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Film Studies 380

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Reading Response 4: Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977)

Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) is an astonishing cinematic achievement. Similar to films like Kubrick's epic *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1967), Tarkovsky's meditative *Solaris* (1972) and Zemeckis's underrated *Contact* (1997), Spielberg takes advantage of all the latest achievements in special effects technology to achieve the images needed for such a vast epic. Plus he also gives us a touching human story full of rich, colorful characters that perfectly capture our awe and wonder while flashing dazzling effects on the screen. In Gene Youngblood's article "The Stargate Corridor" he explains how the legendary special effects supervisor Douglas Trumbull achieved the effects needed earlier on for Kubrick's *2001*, years before working on *Close Encounters*.

Every cinephile knows how groundbreaking the effects were for *2001: A Space Odyssey*, effects which were achieved by 25 year old Trumbull at the time. It is described in the article that Trumbull came up with the idea of scanning slits through mirrors of the camera lens, starting from far away and bringing them back in, techniques which could effectively give off the impression of an optical 'psychedelic' time warp. When later expanding this technique, this created what is now known as the 'Slit-Scan effect,' which was a breakthrough in special effects and motion control photography. Of course Trumbull states, "In one sense the history of film is

but a footnote to Lumiere and Melies” (Youngblood 154), which I find to be an interesting statement since French director Jean Renoir is said to have compared the wondrous effects of *Close Encounters* to the work of George Melies.

Trumbull used many of his motion control photography effects a decade later to *Close Encounters*, describing the approach in using such effects as much, much different compared to the harder, colder Kubrick film in 67. Trumbull stated after the premiere of *Close Encounters* to critic Roger Ebert: “This picture was a lot harder to do than 2001, because the special effects had to be presented in a context of reality. In 2001, the space ships were in outer space -- we were working against a black background reaching back to infinity. In *Close Encounters*, the UFOs had to be right there in the same shot with the people, the buildings, all the rest of it.”

When watching *Close Encounters* again, I realized I was viewing a slightly different version of the film than I remembered growing up watching. Curious by this I decided to look up why that was and I made the discovery that Spielberg was originally dissatisfied with the film back in 77, and a few years later re-released a director’s cut of it. I believe it was the director’s cut that I grew up watching because when watching it again last Wednesday, I realized there were many sequences of the film that I either don’t remember or they felt like they went on for far too long. For instance, the extended sequence of Richard Dreyfuss’s character Roy digging up his entire yard to mold out the mountain of his vision in his home was an entirely new scene I never seen before. Personally I am glad Spielberg took this sequence out for the reissue version, because I always felt that scene was a little silly and unintentionally comic.

The director’s cut I grew up watching also showed extra scenes as well, most famously the inside of the space-ship after Roy walks in at the climax of the film. It was cool to see the

inside of a spaceship when I was a kid, but now seeing it as an adult that scene seems quite pointless. Leaving the inside of the ship ambiguous and more a mystery to the audience leaves a much greater impact in the end and I'm glad Spielberg decided to take it out. I still think *Close Encounters* is a remarkable technical achievement that presents the child-like awe and wonder of all our curiosities on the mysteries of the world and of life on other planets. (Personally I think he perfected this achievement a few years later in *E.T.* though). I love the magical and slightly creepy elements of a ship entering into a home and abducting a child (who is creepy-looking himself), and my favorite moment in the film is Dreyfuss misinterpreting the lights of a landing spaceship to the headlights of a car which he signals to drive around him.

But am I the only one bothered by many of the character's ethic decisions throughout the story? Roy's erratic and obsessive behavior showed obvious signs of schizophrenia and I thought Teri Garr under-reacted to this dangerous behavior. It was quite irresponsible for her to leave the children alone with a husband who is obviously suffering from mental illness, and she immediately should have taken the kids and left him earlier on. But it's the final conclusion of the movie which bothers me the most. To have Roy selfishly abandon his wife and children just to fulfill a quest he only recently felt a need to explore is a morally questionable decision. Maybe this was Spielberg rebelling against the domestic norm of the suburban family of the 1970's, but in the end it makes Roy a pretty lousy husband and father. Teri Garr and the kids deserve better.