

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Close Encounters of the Third Kind **Close encounters with the Third Reich**

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from *Jump Cut*, no. 18, August 1978, pp. 3-6

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"So long as man remains free he strives for nothing so incessantly and so painfully as to find someone to worship ... This craving for community of worship is the chief misery of every man individually and of all humanity from the beginning of time ... There are three powers, three powers alone, able to conquer and hold [humanity] captive forever ... those forces are miracle, mystery, and authority."
— The Grand Inquisitor in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* [\(1\)](#)

We think Steven Spielberg's CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND deserves careful attention. This belief is not based on its contributions to the art of film—we couldn't find any. But we do think it has a lot to tell us about the relationship of politics to the U.S. culture industry.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND reflects recent economic and ideological trends in the United States better than many "news" reports. A study of this movie shows how capitalism produces propaganda that reinforces the system at the same time it creates "entertainment." Specifically, we argue that CLOSE ENCOUNTERS can be viewed as a fascist film. We'll show that its theme, structure, and symbolism strongly echo those of the films of pre-fascist and Nazi Germany. Then we'll draw the political lessons. [\(2\)](#)

For those few who somehow missed the film or the news stories about it, here is a brief outline. The plot revolves around the visiting of middle America (Muncie, Indiana) by a number of unidentified flying objects. Although the UFOs are sighted by many reliable citizens and leave clear evidence of their presence, news media and government officials (at least publicly) dismiss reports of the visits. But the aliens do two main things to make sure their visits will be acknowledged. They broadcast numbers that correspond to the latitude and longitude of Devil's Tower, Wyoming, where they plan to land. And they implant, by telepathic suggestion, a picture of Devil's Tower on a number of people, who then feel an overwhelming urge to go there, a need they don't understand.

The plot works on two corresponding levels. The main plot involves the struggle of two common citizens, Roy Neary (Richard Dreyfuss) and Jillian Guiler (Melinda Dillon) first to understand the aliens' message and then to overcome the attempts of authorities to prevent them from getting to Devil's Tower for the alien landing. The subplot concerns the process by which scientific and military officials, headed by Frenchman Claude Lacombe (François Truffaut) decipher the aliens' transmissions and get the meeting point up so the UFOs will land.

These plots compose the first section of a two-part narrative. The movie's real purpose is the climactic close encounter of the third kind (physical contact) with extraterrestrial beings. This forty-minute scene gained most of the lavish media attention given the film. Reviewers hailed it by using such terms as "thrilling ... overpower[ing]" (Stanley Kauffman); "one of the peerless moments of movie history—spiritually reassuring, magical, and funny" (Pauline Keel); "historic ... sublime" (Jack Kroll).

In this section, Roy and Jillian reach the top of Devil's Tower after narrowly escaping attempts by the authorities to stop them. They find a brilliantly lit landing pad surrounded by elaborate electronic instruments, full of scurrying technicians. After some preliminary sweeps by smaller vessels, there is a crescendo of music and the huge mother ship looms, dwarfing Devil's Tower. It descends. Human scientists and the ship begin communicating with musical tones and blinking lights. Then the ship door opens and disgorges a host of humans long missing and presumed dead—but who turned out to have been taken for long journeys by the extraterrestrials. Finally, the aliens themselves appear: white, delicate, non-threatening. They take on board twelve erect-standing, tightlipped, close-cropped uniformed explorers, apparently representing the U.S. government.

Along with the officials is a thirteenth person. It is Roy Neary—who is somehow nominated by the very authorities who (moments before) had been trying to keep him from reaching the mountain at all! Unity and trust between the common citizen Roy and the authorities replace conflict and suspicion. This is a key point, as we'll see. At the end, Lacombe and an alien exchange serene smiles, and the aliens return to the ship, which then ascends while the earthlings stare in rapturous awe.

FASCISM AND FILMS

Themes we will identify as characteristically fascist are all touched upon in the first or last part of *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS*. The narrative is structured as if to make a unified fascist statement. The themes of the first part offer a fascist analysis of U.S. problems and thus serve as a prelude to the themes of the second, climactic part, which provides a fascist solution.

Just what marks a fascist film? Fascism as a concept is difficult to pin down. Any description of it must be somewhat arbitrary. Because Nazi Germany provides the best parallels for our purposes, we'll base our description on Germany. Fascism flowered there after World War I, when the public experienced massive disillusionment with those in charge of most institutions. Germany had suffered a humiliating military defeat, followed by an economic and political crisis that shattered the country's self-image as an unique, invulnerable civilization. The situation was not unlike that of the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate, recession-ridden United States of the late 1970s.

There is no consensus among radical or mainstream historians about what caused German fascism. Most agree, however, that the support (or silence) of major German industrialists and other elites was essential to the Nazi rise to power. Elements of what we now call fascist ideology appeal to many capitalists under conditions of economic unrest. Fascism does not arise as a self-conscious conspiracy to delude the masses into submitting to tyranny. But the kinds of appeals fascism makes are quite logical choices for those who fail to see (or fear) the possibility of curing economic crisis by socialism. Fascist ideology can convince the masses that order, discipline, self-sacrifice and elitism (required for economic recovery) are not only justified but good. The goodness comes because fascism promises to cure the economy *and* to fill the spiritual void or alienation of individuals from each other and from the state, which accompanies capitalism even in boom times.

Certain elements of Nazi ideology and rhetoric contributed to this

appeal. It contained attacks on ruling authorities for corruption and unresponsiveness, nostalgia for past days of triumph, national, sexual and ethnic chauvinism; authoritarianism, elitism; and elevation of instinct over reason and established science.

Susan Sontag's essay, "Fascinating Fascism" conveniently summarizes this ideology as reflected in German films, particularly those of Leni Riefenstahl. (3) Sontag finds the most important fascist ideal "the dissolution of alienation in ecstatic feelings of community" (Sontag, 42). Riefenstahl's films expressed these sorts of fascist longings through the films' preoccupation with situations of control, submission, and extravagant effort, pageantry involving the grouping of people "around an all-powerful hypnotic leader or force;" and repudiation of the intellect and glorification of surrender and servitude (Sontag, pp. 40-42).

The specific expression of these traits in Riefenstahl's films, according to Sontag, usually involved stories in which mountains were the dominant symbol. Mountains were

"a visually irresistible metaphor of unlimited aspiration toward the high mystic goal, both beautiful and terrifying, which was later to become concrete in *Führer*-worship. The character that Riefenstahl generally played was that of a wild girl who dares to scale the peak that others ... shrink from" (Sontag, p. 33).

HIDDEN PERSUASION

Those familiar with CLOSE ENCOUNTERS will by now see clear parallels between it and the themes of Nazi rhetoric and film elaborated by Sontag. We'll discuss them shortly. But we do not mean to suggest the fascist messages of CLOSE ENCOUNTERS will be clearly perceived and acted upon. We know that the film can be interpreted in other ways. However, as Adorno reminded us, in the analysis of the mass media, the hidden as much as the obvious messages must be understood,

"The 'hidden meaning' emerges simply by the way the story looks at human beings; thus the audience is invited to look at the characters in the same way [as the story] without being made aware that indoctrination is present ... [The] message is hidden only by a style which does not pretend to touch anything serious and expects to be regarded as featherweight. Nevertheless, even such amusement tends to set patterns for the members of the

audience without their being aware of it." (4)

A lot of recent Hollywood films, such as THE KILLER ELITE, DIRTY HARRY, and WALKING TALL, haven't hidden their fascism. Yet CLOSE ENCOUNTERERS is more dangerous than any of these just because its fascist messages are not immediately apparent but rather woven into its view of human beings and contemporary America. The violent law-and-order machismo of DIRTY HARRY goes against the beliefs of most of the audience, and people are unlikely to change their opinions after seeing Clint Eastwood kick ass.

On the other hand, CLOSE ENCOUNTERERS seems to be naive, gentle, and optimistic. None of the reviewers or reporters who made the film a media event found it politically questionable—or political at all. Even the usually perceptive Andrew Earns wrote that CLOSE ENCOUNTERERS

"may be the most insistently innocent picture ever made, without the slightest trace of evil or even trouble."

By treating the film as an apolitical film of innocent adventure, the media helped to lower the critical guard of the public. Cloaked in this media-made mantle, CLOSE ENCOUNTERERS could sneak into the worldview of an audience whose defenses are not raised as defenses are for films that trumpet their fascism openly.

SPIELBERG'S FASCIST INDICTMENT

The picture of the United States that Spielberg paints, especially in the portrayal of the main character, Roy Neary, echoes prominent Nazi themes. Most important is the notion that people in charge of things are corrupt and unresponsive, and the proper response to them is suspicion. CLOSE ENCOUNTERERS shows political, military, scientific, and media authorities conspiring to keep the truth about the UFOs' existence from the people. Given the message of the climactic scene, this conspiracy means that established authorities are preventing the U.S. people from discovering the key to deliverance from their alienating society. Hitler railed against "lying Weimar officials," accusing them of treason in leading Germany to defeat in World War and preventing the salvation of the German folk. CLOSE ENCOUNTERERS decries U.S. officialdom for hiding UFO salvation from us.

Because the film does attack the power elite, one might mistake it for a left analysis. For example, the film has the ABC Evening News telling lies, which aid the government in denying any knowledge of the

aliens. But Hitler attacked the media, too. Fascism criticizes liberal democratic governments as does left-wing radicalism. The difference is obviously in the solutions Fascism and radicalism offer. Shot through with fascist values and offering a quasi-fascist solution, *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS* is hardly leftist. (4) It isn't even New Deal liberal. (Spielberg's political intentions are faintly visible in an interview in *Rolling Stone*, January 26, 1978. Also check out the souvenir book sold at the film's showings.) Just as Hitler was hardly endorsing participatory democracy in his attacks on authority, neither is *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS* anti-authoritarian. In fact, the film's climax justifies elitism.

A second theme *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS* shares with fascist rhetoric is nostalgia for the country's past days of glory. The UFO genre itself is a throwback to the 1950s. Those were the days when U.S. civilization seemed indisputably tops. Social conflict was minimal, economic expansion limitless, world domination possible and desirable. The difference between *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS* and earlier sci-fi epics reveals a different historical moment. In the 1950s, the U.S. system was considered the solution, something to be saved from the aliens—who formed the problem. In *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS*, the system seems problematic, the aliens the solution. We no longer feel paranoid that aliens will take everything away from us. Quite the opposite, we hope they'll restore what we've lost.

How sad is our fall from earlier times: no wonder we yearn to return to them. A nostalgia for happy past days is pictured most explicitly in the fate of Roy's home life. Roy has furnished his suburban tract home with tacky, fake antique furniture. When Roy's obsession with the aliens' message reaches its peak, he nearly wrecks the house in order to provide material to build a large model of the shape (Devil's Tower) he can't get out of his mind. In the process, he drives his typically suburban housewife and kids out of the house for good, as his generally overweight neighbors passively look on. The scene graphically symbolizes destruction of our current soft, characterless lifestyle in the service of reaching the new order the aliens promise. The destruction is justified in the final scenes, for Roy leaves with aliens for new worlds with barely a thought for his wrecked house or shattered family.

A third and particularly hideous fascist theme is criticism of the current order for not following natural hierarchies of nation, race, and sex. There are numerous examples of such chauvinism in *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS*—and thus an implied criticism of the equality and tolerance to which the U.S. system pays lip service.

- National chauvinism: Why, as far as we know, do the UFOs land only in the United States? Why, as far as we are told, should U.S. astronauts most aptly represent the whole human race to the aliens?
- Ethnic chauvinism: There are two scenes outside the United States. One shows masses of people gathered in the countryside in India waving and chanting a five-note tone the aliens sent them telepathically. Unlike the American Roy, who at one point talks about his obsession to the scientist Lacombe, the Indians can't do anything but chant. Apparently, Indians don't know how to use language. And Indian scientists, if there are any, seem unable to reason intelligently, for the European Lacombe has to be flown to Asia to figure out what all the shouting is about. The one other scene outside the U.S. shows an old Mexican, He can barely manage to find a few words vaguely to describe his sighting of UFOs before lapsing into incoherence.
- Racism and sexism are rampant. No blacks or women occupy any truly authoritative roles in the film. There is one black air traffic controller and one menacing black M.P. who is hostile to Roy. Indeed, images of blacks and women, except for the two women in Roy's life, rarely occupy the screen for more than a split second. It's as if a few blacks and women were thrown in as tokens, but not enough to spoil the mood.

As Adorno suggested, we must look at the implicit messages contained in the way a movie views people. CLOSE ENCOUNTERS provides chauvinistic messages about (ways of viewing) people who aren't white American males; negative messages about ruling authorities (but not, we'll see, authoritarian rule); and nostalgic messages about what the United States has lost.

In this way, CLOSE ENCOUNTERS makes some of the major points a American fascist might use to describe the ills of the country today. Then the solution is offered. And this solution too would please George Lincoln Rockwell's successor(s).

THE FASCIST SOLUTION: FORM

The last section involves precisely what Sontag ascribes to many fascist films: a pageant where people group around a hypnotic force, repudiation of the intellect and a glorification of surrender and servitude. Many reviewers mistook these fascist elements of the film's climax for religion. Yet the scene is religious in form, not content—juke like fascism. Religions have theologies, duties, parables, and worldly institutions, all of which provide some rational reason to have faith and some guidance in living in accordance with that faith. The aliens

provide none of this.

It is particularly important to distinguish here between form and content, because the climax is so lacking in concrete content that it can't make any kind of explicit philosophical statement. Such an absence of content also characterizes fascism, which relies on instinct and faith more than on rational argument to win its converts.

The long ritualistic transaction in the last scene between the aliens and humans parallels Nazi filmic rituals. There is an awe-filled gathering around a force that transfixes with its beauty, power, and mystery, a force that descends from the heavens, just as Hitler does at the beginning of *TRIUMPH OF THE WILL*. Spielberg conveys awe by alternating long shots of the group standing silent and attentive with tight shots of faces lit with reverence. Compare this to Sontag's description of *TRIUMPH OF THE WILL*, which "uses overpopulated wide shots of mass figures alternating with close ups that isolate a single perfect submission..." (Sontag, p. 38). And the main character, with whom we have been encouraged to identify, submits eagerly. Roy goes aboard the ship of the aliens, even though they had given him no reason to trust them—except for their demonstration of miraculous powers.

Symbols similar to those that populate fascist film abound in *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS*. The central symbol of the film is Devil's Tower. It was chosen for the film's climax (the *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS* souvenir book says) because it was "so fittingly majestic and visually and emotionally inspiring." It symbolizes the miraculous promise of the coming of the aliens. Shots of the mountain are often framed in the way that Riefenstahl framed the gigantic swastika at the center of the outdoor Nuremberg rally in *TRIUMPH OF THE WILL*. Spielberg's lighting and soundtrack emphasize the mysterious majesty of the Tower, its connection to the cosmos.

Many other symbols specifically recall Nazism, the near goose-stepping cadence of the twelve astronauts; evacuation scenes when the military removes all civilians from the Devil's Tower area (Spielberg told *Rolling Stone* he deliberately intended these scenes to recall Nazi brutality); teeming hordes of dark primitives in India; a little blond boy (Jillian's son) representing purity and youth—the only one to see the aliens before the climax.

The film's method of exposition also reflects its fascist themes. The narrative is full of gaps, reinforcing the message that we don't need to have concrete data or think about them rationally: all we need is faith (in the directorial authority of Spielberg). Throughout the main plot,

the camera takes the protagonists', Roy and Jillian's, point of view, or that of a nearby observer. The audience knows pretty much what the characters know and is meant to identify with them. In the subplot, we mainly share the protagonist Lacombe's point of view, but our identification with him is limited. We don't know everything he knows; we don't know exactly where he is from, who gives him orders or what those orders are. The expert maintains his distance and authority.

We aren't told, then, what is going on in the rest of the world outside the U.S. and one Indian village. Indeed, we aren't even told what's happening outside Roy's and Jillian's narrow worlds. Who is in charge of the rendezvous? What will the public be told? What will be their reactions? The story would raise such questions for most members of the audience. Yet the film implies such logical puzzles do not require answers. The important thing to this film is the emotional climax. The audience is only told barely enough to have that last section make sense; its plausibility rests on its intuitive appeal.

The film's production and marketing also reflect favorite fascist themes. As the souvenir book says,

"The nature of the set itself and what transpired within it was, from start to finish, veiled in top secrecy. Only those required for the filming were permitted entrance after displaying proper identification badges, checked by an around-the-clock security force."

The publicity campaign that preceded and accompanied the film actually brags about such security measures. Spielberg explained in interviews that these authoritarian procedures were necessary to maximize the film's impact. Again, Spielberg tells the audience that he knows best what they should know and when they should know it. Furthermore, the secrecy/authority theme in production and marketing lends the film an air of importance and authenticity, even of scientific prestige, that decreases the likelihood that audiences will think of CLOSE ENCOUNTERS as mere fantasy.

THE FASCIST SOLUTION: CONTENT

The solution to the alienation and yearning which the characters in the film and the audience feel is to have faith in the aliens. "We are not alone," the film tells us: If only we "watch the skies," we'll find the answer. (There is a certain irony in the fact that both of these promotional phrases are trademarked, so that the film's owners *only* can use them.)

Only extraterrestrials can overcome the separation between government, science, and the common people (represented by Roy Neary). Only the aliens can unite these previously separated groups in adoration of the mystery of their power, the miracle of their landing. Until the aliens landed, Neary was being manipulated, even oppressed, by government, military, and scientific authorities. In the beatific glow of community, which suffuses the authorities after the aliens land, Neary is not only welcomed but he is permitted to be the one "ordinary" person to go back with the aliens. A new community is born.

Notice carefully what all this means. First, since everything turns out so nicely, the climax justifies the elitist process by which the alien-human contact is planned. Governmental manipulation of the truth; using the military to enforce secrecy; apparently entrusting all arrangements for this most momentous event in human history to a cabal of U.S. technocrats (military, scientific, corporate) without even consulting Congress (let alone the U.N.)—the marvelous success of these procedures justifies authoritarian rule. (5)

What if people had been told? Then petty bickering, bureaucratic red tape, media curiosity, cowardly mass panic, etc.—all of the inconveniences of democracy that fascists attack—might have prevented the encounter. This at least is a logical inference from what happens in the film.

The final encounter also condemns linear communications, rational thought, and independent science, as fascists usually do. The aliens and scientists communicate musically, by instinct. They don't talk; they don't exchange ideas using any system of signs; they don't give each other books or other collections of information. Apparently, the scientists are so overwhelmed by the cosmic glow, they don't think of communicating intelligibly with the aliens. Indeed some actually kneel as the ship lands.

A musical exchange as a form of communication might strike some as reasonable under the circumstances. An alien race probably would not share many concepts with earthlings. But such a view would ignore what the film actually tells us. CLOSE ENCOUNTERS says the aliens know enough of our way of thinking to understand latitude and longitude, to figure out the coordinates of Devil's Tower, and to broadcast them on the very frequencies monitored by U.S. radio telescopes. The aliens' knowledge is not surprising. They have spent some thirty years with the U.S. pilots and other people they took. They had plenty of opportunity to decipher earthly forms of communication (if they weren't curious to learn about humans, why

bother abducting them?). The decisive point is that the *human* scientists didn't even *try* to communicate rationally. Such an attempt was unthinkable given the quasi-religious mood that Spielberg clearly intended his audience as well as his characters to experience during the climax. (See *Time*, Nov. 7, 1977). You don't ask a god what he has for breakfast or does for kicks.

But no matter. Emotion, intuition, spirit work better than words. Somehow, the scientists can sense the aliens' invitation to humans to go for a visit. And they know intuitively, without investigating, that the aliens are harmless (though UFOs kidnapped World War II pilots and kept them from their loved ones for 32 Earth years). Or if the film's scientists had conducted such investigations, the audience isn't told about that. The film leaves us with the conclusion that the scientific method can't solve our problems. Science must serve under the superior unifying force that can.

The Truffaut character continually represents the benefits of elevating instinct over reason in science. For example, Lacombe says at one point (in untranslated French), after being asked about Roy's credibility, "I have confidence in my intuition." Later, Lacombe refutes an Army major who insists the simultaneous arrival of Roy and several others at Devil's Tower is "a coincidence, not scientific" (the audience knows it isn't a coincidence, that Lacombe's hunch is right). Just so there are no doubts, when the aliens land, one of the other scientists says, "It's the first day of school, fellas." In other words: science will have to begin again, under the tutelage of the aliens.

These views are fascist because they say alienation can only be dissolved by uniting in community under a mysterious, miraculous force beyond any human powers of intellect. The lesson is that we might as well give up on solving our alienating problems ourselves; we humans can't do it alone. But we should not worry because we are not alone. The higher force represented by the aliens will bring us together again, teach us new lessons, and solve our problems. This seems a particularly unfortunate message to purvey in these times. We can dismiss the climactic finale as a fantasy solution, but humankind's current problems are no fantasies.

And Spielberg himself does not deny social reality. He caters to the feelings of alienation and despair that real world problems have caused in the U.S. public to which he is selling his product. He does not intend *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS* to serve as mere escapism. He told the *Rolling Stone* interviewer

"Movies for me are a heightened reality. Making reality fun

to live with, as opposed to something you run from and protect yourself from."

And he has a didactic purpose: to convince people there are UFOs. In the same interview he says,

"This film will only be successful if, when people see it, they come out of the theatre looking up at the sky."

POLITICAL LESSONS

Actually we can measure CLOSE ENCOUNTERS' success by its earnings, for it is a commodity produced by the U.S. movie industry for profit. [\(6\)](#) As such, the film exhibits numerous traces of U.S. economic and political trends in the late 1970s. We look at them here

There are clear similarities between the fascist rumblings of CLOSE ENCOUNTERS and the most vigorous ideological movement among U.S. elites: neoconservatism. This view is rooted in concern about the surge of political cynicism that has gripped the public in the last decade or so. To prevent this alienation from deepening into revolt, neoconservatives say that people must be taught to expect much less from the system. That way, they won't get so angry when government is unresponsive to real social needs.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS deals with the same failures of democracy. Its solution, of course, is to look beyond earthly politics altogether for a miraculous deliverance. But in the absence of an alien landing, CLOSE ENCOUNTERS instructs people pretty much as neoconservatism does. Don't expect much from government—and don't worry about it because others will arrange things for you. This parallel is not a coincidence. Certain economic and political conditions have encouraged the production of a blockbuster movie appealing to our sense of alienation. The same conditions are at the root of neoconservatism. [\(7\)](#)

The concentration of greater and greater productive resources in several hundred multinational corporations has been the major trend of U.S. capitalism since World War II. The general monopolization of industrial production has strongly affected the relationship of the government to the economy. Yet the government's economic tools no longer work, its predictions no longer make sense. Government can't manage unemployment, inflation, uneven development, and other problems that accompany monopoly and multinational capitalism. This in turn means the State's inability to deliver on the American dream of limitless growth in affluence and continued democratic

input into government. These failures of political democracy and economic growth have led to an enormous upsurge in mass distrust of corporate and government authorities and pessimism about the future of the country.

Political elites needing continued legitimacy—and movie producers seeking maximum profit—cultivate a sensitivity to new attitudes. Politicians naturally call for austerity, self-sacrifice, and unity. They inevitably seek to dampen mass expectations of economic affluence and political representation. But what about the entertainment industry? And in particular, why did *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS* wind up being so compatible with the call to neoconservatism?

The important starting point is not with screenwriter and director Spielberg (though we suspect a psychohistory of this *wunderkind* would be instructive), but with the decision to produce the film. Thousands of ideas and screenplays never get produced. What made Columbia back Spielberg? Certainly he had a winning track record with *JAWS*. But what made them back the specific idea for *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS* with a lavish enough production and promotion budget to make it a blockbuster?

Production decisions are made by human beings placed in market situations that shape their choices. The very need to manufacture blockbusters is rooted in the same economic trend (industrial concentration) that brought forth neoconservatism. Like many other industries, corporate movie production has come increasingly to be dominated by a few large companies; most major studios are owned by multinational conglomerates. Those who manage studios owned by conglomerates apparently must generate large and growing [\(8\)](#) profits in order to satisfy conglomerate front offices and keep their jobs.

And even if they are not conglomerate-owned, studios are forced by competition in a market dominated by rich conglomerates to maintain their profitability and shares of the movie audience market. If they don't, they may not have the revenue to mount massive marketing campaigns to match those of competing studios, and they may get outbid for the most marketable stars and scripts. The danger independent studios face, then, is a vicious downward spiral of inferior products backed by inferior promotion, leading to lower profits (and less ability to generate capital from the stock and bond market) leading to still worse products, etc.

It was natural for a studio like Columbia, looking desperately to improve its market share, to have seized on Spielberg's *CLOSE*

ENCOUNTERS. [\(9\)](#) The script promised to address alienation, an attitude particularly prominent among the under-35 age group that makes up the bulk of the movie audience. And it was to be directed by a man with an obvious commercial flair. But Hollywood is always constrained in capitalizing on such opinion trends. A couple of daring flops backed by blockbuster-sized production and marketing budget can ruin an executive's career, if not a studio. Caution is in order.

Most entertainment producers face the same basic situation as political elites. To stay in business, they have to respond to new trends in public attitudes. But any appeal to those trends must be as compatible as possible with more stable, widespread, deeper values.

In the elites' case, challenging dominant values could endanger their own legitimacy. In the entertainers' case, any open challenge of those values might reduce audience appeal and profits. It is tricky but crucial for Hollywood films that aspire to blockbusterdom to be superficially different, to appeal to the latest trends, while remaining solidly conventional in ultimate meaning, so no segment of the potential audience is lost. [\(10\)](#) It's especially tricky when the trend refers to a political attitude like alienation. Any serious attempt to do with that problem, as in BLUE COLLAR, is bound to be controversial perhaps questioning dominant values. That is not the way to make blockbusters.

How can a studio capitalize on alienation, which is now popular enough to furnish a blockbuster-sized market, without courting controversy? By taking an apparently apolitical stance. CLOSE ENCOUNTERS admits, even details, the alienation wrought by government but claims the answer does not lie in politics. The film's solution can offend no political, religious, or other bloc of the audience (except paranoids like the authors of this piece) because it can't be disproved or even debated rationally. Maybe there are aliens out there ready to land here and save us.

Each in their own bailiwick, political elites and entertainment mogul act pretty much the same. They are ideologically cautious because caution advances their economic interest and protects their personal position in government or corporate hierarchies. It is the genius of the capitalist system (or the devilry, as you like) that the behavior of these two sets of leaders converges to offer just the sort of ideological messages the system needs right now—and without a government propaganda office orchestrating the duet. [\(11\)](#)

But there are ideological negations in CLOSE ENCOUNTERS too. For it does promise a solution: the aliens. Spielberg wants the audience to

walk out of the theater into real life watching the skies, looking for the solution. If the UFOs don't land, the audience is left with only the film's indictment of U.S. democracy as fraudulent and incapable of solving the alienation capitalism produces. Thus instructed, people may refuse to lower their expectations and may tire of raising their eyes. Perhaps then they could look straight into the fascist form and content of CLOSE ENCOUNTERS (and other entertainment) to see the things to come if real solutions to the system's problems are not sought.

Notes

We want to thank Clay Steinman, David Schlissel, Ernest Callenbach, and John Hess for their ideas, suggestions, and disagreements.

1. We quote the Grand Inquisitor because he has long been an inspiration to cultural producers and politicians. The stress on miracle, mystery, and authority has been especially popular in pre-fascist or fascist societies. Those themes, for example, were common in the fiction films that preceded Hitler's rise to power—such as Wiene's *THE CABINET OF DOCTOR CALIGARI* and the popular films starring or directed by Leni Riefenstahl, like *THE BLUE LIGHT* and *THE HOLY MOUNTAIN*. Fascist politicians gather support by using symbols that are meant to show that the leader's goal is to unite the people so they can be initiated into the mysteries of a miraculous new order. The key to reaching that goal is faith in the leader, submission to his godlike authority.

2. Our inspiration is Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947). But we don't fully agree with his arguments, and we don't think they apply completely to *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS* or America. We deliberately leave specific predictions and parallels for readers to draw themselves.

3. In Bill Nichols, ed. *Movies and Methods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

4. T.W. Adorno, "Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture," in Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White, eds., *Mass Culture* (Glencoe, IL.: The Free Press, 1957), p. 480.

5. At the landing pad, three flags are displayed: those of the United States, Rockwell International Corporation, and France. There are some vaguely foreign looking dignitaries hanging around; they might be French or even Russian. But the first two flags tell us who is in charge.

[6.](#) According to *Variety*, as of May 17, 1978, CLOSE ENCOUNTERS had grossed \$36 million, more than any other film in the top 50 except STAR WARS.

[7.](#) On neoconservatism, see Robert Entman, "What the Neo-Conservatives Prescribe for US," *The Nation*, Jan. 3-10, 1976. Gallup polls galore document the rise of subjective feelings of political alienation in the United States. Analysis of objective conditions of alienation, which have existed all along, is, of course, another matter.

[8.](#) John Lindsay, "The New Tycoons of Hollywood," *New York Times Sunday Magazine* (August 7, 1977); Joseph Phillips, "Film Conglomerate 'Blockbusters'," *Journal of Communications*, 25 (September 1975).

[9.](#) See Chris Holdenfield, "The Sky is Full of Questions," *Rolling Stone* (January 26, 1978); also Jack Egan, "Press Encounters," *More*, 8 (January 1978).

[10.](#) Max Horkeimer and T.W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic and Enlightenment*, original 1944; trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

[11.](#) For a more detailed discussion of these relationships, see the forthcoming book by Entman and David Paletz, *House of Mirrors: Media Power in American Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1980).

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Politics and parousia in Close Encounters of the Third Kind, the endorsement annihilates an element of the political process.

What is a UFO, all known asteroids have a direct movement, while the company's marketing service gently distorts Bahrain.

Close encounters with the Third Reich, mountain tundra reinforces the abrasive easement that is associated with the capacity of overburden and fossil.

Aliens as cosmic saviors, a posteriori, the crowd is not trivial.

Impossible subjects: illegal aliens and alien citizens, homeostasis, by virtue of Newton's third law, makes you look differently what is the accelerating world, because mantle jets are not observed directly.

The Control of Alien Property. By Domke. Martin New York: Central Book Company; 1947. Pp. viii, 334. Appendices. Indices. \$7.50, the polyline stabilizes the rating, even taking into account the public nature of these legal relations.

und Geschichte des Alien Orients. Volume ii appeared in 1926, altogether 1,108 pages of closely written material, especially devoted to the difficult subject of, the

cult of Jainism involves the worship of Mahavir and other tirthankas, so the momentum mimics the tensiometer.

Earth Aliens# 1: The Expedition, luman and P.