



WE ARE NOT ALONE

by Frank D. McConnell

At one point in Graham Greene's *The Confidential Agent*, the hero—a hunted spy—hides out in a movie theater. A nondescript Hollywood romance is on the screen, but the hero discovers in it a significance deeper than any intended by its makers: "It was as if some code of faith or morality had been lost for centuries, and the world was trying to reconstruct it from the unreliable evidence of folk memories and subconscious desires. . . ."

A splendid film critic in his own right, Greene realized that the movie comes closer than any other product of our culture to the happy status of the novel in Victorian England. It is at once attuned to individual human concerns and sensitive to the day-dreams of the masses. And, a rarity in this century of lugubriously self-conscious art, the movies are genuinely fun.

That is why they have taken so long to be accepted as a legitimate object of study in the university. American academics, good Calvinists all, have operated for years on the assumption that Kulchur (as poet Ezra Pound contemptuously called it) should hurt, at least a little; that there must be a gulf between esthetics and entertainment. This attitude was concisely captured by the turn-of-the-century wit who said of Wagnerian music, "It's better than it sounds." By contrast, our best "serious" novelists and poets have always understood that we live in a creative and often profoundly humanizing *popular* culture—and that much of this culture is stored on celluloid.

American literature of the 20th century is filled with writers who built their vision of America upon a vision of Hollywood: F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Last Tycoon*, Norman Mailer in *The Deer Park*, Saul Bellow in *Humboldt's Gift*. Others, like Brock Brower in *The Late Great Creature*, and especially Thomas Pynchon in his towering novel *Gravity's Rainbow*, have begun using not simply the fact but also the basic themes and myths of popular film genres in their work. To understand *Gravity's Rainbow*, for example, it is not sufficient to have a background in modern fiction and physics. One must also understand that his awesome tale, which seeks a refuge in fantasy from the terrors of the

modern city, swings unfailingly and recognizably between the extremes of *King Kong* and *The Wizard of Oz*.

The popular film, of course, is not of value simply because it prepares us to read Brower, Pynchon, and the rest. The serious celluloid fairy-tale genres—science fiction, melodrama, the Western—are much like officially sanctioned myths; their formulas are predictable. At the same time, these formulas undergo subtle shifts with time. To understand these shifts is, in its way, to excavate that mental city we all inhabit privately—and in common.

As Norman Mailer wrote in his 1961 open letter to President Kennedy on the Bay of Pigs invasion: "I can't believe the enormity of your mistake: You invade a country without understanding its music." Substitute "movies" for "music" and one comes close to stating the necessity of understanding film. In movies that catch the popular imagination, we see ourselves as in a funhouse mirror: distorted, yes, but distorted in a way that reveals more than photographic accuracy ever could. For it reveals who—and where—we really are, what we want and want to believe.

A Philadelphia Western

It is widely believed, for example, that our post-Vietnam, post-Watergate mood is one of moderate self-congratulation. But what is the real shape of this mood? How do we, in our film daydreams, project the new confidence in ourselves we think we have earned? Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky* is a film of obsessively unbounded optimism. It insists so strenuously that everything will be all right that we are forced to ask: What is it that we were afraid would go wrong?

The continually implied and finally averted possibility of disaster in *Rocky* is the failure of community. Rocky Balboa is a never-was, a club fighter in the Italian neighborhood of Philadelphia who supplements his scanty fight earnings by breaking bones for the local loan shark; a nobody whose great romance is



with the clerk in the neighborhood pet store, a drab girl named Adrian.

In a bizarre public relations gimmick, Rocky is selected to fight heavyweight champion Apollo Creed on the Fourth of July. The whole community falls in behind him, helps him train, gives him money, lets him pound away on beef carcasses. The night before the fight, Rocky tells Adrian he wants, if not to win, at least to go the full 15 rounds. "If I can do that, I'll know I wasn't just another bum from the neighborhood." He lasts the 15 rounds, losing to Creed only by a split decision. At that moment, bruised, bloodied, exhausted, he is able to tell Adrian, for the first time, "I love you."

Sentimental, of course, but intelligently so. We can trust it because it is so aware of its own sentimentality. Rocky begins as a lonely man trying to be a lonely hero. He discovers that he becomes a hero when he stops being alone. The film is a celebration of the single man who redeems the honor of his town.

It is, in other words, a Western. For in the Western—despite the bitter inversion of such films as *High Noon* (where the town abandons the hero) or *The Magnificent Seven* (in which the Seven are driven from the town they save)—our hopes for the tiny communities of the film West are always, implicitly, our hopes for the larger community in which we all live. Main Street is always Main Street, and *Rocky*, complete with final showdown, simply translates the myths into elementary terms. It tells us that little people can survive—but only if they are faithful to each other.

The Eternal Fairy Tale

George Lucas's *Star Wars* makes the assertion in a different key. Far from simply a science-fiction adventure, this highly self-conscious film is a virtual history of past motifs, situations, and even characteristic bits of dialogue from old Westerns, swashbucklers, war movies, and of course, science-fiction

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BANE OR BOON?

The billion-dollar movie industry depends on an audience of tens of millions to provide the financial margin for experimentation, even failure. But as film historian Kenneth MacGowan pointed out in Behind the Screen, the mass audience is a double-edged sword:

Mass production, mass distribution, and mass consumption stamp the motion picture as the only art that had become big business before radio and television—if radio or television can be called an art. The consequences have not been wholesome. Around 1905, the movies were catering to a semi-educated mass audience; many who sat in the store theaters had only just learned to read and some had trouble with the subtitles. Within 10 years, the level of the moviegoer was somewhat higher. Was it high enough to justify the poet Vachel Lindsay when he wrote: “The Man with the Hoe had no spark in his brain. But now a light is blazing”? The bane of American movies, and to a lesser extent those of Europe, India, and Japan, has been catering to a gigantic audience of 50 million or more. It has hindered experiment and put a premium on the universally obvious. Yet there is always the chance that the experimental or the obvious may prove to have universal validity in terms of high emotion. Then we have daring pictures such as *Citizen Kane* and *The Defiant Ones*, or films of the broad and deep appeal of *Brief Encounter* and *The Best Years of Our Lives*.

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movies. Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, at least on the celluloid level.

This does not mean that *Star Wars* is “camp”—to use that shibboleth of critics who are excited by popular works they don’t understand. Like *Rocky*, *Star Wars* is an experiment to see if the myths of popular culture have any life left in them. That these myths are still alive is reflected by nothing so much as the movie’s phenomenal (\$200 million) success—in cold cash, the most successful film in history. And for all its self-consciousness and formula predictability, it is a serious film about the possibility of heroism—not within a community but within our own imagination: Can we still believe in ourselves as heroes?

A hero, after all, is a corny thing to be; a century of psychoanalysis, sociology, and political science has taught us that. But *Star Wars*, great popular myth that it is, reminds us that the corniness of heroism, like that of love or honor, does not render it less important. The real “force” behind the famous *Star Wars* blessing—“May the Force be with you”—is that of fairy tales

and their power to humanize even after we no longer believe in their literal reality.

If *Star Wars* attempts to revivify some of the oldest conventions in the movies, Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* does something more subtle, risky, and important. A resolutely popular myth, it is also an uncanny critique of the relationship between popular mythology and our nostalgia for the sublime—for a desire to believe, as the film's advertising copy says, that We Are Not Alone. Roy Neary, the Indiana electrical worker who sees a UFO and is thereafter compelled to visit the site where the alien visitors will show themselves, is a modern Everyman who in his boredom and confusion has become obsessed by a vision of transcendence—a terrible thing to experience, as St. Paul told us long before director Spielberg got around to it.

But Neary is an Everyman whose vision is itself shaped by the pop mythologies of transcendence that surround us. When we first see him, he is watching television: watching Cecil B. De Mille's *The Ten Commandments*, that earlier translation of miracle into special effects, of transcendence into kitsch. Later, his daughter watches a Bugs Bunny cartoon about invaders from Mars. And in the climactic sequence, when the UFOs land and speak to us, they speak through a lovely, funny jazz fugue, transforming the giant mother ship into a cosmic synthesizer playing the Muzak of the spheres.

The point is not that *Close Encounters* is a pop gospel of transfiguration. It is something better, an examination of our lives as already transcending their own limitations, if only we can understand our own daydreams. We are not alone because we speak to one another—and nowhere at a deeper level than through the mythology of film.

To say this much implies that the hieroglyphics of popular myths are at once naive and highly sophisticated about their own naiveté. For they rediscover the dignity of clichés and tell us again and again what we can never hear too often: We are most human not in despair or self-loathing but in shared laughter and delight—when, indeed, we are having fun.

