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Close Encounters of the Third Kind, by Dana Polan. The British Film Institute: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024, 104 pp.

André Seewood

In three decades, the BFI Film Classics book series has devoted almost two hundred monographs to the analysis and discussion of cult films, art films, and international films contributing significantly to the flourishing and renewal of cinephilia in successive generations. These short but intensive monographs, normally about a hundred pages in length, provide rigorous and focused scrutiny of a single film including production, reception, and critique, which could well be obscured in a larger book-length study of a particular auteur, their oeuvre, and their cultural milieu. Many well-established and up and coming film scholars have written about specific films for the BFI Film Classics book series; including Dana Polan who has already contributed marvellous analyses of Nicholas Ray's *In A Lonely Place* (1950) in 1994 and Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) in 2000. However, it is surprising to see Polan writing on Steven Spielberg's three different versions of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977, 1980, 1998).

The surprise here is that Steven Spielberg, at least at the beginning of his career, was mostly thought of as a superior craftsman of popular entertainment and the director responsible for the introduction of the Hollywood blockbuster with films like *Jaws* (1975), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), and the monumental *Jurassic Park* franchise which began in 1993. The notion that a Spielberg film would be given a BFI Film Classics analysis is indicative of how Spielberg's reputation has changed from showman to serious film artist after the release of films such as *The Color Purple* (1985), *Empire of the Sun* (1987) and *Schindler's List* in 1993 and the subsequent awards they won globally.

To be sure, *The Color Purple* and *Minority Report* (2002) are among a number of significant works by Spielberg that, in my opinion, would benefit from an extended scholarly discussion in the BFI Film Classics format. Nonetheless, Spielberg's second blockbuster, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, is a curious and fascinating choice. Polan lets us know that the film was conceived and developed in the 1970s zeitgeist of Watergate paranoia, US defeat in Vietnam, and a collective renewed interest in UFOs and alien visitors. The film is an enigmatic one to which Spielberg could never find a satisfying ending: its narrative stops rather than completes; it exists in multiple versions, each more incomplete than the original theatrical release; and it unites the global audiences within the film with the real-life global audiences that made the film a blockbuster. For these and other reasons, Polan's monograph serves as an analysis of 1970s pop

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culture that touches on gender roles, familial abandonment, government conspiracies, and transcendental experiences beyond middle-class consumer society.

Polan's extensive research into the long gestation process and the multiple screenplays of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* raises challenging questions regarding the complex nature of film authorship that have not been fully resolved since film critic Pauline Kael questioned Orson Welles' authorship of *Citizen Kane* (1941) (Carringer, 79). Although Spielberg ultimately took credit for the screenplay of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* it appears that he did so after several drafts had been written, most notably by 1970s golden boy Paul Schrader, who had written screenplays for *The Yakuza* (Sidney Pollack, 1974) and *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976), and John Hill. As Polan explains, "the film itself would take up some elements from these scripts and drop others, and there were in fact modifications even to the final shooting script once on-set production began" (72–73). Details such as these allow Polan's analysis to be more than just a sycophantic study of a great auteur, but instead to challenge the great bourgeois individualism upon which the notion of an auteur is enshrined and reified in the film via the casting of French New Wave director Francois Truffaut as the scientist Lacombe. Polan concludes, "Schrader wanted—and, it seems, still wants—his efforts acknowledged [but] Spielberg clearly felt it would strengthen his reputation as an auteur to be listed as sole writer (just as decades earlier Orson Welles had initially contemplated not sharing credit for the script of Citizen Kane [1941] with Herman J. Mankiewicz)" (66).

It is disappointing that Polan doesn't challenge Spielberg's authorship further by discussing legendary Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray's claims of plagiarism regarding his 1967 unproduced screenplay, *The Alien*, and the striking similarities it has with Spielberg's *E.T. The Extra Terrestrial* (1982). As Ray himself noted, *E.T.* "would not have been possible without my script of *The Alien* being available throughout America in mimeographed copies" (Newman). It could also be argued that Ray's screenplay, which had been circulating through the hands of many different producers at Columbia pictures for decades, was the inspiration for the scene of men in India chanting the five-tone melody of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, who, when asked to identify the source of the notes, all point upward to the sky. Spielberg has vehemently denied any plagiarism (Rahman), but like the coincidences that initiate the quest for truth in this film, an analysis of Ray's claim of Spielberg's plagiarism of his work by Polan could have been very revealing about the complex and deceptive politics of film authorship.

Questions of authorship aside, Polan surprisingly situates *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* within a dominant American movie trend of the late 1970s: the good ole boy road movies like *Smokey and the Bandit* (Hal Needham, 1977), *Convoy* (Sam Peckinpah, 1978), and *Cannonball Run* (Hal Needham, 1981). These films mostly played in drive-ins in the South and Midwest of the US, "but the movies were numerous, feeding no doubt into contemporary sociological currents around working-class men and whiteness, and a romanticization of life on the road", as Polan notes (44).

Whether we think of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* as a road movie or a quest narrative, as is the case in most BFI Film Classics, the author points our attention to details within the films that can be productive for greater scholarly scrutiny and for undergraduate students looking for those stones left unturned to provide new approaches in the study of these great films.

For example, Polan is quick to emphasise how *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and its main character Roy (Richard Dreyfus) reject "those key American values that the Reaganite moment would hold dear: the movie offers no celebration of either family or commodity culture and the idea that personal possessions, such as leisure items, are a path to perfection" (54).

This rigorous study also allows us to open doors on questions of racial representation that have become a contestable aspect of Spielberg's work. Here, *Close Encounter of the Third Kind*'s second scene has a Black air traffic controller (David Anderson) leading the inquiry into whether or not airline pilots want to report their encounter with alien spacecraft. Yet, later in the film, when Ronnie (Terri Garr) leaves her UFO obsessed husband Roy, he has a tug-of-war over a garbage can with a Black sanitation worker that seems to re-establish the menial stereotype of Blackness that the agency of the Black air traffic controller had challenged. The film also lacks any female scientists and seems to lock women into their prescribed roles as mothers with little to no interest in alien encounters. Polan assures us throughout that, in Spielberg's view, a close encounter of the third kind is reserved primarily for white males.

In this new age of AI it is uncertain whether or not BFI Film Classics will just become fodder for the AI learning algorithm or whether these short but intensive monographs will continue to intrigue, inspire, and/or renew an interest in the analysis and discussion of cult films, art films, and international films in the years to come. Regardless, it should be noted that Polan has dutifully contributed an inspiring analysis of one of Spielberg's most interesting blockbuster films.

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