

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE RELIGIOUS KIND

John A. Keel

"The real story in town was 'Close Encounters of the Third Kind', which is eyeing a smashing \$165,000 [£90,000] or near in its first Ziegfeld week based on \$121,923 in five days. That should claim the house record of \$151,059 rung up by Col's [Columbia Pictures] 'Tommy' in 1975. 'Encounters' plays longer than 'Tommy' resulting in fewer shows, but is priced at \$4.50 or 50c more than 'Tommy'.

"Topping the newcomer parade [in Los Angeles] is 'Close Encounters of the Third Kind' shaping to a great \$115,000 at the Cinerama Dome..."

—Variety, Nov. 23, 1977

THE long, suspenseful wait has ended. A major flying saucer movie has finally arrived and it promises to create a new climate for the UFO subject. Despite some rather harsh reviews by the more knowledgeable film critics who resent the weak script and poor characterizations, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* has struck a responsive chord in America's young people and they are forming long lines at the box office in New York and Los Angeles, the first cities to present the film.

When Columbia Pictures spent a staggering \$14,000,000 to make the movie they were gambling on the talents of a 29-year old named Steven Spielberg who had written and produced *Jaws*, a big money-maker about a man-eating shark. Would UFOs have the same universal appeal as a hungry fish? The cynics thought not. The sophisticated film critics left preview screenings holding their collective noses. They labelled the film "poor science fiction" and compared it with the cheap flying saucer movies of the 1950s. It lacked, they said, the wit and "fun" of *Star Wars*, a science-fantasy that has earned millions this year. They all ignored (or were unaware of) one very important fact: *Close Encounters* is the climax of thirty years of wonder, speculation and propaganda. An entire generation has grown up hearing about, and believing in, extraterrestrial visitants, and they are ready for a film shorn of the usual science fiction trappings ... one that deals with UFO sightings realistically and concentrates on how the UFO experience affects the witnesses.

To this new generation *Close Encounters* is more than just a trip to the movies. It is a religious-like experience. It is confirmation of personal beliefs. Thanks to a very noisy sound track and some truly spectacular special effects, the film engulfs the mind, transcends all logic, and offers something very close to the Second Coming. Audiences, most of whom are under thirty, leave the theatre silent, a glazed look in their eyes. They have been stunned ... as stunned as any real-life UFO percipient ... because

STOP PRESS

Mr. Keel's very welcome article was received in December after the CEIII movie had made its debut in New York and Los Angeles. Coming as it did after our Editorial had already been set, it was decided to hold over Dr. Buhler's article *Attempted Abduction at Vila Velha* to make way for it, and it now complements our observations on pages 1 and 2.

EDITOR

they have been cleverly manipulated by the filmmaker's art.

Columbia Pictures is spending millions advertising and promoting *Close Encounters* so I won't try to summarize the whole film here. It begins with a sand storm, the wind howling so loudly that the audience is obliged to lean forward and strain to hear what the actors are saying. Thus they are made tense from the very opening scene ... an old trick devised by Alfred Hitchcock many years ago.

The first distinguishable words are: "Are we the first?"

The sound track is unrelenting. Even domestic scenes are staged in near hysteria amidst blaring television sets, ringing phones, screaming arguments. At some points you want to cover your ears and cringe in your seat, just as Spielberg intended.

When the saucers appear the special effects are so well done you almost feel as if you are witnessing a real UFO event instead of just celluloid make-believe. And when a gigantic "mother-ship" finally descends in the climactic scenes the effect is awesome. (We also receive a brief, less than awesome, glimpse of Dr. J. Allen Hynek towards the end of the picture.) Screeching electronic music and high pitched blasts of bleeping and wailing contribute to the assault on your nerves. The film literally wears you out.

By leaving almost every question unanswered (Spielberg never even approaches the question "Where are they from?"), and by steadfastly refusing to fill in the many holes in the slipshod script, the audience leaves with a thousand questions in their minds. Perhaps in the hands of a lesser talent this picture would have been an unmitigated disaster and there would have been riots at the box office as the victims demanded their \$4.50 back. Instead, they leave strangely satisfied. Spielberg has been honest. He has not attempted to provide an answer. He hasn't even spelled out all the questions. His main goal is to awe, to attack the senses, to provide

an experience rather than a mere entertainment. He succeeds.

The picture must gross an unbelievable \$45,000,000 before Columbia Pictures breaks even. Judging from the success of its first few days, we can estimate that it will probably finally earn around \$200,000,000 worldwide. (*Jaws* has thus far earned \$185,000,000.) In these days of economic blight such figures are mind boggling. The New York press and trade journals like *Variety*, the weekly "bible" of show business, have been preoccupied with the numbers involved. The *Wall Street Journal* was enchanted to note that Columbia's stock rose from 7 early in the year to nearly 20 after the film was released. In fact, Wall Street speculators made over \$100,000,000 juggling Columbia's stock before the picture even opened. In America "big bucks" (big money) automatically brings respect. Ironically, money is finally making flying saucers respectable. The news media are no longer joking about UFOs.

There were many snickers when Columbia Pictures announced that it would demand an advance payment of \$150,000 from any theatre owner who wanted to show *Close Encounters*. This was an unheard of "guarantee" and it seemed unlikely that many theatres would be willing to gamble such a sum against possible earnings. But with the picture now making over a quarter million dollars per week playing in only two theatres, the theatre owners are enthusiastically paying in advance.

Dr. J. Allen Hynek acted as special adviser to the film and, of course, the title was lifted from his book *The UFO Experience*. In the past, Hollywood has paid as much as \$200,000 just for a title and then written a film to match it (e.g. *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Sex, The Naked City*, etc.). Hynek has also actively helped to promote the film by appearing on radio and television, having been promised widespread publicity for his UFO Center in Illinois. This kind of involvement for a movie with this kind of budget would normally have called for a minimum payment of \$250,000. The New York press rumoured that he was being paid \$20,000. Actually he has received only \$1,700 from the producers. When you realize the time and effort he has put into the project no-one can accuse him of profiteering. Instead, he has been exploited by the movie-makers.

There are already indications that *Close Encounters* will outgross every other movie ever made. The audience will be young (in the United States the general movie audience is between 19 and 30), and they will understand all the hidden ramifications of the film; ramifications which might elude older, more sceptical people. It is already on its way to becoming a "cult film," like *2001* which appeared a decade ago and was embraced by the youth audience. People who have seen UFOs, and they now number in the millions, will certainly stand in line to see it. People who have never seen a UFO but always wanted to — and they also number in the many millions — will also line up at the box offices. The

picture will make UFOs totally real to millions all over the world. Ufology will never be the same again.

The next big UFO wave will probably attain greater notice than any previous one ... all because of this movie. Already the normally staid anti-UFO New York press is giving space to local UFO sightings. The New York *Daily News*, the largest American newspaper, gave front page coverage to some recent sightings on Staten Island, under the heading: "UFOs: Close Encounters of the Local Kind" (November 27, 1977). Sightings are beginning to increase in the United States, following the mini-waves in northern Europe and elsewhere in 1977. You don't need a crystal ball to predict a new American wave in the months ahead. *Close Encounters* will naturally ride the crest of the wave.

At least six other films with UFO themes are completed, or nearing completion, and will soon be released to ride the tail of *Close Encounters*' success. A number of television series are also being readied, notably an effort by Jack Webb of *Dragnet* fame, reportedly based upon cases from the files of Project Blue Book. So 1978 will be the year of the flying saucers.

Those of us who have been concerned about the true nature and intent of UFOs must regard this popularization and exploitation of the UFO lore with some alarm. Hollywood has chosen only a small part of the whole problem for the glamour treatment and *Close Encounters* assures its audiences that the Ufonauts are really friendly, super-intelligent creatures sympathetic to the human condition. We know this has seldom been the case in real-life UFO encounters. The film is a propaganda masterpiece, not only in getting the public to accept UFOs, but leading them to accept the benevolence of the Ufonauts. (In the closing sequence the spindly Ufonaut twists his almost featureless face into what passes for a smile ... and the effect is electric. Audiences respond to it as if they are receiving godly grace.)

The abject horror of those who have experienced close encounters and their agonizing suffering afterwards, are whitewashed by this film. People leaving the theatre find themselves gazing at the sky wistfully, hoping it will happen to them, convinced that the advent of the flying saucers is somehow a religious event ... mankind meeting the gods. Future percipients will undoubtedly colour their experiences unconsciously to match the film.

For years the truest believers amongst us have waited patiently for some spectacular UFO event, like a landing on the White House lawn. Though frequently predicted, the event has never occurred. Now Hollywood has done it by creating the landing for us and by presenting it to the entire world, dressed up in impressive cinematic trickery. Future ufology will be divided into two parts: BCEIII (Before "Close Encounters") and ACEIII (After "Close Encounters"). It will be very interesting to see what strange new games the UFOs play in the post-*Close Encounters* era.