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# 30 YEARS OF *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS*

BY JENNIFER HENDERSON AND GEORGE M. EBERHART

The Hollywood blockbuster UFO film directed by Steven Spielberg, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, premiered in New York City on November 17, 1977. Although J. Allen Hynek had originated the term “close encounters” in his 1972 book *The UFO Experience: A Scientific Inquiry*, the movie’s use of the phrase allowed it to leap from ufological jargon directly into timeless popular culture. An instant success, *Close Encounters* also cemented Spielberg’s reputation (close on the dorsal fins of *Jaws*) as a major director, saved Columbia Pictures from a financial downturn, and put Hynek and the UFO phenomenon in the national spotlight where both gained new credibility amid a wave of public interest that has diminished little over the past 30 years.

Hynek recalled how his involvement with the film came about in an interview with Dennis Stacy in the February 1985 *MUFON UFO Journal*: “I’d heard that Spielberg was making a movie called ‘Close Encounters of the Third Kind,’ so I called him up and we had a very nice talk. He apparently wanted to make some kind of financial arrangement with me and here I made a very bad mistake. Unfortunately, I said ‘Be my guest.’ Of course it’s impossible to copyright a title alone,



J. Allen Hynek on the *Close Encounters* set in Mobile, Alabama.

so he didn’t pay a thing for its use. He was kind enough, however, to ask me to be a technical consultant to the movie, so that worked out very well.”

Apparently this conversation made Columbia Pictures a bit nervous about the legal rights. In a letter to Hynek dated January 20, 1976 (still in the CUFOS files), Spielberg wrote: “I must really apologize for not contacting you before assigning my forthcoming film your original chapter

title [Chapter 10 of *The UFO Experience* was called “Close Encounters of the Third Kind”]. The title was suggested to me by a friend who considered ‘The UFO Experience’ required reading. In turn, I now require all creative participants to study the book as a primer toward understanding the UFO controversy.

“Apart from your letter, however, Columbia Pictures and Phillips Productions have decided against the use of that title for purely commercial reasons. Our new working title is ‘Watch the Skies.’”

“Watch the skies,” as every science-fiction buff knows, is the final line from the classic 1951 saucer movie, *The Thing from Another World*. Shortly after Hynek agreed to be a consultant on the film, Columbia apparently relented and went back to Spielberg’s original title. However, *Watch the Skies* persists as the title of a 1977 “making of” featurette.

Did Hynek receive a fee for his help? He told Stacy in 1985, “A very small fee, but I actually lost money on that. What happened was that my publisher [Henry Regnery] withheld \$25,000 in royalties from the sale of my book. . . . The argument was that I had sold the movie rights to Hollywood. I pointed out that I might be a dumb professor, but I wasn’t so dumb as to know you don’t sell movie rights for a thousand dollars. Finally, the thing was settled with me getting \$15,000 and paying \$9,000 legal fees out of that, so I didn’t get very much.”

Hynek recalled that he was only a technical consultant and gave advice on the “radio telescope and how a mili-



Steven Spielberg explains Hynek’s role in the movie. From a 1997 *Making of Close Encounters* documentary.

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*The dramatic contact scene at the end of Close Encounters of the Third Kind.*

tary officer would say things.” Although he sat down with Spielberg and went over the script, only some details got changed. “At that time I was caught up in the glamor of Hollywood myself,” Hynek admitted, “seeing how a picture was made, so I went along with it and I had a lot of fun. But that’s about all.”

Spielberg credited Hynek’s place in the movie as more of an inspirational role model. In a 1997 documentary, he explains that Hynek

found the witness reports very credible and he found so many similarities from so many portions of America as well as throughout the world that he became a convert to the fact that the government was hiding something. . . . So I met with him and I used him and I picked his brain and he consulted with me. He’s even in the movie in a bit of a scene in the third act.

I owe a lot to his instilling in me a professional’s point of view on this kind of field reporting, and he helped me make the movie more credible than it would have been without his existence.

The contact sequence in the movie was filmed, not at Devil’s Tower, Wyoming, where some of the exteriors were shot, but inside a huge aircraft hangar in Mobile, Alabama. According to the Internet Movie Database, “The UFO landing site built for the movie was 27 meters high, 137 meters long, and 76 meters wide, making it the largest indoor film set ever constructed.” The UFO was added in later, of course, so the actors had to gaze up at nothing and pretend to react to a landed mother ship with blinking lights.

Bob Balaban, who played UFO researcher David Laughlin in the film, recalls in *Spielberg, Truffaut and Me* (Titan Books, 2002), based on his diary at the time, that Hynek arrived on the set in Mobile on July 23, 1976:

He is wearing a Hawaiian shirt and doesn’t look like a scientist except for his neatly cropped Van Dyck beard

which makes him look a little like the Wizard of Oz. He thinks the movie will help the UFO cause since Steven has done such thorough research, and based so much of the film on actual events. . . . No photographs can be taken on the set, so Hynek sits quietly in his canvas chair aiming a small tape recorder in the direction of the filming. Since he can’t take pictures, he’s taping the sounds in the hangar to help him remember this day.

Later that night, Hynek gives a lecture to us interested UFO-ers. [Richard] Dreyfuss and Melinda [Dillon] are there, along with about forty other people. After a short spiel about subscribing to a UFO newsletter he’s publishing [*IUR*], Hynek dims the lights and shows slides of various UFOs he’s authenticated. He even shows a picture of an umbrella-like object he snapped from an airplane [probably the photo opposite p. 53 in Hynek’s *UFO Experience*]. About a dozen people, including Melinda, raise their hands when Hynek asks if any of us have ever had a close encounter.

Hynek’s eight-second cameo begins at 2 hours, 2 minutes, and 57 seconds into the film (the 137-minute “Collector’s Edition” version of 1998), just after the pilot and crew of Flight 19 emerge from the landed UFO. He strolls to the front of the crowd, brushes his goatee, and inserts his pipe into his mouth. The timing is somewhat ironic, since Hynek had objected to Spielberg’s associating UFOs with the missing Navy TBM Avenger bombers in 1945.

Hynek almost had another cameo appearance in the film. In part because Stanley Kubrick in *2001: A Space Odyssey* had chosen to avoid the thorny problem of how to portray realistic aliens, Spielberg decided early on that his UFOonauts would put in a physical appearance. He wanted them to look roughly like the short, big-headed, long-armed humanoids present in many UFO occupant cases of the 1970s, and he had the idea to use six-year-old girls dressed up as ETs. Makeup masters Frank Griffin and Tom Burman came up with a plan

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to fit about 50 girls in alien masks and false hands with long, spindly fingers. As it turned out, Spielberg decided he wanted a different look for his ETs, but not before filming Hynek in a scene with the girl aliens. David Ayres, an associate of Burman's, remembered the setup in *Cinefantastique*, vol. 7, no. 3/4, in 1978:

[Spielberg] filmed scenes of aliens coming out of the ship and going over to touch [François] Truffaut and Dr. Hynek and some of the others. And it was really nice, because you saw the curiosity of these creatures. They pulled out Dr. Hynek's pipe and looked at it—and their eyes were moving—and then they stuck it in their nose and their mouth. And they pulled at his tie.

However, the effect was not what Spielberg wanted at the time, so the scenes were never used.

## THE STORYLINE

Some of the plot elements for *Close Encounters* came from a two-and-a-half-hour 8mm UFO film, *Firelight*, that the 17-year-old Spielberg shot in Phoenix in 1963 (“one of the five worst films ever made,” the director says now). Jean Weber Brill, who helped Spielberg with the makeup, said that “There were scenes in *Close Encounters* that were almost direct copies from *Firelight*, such as the lights appearing on the highway and the scene when the little boy looks out the door at the bright light. The storyline of *Close Encounters* was very similar, but obviously rewritten and more sophisticated.” *Firelight* also featured a dysfunctional married couple not unlike the characters played by Richard Dreyfuss and Teri Garr.

In late 1970, Spielberg had also written a short story, never published, called “Experiences.” He told interviewer Don Shay in *Cinefantastique* that the story was about a “lover’s lane in a small midwestern town and a light show in the sky overhead that these kids see from inside their cars. That was my first piece of writing on the UFO idea—the first scene that went down on paper.”

*Close Encounters* was at first assigned to screenwriter Paul Schrader, who had written *Taxi Driver* and *American Gigolo*, but Spielberg did not like what he came up with and decided to do it himself, creating five or six scripts over two years:

... I ingested a lot of information, but what came out was pretty much representative of my imagination more than documented facts. The design of the UFOs was my own. That was something I just did by making lots of black-and-white pencil drawings with arrows and notes indicating the colors I wanted. But even though the light display on the UFO was mine, the idea of intense acetylene light was something that has been reported tens of thousands of times by witnesses all over the world.

The UFO sequence that traumatizes Richard Dreyfuss's character was based in part on the famous Portage County

police chase that took place April 17, 1966, when police cruisers chased a large UFO—which one officer described as looking like an “ice cream cone with a sort of partly melted down top”—for 60 miles from Ohio to Pennsylvania. Hynek had provided a summary of the case on pages 100–107 of *The UFO Experience*.

Spielberg was also probably influenced by the books of French-American UFO researcher Jacques Vallee, after whom the character of the scientist Claude Lacombe (played by Truffaut) is modeled, although Spielberg did not meet Vallee until after the film was completed. Other 1970s-era themes enter the storyline at various points, among them:

- Bermuda Triangle-style disappearances as a result of alien activity;
- a radar-visual case with elements similar to those mentioned in Hynek's book;
- a massive, area-wide power outage reminiscent of the Northeast Blackout of November 1965, which some attributed at the time to UFO sabotage;
- intense vehicle-interference effects where a UFO stalls a truck's ignition and electrical system;
- a series of implanted dreams or visions in which the characters engage in ambiguous or bizarre attempts to decipher an apparent otherworldly contact;
- SETI-like signals from space;
- a sinister government cover-up featuring black helicopters, clandestine military maneuvers on American soil, and a secret international silence group (symbolized by the black triangle on a white background that appears on podiums and shoulder patches); and
- pre-Hopkins/Striever abduction scenarios that are more confusing than terrifying.

In 1980 for the release of the recut “Special Edition” on videotape, Spielberg reluctantly (at the insistence of Columbia Pictures) added a scene at the end to show Dreyfuss's character after he entered the mother ship. However, the original ending was restored for the 1998 “Collector's Edition.”

For the 30th anniversary of the film this year, Spielberg is issuing *Close Encounters* once again on November 13, in both DVD and Blu-ray formats. Through a process known as “seamless branching,” the Blu-ray version contains all three versions on a single disc. The process identifies the differences, segments the footage, and then arranges it into three unique playlists so that frames used in all three films are only included on the disc once.

## CLOSE ENCOUNTERS AND UFOs

Despite the predictions by skeptical pundits (such as Martin Gardner in the *New York Review of Books*, January 26, 1978) that the film would spark a wave of sightings after its release, UFO activity did not increase, despite a spike in public interest. CUFOS noted that people were submitting reports of sightings that took place years earlier, not recent

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## CLOSE ENCOUNTERS—*continued from page 18*

cases (*IUR*, February 1978, p. 8). Spielberg had agreed to distribute CUFOS-created UFO report forms at some theatres, and this may also have helped encourage the older reports. CUFOS office administrator Estelle Postol said in the January 7, 1978, *Moline (Ill.) Daily Dispatch* that the Center was receiving 10–15 reports daily, compared to 3–5 before the movie’s release. “What the movie has done is put the subject in a more serious vein,” she added. On the other hand, the White House was flooded with UFO mail as a direct result of the movie as well as President Carter’s campaign promise one year earlier to release all classified UFO data (*Time*, December 12, 1977).

Jerome Clark, in the second edition of his *UFO Encyclopedia* (Omnigraphics, 1998), also noted:

In later years, when abduction reports came to occupy a prominent role in the UFO phenomenon, skeptics and debunkers would argue that the big-headed humanoids and spindly gray alien in the film were responsible for comparable entities impressionable witnesses imagined seeing. Folklorist Thomas E. Bullard, the author of several scholarly monographs on the abduction phenomenon, put this hypothesis to a “simple test.” He wrote, “If *Close Encounters* is as influential as skeptics allege, abductions reported prior to its release in October [sic] 1977 ought to show a variety of alien types, while subsequent reports ought to be more consistent, reflecting the alien image from the movie.”

In 1994, Bullard conducted a study of 104 abduction reports (38 on record prior to the film, and 65 that came to light afterwards). In what will come as no surprise to anyone who has been reading *IUR* regularly, he concluded:

The evidence acquits Steven Spielberg of creating the standard humanoid. These beings existed from the earliest days of the abduction phenomenon, and claims that *Close Encounters* planted the image simply do not square with the facts. A second truth is that standard humanoids did not rise to prominence in the wake of this movie; they were already there. . . . Standard humanoids [moreover] are not and never have been the only sort of occupants that abductees report. Monstrous, human, and exotic types comprised some 20% of the sample before *Close Encounters*, and this figure has remained more or less constant ever since.

Perhaps Spielberg’s most significant achievement with *Close Encounters* was to portray aliens as powerful yet benign, a concept at odds with 1950s films and their bug-eyed monsters intent on conquering the planet. As Lester D. Friedman put it in *Citizen Spielberg* (University of Illinois Press, 2006), “*Close Encounters* presents a more progressive, tolerant, and even cosmopolitan vision of the universe than the vast majority of the science-fiction films preceding it.” ♦