
The Movies

Close Encounters of a Benign Kind

by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

WHEN ALL ELSE about the twentieth century is forgotten, it will doubtless still be remembered as the century when man burst his terrestrial bonds and began the adventure of space. Yet until recently the space film was a minor genre. Then Stanley Kubrick's *2001* showed that space could provide a theme for a masterpiece, and George Lucas's *Star Wars* showed that space could rescue 20th Century-Fox from drift toward bankruptcy. Now Steven Spielberg, the wunderkind of *Jaws*, has tried in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* for both a masterpiece and a blockbuster. I cannot estimate his chances of the second, but he has made an honorable stab, I believe, at achieving the first.

Close Encounters assumes the reality of an intelligent life somewhere else in the universe—not unreasonably, in view of the size of the cosmos and the improbability that life exists in only one of an infinitude of galaxies. It deals with the first meeting between earthlings and extraterrestrials. It uses this theme for terror, melodrama, and satire in fairly obvious ways. Its power comes from its sense of wonder.

Scott Fitzgerald once wrote of the "transitory enchanted moment" when "man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder." But it was not the last time in history. Fitzgerald did not allow for space. Spielberg catches that moment of wonder marvelously when ordinary Americans, gathered on an Indiana hillside, suddenly see the extraterrestrial spaceship soaring down out of the night. And he embodies the capacity for wonder throughout in a four-year-old child drawn buoyantly and irresistibly to the intruders. (The child is beautifully played by Cary Guffey, an immense relief after the odious juveniles presented to us earlier this season.)

The audience, or at least this member of it, often does not altogether understand

what is going on. Mystification is part of the technique of wonder, and no doubt properly so. But too much is left unexplained here. I never figured out, for example, who the French scientist, played with gentle charm by François Truffaut, was supposed to be. The sequence in India, though visually superb, was incomprehensible. How could the giant spaceship touch down in the tiny arena built for it by the Army? When did the Army, first displayed scoffing at unidentified flying objects, begin to take the extraterrestrial possibility seriously?

Still, Spielberg's narrative drive is confident and sustained. He keeps the sprawling story under firm control. The special effects, concocted by that magician Douglas Trumbull, are dazzling. The effects, indeed, dwarf the actors, though Melinda Dillon conveys real anguish as the mother of the kidnapped boy. Richard Dreyfuss struggles manfully with a script that gives too much footage to his rather boring domestic troubles.

The film is full of nice imaginative touches. I particularly liked the way the alien spaceship managed to turn on electric toys, television sets, and stoves. The climax, of course, is the meeting with the extraterrestrials. Spielberg gambled when he decided to show us, in close-up, a being from outer space. Another director might have played it safe, representing the aliens by a play of lights and shadows and leaving it to the audience's imagination to fill in the detail. Still, the risk taken, the result is not implausible; rather, oddly haunting. The last scene, when the spaceship, with American volunteers aboard, takes off into the great dark, is genuinely moving.

A comparison with *Star Wars* is really not apt. *Star Wars* was a romp in outer space, a delicious film, filled with antic imagination and bravura action, but an entertainment, not a testament. *Close Encounters* falls about halfway between *Star Wars* and *2001*. It lacks the austere passion and the apocalyptic imagination that Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke brought to the latter. But it has a sense of historic significance and a distinctive poignancy of its own.

Close Encounters is also a surprisingly optimistic film. Kubrick showed robots succumbing to original sin and concluded with the spaceship roaring through space and time in a sequence of epiphanic mysticism. Lucas's movie was based, if on anything coherent, on a cyclical theory of history, with the Force, the power of the spirit, engaged in perennial struggle against dehumanized and corrupting technology. Spielberg embraces a progressive view of history. In this regard he is in the spirit of Jules Verne rather than of H. G. Wells.

"My favorite author," Dr. Edward Teller, the nuclear physicist, once said, "was Jules Verne. I no longer read science fiction. This is not because I have become particularly more wise or clever. Science fiction has changed. When I was young, science fiction said, 'How wonderful.' Today, science fiction says, 'How horrible.' ... We are afraid of the power which man now holds in his hands." The change was crystallized by Wells. However utopian Wells may have been in his manifestos, he was generally a pessimist in his tales. His was the imagination of catastrophe.

Close Encounters says, "How wonderful." Spielberg has no doubt that the visitors from space will be benign. The little boy, snatched up as the spaceship hovers over Indiana, returns intact and happy. But how can we be so sure that a civilization sufficiently in advance of our own to put its spaceship on earth will regard us with any more consideration than white intruders from Europe regarded the Indians of the American continent, the blacks of Africa, or the primitive peoples of the South Pacific?

Professor Zdenek Kopal of the University of Manchester has warned: "The chances that we could come across another civilization in the Universe at approximately the same level of development—and with which we could effect some kind of intellectual understanding—are ... vanishingly small." This being so, what gain could we expect from contact with civilizations millions of years ahead of our own? "The risks entailed in such an encounter would vastly exceed any possible interest—let alone benefit; and could easily prove fatal. Therefore, should we ever hear that 'space-phone' ringing... for God's sake let us not answer; but rather make ourselves as inconspicuous as we can to avoid attracting attention."

This is not Steven Spielberg's vision. Let us pray that the future dreamed of in this humane, attractive, brilliant movie turns out to be right. ●

Television

Communism's More Human Face

by Karl E. Meyer

ONLY RARELY do Americans get the chance to see the Soviet Union from within, through the eyes of those who are trying to reform and humanize a cruelly difficult system. In a remarkable drama, *The Ascent of Mt. Fuji*, we are in effect privileged eavesdroppers on a nation's "family" quarrel—the discord over the personal responsibility of every Soviet citizen for the crimes of Stalinism. The television premiere of this Russian play is to my mind an event of moral and aesthetic importance, and it is another coup for the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). (*The Ascent of Mt. Fuji* will be broadcast on Tuesday, January 10, at 8:00 P.M. EST on most public stations.)

What is most significant about *Mt. Fuji* is that its authors are neither dissidents nor émigrés. Yet in their drama, Chingiz Aitmatov and Kaltai Mukhamedzhanov were able to deal so effectively with the sensitive theme of dissent that their play was a resounding success at a leading Moscow theater in 1973.

To be sure, *Mt. Fuji* employs code-language and prudent symbolism, but its message is clear enough, and it is in no way hackwork. The authors use the dramatic technique of Chekhov—free-form conversation among intimate friends in which terrible truths are suddenly blurted out.

The play has nothing to do with Japan or mountain-climbing. It is set in post-Stalinist Kazakhstan, in Soviet Asia, on a mountain that has been whimsically named Fuji. Gathered here for a weekend reunion are four old schoolmates, their wives, and the high school teacher who has regarded the boys, now middle-aged, as her own favored offspring.

Like Godot, Sabur, the main character and fifth schoolmate, never appears. He is a poet who, we learn, was betrayed during World War II by one of the four schoolmates; he had written some heretically pacifist verse in his notebooks, and for this crime he was recalled from the front and sent to a labor camp.

As the circumstances of Sabur's betrayal slowly emerge, the mountain, like its namesake, becomes a holy place where

conscience speaks. Then, in an unexpected, very Chekhovian twist, two of the four comrades once again decline to accept moral responsibility for an accidental wrong—this time having nothing to do with politics—that ends their reunion. The drama does not close on a note of sentimental affirmation; instead, it underscores the conformist pressures within Soviet society. "How can a man be a human being?" runs a line in one of Sabur's poems, and in addressing this question, the play lights a flare on Mt. Fuji.

The Ascent of Mt. Fuji had its American debut in Washington at the Arena Stage. Produced and directed for the Hollywood Television Theatre by Norman Lloyd, the film's roles are competently acted and simply staged. Nicholas Bethell translated the play. The lovely Andrea Marcovicci, playing the actress Gulzhan, seemed outstanding to me, but all performed admirably in this welcome attempt to show communism's more human face.

IN OUR SOCIETY, we may not publish certain poets, but we do not send them to labor camps. In America, those we label "non-persons" are the old, those unfortunates we describe, in that dreadful newspeak phrase, as "senior citizens." Television generally ignores the old, both as an audience and as a source of enlivening interviews (save in the case of *People* magazine celebrities like the late Leopold Stokowski).

For this reason, I am pleased to call attention to another PBS show, *The Crowded Life*. A portrait of Eric Hoffer, the program examines the thoughts and theories of this longshoreman philosopher who, nearing eighty, is as irascibly articulate as ever. (*The Crowded Life* will be broadcast on Tuesday, January 17, from 8:00 to 9:30 P.M. EST on most public stations.)

Wisely, producer Jeanne Wolf of WPBT in Miami has let Hoffer do all the talking, and if his ideas are familiar, his language is invariably fresh. Hoffer, who has a wonderful face—a tanned parchment, with a surface like a relief map—has tirelessly restated the same essential ideas that he put forth in his first book, *The True Believer*,

when he was fifty. Some examples: "It is not love of self but hatred of self that is at the root of the troubles that afflict the world." And, "We find it easier to believe in God than in the purposeful workings of blind chance."

It is impossible not to be impressed by this self-educated, urban Thoreau as he draws on a lifetime of experience in San Francisco and on its waterfront. I am not as smitten with some of his ideas, which seem oversimple to me—Hoffer, in his celebration of the common man, tends to disregard the George Wallace, racist segment of the world; in his put-down of intellectuals, he also stubbornly disregards the role of the educated few in forcing the many to face racial and economic injustices.

Never mind. Hoffer is sui generis, and through his love of language and learning he has earned a niche in the community of useful troublemakers.

But why stop with Hoffer? There are dozens of other, now retired Americans who should be given television attention. To mention a single example: J. William Fulbright, former chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. What does Fulbright think of Carter, the Middle East, energy, SALT? I'd very much like to know. But Fulbright is no longer in office; he is a nonperson in Washington, consigned to American history's dustbin. Is it too much to hope that television will do more to tap our most flagrantly neglected resource—the wisdom of those who can think in decades, not simply in days and weeks? ●

Answer to Middleton Double-Croctic No. 137

Lillian Carter (and
Gloria Carter Spann):
Away from Home
(Letters to My Family)

After all the talk I heard about
snakes in India, I haven't seen
a one. The only thing I've found to be
afraid of is riding in a car. I simply
close my eyes, while the driver just
toots the horn and people run
out of the way—all nearly being
slaughtered.