"Now That's What I Call a Close Encounter!": The Role of the Alien in Science Fiction Film, 1977-2001

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I: "Between 2001 and Star Wars"

In 1978 Joan F. Dean examined the state of the Science Fiction film and the commercial failure of many productions between the release of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and George Lucas' *Star Wars* (1977). According to Dean, despite the promising start provided by *2001*, the failure of many 1970s science fiction films was due to their focus on the conflicts arising from America's increasing social and political problems and the continued resentment of military involvement in Vietnam (Dean, 1978). These issues were often reflected in the dystopian vision of the future set out in films such as *Westworld* (1973), *Zardoz* (1973), *THX-1138* (1971), *Soylent Green* (1973), *Rollerball* (1975), *Logan's Run* (1976), *A Boy and His Dog* (1975), *Beneath the Planet of the Apes* (1970), and *Silent Running* (1972). Furthermore, she argues that, as a result of these concerns, there was also a corresponding lack of interest in the once favourite topic of American science fiction: extra-terrestrial life and interplanetary travel, a situation that is particularly ironic given that the period was framed by three of the most identifiably "extra-terrestrial" movies in the history of science fiction film: *2001*, *Star Wars*, and Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977).

Furthermore, she claims, the films that did deal with the possibilities of extra-terrestrial life, such as *The Andromeda Strain* (1971), *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1972),and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), displayed a "developing neo-isolationism" and did little to broaden the genre's comprehension of anything beyond America's domestic and foreign interests (Dean, 1978: 36). In effect, Dean claims, "all that the science fiction films of the early seventies offer in the way of extra-terrestrial life were bacteria, David Bowie, an Invisible civilization, and a few perverts" (Dean, 1978: 37).

The term alien is an exclusionary term that works to define a sense of difference or distinction between that which is self and that which is Other. It is not the objective of this essay to propose a new way of theorising the meaning of the "alien" or "other" but rather to highlight and extrapolate how the ‘idea of the alien' has been portrayed on screen since the late 1970s. This era, which immediately follows the period studied by Dean, saw the alien re-emerge as the central preoccupation of science fiction, and the films of this latter period have been divided into three distinct but inter-connected sub categories. Each category looks at the alien in binary terms, following Jenny Wolmark's examination of science fiction metaphor in which she concludes that the alien "enables difference to be constructed in terms of binary oppositions which reinforce relations of domination and subordination" (Wolmark, 1994: 2). Within the films under consideration, we have identified a binary relationship between the

alien and the human, in which the human is placed under investigation with the result that it is either legitimated through opposition to a negatively defined alien Other or found wanting through comparison with an alternative and superior way of life.

In this essay we want to explore the departure from Earth-based science fiction described by Dean and examine the ways in which the role of the alien had become, and continues to be, a major focus of the genre throughout the eighties, nineties, and into the start of the new millennium. As a result, we will track the progress of the alien -- how it was portrayed and what it represents -- in relation to the shifting signs of the times. We also offer some suggestions about where the alien science fiction movie might go in the new century. We have therefore divided the films into three main categories: alien relations, alien horror and alien invasions. These three distinct categories also relate to overlapping historical periods. The first historical shift occurred when science fiction films changed from dystopian visions to films about extra-terrestrial contact, largely concerned with the ‘good' alien; one that makes contact an enlightening experience. The second and third categories could be read as being one and the same as they figure the alien as a threat, yet we differentiate between them on the grounds that while the alien films of the 1980s and early 1990s concentrated on the single alien, the alien invasion films that followed replaced the individual alien with the collective alien threat of mass invasion with no possibility of interacting on a personal basis. The first section therefore deals with *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and other films such as *E.T.* (1982), particularly the ways in which alien/human relationships provide hope and direction in an increasingly secular society. Having been absent from the big screen since the B movies of the 1950s, aliens returned as benevolent, messianic beings, helping humanity on the road to reconstruction after a period of social and political conflict (Telotte, 2001:151 and Ruppersberg, 1990: 33). In the second section, we contrast such films with *Alien* (1979) and its progeny. Here we examine a largely negative form of alien/human interaction, that heavily draws on the horror genre to create suspenseful atmospheres during the post-Carter malaise and early 1980s Cold War paranoia. This trend can also been linked to the more recent *Pitch Black* (2000) and *The Faculty* (1998), both of which sought to provide a post-modern pastiche of the *Alien* genre. Although we recognise that the aliens in these two films represent a collective threat, we place them in this section because they re-trace the footsteps of the original *Alien* series. In *The Faculty*, the invading aliens are appendages of the one alien Queen, who has taken over the school in the guise of a solitary human girl, while the aliens in *Pitch Black* move collectively like a herd, but mimic the single-minded, inexorable pursuit of Ripley in *Alien*. Finally, the last section deals with two similarly-themed films that differ in their handling of the alien. *Independence Day* (1996) and *Mars Attacks!* (1996) both parody the alien invasion narratives of the 1950s, whilst relying on a knowing intertextuality based on the films discussed in previous sections. The alien of the late 1990s and early 2000s amalgamates these concepts of the alien as both helper and attacker, thus reflecting the confusion experienced as we move into the new millennium uncertain of national and global identities.

II: Between Star Wars and 2001

The period after the release of *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters* saw an extraordinary turnaround in fortune for the alien science fiction film. These movies breathed new life into a genre that had been almost completely preoccupied with earth-bound narratives in recent years. The look and feel of these new movies were a change from the bleak futuristic worlds in the previous period, and their success was, in part, due to the huge increase in production budgets following the success of Lucas' low-budget but visually innovative, *Star Wars*. The

concerns over national politics, overpopulation, and energy shortages that had once weighed heavily on the films of the early seventies had been forgotten as George Lucas and Steven Spielberg took moviegoers to another place. At the same time, these films rejected the pessimism of the earlier period, and they suggested that the social problems of the decade could be solved. Many conveyed a vision of hope, in which -- with a little help from our extra-terrestrial friends -- the future might become a technological paradise complete with world peace. As a result, while these films have been criticised for their affirmative visions, which have often been associated with a conservative shift to Reaganite cinema (see for example, Ryan and Kellner, 1988), it is possible to see these films differently. The science fiction films of the early seventies were often unable to imagine the possibility of redemption and often viewed humanity as simply doomed. Thus, while they have been seen as radical, they were also profoundly nihilistic with no alternative to the decadent order of things. In contrast, the films of the late seventies were often concerned with the exact opposite, an attempt to image an alternative and establish a sense of hope. While their solutions may have been "fantastic," they may be viewed in similar terms to those in which Richard Dyer discusses the musicals. For Dyer, the musical might not tell us what Utopia would actually be like, but it tells us what it might feel like (see Dyer, 1981; 1992). Films may not be able to solve the problems of the present, but they might create a sense that there are alternatives for which it is worth striving. Of course, such narratives of hope can be used for very different political purposes, but this is not to suggest that we should automatically condemn stories of hope as conservative -- without them there can be no basis for radical action either.

These concerns are also related to the films' formal features. As Vivian Sobchack has stressed, the production values of these films are related to their portrayal of the alien: "Inherent in the big-budget SF film… is a visual aura of confidence and optimism. The strange is conquered ... The infinite is introduced and made finite, the unknown is made familiar" (Sobchack, 1998: 110). Sobchack clearly contrasts low and big budget SF films, drawing on the work of Parker Tyler, who describes their respective pessimism and optimism as "spatial paranoia and spatial megalomania" (Sobchack, 1998: 109). Furthermore, the alien-invasion blockbusters such as *Independence Day* and *Mars Attacks!* often present aliens as 'unexplored territory' and, as Sobchack suggests, although the humans are initially routed by their attackers, they eventually rally round, learn about the nature of their adversaries and exploit their inherent weaknesses to bring about their downfall. Similarly, in the territories explored by Spielberg and Lucas, our contact with alien life-forms liberates humanity from its current problems and allows it to become one with the infinite.

The shift from the dystopian films of the early 1970s to the extra-terrestrial films of late 1970s has two possible explanations. Firstly, as Dean points out, the films of the early seventies concerned vital political and humanitarian issues that many believed were crucial to the future of the planet. These films concerned problems such as hunger, poverty, overpopulation, political corruption, and threats to the environment and they often presented worst case scenarios of what might happen if problems were not resolved. These films were socially aware, politically active but, as we have seen, the turn to narratives of alien encounter was not necessarily a retreat from these concerns, but an attempt to imagine a solution to them.

Secondly, when Lucas and Spielberg began to experiment with the science fiction genre, they did so because the alien was already part of their filmic vocabulary. They had grown up with adventure serials such as *Buck Rogers* (1939, 1950) and *Flash Gordon* (1936, 1959), and with the monster movies of the fifties, they saw science fiction as part of their own cinematic

heritage. Furthermore, like others of the movie brat era, they saw the cinematic past of classical Hollywood as a source of authenticity to which they paid homage in their films (see Klinger, 1994). For example, J. P. Telotte describes *Star Wars* as "homage to a great number of films and film types -- the western, war films, Japanese samurai films -- all of which have contributed to Lucas's vision" (Telotte, 2001: 105). Some academics see this nostalgic return to established genres as part of a conservative backlash to the political radicalism of the seventies (Ryan and Kellner, 1988), but it should be stressed that many of the key examples of cinematic radicalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s were themselves examples of the nostalgic film, *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Chinatown* (1974) and *The Godfather* (1972). Furthermore, these films also shared many of the political paranoia of the early 1970s -- the Empire in *Star Wars* represents bureaucratic, ruthless, imperialism and *Close Encounters* clearly plays on anxieties about the relationship between the state and the individual citizen.

1. Alien Relations

As a result, the relationships between aliens and human within these films raise issues about the political and social dynamics within American society in the seventies. Between 1977 and 1986, there is a clear historical period in which enlightened alien beings bring ‘salvation' to America. As we see in the next section, not all alien movies of the 1980s saw the alien as a benevolent figure, and some films portrayed a menacing individual intent on the destruction of human life. However, both types of films, despite being diametrically opposed as a way of representing the alien, deal with similar anxieties and political problems.

Many science fiction films in the 1980s concentrated not simply on the relationship between the human and the alien but specifically on the relationship between children and aliens. *Starman* (1984), *The Last Starfighter* (1984), *Explorers* (1985), and *Flight of the Navigator* (1986) all featured encounters between adolescents and aliens, in which it was suggested that the young are simply more open to wonder and therefore more able to accept the Otherness of alien life forms. However, it is also related to Robin Wood's shrewd observation that Hollywood had tended to construct the viewer as child-like and therefore receptive to the wonder of the cinematic illusion, a construction that is clearly related to the commercial success of Lucas' *Star Wars* trilogy and Spielberg's *Close Encounters* and *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (Wood, 1986: 163).

For example, *E.T.* not only features a benevolent and enlightened alien, who is willing to exchange ideas with others, but the child that he encounters also shares these same qualities. In the process, E.T. not only builds a close relationship with the child, Elliott, but is also able to heal Elliot's troubled family. Furthermore, E.T.'s willingness to exchange ideas with Elliott is contrasted against the ignorance of the adult work of masculine authorities. The threat and menace within the film do not come from anything malevolent within the alien himself, but rather from the fear that he inspires in narrow-minded *adult* humans. The masked invader that comes to take him away becomes the real ‘alien' for Elliott and his family, not unlike his absent father who is ‘alienated' from the family and now lives in Mexico, far from his native land.

In *Cocoon* (1985), *Cocoon: The Return* (1988) and **batteries not included* (1987) aliens are also presented as bringing harmony and peace to humanity, but in this case the encounter is not with children but senior citizens. If on the one level children represent a positive response to alien visitations because of their innocence and open-hearted acceptance of the fantastic, senior citizens represent a knowing wisdom and a lack of prejudice. Furthermore, in these

films, the alien effectively ‘brings out the child' in them. In *Cocoon* and **batteries not included* an elderly group of friends refuse to give up on life by helping the aliens return home and, in return for their help, they receive a new lease of life. In *Cocoon*, they even journey home with the aliens where they will have the chance to live forever, while in **batteries not included* the elderly protagonists -- with the help of their alien friends -- succeed in stopping developers who want to tear down their "old" apartment building and build a modern office block for the "younger" generation in its place.

In these films, the alien allows humans to recover or discover their essential humanity. It is not only able to preserve or resurrect human life, but also to enable those who feel estranged from society to rediscover the joys of life. Thus, while the aliens in *Cocoon* enable the elderly to live forever, they also "change a swimming pool into a fountain of youth" and so "make children of senior citizens" (Grant, 1999: 25). Furthermore, the story also concerns the grandson of one of the elderly. Although not an adult, the grandson not only helps the aliens to return home but, in so doing, demonstrates a child-like open-mindedness that is contrasted with the attitudes of his parents who believe that both he and his grandfather are suffering from delusions. In other words, this grandson embodies all the qualities that these films associate with children -- youthful exuberance, enthusiasm, curious innocence.

In the exemplary *Close Encounters*, the aliens are also associated with children and child-like adults, but the film also suggests that human communion with the enlightened and amicable aliens will bring about social cohesion. Whilst an elite group of scientists aims to conceal the truth about the U.F.O.s that have been witnessed around the world, power repairman Roy Neary represents the "everyman" who succeeds in reaching the aliens and proving that such information cannot be kept hidden. Drawing on the theme of the "messianic" alien mentioned previously, the aliens of *Close Encounters*, who are absent from the majority of the film, appear to be almost heavenly beings when they are finally revealed at the end and offer a technological salvation to humanity which is presented as having lost its way. As Hugh Ruppersberg puts it, the aliens of the film "offer solace and inspiration to a humanity threatened by technology and the banality of modern life" (Ruppersberg, 1990: 33). The religious connotations of the arrival of these aliens is also emphasised by scenes of mass ‘worship' that follow early sightings of the alien in the heavens, and suggest that the aliens are a "cosmic incarnation of Christian myth and doctrine" (Ruppersberg, 1990: 36).

The actions of the naive Neary also involve a journey of self-discovery that is not only implied to be a personal narrative but also one that suggests humanity's passing from childhood into maturity. As Telotte argues, "The film suggests that Neary and, by extension, the rest of humankind, might grow to a new maturity, one in which he will be able to maintain a sense of that child within... necessary for opening up to and understanding the human place in the universe" (Telotte, 2001: 151). This journey is facilitated by the appearance of the child-like aliens, who, as Telotte points out, exhibit the same sense of wonder in their encounter with humanity as humanity exhibits in its encounter with the alien (Telotte, 2001: 153). Imagery of the child pervades the entire narrative, and an abiding symbol of the film continues to be the image of the young child, Barry Guiler, standing in front of an open door to symbolically welcome the aliens. In this scene, Spielberg builds up suspense using a medley of sounds and a vivid orange glow to herald the arrival of the alien who had finally returned to cinemas after a ten year absence. The optimism of this scene, and of the whole film, demonstrates Spielberg's desire to suggest a new beginning for post-Vietnam America and to open the door to a new era.

2. Alien Horror

If Spielberg opened the door to the alien, Ridley Scott's *Alien* nearly ripped it from its hinges. From 1979 to the early 1990s, a horde of alien horror films concerned the threat posed by an individual alien monster. These concerns can be seen as a response to the political climate of the time, characterised by Ronald Reagan's presidency. In one sense, it could be argued, the alien's attack on humans was related to American fears of Soviet aggression, while the reason that the alien threat came in the form of an lone individual can be related to Reagan's one-man mission to rid the world of the ‘evil empire'. However, lone killing machines were not only a feature of the 1980s alien monster but also of the psychotic knife-wielding aggressor of the ‘slasher' films of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Furthermore, this was also a generic feature that can be traced back to earlier in the 1970s: to Yul Brynner's android in *Westworld* (1973) and the shark in *Jaws* (1975). These later alien horror films were not only concerned with external threats but also with the ruthless individualism of Reagan era economics. Not only was the alien determined to survive at the expense of others in these films but, in *Alien*, a faceless corporation stops at nothing to capture the alien and harness its unique potential in the pursuit of profit, while in its sequel Ripley suggests that it is the yuppie greed of Burke rather than alien aggression which is most despicable and dangerous: "I don't know which species is worse. You don't see them fucking each other over for a goddamn percentage."

In these films, the child-like curiosity of Neary in *Close Encounters* is castigated as myopic and dangerous. From *Alien* to *Pitch Black*, films have created and recreated ever-more-terrifying extra-terrestrials to play on our fear of the unknown. The eponymous *Alien* has epitomised our idea of alien ever since the first film, spawning three sequels and a number of imitations. In C*lose Encounters*, humanity's curiosity about the alien visitors is rewarded; the aliens share their galactic knowledge with Roy Neary as he ascends with them in their spaceship. In *Alien*, the crew's curiosity of the extraterrestrial egg chamber is severely punished as John Hurt's character Kane plays host to the monster's embryo. The film combines elements of both the horror and science fiction genre to create a dark and menacing environment that is as alien to the human crew as is the beast. For Telotte, science fiction and horror are distinguished from one another by their different attitudes towards curiosity (Telotte, 2001: 9). In horror, curiosity is dangerous, while in science fiction curiosity is the means by which the characters grow and humanity's intellectual capacity is expanded. In alien horror, "there are things we are better off not knowing" and this rejects the unquenchable thirst for answers that characterised the alien relations films. Ridley Scott even stresses *Alien*'s connections with gothic horror through Lovecraft's claim that "the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" (Lovecraft, 2000: 423).

The now notorious scene at the end of *Alien* where Ripley meets the beast face to face in her underwear emphasises the attitude to curiosity within the film. As she sits and waits with her back turned toward the creature, in her overly large gloves, trying to press the right button to coax it out of its hiding place, one is struck by her courage to remain still and not turn to face it. Even as the alien struggles from its alcove and looms over Ripley, she waits until the last second to release the airlock and fire the thing out into space. It is her own curiosity that warns her of the creature's proximity, as she dares to turn around she immediately presses the button. Only this time her curiosity is rewarded, instead of being punished like the rest of her crewmates for trying to "seek out" the alien -- always looking around one too many corners -- Ripley's curiosity saves the day. Her "fear of the unknown" spurs on her actions and, in the

process, Ripley begins to realise the nature of the beast's tenacity which will become a recurring theme in the three *Alien* sequels.

In *Pitch Black*, a group of "misfit" humans crash on a desert planet and find they must band together to survive the savage *Alien*esque creatures that prey on them once darkness falls. The arid landscape acts as a potent source of alien horror by forming a starkly disquieting vista of limitless, untamed territory in which these aliens have all the advantages. Such scenery serves to highlight the plight of the humans; they are stranded and defenceless in a truly alien world, one which they cannot hope to master. As Sobchack argues, an environment so hostile to humanity is fundamentally horrific because it renders its native ‘other' as "almost always indestructible" (Sobchack, 1998: 118) -- a theme used to similar effect in *Alien*. *Pitch Black* also deals with the concept of "otherness" in human terms. Ultimately, the group is forced to overcome its fear of the human ‘alien' in its midst, embodied by the mysterious Riddick, a dangerous convict in transit.

In *Predator* (1987), the horrific alien is transferred onto Earth with Sigourney Weaver's Ripley transformed into a muscle-bound *Rambo*-style hero played by Arnold Schwarzenegger. Only recently, and hundreds of years after the setting of the first film, has *Alien*'s own monster gene finally reached Earth's atmosphere in *Alien: Resurrection* (1997), creating the possibility that it would take over the planet. Furthermore, the monstrous ‘mother of all aliens' could now reproduce as an alien-human hybrid thanks to the cloning of Ripley whose DNA was fused with that of the Alien Queen. The alien other is literally stuck inside her human body, its genetic make-up totally entwined with hers. It can no longer burst out of its human host but is now part of her DNA and her psyche. Ripley's perpetual nightmare has become inescapable and she is now one with that which she feared most in her life -- the alien.

This concern with the internalisation of the alien threat is also a feature of films concerning alien viruses. In many films, there is a recurrent concern with an alien virus that contaminates humanity for the purpose of planetary domination. In 1971, *The Andromeda Strain* suggested that space might contain alien germs that were harmful to humans, but films such as *virus* (1999) and *The X-Files Movie* (1998) develop the idea of threat from an alien virus. For example, in *virus*, the alien travels in the form of an electrical signal sent from another planet to invade other worlds, and it takes control of all technology with which it makes contact. Furthermore, in a manner reminiscent of *The Thing* (1982), it cannibalises this technology and combines it with human flesh to create the cyborgs that are bent on human annihilation. However, the twist of the film is that the virus of the title does not refer to the alien signal but to the humans that it seeks to wipe out: for the alien, humans are a virus. Again, the single-mindedness of the entity reflects the horror of the unstoppable creature in the *Alien* series. According to Jack Morgan, "the possibility of human devolution to some such dumb driveness is a chilling horror image" (Morgan, 2002: 102). The alien monster in *virus* could represent humanity's nightmare, as it takes over and subsumes it into an all-consuming alien entity intent on purifying the human disease. In *The X-Files Movie*, an alien virus has lain dormant on Earth for centuries. However, it is resurrected when aliens begin collaborating with an economic and political elite on earth in an attempt to dominate the world. The virus infects the human body, which becomes the host to a new life form that gestates within until it eventually bursts out of the human shell, a process akin to the famous scene from *Alien*. Once free, the single alien then indiscriminately attacks humans so that the threat of the alien swarm is once again embodied by the solitary alien.

With *The Faculty*, alien horror entered the new ground established by the post-modern teen horror movie *Scream* (1996). With the knowing textual references to films such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956, 1978) plus the comedic elements that made *Scream* and its sequels so influential, *The Faculty* combines a high school setting with alien possession and ultimately speculates on what might happen if one's teachers really were aliens. As highlighted earlier, this film can be viewed as a collective invasion narrative. However, the film's reliance on traditional generic alien tropes such as the malevolent individual alien connects it to its predecessors. *Men in Black* (1997) satirises a similar theme by suggesting that aliens exist peaceably on Earth in the guise of teachers, politicians, actors etc. *The Faculty's* tagline "MEET THE ALIEN GENERATION" intimates that the film follows in the new "cool" cinema tradition of *Scream*. But it also suggests that the main characters in the film -- the "hip" teenage high school students, who are both the films characters and its target audience -- are products of a *new* generation. The group of kids is made up of the geek, the jock, the school hard man, the pretty cheerleader, yet despite their stereotypical roles and forced interaction, they remain isolated from each other. The "alien generation" of today is a stranger to both itself and the older generation.

3. Alien Invasions

The third major cinematic theme that we have identified is that of alien invasion whereby we are forced to confront the hostile "other" as it invades our own territory. From the early 1990s into 2001 and beyond, alien invasion narratives focused on the alien swarm, rather than the individual, as threat. Of course, films from the period such as *Species* (1995) still concerned individual aliens, although even these aliens represented the advance guard of a larger invasion. Similarly, *The X Files Movie* and *The Faculty* concentrated on a solitary alien who was meant to infiltrate society before the swarm arrived to complete the invasion. However, in the films that concern this section, the invading collective is all that humans encounter. The entire species is characterised as a pestilential entity, focused on the invasion, destruction, and consumption of our own planetary resources. All attempts at trying to interact with these aliens as individuals -- as achieved with E.T. *et al* in the movies of the previous two categories -- is futile since they have no concept of personal relationships or individuality. For humans to defeat the oncoming swarm they must assume their own sense of collective responsibility and join together. Paranoia and xenophobic distrust of our own national differences have to be put aside to successfully combat the alien hive mentality. As we will explain, the films of this pre-millennial period draw attention to issues such as globalisation and trans-nationalism that characterised a historical shift between superpower politics of the eighties and the new political order following the end of the Cold War. Typically, once threatened with such an alien attack, humanity is shown to unite and form a ‘global village' to protect its citizens from the onslaught. As observed by Mark Jancovich, most critics of the 1950s invasion narratives see them as being inextricably linked to Cold War ideology, so that the alien was code for the imminent Communist threat. American films of the decade, it is claimed, demonised both the Soviet Union and any resistance to the *status quo*, ensuring that the institutions and authorities of the country were protected from the so-called red menace that was spreading the nation (Jancovich, 1996: 15). By pulling together Americans were given two choices, either support America or be seen as a Communist sympathiser. The result of this distinction meant that there was a clear line between right and wrong, between America and the alien other (see Biskind, 1984 and Tudor, 1989).

Similarly, in *Independence Day*, all races work together to confront the alien invaders, putting aside their differences to ensure the future of the species. An alternative view has

been proposed by Jan Mair, who claims that *Independence Day* represents a shift from alien other as communist, back to a much older Western fear -- that of Islam as "the dark Other of Europe -- the alien Saracen" (Mair, 2002: 37). The film's explicit celebration of American resilience, she claims, presents the locust-like invaders in terms defined by recent US experiences during the Gulf War. Implicit in the film is the Western fear of a popular uprising in Iraq controlled by Saddam Hussein and a subsequent loss of power in the region. Therefore, the "demonised 'vicious Oriental'/Arab is mythologised" into a powerful threat that needs to be eradicated (Mair, 2002: 38). However we would furnish a simpler argument. The true horror of the aliens lies in their very uniformity and the concomitant suggestion that our own nationality and even individuality is under threat from globalisation. *Independence Day*'s plot appeals to anxieties relating to the effects of accelerating globalisation on nation states: The movement of people, money and information across national boundaries. For example, much can be made of the way in which the remaining air-forces from around the world come together to confront the "global" menace. This point will be addressed later with reference to *Mars Attacks!*. It is important to stress now that the film clearly communicates the message that it is the aliens' *lack of humanity* that is their undoing. They are insect-like in appearance and likened to locusts insofar as they favour planned ruthless consumption of resources by occupying fertile planets. It is the individualised humans, united in their emotional response to attack from the alien other, that defeat the militaristic and group-minded aliens. The absence of the Cold War allows for a certain ironic freedom of choice, either remain insular and die, give in willingly to the alien and die, or stand and fight as humans. National borders and ideas of the state mean nothing if you have no planet on which to live. The same global network theme is parodied in *Independence Day's* comedy-counterpart *Mars Attacks!* The political correctness of the former's multicultural union is made visible through the tri-colour configuration of the president's family, a black family and a family resigned to a trailer park (Hedgecock, 1999: 116).

The futuristic *Starship Troopers* (1997) has taken this theme one step further in depicting an austere view of inter-planetary conflict institutionalised and regimented to a high degree. Here, aliens are portrayed solely as savage, destructive monsters bent on human bloodshed and destruction. *Starship Troopers'* view of otherness is *a priori* evil (Gordon, 2000:248), whereby its imperialistic overtones position the alien as inferior in contrast to the humans who are enlightened and therefore justified in colonising the aliens' homeworld. Organised alien control leading to extermination is the only means by which humanity can ensure its own survival. Undercutting the explicit notion that monstrous aliens can be exterminated only when humanity unites is the implicit suggestion that humanity itself has become one such aggressor. When an asteroid collides catastrophically with Earth, its residents blame the 'aliens' for crashing it and then retaliate by travelling millions of light-years across the galaxy conveniently exploiting the aliens' "otherness" to galvanise citizens into extreme action. The flip side of this can be seen in *Battlefield Earth* (2000) where a savage race of alien warriors seek to exterminate humanity and conquer Earth. It is only when the few remaining humans band together exhibiting typically human qualities of stubbornness and loyalty, that the alien threat can be vanquished.

It is interesting to note the polarised depictions of aliens in film, in which they either appear as intellectually advanced beings or as bestial monsters. For example, the insect-like aliens in *Independence Day*, whose mastery of technology far outstrips our own, are potentially our superiors. In contrast, aliens in *Men in Black*, *Evolution* (2001) and the monstrous figures of fear in *Alien* and *Pitch Black* are more animal than human. Their sole purpose is simply to hunt down and devour people where they find them, in the manner of dinosaurs or the

monsters of 1950s B-movies, rather than planning occupation through organised co-operation. As Heidi Kaye and I.Q. Hunter have summarised, these films "identify the inhuman with monstrous, gloopy, insect-like otherness, and leave no doubt that the only good alien is a dead alien" (Kaye and Hunter, 1999: 2). The alien virus theme as previously discussed can also be identified in this section. *Independence Day's* swarm of aliens has been likened to the threat AIDS poses to humans, the ‘alien' being inside the body. According to Michael Rogin *Independence Day* takes the alien virus and turns it against the alien and at the point "when David (Jeff Goldblum's character) plants his computer virus, he is entering the field of AIDS" (Rogin, 1998: 65).

The invasion narratives of the 1990s appear to also tap into the psyche of a West once again looking for meaning in the heavens. According to Jan Mair "an estimated 23 per cent of Americans believe in aliens and 10 per cent actually claim to have been abducted" (Mair, 2002: 47; see also French, 2001). However, whilst Roy Neary's and Elliott's search for enlightenment in the late seventies and early eighties reflects an era where the alien can provide the answers, such quests in film narratives of the nineties are both ridiculed: they make one victim to extraterrestrial domination. For example, *Communion* (1989) sees author Whitley Strieber struggling with writer's block and retreating for a weekend to his country cabin with family and friends. During the first night away, the cabin is flooded with a blinding white light and its inhabitants sense that they are being watched. The two friends subsequently insist on returning home the next day, and months later Strieber experiences alien abduction and a medical examination. The discovery that his young son has also encountered the aliens reiterates the traditional motif of aliens making contact with open-minded youths, as yet unbiased by a more stringently scientific worldview. This theme is continued later as Strieber's psychiatric refers him to a group of people with similar experiences of the stereotypical "bug-eyed" and "blue-skinned" aliens so common in alien abduction narratives. Several of these abductees describe the aliens' interest in children.

Mars Attacks! shows that the trusting openness of the *Close Encounters* era can hold no longer as the savage Martians destroy their welcoming committee in a bid to conquer Earth and rid it of its human inhabitants. As an ironic reference to the film's most famous predecessor *The War of the Worlds* (1953) Liz Hedgecock has observed how both films have tried "to expose the uncertainty of civilisation, and show the aggressive invasiveness of contemporary life as a threat to what civilisation we have" (Hedgecock, 1999: 117). *Mars Attacks!* not only shares a connection with science fiction of the 1950s but also conveys a sense of foreboding for what lies in store for civilisation in the future. America is destroyed, Las Vegas is in ruins, and only a "rag-tag" group of "misfits" remain to rebuild society. This film forms a striking parallel to the plot of *Independence Day*, released in the same year, and at the same time parodies it by twisting *Independence Day's* iconographic and spectacular scenes of destruction into a comic strip representation of disaster. When the aliens topple the Washington Monument to obliterate some boy scouts, the film ridicules the overused shot from the trailer for *Independence Day* in which the White House explodes (Hedegcock, 1999: 116). *Mars Attacks!* is a true celebration of individuality in the face of the collective alien enemy: groups such as Congress and the army are destroyed whilst individuals and impromptu bands of individuals are seen to survive. Whereas *Independence Day* celebrates conformity and collective identity, this film shows how precarious a stance such blind patriotism can be. With the rise of a global mass media comes a latent technophobia and fear of assimilation (a fear literally embodied by *Star Trek*'s Borg) into a dehumanised collective incapable of individuality or free will. Again, this is a theme familiar to the science fiction

movies of the fifties and elucidated by Vivian Sobchack in her discussion of collective anxiety in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Sobchack, 1998: 123).

III: Conclusions: Close Encounters

In conclusion, it would appear that science fiction over the last twenty-four years has moved from the receptiveness of *Close Encounters* and *E.T.* to the cynical and defensive ‘close encounter' described by Will Smith in *Independence Day*. When Smith's Capt. Hiller downs the alien craft and jettisons himself above the New Mexican desert, the audience is treated to an amusing scene where he confronts the alien pilot. Aware that it may still be alive, Hiller approaches the craft with pistol in hand ready to kill, however, when he opens the hatch and the alien leaps forth, he uses brute force to punch the alien's head and knock it into submission. Hiller's ensuing ironic statement -- "Now that's what I call a close encounter!" -- illustrates the historical shift in attitude toward the alien, both in the film (the aliens are at first welcomed) and within our own period (the alien is not something to which humans can or want to relate). Hiller's "close encounter" is neither rewarding nor congenial unlike Neary's experience. Instead Smith's off-screen persona enables Hiller to dispatch the creature in a smooth but aggressive manner, almost as if humans have recognised the need for caution and the lessons learnt from *Close Encounters* are obsolete.

Now as we move closer to the middle of the decade, *E.T.* has had its twentieth anniversary and a return to the big screen, it seems that it is time for science fiction to return once again to harmony in human-alien relations. Recently, film has begun to concentrate on a humanity that is attempting to understand its origins through encounters with extra-terrestrial life. Films such as *Mission to Mars* (2000) and the earlier *Contact* (1997) both associate the alien other with the human body, paralleling the emerging theme of the amalgamated alien/human body discussed in connection with horror. The former film stipulates that our DNA is based on the alien, whereas the latter symbolises the body as a positive extension of the alien. This contrasts sharply with alien horror where any connection between the alien and the human body represents infection, mutation, and ultimately death.

Through the previous sections, we have drawn a discernible trajectory of the alien's path through film. The optimism of *Close Encounters* was quickly countered by an innate paranoia reflecting tensions of the Cold War and notions of the "other" as a threat. Events such as the AIDS epidemic and even belief in real alien abductions brought about films which sought to place the "alien" within our very selves. This bleak reality is hard to accept, so films like *Independence Day* and *Mars Attacks!* again allowed us to project our fears onto an external enemy. Will Smith's attack on the alien aggressor has a cathartic effect -- we feel better about ourselves because he has punished the apparent source of our discomfort.

We have come full circle: from the extra-terrestrials that Joan Dean described as "neither monstrous nor dangerous… far less malevolent than earthly sharks," (Dean, 1978: 40) through to those seen in *Alien*, its sequels, and the many imitations that represented the most horrific manifestations of our worst nightmares, finally reverting back to something far less terrifying but infinitely more complex as society struggles to understand its place in the new millennium. The alien science fiction film has nowhere else to go but back to its roots, back to the initial encounters between alien and human as seen in *E.T.* and *Close Encounters*, to understand our own position as the ever changing world continues to pose new problems to

work through, new "global" issues to address. The purpose of the alien science fiction film was to cast ourselves as the other so we could adequately discern our weaknesses, examine society through the eyes of a coded outsider. The current trend of going back to the beginning, of investigating the possible link to an extra-terrestrial origin, indicates that society needs another chance to explore humanity in this way.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Mark Jancovich and the *Scope* editorial team for their help in the revisions for this paper.

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Filmography 1977-2001

In this filmography we have listed all the movies between these dates that focus on the alien in a wide-ranging capacity. From this list we were able to identify the three sections that make up our analysis of the alien. The categories that we use in the filmography are themselves quite loose and many of the films that appear in one could also be included in another.

Alien Relations with Young and Old

Close Encounters of the Third Kind, 1978. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Columbia Pictures, EMI Film Ltd.

E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial, 1982. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Amblin Entertainment Ltd, Universal Pictures.

The Last Starfighter, 1984. Dir. Nick Castle. Lorimar Film Entertainment, Universal Pictures.

Starman, 1984. Dir. John Carpenter. Columbia Pictures, Industrial Light and Magic.

Cocoon, 1985. Dir. Ron Howard. Twentieth Century Fox, Zanuck/ Brown Productions.

Explorers, 1985. Dir. Joe Dante. Paramount Pictures.

Flight of the Navigator, 1986. Dir. Randal Kleiser. Walt Disney Pictures.

**batteries not included*, 1987. Dir. Matthew Robbins. Amblin Entertainment, Universal Pictures.

Cocoon: The Return, 1988. Dir. Daniel Petrie. Twentieth Century Fox.

Comic Aliens

Flash Gordon, 1980. Dir. Mike Hodges. Twentieth Century Fox, De Laurentiis Entertainment Group.

Critters, 1986. Dir. Stephen Herek. New Line Cinema.

Spaceballs, 1987. Dir. Mel Brooks. Brooksfilms Ltd, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Critters 2: The Main Course, 1988. Dir. Mick Garris. New Line Cinema.

My Stepmother is an Alien, 1988. Dir. Richard Benjamin. Catalina Productions.

Earth Girls are Easy, 1989. Dir. Julien Temple. De Laurentiis Entertainment Group.

Suburban Commando, 1991. Dir. Burt Kennedy. New Line Cinema.

Critters 3 (1992 video release) New Line Cinema.

Critters 4 (1992 video release) New Line Cinema.

Coneheads, 1993. Dir. Steve Barron. Paramount Pictures.

Mars Attacks!, 1996. Dir. Tim Burton. Warner Bros.

Men in Black, 1997. Dir. Barry Sonnenfeld, Amblin Entertainment, Columbia Pictures Corporation.

Galaxy Quest, 1999. Dir. Dean Parisot. Dream Works SKG.

My Favorite Martian, 1999. Dir. Donald Petrie. Walt Disney Pictures.

Evolution, 2001. Dir. Ivan Reitman. The Montecito Picture Company.

The Alien "Other" and "Unknown"

Blade Runner, 1982. Dir. Ridley Scott. Blade Runner Partnership, The Ladd Company.

Terminator, 1984. Dir. James Cameron. Cinema 84, Euro Film Fund, Hemdale Film Corporation, Pacific Western.

The Abyss, 1989. Dir. James Cameron. Twentieth Century Fox, Lightstorm Entertainment, Pacific Western.

Terminator 2: Judgment Day, 1991. Dir. James Cameron. Carolco Pictures Inc., Le Studio Canal+, Lightstorm Entertainment.

Event Horizon, 1997. Dir. Paul Anderson. Golar Productions, Impact Pictures, Paramount Pictures.

Sphere, 1998. Dir. Barry Levinson. Baltimore Pictures, Constant C Productions, Punch Productions Inc.

Supernova, 2000. Dir. Thomas Lee. Hammerhead Productions, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Screenland Pictures, United Artists.

A.I.: Artificial Intelligence, 2001. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Warner Bros., Dreamworks SKG, Amblin Entertainment, Stanley Kubrick Productions.

Alien Visitations/Abductions

Communio, 1989. Dir. Philippe Mora. Allied Vision Ltd., MCEG Productions, Pheasantry Films, The Picture Property Company.

Fire in the Sky, 1993. Dir. Robert Lieberman. Paramount Pictures.

Dark City, 1998. Dir. Alex Proyas. Mystery Clock Cinema, New Line Cinema.

The X-Files, 1998. Dir. Rob Bowman. Twentieth Century Fox, Ten Thirteen Productions.

Alien Invasion

Village of the Damned, 1995. Dir. John Carpenter. Alphavilee Films, Universal Pictures.

Independence Day, 1996.'Dir. Roland Emmerich. Twentieth Century Fox, Centropolis Entertainment.

Starship Troopers, 1997. Dir. Paul Verhoeven. Big Bug Pictures, Touchstone Pictures, TriStar Pictures.

Battlefield Earth, 2000. Dir. Roger Christian. Acoustic Visions Inc., Battlefield Productions LLC.

Alien Horror

Invasion of the Body Snatchers, 1978. Dir. Philip Kaufman. Solofilm.

Alien, 1979. Dir. Ridley Scott. Twentieth Century Fox, Brandywine Productions.

The Thing, 1982. Dir. John Carpenter. Universal Pictures.

Aliens, 1986. Dir. James Cameron. Twentieth Century Fox, Brandywine Productions.

Predator, 1987. Dir. John McTiernan. Twentieth Century Fox, Amercent Films.

Predator, 1990. Dir. Stephen Hopkins. Twentieth Century Fox.

Alien 3, 1992. Dir. David Fincher. Twentieth Century Fox, Brandywine Productions.

Robert A. Heinlein's The Puppet Masters, 1994. Dir. Stuart Orme. Hollywood Pictures.

Species, 1995. Dir. Roger Donaldson. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Alien: Resurrection, 1997. Dir. Jean-Pierre Jeunet. Twentieth Century Fox, Brandywine Productions.

The Faculty, 1998. Dir. Robert Rodriguez. Dimension Films, Los Hooligans Productions.

Species 2, 1998. Dir. Peter Medak. FGM Entertainment, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Virus, 1999. Dir. John Bruno. BBC, Dark Horse Entertainment, Mutual Film Company.

Pitch Blac, 2000. Dir. David Twohy. Interscope Communications, Intrepid Pictures.

Alien/Human Societies

Star Wars, 1977. Dir. George Lucas. Lucasfilm Ltd.

Star Trek -- The Motion Picture, 1979. Dir. Robert Wise. Century Associates, paramount Pictures.

The Empire Strikes Back, 1980. Dir. Irvin Kershner. Lucasfilm Ltd.

Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan, 1982. Dir. Nicholas Meyer. Paramount Pictures.

The Return of the Jedi, 1983. Dir. Richard Marquand. Lucasfilm Ltd.

Dune, 1984. Dir. David Lynch. De Laurentiis, Universal Pictures.

Star Trek III: The Search for Spock, 1984. Dir. Leonard Nimoy. Cinema Group Ventures, Paramount Pictures.

Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home, 1986. Dir. Leonard Nimoy. Paramount Pictures.

Star Trek V: The Final Frontier, 1989. Dir. William Shatner. Paramount Pictures.

Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country, 1991. Dir. Nicholas Meyer. Paramount Pictures.

Star Trek Generations, 1994. Dir. David Carson. Paramount Pictures.

Star Trek: First Contact, 1996. Dir. Jonathan Frakes. Paramount Pictures.

Star Trek: Insurrection, 1998. Dir. Jonathan Frakes. Paramount Pictures.

Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace, 1999. Dir. George Lucas. Twentieth Century Fox, Lucasfilm Ltd.

Alien Origins

2010, 1984. Dir. Peter Hyams. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Contact, 1997. Dir. Robert Zemeckis. South Side Amusement Company, Warner Bros.

Mission to Mars, 2000. Dir. Brian De Palma. The Jacobson Company, Touchstone Pictures.