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Author(s)	Ursula K. Le Guin
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TANGENTS

Film

Close Encounters of the Third Kind

Producer: Julia Phillips and Michael Phillips

Director: Steven Spielberg

Star Wars

Producer: Gary Kurtz

Written and Directed by George Lucas

A dark screen. The title, *Close Encounters*, appears in silence. The sound begins very, very softly; rises slowly; explodes into a roaring fortissimo—and stays there during the rest of the movie.

The light is often at top brightness, too, but it is almost impossible to make the light from the projector painful; and anyhow, we have eyelids. But no earlids. The light is used with variety and a great deal of beauty. The sound is used with brutality.

Very seldom can one understand a complete sentence. Words are mumbled and slurred off, Method-style, shouted or screamed into dust-storms, wind-storms, helicopter backwash, yelled simultaneously in French and English, redoubled and self-effaced by loudspeaker echo. A few lines come through clear, and they are effective:

"I didn't want to see it."

"Yes, I saw you going up in the air, did you see me running after you?"

And my favorite, whispered:

"*Mince alors...*"

Just enough comes through to convince the middle-aged moviegoer in the fourth row extreme left (does Pauline Kael ever have to sit in the fourth row extreme left?) that she

isn't going deaf, and that the unintelligibility is deliberate. Perhaps it is used to disguise the banality of most of the dialogue. Certainly there were moments in *Star Wars* when one prayed in vain for unintelligibility... Possibly the high proportion of noise to meaning *has* a meaning. But I am afraid that it serves merely to augment the hysterical tension established in the opening scene and never relaxed thereafter.

Why, after all, does there have to be a dust-storm in the Sonora Desert just then? Why does everyone rush about screaming in three languages? The discovery of mysteriously just-abandoned World War Two planes might very well take place quietly, eerily; deserts aren't noisy, crowded places, as a rule. But no. The wind and all the performers have to howl in unison.

When humans and aliens finally communicate, it is by musical tones. In that one scene the noise-gimmickry all comes together; it is at last a genuine climax. If it rose to true music, it would be a great moment.

But even then it would not justify the rest of the soundtrack, which uses noise to whip up emotion, the same trick that's so easy to do with electronically amplified instruments; deci-

bellicosity. Exposed to aggression by loud noise, the body must continually resist its own fight flight reaction, thus building up an adrenalin high, thus feeling surges of unfocused emotion, increased pulse-rate, etc.—thrills and chills. No harm. Same as a rollercoaster. But a rollercoaster doesn't pretend to have a message. On the other hand... *Star Wars*, which rather ostentatiously pretends not to have any message, may be even trickier.

The end of *Star Wars* kept bothering me after I saw it the first time. I kept thinking, such a funny silly beautiful movie, why did Mr. Lucas stick on that wooden ending, a high-school graduation, with prizes for Good Citizenship? But when I saw it again I realized it wasn't high-school but West Point: a place crawling with boots and salutes. Aren't there any civilians in this Empire? Finally a friend who knows Films explained to me that the scene is a nostalgic evocation or imitation of Leni Riefenstahl's famous film of the 1938 Olympics, the German winners receiving a grateful ovation from the Thousand Year Reich. Having dragged Dorothy and Toto and that lot around the cosmos a bit, Mr. Lucas cast about for another surefire golden oldie, and came up with Adolf Hitler.

Anyhow, what the hell is nostalgia doing in a science fiction film? With the whole universe and all the future to play in, Mr. Lucas took his marvelous toys and crawled under the fringed cloth on the parlor table, back into a nice safe hideyhole, along with Flash Gordon and the Cowardly Lion and Luke Skywalker and the Flying Aces and the Hitler Jugend. If there's a message there, I don't think I want to hear it.

There are gorgeous moments in *Star Wars*, especially on the desert planet (before everybody gets into uniform). The little desert people, the caravan, the behemoth, the town, R2D2 lost,

and so on. Through the impasto of self-indulgence and the comic-book compulsion to move-move-move, there breaks a childlike, radical, precise gesture of the imagination: and you glimpse what a science fiction movie might be like, when they get around to making one.

Close Encounters has science-fiction elements—the space ship is even more splendid than the one in *Star Wars*—but it seems to me essentially an occultist movie. It's much more amiable than the endless nasties about little girls possessed by devils; it's definitely on the side of the angels. But the arrival of benevolent aliens in saucers is a theme science fiction hasn't dealt with, except facetiously, for at least a generation. Fiction writers got out long ago, leaving the field to believers, faddists, amateur photographers, psychologists, and the Air Force. Saucerism has a lot to do with religion, as Jung pointed out, but nothing at all to do with either science or science fiction.

Indeed the movie seemed almost entirely irrational. Perhaps, being middle-aged and seeing it from a highly oblique angle, I missed some explanations. I ought to see it again before saying this: but my impression is that the plot abounds in giant loopholes, as the universe abounds in black holes, or does it? How does the U.S. Government know *when* to expect the aliens? Why do they have a troop of—well, exchange students, I guess—all dressed up in red pantsuits (one woman, or was it two? in the whole troop) ready to go aboard the saucer? How do they know they'll be wanted? What the dickens is François Truffaut doing there? And if he's there, amidst all the security officers and dead sheep, why aren't there any Mexicans or Chinese or Russians or Canadians or Peruvians or Samoans or Swahili or Thai? Why does the United States get to hog the cosmic show? Why does—Oh well. Shoot.

"Why do you spoil it, asking questions?" everybody snarls at me.

Well, because both movies come on as science fiction, or as "sci fi" anyhow; and I was brought up to believe that science fiction, whatever its shortcomings in the way of character, catharsis, and grammar, was supposed to try to be intellectually coherent: to have an idea, and to follow it through. Neither of these movies would know an idea if they fell over it (which, of course, given their subject matter, they frequently do.) *Star Wars* is all Action and *Close Encounters* is all Emotion, and both are basically mindless.

The emotional bias interests me somewhat more—it's a greater artistic risk to take. In *Close Encounters* sometimes the emotions do move. Children are genuinely important throughout it, and so there is a deep resonance for a moment when the aliens first appear, childlike, gracile, almost fetal forms bathed in pure light. But then Mr. Spielberg blows it with a disastrous close-up. His hand is so heavy! Nobody is allowed to do anything, even load a camera, quietly or easily; all movements are frenetic, violent, as if the characters were being pursued by giant sharks. Yet the actors are so good they establish personality and believable response against all the odds. You begin to feel with them, to go along with them... and then another load of hysteria gets dumped on and the volume gets turned up another notch.

The end for instance. I think we're supposed to be sort of misty-eyed; but what about? I want to be clear about what I'm misty about. Is it because they didn't blow us up? Because we didn't blow them up? Because the hero's doing what he wanted and going off in a really gorgeous super-saucer? But what happened to the other guys (and gals) in red pantsuits? They don't seem to be going into the saucer with him. And why does

the heroine express her emotion by suddenly ignoring her beautiful kid and shooting a full twenty-four-shot roll of snapshots, color slides no doubt, of the hero's exodus? There she is, smiling through her tears, pressing the shutter again—and again—and again—Is that an adequate dramatic expression of human emotion at a peak experience? Is it even appropriate? I find it pitiful; and, since this is a movie, grotesquely self-conscious. It happened, because it's on film...

Well, it's real pretty. And some day they'll make a science fiction movie. Meanwhile, I think I'll go back and see *Dersu Uzala* for the third time. Because it's a movie about a world and a time none of us will ever see; about aliens; about fear, and love; because it lets us see that the universe really is endless, and terrible, and beautiful. *Ursula K. Le Guin*

Ursula K. Le Guin is the author of many books, among them The Left Hand of Darkness and The Dispossessed, both winners of the Nebula Award for best novel. She is currently at work on a new novel.