

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND (1977)

- Released by August 11th, 2017
- 2 hours 17 minutes
- \$20,000,000 (estimated) budget
- Steven Spielberg directed
- Columbia Pictures Corporation, EMI Films, EMI Films
- Rated PG

QUICK THOUGHTS

- Demetri Panos
- Phil Svitek
- Marisa Serafini

DEVELOPMENT

- The film's origins can be traced to director Steven Spielberg's youth, when he and his father watched a meteor shower in New Jersey
- As a teenager, Spielberg completed the full-length science fiction film Firelight. Many scenes from Firelight would be incorporated in Close Encounters on a shot-for-shot basis
- In 1970 he wrote a short story called Experiences about a lovers' lane in a Midwestern United States farming community and the "light show" a group of teenagers see in the night sky
- In late 1973, during post-production on The Sugarland Express, Spielberg developed a deal with Columbia Pictures for a science fiction film
- 20th Century Fox previously turned down the offer
- Julia and Michael Phillips instantly signed on as producers
- The title is derived from Ufologist J. Allen Hynek's classification of close encounters with aliens, in which the third kind denotes human observations of aliens or "animate beings"
- He first considered doing a documentary or a low-budget feature film about people who believed in UFOs
- Spielberg decided "a film that depended on state of the art technology couldn't be made for \$2.5 million."
- Borrowing a phrase from the ending of The Thing from Another World, he retitled the film Watch the Skies, rewriting the premise concerning Project Blue Book and pitching the concept to Willard Huyck and Gloria Katz
- Katz remembered "It had flying saucers from outer space landing on Robertson Boulevard [in West Hollywood, California]. I go, 'Steve, that's the worst idea I ever heard.'"
- Spielberg brought Paul Schrader to write the script in December 1973 with principal photography to begin in late 1974. However, Spielberg started work on Jaws in 1974, pushing Watch the Skies back
- With the financial and critical success of Jaws, Spielberg earned a vast amount of creative control from Columbia, including the right to make the film any way he wanted

WRITING (Steven Spielberg)

- Though Spielberg received sole credit for the script, he was assisted by Paul Schrader, John Hill, David Giler, Hal Barwood, Matthew Robbins, and Jerry Belson, all of whom contributed to the screenplay in varying degrees
- Schrader turned in his script, which Spielberg called, "one of the most embarrassing screenplays ever professionally turned in to a major film studio or director. It was a terribly guilt-ridden story not about UFOs at all."

- Titled Kingdom Come, the script's protagonist was a 45-year-old Air Force Officer named Paul Van Owen who worked with Project Blue Book
- "[His] job for the government is to ridicule and debunk flying saucers." Schrader continued. "One day he has an encounter. He goes to the government, threatening to blow the lid off to the public. Instead, he and the government spend 15 years trying to make contact."
- Spielberg and Schrader experienced creative differences, hiring John Hill to rewrite
- At one point the main character was a police officer. Spielberg "[found] it hard to identify with men in uniform. I wanted to have Mr. Everyday Regular Fella." Spielberg rejected the Schrader/Hill script during post-production on Jaws
- He reflected, "they wanted to make it like a James Bond adventure."
- David Giler performed a rewrite; Hal Barwood and Matthew Robbins, friends of Spielberg, suggested the plot device of a kidnapped child.
- The song "When You Wish upon a Star" from Pinocchio influenced Spielberg's writing style. "I hung my story on the mood the song created, the way it affected me personally."
- Jerry Belson and Spielberg wrote the shooting script together
- During pre-production, the title was changed from Kingdom Come to Close Encounters of the Third Kind
- J. Allen Hynek, who worked with the United States Air Force on Project Blue Book, was hired as a scientific consultant. Hynek felt "even though the film is fiction, it's based for the most part on the known facts of the UFO mystery, and it certainly catches the flavor of the phenomenon Spielberg was under enormous pressure to make another blockbuster after Jaws, but he decided to make a UFO movie. He put his career on the line."

STORY/TOPICS

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CAST

- J. Allen Hynek makes a cameo appearance in the closing scene
- Spielberg's friends Hal Barwood and Matthew Robbins cameo as two World War II pilots returning from the mother ship
- Real-life ARP technician Phil Dodds cameos as the operator of the ARP 2500 synthesizer communicating with the alien ship
- Musician Jerry Garcia also makes an appearance in the crowd scene. Carl Weathers appeared as a soldier in the film
- Cary Guffey's (Barry) performances were so good that they only ever had to do one or two takes of each shot he was in. He became known as "One-Take Cary" on the set, and director Steven Spielberg had a T-shirt printed up for him with the phrase written on it

RICHARD DREYFUSS (Roy Neary)

- Richard Dreyfuss as Roy Neary, an electrical lineman in Indiana who encounters and forms an obsession with unidentified flying objects
- Steve McQueen was Spielberg's first choice. Although McQueen was impressed with the script, he felt he was not right for the role as he was unable to cry on cue
- Dustin Hoffman, Al Pacino and Gene Hackman turned down the part as well
- Jack Nicholson turned it down because of scheduling conflicts
- Spielberg explained when filming Jaws, "Dreyfuss talked me into casting him. He listened to about 155 days' worth of Close Encounters. He even contributed ideas."

- Dreyfuss reflected, "I launched myself into a campaign to get the part. I would walk by Steve's office and say stuff like 'Al Pacino has no sense of humor' or 'Jack Nicholson is too crazy'. I eventually convinced him to cast me."

FRANCOIS TROUFFAUT (Claude Lacombe)

- a French government scientist in charge of UFO-related activities in the United States
- Gérard Depardieu, Philippe Noiret, Jean-Louis Trintignant and Lino Ventura were considered for the role
- Internationally renowned as a film director, this was Truffaut's only acting role in a film he did not direct as well as his only role in an English language film
- During filming, Truffaut used his free time to write the script for The Man Who Loved Women
- He also worked on a novel titled The Actor, a project he abandoned
- Publicly criticized Phillips as incompetent, a charge she rejected, writing that she had essentially nursed Truffaut through his self-created nightmare of implied hearing loss, sickness and chaos during the production
- François Truffaut's English was not strong. In order to get through some of his scenes, he stuck pieces of paper with his lines on them on various objects where he could read from them but the camera would not pick them up. In one case, as he argues face to face with an Army officer (who has his back to the camera), he is in fact reading his lines off a card pinned to the man's chest. He had shown the same trick to an actress who was having trouble with her lines in his own Day for Night (1973) (Day for Night), in which he played the director of the movie-within-the-movie

TERI GARR (Ronnie Neary)

- Roy's wife
- Spielberg's future wife Amy Irving also auditioned for the role

MELINDA DILLON (Jillian Guiler)

- Barry's mother
- She forms a similar obsession to Roy's, and the two become friends
- Teri Garr wanted to portray Jillian, but was cast as Ronnie
- Hal Ashby, who worked with Dillon on Bound for Glory, suggested her for the part to Spielberg
- Dillon was cast three days before filming began

BOB BALABAN (Mellie Logan)

- Lacombe's assistant and English-French interpreter
- They meet for the first time in the Sonoran Desert at the beginning of the film
- His former position as a cartographer allows him to interpret the alien signals as coordinates leading to the meeting at Devils Tower
- Kept a diary of behind-the-scenes events during production. This diary was published to tie-in with the release of the film

J. PATRICK MCNAMARA (Project Leader)

- Known for Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977), Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure (1989) and Blow Out (1981)

SYMBOLISM/TRIVIA/EASTER EGGS

- In her 1991 book *You'll Never Eat Lunch in This Town Again*, producer Julia Phillips wrote highly profane remarks about Spielberg, Zsigmond, and Truffaut, because she was fired during post-production due to a cocaine addiction. Phillips blamed it on Spielberg being a perfectionist
- The words that the crowd in India chants are, "Aaya Re! Aaya," which means, "He has come," in Hindi
- Real air traffic controllers were used in the opening sequence. The synthesizer technician/performer was the actual engineer sent by ARP Instruments to install the synthesizer equipment (ARP 2500) on the set. Director Steven Spielberg watched his expert playing of the equipment and immediately cast him for the role. The name of the ARP engineer is Philip Dodds, and he is actually mentioned in the credits
- The filming was done under utmost secrecy to keep the element of surprise until it finally became ready for release and also to prevent anyone ripping off the idea and making some quick knockoff of it. Security at the Mobile hangar was so tight that even Steven Spielberg was denied entrance one day when he forgot his ID card
- The hand signals used by the aliens are actually used by classroom teachers to teach the solfege scale. They were invented by the Reverend John Curwen, an English Congregationalist minister, and then adapted by composer Zoltán Kodály

DIRECTING (Steven Spielberg)

- For the scene in which Barry (Cary Guffey) says "toys!" as he looks out the window and spots the UFOs, Steven Spielberg actually pulled out a toy car behind the camera to cause Barry's unexpected one-take reaction
- Spielberg's obsession with aliens (CE3K, ET, War of the Worlds, Falling Skies, Indiana Jones 4, Super8)

PRODUCTION/CINEMATOGRAPHY (Vilmos Zsigmond)

- USAF and NASA declined to cooperate on the film
- In fact, NASA reportedly sent a 20-page letter to Spielberg, telling him that releasing the film was dangerous
- In an interview, he said: "I really found my faith when I heard that the Government was opposed to the film. If NASA took the time to write me a 20-page letter, then I knew there must be something happening
- Early in pre-production, Spielberg hired the film title designer Dan Perri to design a logotype for Close Encounters. Perri, who had previously worked on The Exorcist (1973) and Taxi Driver (1976), produced a logotype in Handel Gothic typeface, with only a script to work from. Spielberg was delighted with the result, and applied the logo to all production stationery and crew shirts
 - Unusually in filmmaking, Spielberg carried enough influence to maintain creative control over the film's entire branding, and asked Perri to design the advertising campaign and title sequence for Close Encounters based on his logo
 - Perri later went on to design titles for a number of other major Hollywood pictures, including Star Wars (1977), Raging Bull (1980), and Airplane! (1980)
- Principal photography began on May 16, 1976, though an Associated Press report in August 1975 had suggested filming would start in late 1975
- Spielberg did not want to do any location shooting because of his negative experience on Jaws and wanted to shoot Close Encounters entirely on sound stages, but eventually dropped the idea
- Filming took place in Burbank, California; Devils Tower National Monument in Wyoming; two abandoned World War II airship hangars at the former Brookley Air Force Base in Mobile, Alabama; and the Louisville and Nashville Railroad depot in Bay Minette

- The home where Barry was abducted is located outside the town of Fairhope, Alabama
- Roy Neary's home is at Carlisle Drive East in Mobile
- The UFOs fly through the former toll booth at the Vincent Thomas Bridge, San Pedro, California
- The Gobi Desert sequence was photographed at the Dumont Dunes, California, and the Dharmasala-India exteriors were filmed at the small village of Hal near Khalapur, 35 miles (56 km) outside Bombay, India
- The hangars in Alabama were six times larger than the biggest sound stage in the world
- Various technical and budgetary problems occurred during filming. Spielberg called Close Encounters "twice as bad and twice as expensive [as Jaws]"
- Matters worsened when Columbia Pictures experienced financial difficulties
- Spielberg estimated the film would cost \$2.7 million to make in his original 1973 pitch to Columbia, but the final budget came to \$19.4 million
- Columbia studio executive John Veich remembered, "If we knew it was going to cost that much, we wouldn't have greenlighted it because we didn't have the money."
- Spielberg hired Joe Alves, his collaborator on Jaws, as production designer
- Cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond said that, during the time of shooting for the film, Spielberg got more ideas by watching movies every night which in turn extended the production schedule because he was continually adding new scenes to be filmed
- Zsigmond previously turned down the chance to work on *Jaws*
- Cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond overexposed the scenes with the extraterrestrials deliberately so they would appear fuzzy and diffuse. When producer Julia Phillips saw the footage, she thought he'd made a mistake and ordered the film re-processed so that the aliens came out with a normal contrast, and their rubber heads and suits were obviously fake. She then told Zsigmond he'd botched up the filming and it looked awful. The upset Zsigmond told the lab to reprocess the film the way he originally said and everything looked fine in dailies the next day
- The large, long-armed alien character who came to be known as Puck was a puppet created by marionette maker Bob Baker with an upper torso and head and articulating features for close-ups by Carlo Rambaldi, who had created the ape's face in the remake of King Kong (1976). Eight people operated the mechanisms to control the puppet, and Steven Spielberg was so pleased with it, according to Rambaldi, he often played with it. The face worked particularly well in the moment when the creature exchanges beaming smiles with Lacombe. François Truffaut became so enchanted with it, he would go over to greet it every morning on the set
- The UFO landing site built for the movie was 27 m high, 137 m long, and 76 m wide, making it the largest indoor film set ever constructed. The structure included 6.4 km of scaffolding, 1570 square metres of fibreglass, and 2740 square metres of nylon canopy

EFFECTS

- Douglas Trumbull was the visual effects supervisor, while Carlo Rambaldi designed the aliens
- Trumbull joked that the visual effects budget, at \$3.3 million, could have been used to produce an additional film
- His work helped lead to advances in motion control photography
- The mother ship was designed by Ralph McQuarrie and built by Greg Jein
- The look of the ship was inspired by an oil refinery Spielberg saw at night in India
- Instead of the metallic hardware look used in Star Wars, the emphasis was on a more luminescent look for the UFOs
- One of the UFO models was an oxygen mask with lights attached to it, used because of its irregular shape

- As a subtle in-joke, Dennis Muren (who had just finished working on Star Wars) put a small R2-D2 model onto the underside of the mothership
- The model of the mothership is now on display in the Smithsonian Institution's Air and Space Museum Udvar-Hazy Annex at Washington Dulles Airport in Chantilly, Virginia
- Since Close Encounters was filmed anamorphically, the visual effects sequences were shot on 70 mm film to better conform with the 35 mm film used for the rest of the movie
- A test reel using computer-generated imagery was used for the UFOs, but Spielberg found it would be too expensive and ineffective since CGI was in its infancy in the mid-1970s
- The small aliens in the final scenes were played by local girls in Mobile, Alabama. That decision was requested by Spielberg because he felt "girls move more gracefully than boys." Puppets were attempted for the aliens, but the idea failed. However, Rambaldi successfully used puppetry to depict two of the aliens, the first being a marionette (for the tall alien that is the first to be seen emerging from the mothership) and an articulated puppet for the alien that communicates via hand signals with Lacombe near the end of the film
- VFX man Douglas Trumbull created the cloud effects by injecting white paint into tanks half filled with salt water and half filled with fresh water
- A digital system called the Electronic Motion Control System was employed to record and program camera movements so they could be duplicated in post-production when putting live-action photography together with the matching miniature effects

EDITING (Michael Kahn)

- Close Encounters is the first collaboration between film editor Michael Kahn and Spielberg
- Their working relationship has continued for the rest of Spielberg's films
- Spielberg stated that no film he has ever made since has been as hard to edit as the last 25 minutes of Close Encounters and he and Kahn would go through thousands of feet of footage just to find the right shots for the end sequence
- When Kahn and Spielberg completed the first cut of the film, Spielberg was dissatisfied, feeling "there wasn't enough wow-ness"
- Pick-ups were commissioned but cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond could not participate due to other commitments
- John A. Alonzo, László Kovács, and Douglas Slocombe worked on the pick-ups
- Slocombe was originally to find Flight 19 hidden in the Amazon Rainforest, but the idea was changed to the Sonoran Desert. Spielberg also took 7.5 minutes out from the preview
- Post-production was completed by June 1977, too late for the film to be released as a 'summer blockbuster' which might have been just as well, as Star Wars opened that summer
- Steven Spielberg edited the film secretly, not at the studio but in a rented apartment in Marina del Rey under guard

SOUND/MUSIC (John Williams)

- The score for the film was composed, conducted and produced by John Williams, who had previously worked on Spielberg's Jaws
- Williams wrote over 300 examples of the iconic five-tone motif for Close Encounters—the five tones are used by scientists to communicate with the visiting spaceship as a mathematical language—before Spielberg chose the one incorporated into the film's signature theme
- Spielberg called Williams' work "When You Wish upon a Star meets science fiction"
- Incidentally, Williams briefly included the song's signature melody in the score at Spielberg's behest, just before Roy Neary turns to board the mothership

- Spielberg initially included Cliff Edwards' original "When You Wish upon a Star" from Pinocchio in the closing credits, but after a Dallas preview where several members of the audience audibly snickered at the inclusion, the song was dropped and replaced with Williams' orchestral version of it
- The score was recorded at Warner Bros. Studios in Burbank, California.
- Williams was nominated for two Academy Awards in 1978, one for his score to Star Wars and one for his score to Close Encounters. He won for Star Wars, though he later won two Grammy Awards in 1979 for his Close Encounters score (one for Best Original Film Score and one for Best Instrumental Composition for "Theme from Close Encounters")
- Much like his two-note Jaws theme, the "five-tone" motif for Close Encounters has since become ingrained in popular culture
- The John Williams score was created before the film was edited. Steven Spielberg edited the film to match the music, a reverse of what is usually done in the film scoring process. Both Spielberg and Williams felt that it ultimately gave the film a lyrical feel

PROMOTION

- The film was originally to be released in summer 1977, but was pushed back to November because of the various problems during production

BOX OFFICE

- It was a critical and financial success, eventually grossing over \$337 million worldwide
- Made on a production budget of \$20 million, Close Encounters was released in a limited number of cities on November 16, 1977 and November 23, 1977 before expanding into wide release the following month
- Upon its release, Close Encounters had a huge impact on society and became a certified box office success, grossing \$116.39 million in North America and \$171.7 million in foreign countries, totaling \$288 million
- It became Columbia Pictures' most successful film at that time

RECEPTION

- IMDB: 7.7
- Cinemascore:
- RT: 96% Tatometer, 85% Audience
- The film received numerous awards and nominations at the 50th Academy Awards, 32nd British Academy Film Awards, the 35th Golden Globe Awards, the Saturn Awards and has been widely acclaimed by the American Film Institute
- The film was nominated for eight Oscars at the 50th Academy Awards, including Best Director, Supporting Actress (Melinda Dillon), Visual Effects, Art Direction (Joe Alves, Daniel A. Lomino, Phil Abramson), Original Music Score, Film Editing, and Sound (Robert Knudson, Robert Glass, Don MacDougall and Gene Cantamessa)
- The film's only win was for Vilmos Zsigmond's cinematography, although the Academy honored the film's sound effects editing with a Special Achievement Award (Frank Warner)
- At the 32nd British Academy Film Awards, Close Encounters won Best Production Design, and was nominated for Best Film, Direction, Screenplay, Actor in a Supporting Role (François Truffaut), Music, Cinematography, Editing, and Sound
- Close Encounters lost the Hugo Award for Best Dramatic Presentation to Star Wars, but was successful at the Saturn Awards. There, the film tied with Star Wars for Direction and Music.

Spielberg's screenplay, Richard Dreyfuss, Melinda Dillon and the visual effects department received nominations. Close Encounters was nominated for Best Science Fiction Film

- The film received four more nominations at the 35th Golden Globe Awards: Best Director (Steven Spielberg); Best Film - Drama; Best Original Score (John Williams); and Best Screenplay (Steven Spielberg)

SEQUEL/LEGACY

- Shortly after the film's release in late 1977, Spielberg desired to do either a sequel or prequel, before deciding against it. He explained, "The army's knowledge and ensuing cover-up is so subterranean that it would take a creative screen story, perhaps someone else making the picture and giving it the equal time it deserves."
- When asked in 1990 to select a single "master image" that summed up his film career, Spielberg chose the shot of Barry opening his living room door to see the blazing orange light from the UFO. "That was beautiful but awful light, just like fire coming through the doorway. [Barry's] very small, and it's a very large door, and there's a lot of promise or danger outside that door."
- Alongside Star Wars and Superman, Close Encounters led to the reemergence of science fiction film
- In 1985 Spielberg donated \$100,000 to the Planetary Society for Megachannel Extraterrestrial Assay
- In 2011, ABC aired a primetime special, Best in Film: The Greatest Movies of Our Time that counted down the best movies chosen by fans based on results of a poll conducted by ABC and People
- A Special Edition of the film, featuring additional scenes, was released theatrically in 1980
- A third cut of the film was issued on VHS and LaserDisc in 1998 (and later DVD and Blu-ray)
- The film will be remastered in 4K and re-released in theatres on September 1, 2017 for its 40th anniversary
- In December 2007, it was deemed "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant" by the United States Library of Congress and selected for preservation in the National Film Registry
- Film critic Charlene Engel observed Close Encounters "suggests that humankind has reached the point where it is ready to enter the community of the cosmos. While it is a computer which makes the final musical conversation with the alien guests possible, the characteristics bringing Neary to make his way to Devils Tower have little to do with technical expertise or computer literacy. These are virtues taught in schools that will be evolved in the 21st century."
- Other critics found a variety of Judeo-Christian analogies. Devils Tower parallels Mount Sinai, the aliens as God and Roy Neary as Moses. Cecil B. DeMille's The Ten Commandments is seen on television at the Neary household. Some found close relations between Elijah and Roy; Elijah was taken into a "chariot of fire", akin to Roy going in the UFO. Climbing Devils Tower behind the faltering Jillian, Neary exhorts Jillian to keep moving and not to look back, similar to Lot's wife who looked back at Sodom and turned into a pillar of salt. Spielberg explained, "I wanted to make Close Encounters a very accessible story about the everyday individual who has a sighting that overturns his life, and throws it into complete upheaval as he starts to become more and more obsessed with this experience."
- Roy's wife Ronnie attempts to hide the sunburn caused by Roy's exposure to the UFOs and wants him to forget his encounter with them. She is embarrassed and bewildered by what has happened to him and desperately wants her ordinary life back. The expression of his lost life is seen when he is sculpting a huge model of Devils Tower in his living room, with his family deserting him. Roy's obsession with an idea implanted by an alien intelligence, his construction of

the model, and his gradual loss of contact with his wife, mimic the events in the short story "Dulcie and Decorum" (1955) by Damon Knight.

- Close Encounters also studies the form of "youth spiritual yearning". Barry Guiler, the unfearing child who refers to the UFOs and their paraphernalia as "toys" (although that was unscripted, with the child being drawn to smile by being shown toys offstage), serves as a motif for childlike innocence and openness in the face of the unknown
- Spielberg also compared the theme of communication as highlighting that of tolerance. "If we can talk to aliens in Close Encounters of the Third Kind," he said, "why not with the Reds in the Cold War?"
- Sleeping is the final obstacle to overcome in the ascent of Devils Tower. Roy, Jillian Guiler and a third invitee climb the mountain pursued by government helicopters spraying sleeping gas. The third person stops to rest, is gassed, and falls into a deep sleep
- In his interview with Spielberg on Inside the Actors Studio, James Lipton suggested Close Encounters had another, more personal theme for Spielberg: "Your father was a computer engineer; your mother was a concert pianist, and when the spaceship lands, they make music together on the computer", suggesting that Roy Neary's boarding the spaceship is Spielberg's wish to be reunited with his parents
- In a 2005 interview, Spielberg stated that he made Close Encounters when he did not have children, and if he were making it today, he would never have had Neary leave his family and go on the mother ship