

BFI FILM
CLASSICS

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND

Dana Polan



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For Jon Lewis, dear friend and New Hollywood expert,
currently navigating his way through Nakatomi Plaza

'I am a lineman for the county / And I drive the main road / Searchin' in the
sun for another overload'

'Wichita Lineman' (1968 hit song, lyrics by Jimmy Webb)

'More of a movie than it is a film, really'

Steven Spielberg describing *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*¹

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Close Encounters of the Third Kind

Overture

When *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) was in production and then in box-office smash release, interviewers overwhelmingly would ask Steven Spielberg a predictable, perhaps too literal question – one that forgot cinematic form and instead emphasised content. Did he, they wondered, believe in UFOs? (Depending on the moment, he might answer Yes; sometimes he would declare himself ‘agnostic’.) Likely, the question was beside the point: what did it matter whether the director offered belief in his movie’s fantastic content? The more pertinent, never-asked question – maybe because the answer was visible right up there on the screen – was: did Spielberg believe in cinema? *Close Encounters* (as I’ll shorten its name) is an ode to the power of moving images to inspire awe – not only for characters within its narrative but we spectators as the movie’s sights and sounds wash over us hypnotically, spectacularly. (Sound needs to be insisted on, as the movie, we’ll see, was destined early on for Dolby immersive multi-track audio.)

The following pages take as their central gambit to argue that within Seventies cinema, *Close Encounters* is not fundamentally a movie about alien spaceships per se but above all *about cinema itself* as an affective force and, here, it’s obvious that Spielberg is a true believer. It’s a movie movie – content matching form to enact cinematic seduction and display the deep affective powers of an emergent mode of blockbuster cinema.

In this respect, the following pages concentrate on the cinematic contexts for *Close Encounters* – other movies by Spielberg; other movies of the times; fan celebration, focused often on recondite technical aspects of the movie’s making; critical appreciation (and dissension); tie-ins and franchising – along with filmic aspects internal



A movie movie

to the movie, such as the role of enveloping sound; the fascination with looking with awe at powerful events; the inscription, within the narrative, of acts of appreciation of spectacle, such as applause, that are then shared between character and audience alike; and so on.

Plot

As a reminder, *Close Encounters* chronicles how the luminous sighting that suburbanite Roy Neary (Richard Dreyfuss) has of UFOs becomes an inchoate obsession that impels him to journey to where government and scientists are preparing secretly for full encounter with extraterrestrials. Roy abandons spouse and children on his quest, yet he partners for a while with single mom Jillian Guiler (Melinda Dillon), whose son was spirited away during another alien visitation. Along the way, Roy and Jillian confront obstruction and obfuscation from the military, which wants to keep alien visitation under wraps, but ultimately the couple reaches the landing site constructed to greet the aliens. Jillian reunites with her son who

emerges from the flying saucer. Head scientist Claude Lacombe (François Truffaut) sees that Neary needs existentially to participate in the mission and gives his blessing for Roy to join a team of astronauts trained to accompany the aliens back into outer space. Yet when the aliens arrive, they single out Roy and take him into their spaceship. (Even freezing the image doesn't clarify whether the expert space travellers enter the spaceship with Roy or not.) Ultimately leaving Jillian behind, Roy Neary heads off towards a seemingly wondrous future.

Setting the scene: a study in modern American culture

In the 1920s, sociologists Helen and Robert Lynd moved to what was, by all accounts, an average Midwestern town for on-site observation of the effects of modernisation on ordinary American traditions. The resultant book (1929) became a classic ethnography of everyday life, spawning numerous follow-up studies, even a public television series in the 1980s. To emphasise the generic quality of small-city life, the Lynds named their volume *Middletown* (subtitled *A Study in Modern American Culture*, with a sequel, *Middletown in Transition* [1937]), but word soon got out (including from the town's inhabitants) that 'Middletown' was a stand-in for the actual town of Muncie, Indiana.

The tradition of writings on 'Middletown' (including in the popular press), as well as fiction- and non-fiction films, has rendered Muncie an ongoing symbol of small-town Americana. It is, for instance, where hapless protagonist Norville Barnes (Tim Robbins) hails from in 1994's *Hudsucker Proxy* and which venal New York-bred Amy Archer (Jennifer Jason Leigh) herself claims as her folksy hometown in her scheme to exploit Norville.

I think it matters in this respect that as *Close Encounters* opens, Jillian Guiler and Roy Neary are each living, as a title declares, in 'Muncie, Indiana'. (The title comes up over Jillian's farmhouse but it's Roy who's living in *suburban* Muncie, and the film resolutely becomes *his* story as soon as he comes on screen.)