

## A Closer Look at CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

Admirers of science fiction have a paradoxical disposition to be literal-minded in their discussion of sf, to resist the possibility of interpretation, and so very often to miss the point even of those works they admire. Perhaps the paradox is built into the genre, for what does the sci of sci-fi promise us but that there is a logical, “scientific” legitimacy to fantasies that we might otherwise blush to entertain? So, in all the talk about *Star Wars*, I never once heard mention of what seemed the salient feature of the storyline—that it retold, on a larger scale but quite transparently, the sperm-as-spaceman skit from Woody Allen’s *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Sex But Were Afraid to Ask*. The film is a virtual sex manual for nervous teenage boys who need to be reassured that if they will only *relax* a little, all will be well and the force will be with them. Perfectly sound advice, and glad tidings, evidently, to millions of viewers. But how did the critics view *Star Wars*? As a jolly old-fashioned conflict between Good and Evil of which nothing more need be noted. Enough to praise the special effects and to vie with each other in tracking down the sources they supposed Lucas to be plagiarizing, an exercise on a par with tracing the iconographic influences on modern automobile showrooms: decor, after all, cannot be copyrighted.

In not wishing to interpret *Star Wars*, its critics showed themselves to be staunch clerics and preservers of their culture’s most hallowed (and therefore unspoken) traditions, which are to be understood as self-evident and above interpretation. Now the same thing has happened with *Close Encounters*, with this difference—that as its subtext is subversive of many of our most cherished values, deceptions, and social arrangements, it has been dismissed (with some faint praise for its special effects) with the same cavalier inattention to what it means as *Star Wars* was welcomed with. Which is to say that it doesn’t mean anything.

Or rather, that it only means what its ads have proclaimed—that we are not alone and that the UFOs are up there, biding their time until They’re ready to bliss us out. The critics have been abetted in their self-blinkered nescience by the film’s director, Steven Spielberg, who maintains in his interviews that maybe UFOs really are real. Mr. Spielberg is a young man with a manner as guileless as four-year-old Cary Guffey’s in his film, and his protestations have been accepted at face value. After all,

it isn't in the interest of his interviewers or anyone else in the publicity machine to probe too deeply into Spielberg's good or bad faith in this matter. It may be wondered whether his movie would have made quite so many millions of dollars if Spielberg hadn't thrown these sops to his literal-minded audience, who in this way are able to enjoy.

I, for one, don't believe in the extraterrestrial origin of UFOs, any more than I believe in ESP, reincarnation, or the divinity (or satanic maleficence) of whatever guru has most recently won space in the Sunday supplements—though all of these are viable and potentially significant premises for fantasy. However, as Richard Dreyfuss keeps insisting as he models his mashed potatoes into truncated pyramids, it must mean something. I would submit that what Spielberg means in *Close Encounters* is much the same as what R. D. Laing means in *The Divided Self*. Less familiar though even closer to Spielberg's general drift is *Mount Analogue*, an allegorical novel by the French surrealist René Daumal, in which the quest for transcendental experience is likened to a mountain-climbing expedition—an analogy so precise it may amount in at least one direction (mountain climbers *are* pursuing transcendence) to an identity.

Interpreted in this light, *Close Encounters* may be seen as a story about the pursuit of God by an Everyman called Roy Neary (as in "Neary My God to Thee"). It is not an easy pursuit, for it requires acts of faith that look to his employers, family, and neighbors like madness. Indeed, Neary is mad, for God is not approachable in the clothing of rationality. (When the police cars try to follow the first set of flying saucers they plunge over a precipice.) Neary's first experience of Something Else is a gratuitous visitation, an act of grace, but because Neary insists on following the saucers whither they lead, he loses his job: you cannot serve God and Mammon. When the saucers have departed, Neary has no very good idea of how to continue the pursuit. He has an obscure impulse to model shaving foam, mashed potatoes, and finally the entire fabric of his house and grounds into an Object of mysterious, numinous significance. In short, he becomes an artist, a decision that entails for Neary (as for that other representative all-sacrificing artist Gauguin) the abandonment of his family. Christ demanded no less. The TLS's reviewer, S. Schoenbaus, writes that "Neary's willingness to give up wife and children for a fabulous voyage may be comprehensible, but his ability to do so without an internal conflict betrays the psychological poverty of the script." On the contrary, it is precisely the heedless, headlong, joyful way that Neary smashes up his own suburban household in the pursuit of his vision that evidences the psychological acumen of the script. Converts, and madmen, are people who have passed beyond internal conflicts.

At length, Neary is rewarded for his persistence by a Sign that the form he has been modeling and remodeling has an objective existence outside his imagination (a sign it is every artist's hope some day to be vouchsafed). It is shown on television, Devil's Tower, a mountain in Wyoming. Naturally, he sets off at once for the spot. However, the forces-that-be would prevent him from going there. (Mammon, after all, has his own interests to look after.) They say the area has been contaminated with nerve gas and that he will be poisoned unless he wears a gas mask. In other words, it is unsafe to pursue wisdom along the paths of excess, and madness is not only bad but fatal. The dramatic high point of the film occurs when Neary decides to take off his gas mask. This leap of faith immediately liberates him and his two companions to make their attempt on the Devil's Tower (a name, like the story about the nerve gas, that is meant to act as a deterrent; religious authority is always suspicious of do-it-yourselfers), and his reward at the mountain top is a vision of . . . something ineffable.

If the movie can be faulted, it is for its vision of Neary's reward. Spielberg demonstrates technical mastery in establishing the scale and physical reality of Devil's Tower, so that when the mothership eventually makes its entrance, dwarfing the mountain, the effect is truly awesome. But the concert that ensues is not, to my ear, the music of the spheres. I'd have preferred a score by Beethoven—or, lacking that, by Terry Riley. But after all, art always fails at conveying the Divine Presence in the fullness of its glory. Art offers an image, not the real thing, and that image, finally, takes a human form, as it does in the Sistine Chapel, or in Blake's drawings, or in the "aliens" who come out of their ship to wave hello to the audience. If the effect is risible, the laughter is inherent in all anthropomorphic representations of the divine.

Why, if this is indeed the subtext of the film, has the film been so popular? Surely, it does not portend a mass exodus from suburbia into the desert. It has been popular, I think, for the same reason Christianity has been—not because the audience is persuaded to take its precepts to heart, but because it offers an impressive picture of God, a graven image, a Golden Calf. We are all hungry to see His face, and at the same time reluctant to become a madman for His sake, which so many authorities have claimed to be one of the requirements. What we can't do, however, we can enjoy watching in simulation, especially if the endeavor has been masked in the sanitized imagery of conventional sci-fi and we aren't required to think about it, since, by definition, sci-fi can never mean anything important.