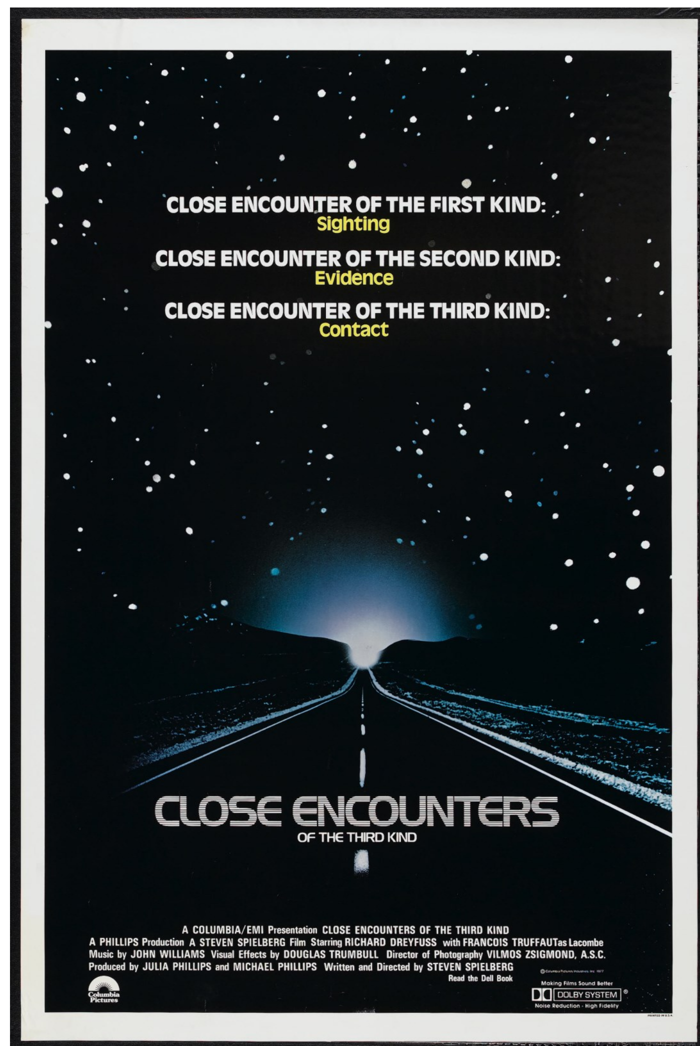
As a child growing up in suburban Phoenix, Arizona, during the 1950s, Steven Spielberg was fascinated by the concept of UFOs and life on other worlds. His youthful obsession bore spectacular fruit decades later, this movie-and-TV-crazy suburban boy grew up to become an expressive director whose first three features, "Duel," "The Sugarland Express," and "Jaws" coupled precision-tooled suspense narratives with an uncanny understanding of how middle-class Americans thought, felt, and dreamed. His nautical horror film "Jaws," released in the summer of 1975, went on to become the top grossing film of the 1970s. It was succeeded two years later by the space fantasy "Star Wars," directed by his old friend and future coproducer, George Lucas.

Spielberg's own 1977 release, "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," about the effects of extraterrestrial contact on a handful of middle-class Indiana suburbanites, didn't unseat Lucas's high-tech cliffhanger, but it was arguably the decade's most complex, moving, and mysterious blockbuster — a spectacle that deployed the latest in optical and sound effects to suggest not just what extraterrestrial life might look like but how proof of its existence might make us *feel*. The film's unofficial sequel, "E.T .," a rapturously intense kids' movie about the friendship between a fatherless suburban boy and a stranded alien botanist, did topple "Star Wars" from its box-office perch, establishing Spielberg not just as the most technically fluent and financially successful director of the modern age but also the most emotionally intuitive.

"Close Encounters" begins with a black screen backed by ominously shapeless chords by Spielberg's longtime collaborator, John Williams; the music rises in pitch, climaxing with a burst of music and blinding white light. Thus does the director summarize, in a few brilliant seconds, the keys to his own artistic strategy: the opposing poles of mystery and certainty, darkness and illumination, fear and reassurance. Audaciously invoking fairy tales and miracles (including clips from the 1956 version of "The Ten Commandments" and a Warner Bros. cartoon with Marvin the Martian, and overheard snippets of "When You Wish Upon a Star" from Disney's "Pinocchio"), Spielberg dares to take extraterrestrial visitation seriously,



Original release poster. Courtesy Library of Congress

portraying its life-altering effect on the lives of everyday Americans.

In the first act, the film's hero, Roy Neary (Richard Dreyfuss), a suburban electrician and family man, crisscrosses the Indiana countryside in his battered pickup, attempting to restore order (light) to a state plunged into chaos (darkness) by UFO visitations. At a crossroads, his truck is nuked by otherworldly light so intense that it sunburns half his face. Tracking the saucers via radio reports, Roy crosses paths with a suburban single mom, Jillian (Melinda Dillon), who's chasing her five-year-old son, Barry (Cary Guffey), a wide-eyed moppet lured from his spacious woodland home by unseen visitors. Roy, Jillian and Barry witness a flyby visitation from starships that roll through the air like Christmas tree ornaments. Imprinted by the aliens with visions of a flat-topped mountain, these ordinary folks become hopeless seekers, groping after a truth that's more emotional than scientific.

Although Spielberg is frequently accused of sugarcoating the fantastic, the second act of "Close Encounters" de-

picts these same everyday visionaries as the secular equivalent of religious pilgrims whose glimpse of infinity wrecks their lives ("Taxi Driver" screenwriter Paul Schrader, who did uncredited work on the film's script, envisioned the heroes' encounter with a higher life-form as a biblical event akin to Paul's revelation on the road to Damascus.) Jillian's son is kidnapped by the visitors for an unknown purpose (seeing the lights tumbling down from lightning–spackled storm clouds, the grinning kids cries, "Toys!"), then spends the rest of the film attempting to reunite with him. Roy tries to physically re-create his subconscious visit, spiraling into derangement and driving away his wife and kids. (The visitation turns workaday Americans into artists: Jillian draws sketches of her dream, while Roy makes sculptures.)

A newscast about a chemical spill at Devil's Tower, Wyoming, puts longitude and latitude to Roy and Jillian's dream of the heavens descending upon a mountaintop: they make their way West (the classic American journey) but are captured by the military, which concocted the chemical-spill story to keep civilians from intruding on the government's first meeting with the aliens. (The chief UFO researcher, Lacombe, is played by the French New Wave figurehead François Truffaut, a movie critic turned autobiographical filmmaker whom Spielberg considered a hero; by casting Truffaut, the young director instantly gave a populist sci-fi movie the art-house equivalent of street cred — and implied that even expensive Hollywood blockbusters could be personal.)

Undaunted, they escape government custody, make their way to the other side of the mountain to a state-constructed landing strip, and are rewarded with a biblically fantastic sound-and-light show in which a sky full of UFOs serves as a mere curtain-raiser. After a moment of ominous silence, the mothership rises up from behind Devil's Tower, like a demon disgorged from the earth. Spielberg's concise, abstract opening is elaborated upon in the film's finale, which has the mothership darkening all who gaze upward at its majesty, then illuminating every corner of the screen with music and light before releasing several decades' worth of abductees, including Barry. The man-child Roy, divested of everything but his desire to leave this earth, is tapped as the aliens' only human passenger on the return home — faith and innocence rewarded. Throughout the finale, Spielberg cloaks the aliens in ethereal light and presents them in suggestive flashes. Like characters in a dream, their motives and actions are never explained, — yet the director's beatific images and increasingly sweet music tell us they mean no harm and that humanity is elevated by their presence.

Released five years later, "E.T.," about a stranded alien with nearly Christlike powers befriending and mentoring a fatherless boy named Elliott (Henry Thomas), might have played like a storybook addendum to "Close Encounters." Yet Spielberg's awesome command of darkness and light — and his deep-seated conviction that sentient beings everywhere were basically decent — transcended science fiction and fantasy, plugging into moviegoers' collective fantasy of secret missions and imaginary friends and their wish for paternal rescue from fear, loneliness, even death. Spielberg and screenwriter Melissa Mathison repeated "Close Encounters" tropes (including government scientists who seemed evil on first glance but had our best interests at heart) while enlarging the former movie's intense desire for love, escape and deliverance. Set largely in a spooky green forest primeval (a setting Spielberg revisited, with much less clarity, in 2001's broken-backed robot parable "A.I.") , it was a fairy tale full of eye-popping storybook images; a wilted flower springing to life, an airborne bicycle silhouetted against a blinding full moon.

As always, the director plunged his audiences into darkness, then blinded them with light, yet for most viewers, the strategy seemed liberating rather than bullying — the surehanded tricks of a master showman. E.T., a long-necked, waddling robot puppet whose gibbering language was voiced by movie star Debra winger, seemed an unlikely candidate to melt hearts, but he did exactly that. By turns a freak, a clown, a brother, and a Jesus figure that could heal by touch, this squat amphibian erased a divorce-wracked family's emotional scars, then resurrected himself before ascending heavenward. Watching it, one is reminded that a diverse array of Spielberg films — from "Always" and "Jurassic Park" to "Schindler's List" and "A.I." — have showed people, animals, and sometimes entire cultures being raised from the dead. Directors love to play god, but only Spielberg makes a career of it — and makes the act seem not blasphemous or cynical, but playful and divine.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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