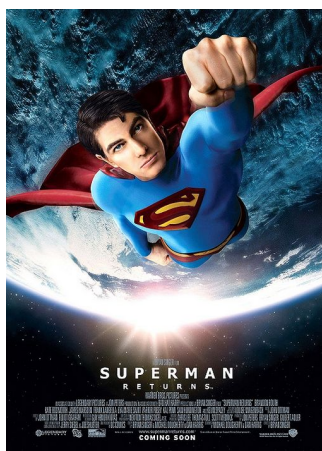




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Superman Returns ***-Bringing A Heightened Maturity*** ***to a Popular Franchise-***

By Johnny Blue Star

Superman does it better.

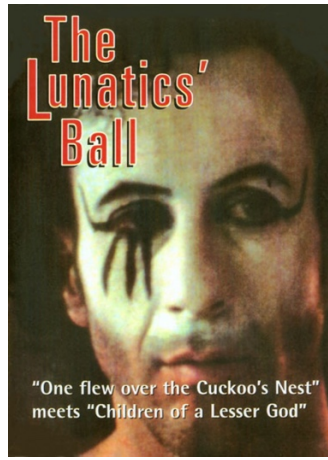
The 2006 *Superman Returns* brings the Superman franchise to a heightened maturity in both special effects and the development of character and plot. Although this happens because of the unashamed correlation of this film with Christopher Reeve's splendid films, it is a new type of weaving of old familiar scenes and themes with new twists on the characters and story of Superman. Superman has been redressed in new clothes without destroying continuity with

the old. *Superman Returns* does it better. *Superman Returns* is a grand experiment in injecting advanced concepts of continuity into a sci-fi fiction franchise.

Superman is, of course, a great pop culture science fiction franchise. A pop culture science fiction piece contains all the elements of science fiction but with a slight ambience of oversimplifying the science, presenting somewhat unrealistic and exaggerated characters and fantastic plots. Superman, of course, contains extraterrestrials (Superman is an alien), spaceships (he originally got here in a spaceship), alien cultures (he is the product of the planetary civilization on Krypton), extraordinary powers justified through some kind of scientific framework (like Superman being stronger because he comes from a Red Sun) and bad guys who often have scientific credentials (Luthor is a variation of a mad scientist type). But *Superman*, like other pop culture heroes, does not take great pains to explain or describe its science (like the crystals that form the basis of Krypton technology). Superman, played by Brandon Routh may have a slight bit more human depth than the Reeve version- certainly a lot more capacity for jealousy and attachment- but he is always doing those clumsy, comic things and smiling with the silly grin that helps him bury his Superman countenance behind Clark's magnificent eyeglass disguise.

Superman Returns is a step upward in the development of *Superman* as a superior special effects vehicle, beyond the Christopher Reeve franchise but still a loving tribute to Christopher Reeve and his conception of the character and the over-all vision of the 1978 version and its sequels. For that matter, Kevin Spacey as Luthor, provides a slightly more sophisticated character than Gene Hackman's in the '79 version; Kate Bosworth is a trifle more complex character than Margo Kidder. There is development of these characters, but it is subtle- sort of a 10% solution, which improves the characters and story but does not demolish continuity.

Yet, perhaps with the John Williams theme and the continual recapitulation of certain sets from the first film (like Superman's meeting with Lois and her first stratospheric journey with Superman or Luthor's mad hunting for books in his huge library- or Clark Kent's whimsical clumsiness in the offices of the Daily Planet), there is a strange sense of déjà vue and disorientation. Why? Because this is obviously a set of new players, altogether new players- with the theme of a very young Superman taking a five year vacation to return to Krypton, a significant temporal intrusion into the story. Yet, with the heightened story of Superman's obsessive, almost voyeuristic obsession with Lois at the beginning of the story and the latter revelation of Superman's steamier, earlier relationship to Lois Lane and the introduction of a child emerging from that relationship, there are added dimensions and depth to the story, not possible perhaps in the depression borne earlier versions of Superman and barely touched on by the Reeve version. In summation, despite its strange, semi-parallelisms to the Reeve franchise- this film carves out its own true identity. But, by making it a true sequel to the Reeve versions, you have a unique blend of originality and continuity in this amazing film. A heightened maturity, indeed!



PALM SPRINGS INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW

REACHING FOR THE
INDESCRIBABLE
-AN ACTOR'S VOYAGE IN THE
LUNATICS' BALL-

By Johnny Blue Star

When I first spoke to Russel Walder on the phone, I was surprised to find out he was the lead actor in a film playing this Wednesday evening at the Palm Springs High School Auditorium. Leading men and women are not known to contact the press personally and I noted to myself that Russel sounded enthusiastic and involved with his project and I looked forward to meeting him.



*Russel Walder points
to his Zambesi shirt
logo*

When Craig Prater took the podium before the film began, he observed how the passing moments of the Festival had become a blur, as they have to so many of us who have seen film after film and met so many, incredible people devoted to the film business. He noted also how he had when screening many, many films in a few days , "The Lunatics' Ball" was one of three films- out of about 60- that jumped out at him.

The New Zealand film, directed by Michael Thorp, began at a relentless pace that never stopped until the last breath of the film. For a small movie, with an ensemble cast, this film sped along with power and strength of a runaway freight train- because there was passion, sexuality, love and death steaming forward full tilt in this film about Charles Duran, a psychologist, who attacks insanity with an obsessive vitality and humor that would make Patch Adams quiver in his graduate robes. Russel Walder plays this role with a passion and intensity that borders on the indescribable. So, for that matter, does brilliant actress Jane Irwin, who, as Charlotte, the Psychiatrist, as she balances the unpredictable Duran with the infatuation and love of a woman of insight and dedication. Duran, who has taken on a new job in the beginning of the film, opens himself to great opportunity, but given his health and his work history, flawed by the death of one of his patients, he is also facing great personal danger.

Michael Thorp, who did everything in this film- writing and producing, too- is a quiet spoken man who is quietly obsessed with film-making and has risked everything to make a film at the lowest of budgets that achieves a cataclysmic emotional effect, I am sure, on even the most jaded of viewers. He spoke of how he chose his actors because of traits they shared with his characters, so as to produce the most natural and spontaneous of acting. Yet, talking to Walder after the film, you could see, however faint the resemblance between his personality and Duran's, the gap between the character and the reality of the actor was enormous. Considering Thorp's one or two take scenarios; his late, late hours of shooting; his obsession with creating conditions for psychological spontaneity at

the price of comfort, must have created an EST-like environment for these actors, whose performances sometimes jump out of the screens with a quiet ferocity. These people, I can assure you, were not paid well- and the reality of their performances was the price of their discomfort- but a reward for the spectator. The acting is unusual in this movement.

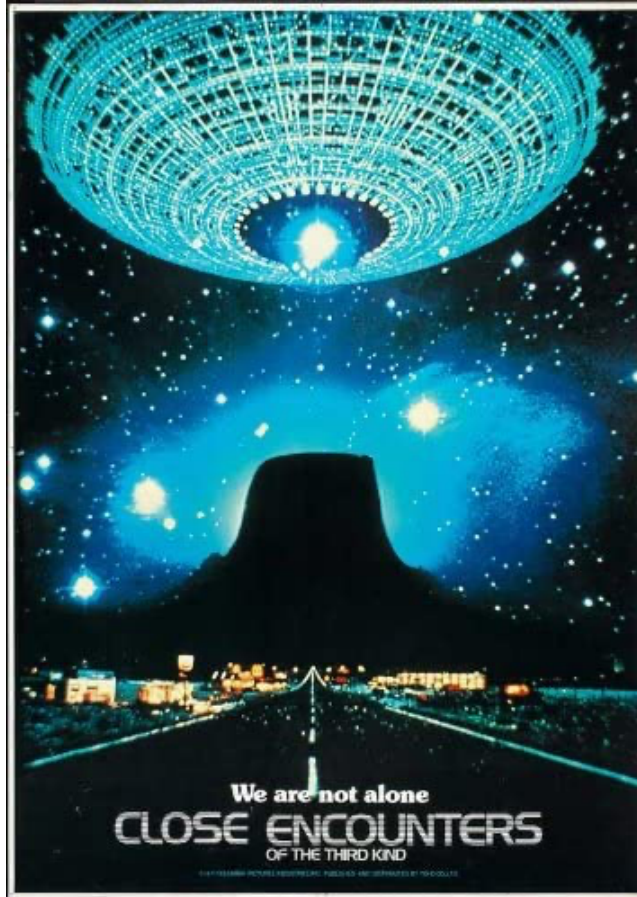
Peter Scholes' music, combined with classical pieces, and the tightly controlled pace of the editing, moves this film forward- fast- providing a somewhat controlled backdrop to the quality of acting. But let me be clear here. The film is edited like a suspense, thriller- and, upon reflection, it shares a little bit, plot-wise, of that genre, because it is about murder. It is also about a caring and good man rushing towards Death, utilizing everything he has- including his scientific prowess- to ward off that encounter.

A good film, but fate is still uncharted. It was good to see Stephen Ashton, Creative Director of the Wine Country Film Festival, enthusiastically talking with Michael Thorp. This is what the Festival is about- giving films their first public life and their first chance at visibility and distribution in the larger world.



Michael Thorp and Stephen Ashton

Thorp, the producer who produced something from nothing and Walder, the actor who took that something and gave it the deep emotional charge that Thorp sought so passionately, are craftsmen with a mission. We wish them well. Passionate craftsmen on the edge are the type of artists whose risks sometimes pay off- in an industry replete with opportunity and cataclysm, just like their movie.



Close Encounters of the Third Kind ***-Dealing with the Great Undefined Something Else-***

By Johnny Blue Star

The extraordinary thing about *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, released almost three decades ago in 1997, is that it makes you look at yourself almost as much as it makes you squint a little more closer and a little harder when you look up at the sky. It brings to science fiction a dimension of reality, intimacy and introspection unusual in this genre.

Close Encounters of the Third Kind is a film with the capacity for extraordinary personal impact on its viewers. It takes science fiction film to a new height- both in respect of treating UFOs as serious phenomena and by imparting an enviable reality to its main characters unusual in this genre. Deriving its scientific credentials from Dr. Allen Hynick's pioneering attempts to catalog and classify UFO

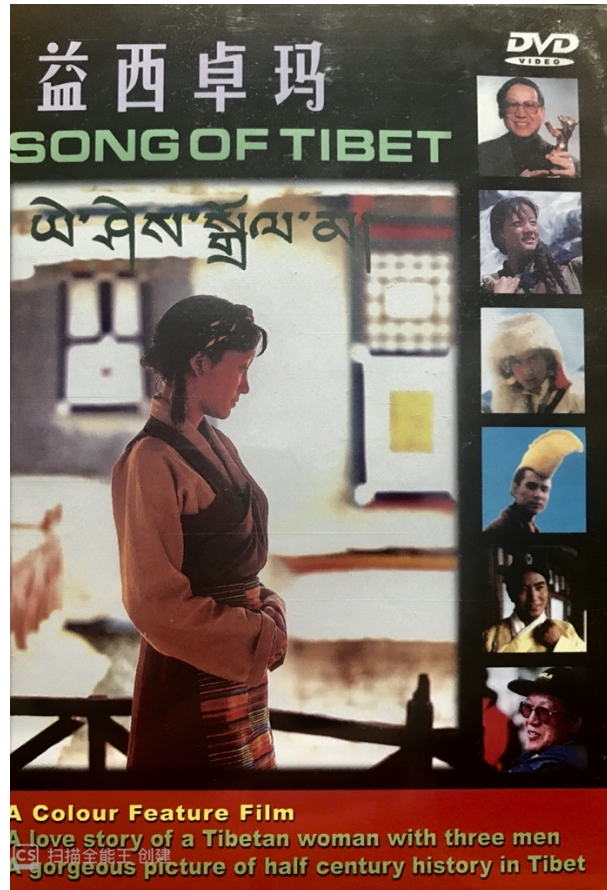
experience, *Close Encounters* did not stop at Hynick's strict scientific baselines. It also added a kind of ambiguous, spiritual interest in the nature the phenomena, unequalled until the 1997 film, *Contact*, with Jody Foster. In the works of recently deceased psychiatrist, Dr. John Mack, who wrote *Abducted*, the pioneering but ultra-scary works of hypnotherapist Budd Hopkins who wrote *Intruders*, the tales of Whitley Strieber and other serious attempts to chronicle alien contact, those concerned with concerned with real life sightings and these strange abductions found an element of the ultra-technological blended strangely with the mysterious and fantastic.

Until *Close Encounters*, UFO's were a subject formerly confined to pop science fiction sensitivities. Films like the 1955 *This Island Earth*, the 1956 *Earth Versus the Flying Saucers* with its impressive Ray Harryhausen effects or even the 1953 *War of the Worlds* had a fake kind of Hollywood quality that was utterly transcended by Spielberg.

Close Encounters creates an excitement about the potential for UFO experiences as having a fundamental, non-manufactured reality and is drawn, in many ways, from various elements of those who had reported UFOs and the reaction of government and the military to those who reported them. To an extent, *Close Encounters* approaches a kind of social commentary about the hidden yearning for A Great Undefined Something Else, underlying the secularized and commercialized American Middle Class Experience.

Close Encounters of the Third Kind was Stephen Spielberg's second big movie, following the smash hit, *Jaws*. It took the popular science fiction theme of encounters with aliens to new heights of realism and was a powerful social commentary on the dangers of comfortable conformity in middle America. It stars Richard Dreyfus; back again after his starring role in *Jaws*, into the role of Roy Neary, an electric company technician's whose world is plunged into darkness by a UFO-initiated blackout. Assigned to service a specific area of the blackout, he becomes converted to an entirely different way of understanding life. *Close Encounters* shows what could happen when a typical American middle class family encounters aerial fireworks with a very strange musical accompaniment. .

Close Encounters like *Poltergeist*, *ET* and *Jurassic Park*, showcases ordinary people in the harsh light of extraordinary and strange events. But somehow in *Close Encounters*, the light is brighter and more persuasive.



XIE FEI'S "SONG OF TIBET: A Love Story Which Touches Primordial Chords

by Johnny Blue Star

*"Behind the eastern mountain
The Silver moon breaks free"*

So sings the maiden by the river, dwarfed by the mountains, her songs rising to heaven like that of a celestial lark. Swept off his feet by the mysterious

enchantress, Jiacao, the crazy, young mule driver swears to heaven that he will have this woman, no matter what the cost. "Song of Tibet" is a generational story of this great love and the great courage that sweeps through the heart of these people with the same strength and tenacity of the chilling mountain winds that challenge their very capacity to survive in this half fairy tale and half nightmare kingdom of luminous shadows we call Tibet.

Who are these people- in a world where monks and king are chosen by dint of reincarnation; where the chants of the people dart off the mountain peaks with incessant cries to transcend their flesh and the singularity of their souls; where the grim realities of Chinese politics has displaced their political leaders and thousands of their countrymen? If you cannot find it in the newspapers or in the politics of the disenfranchised; if you cannot find it in a strange mantra or in a cultural anthropology class- perhaps you find it in this movie, which touches primordial, mythic chords.

I think the audience was enchanted by this film, with its faithful capturing of the tumultuous changes Jiacao and Yixi pass through, as they move from a world of mules, swords and ancient poetry to a world of Internet cafes, automobiles and rock music. Xie Fei, its director and co-author, in the Q & A following the music, spoke of the censorship that displaced certain scenes of the movie, dealing with the Cultural Revolution. In one scene, the Dalai Lama is seen fleeing, stopping by the home of Gongsa, the father of Yixi's son. In the final cut, this was depicted as an anonymous, high Tibetan monk. Though censorship may have abounded, there is a life in this movie that censorship could not touch, that transcends even the bonds of disparate cultural spaces and soars upwards as pure mythic beauty, like the songs of the enchantress, Yixi, whose celestial music, sharp and piercingly cuts through any darkness in our souls. Xie Fei has brought a new light, a new level of communication, into the on-going saga of this great and wonderful culture. That this movie comes from China at all is a marvelous portent for fresh breezes and a new hopefulness- not only for Tibet, for the rest of the world. For if the soul of the new China is anything like the strength and power of life that pours through this movie, then surely there will be a renewed force of good in this world. This movie, then, is a foundation for hope, coupled with caution, for the silver moon of freedom to break through those shadowed, silver mountains. We have all cried for Tibet. Perhaps this film gives us leave to sing, and to hope, if just a little.

Exclusive CVNEWZ Interview by Johnny Blue Star with Chinese Director, XIE FEI – at the 2001 Palm Springs Film Festival

Johnny Blue Star (JBS): How do you think "Song of Tibet" was received at the Palm Springs Film Festival? How do you compare this festival with others you have participated in?

Xie Fei (XF): It is my first time in Palm Springs. It is a very beautiful and dear city. I appreciate the attention the Palm Springs Film Festival has paid to "Song of Tibet." It was selected as one of the special Galas. On January 16th, it was shown twice in the largest theatre available (nine hundreds seats). It was very exciting for me to see that many in the audience were moved by my film. The audience enjoyed it very much and asked many interesting questions. My film has been shown in the Chicago and Honolulu Film Festivals previously. It was very well welcomed by audiences there as well. However, there was more of an audience in Palm Springs. I noticed that middle aged and older people appreciated my film even more than younger people.

JBS: Do you feel that your film has gotten enough attention from distributors?

XF: It has not gotten too much attention from distributors yet. This is just the beginning phase of exhibiting my film. Prior to this, there has been no marketing experiences for Chinese filmmakers.. I hope through the Palm Springs Film Festival, my film will get more attention from distributors. And that they, of course, will contact me.

Next month I will go to Berlin film festival to be on the jury and my film will be screened in the program. I hope my film will get sufficient attention by European distributors as well.

JBS: Do you enjoy combining script writing with directing?

XF: So far, I have directed nine feature films and have written three of them. I hope I can work with professional writers in the future. Then I can focus on directing and production. Unfortunately, the Chinese film market has been very weak. Many good writers have refused to write film scripts, instead selecting to write TV drama. In the case of "Song of Tibet," I had to write it by myself. Actually, Chinese filmmakers have been not only director, writer and producer, but also a seeker after distributors . Even through there are many difficulties, I have fallen in love with this genre of art film, featuring Tibetan culture. It cost me two years to finish the film, but it was a very valuable experience for me. I have enjoyed the whole process very much.

JBS: How closely do you work with Fu Jinshen?

XF: He is an excellent cinematographer. We were classmates in Film School and have worked together in three films. The other two were A Mongolian Tale and A Girl from Hunan. He is a fine art artist as well. So his cinema work was beautiful and the image has a very strong sense of painting.

JBS: How have the Tibetan people reacted to your film?

XF: "The Song of Tibet" has been showing in Tibet and various minority areas in China. It has been very successful. It's gotten the Best Screen writing, Best Actress and Best Music citation from the Golden Rooster Awards (which is the most important film competition in China).



Contact

-A Very Cosmic Leap of Faith-

By Johnny Blue Star

Contact, released in 1997, based on a novel by the renowned, deceased scientist, Carl Sagan, represents the coming of age of the science fiction genre. *Contact*, epitomizes the genre's ability to weave scientific and metaphysical themes into an ultra-realistic portrait of a humanity caught in a stranglehold of petty personal rivalries, bureaucratic one-upmanship and metaphysical confusion when facing the ultimate experience of High Strangeness, true contact with another world. It is also a portrait of the unquenchable search for truth, another component of the human heart, typically masked by our lower personal agendas and seldom mentioned or developed in the often mundane scientific acquisitiveness developed in many science fiction films. *Contact* is about one person's passion for truth. It is, in one sense, the saga of Dr. Ellie Arroway.

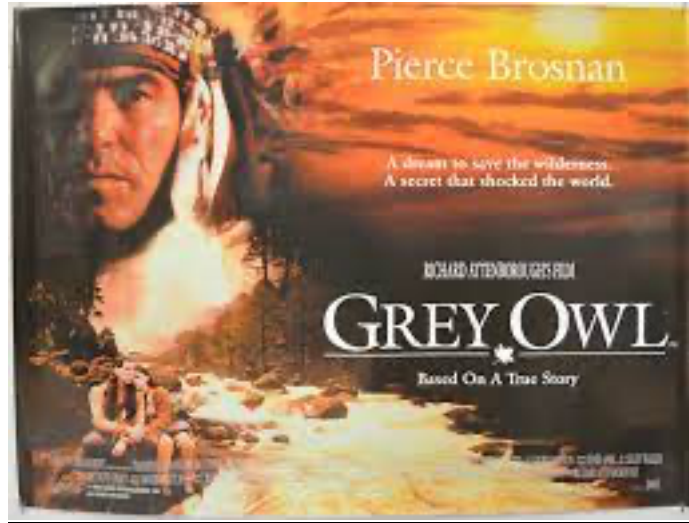
Though a story of alien contact, *Contact* reaches deeply into the human heart in ways that few movies can or ever will. It is the story of Dr. Arroway's indomitable search for alien life in the scientific beaureacracy of SETI which leads to a unique and overwhelming experience of what appears to be the real thing. Directed by Robert Zemeckis, *Contact* is a masterpiece of scientific speculation about alien contact, ruminations on the possibilities of Higher Reality, the meaning of death and the clash between science and religion. It also encompasses a great cinematic love story, a rarity into a genre populated by shallow, one dimensional relationships that are dwarfed by spectacular effects. Another theme that dominates the film is the clash between government beaureacroy and politically correct protocol showcased by the sparks continually flying between Tom Skerritt's rich portrayal of a crafty government beaureaucrat, David Drumlin- and the warlike instincts of security advisor, Michael Kitz, tersely played by James Woods.

Perhaps the most touching element in the film is the ever-unresolved love interest between Ellie Arroway and Palmer Joss, a theologian/writer whose speculations reach the portals of the Clinton Whitehouse. The romance reaches strange pinnacles of drama when Ellie puts her life on the line to travel to another star system in a machine whose blueprints have been sent down an alien cyber pipeline to Earth's skeptical population. Having reach a certain status and power,

her erstwhile suitor, Palmer Joss, played by Matthew McConaughey, becomes the key factor in blocking her from attaining her heart's desire to know the truth. But, in this extraordinarily highly woven stories, an ironic intervention saves her to leave on her journey to the stars

If the film, *Contact*, does anything, it questions the meaning of faith and the way we interpret ordinary reality in light of other vaster or more limited contexts? *Contact* has everything a science fiction movie is supposed to have- contact with alien civilizations, brilliant scientists with mind-bending agendas, high technology for faster-than-light, government intrusion blocking the objectives of pure science, but, in the end, all these concerns are painted over with the ambiguity of the heroine's situation? In the end, despite all the convoluted twistings of a master storyline, you really cannot be sure what has really happened. The stubborn facts, the sure-footed theories elude you- and there is nowhere to stand on firm ground.

Ellie Arroway, like the viewer, has come full circle. She has fulfilled her heart's desire at the price of her science and her certainty. The only sure footing she has is on the sandy ground of a new-found faith in a very powerful but private experience.



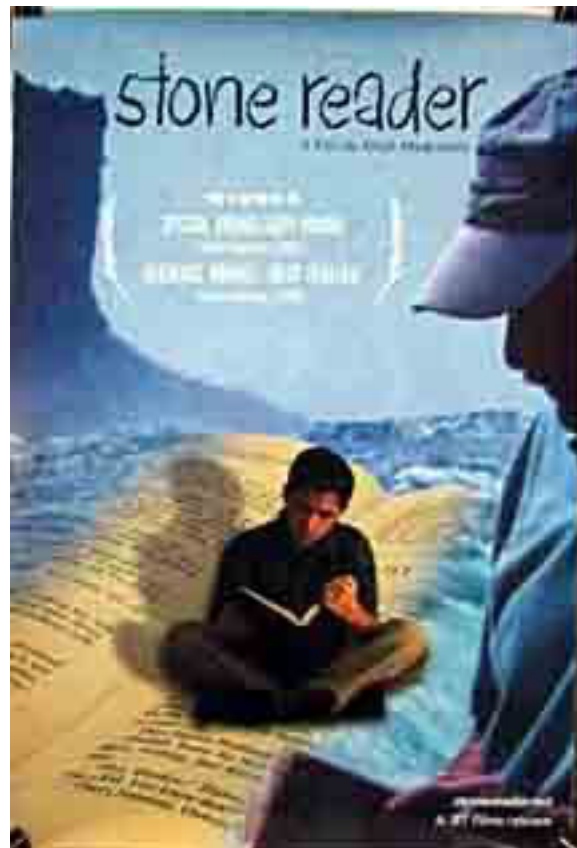
PALM SPRINGS INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW

GREY OWL

By Johnny Blue Star

The festival began with "Walking Through Egypt" and concluded with "Grey Owl," which were two of my very favorite films that I saw in the Festival. Both were extremely well acted and directed films, that in a way were on a very small scale. "Grey Owl" is about a man, played with great finesse and charm by Pierce Brosnan, who, by a combination of stealth and accident, becomes a leading exponent for environmental concerns in the 1930's. It is the story of a courageous, dedicated man with a very dark secret, who is catapulted into achieving monumental fame for his cause and his person in both Canada and England. The cinematic qualities of this film are very high and his world of Nature subtly blends into various human dilemmas and concerns which grip him,

enhanced by a subtle kind of editing at the beginning and the ending of the story, that brings humor and drama into the umbrella of the story, how this man became an ikon in his world with so much baggage in his past. The film was, of course, directed by Lord Richard Attenborough. Its co-star, Annie Galipeau is convincing and poignant as Anahareo, the love beacon in Grey Owl's closed and secretive world- and her passion to live and be with him is a beautiful love story creditably woven around his unexpected passage to notoriety.



THE STONE READER By Johnny Blue Star

Perhaps one of the most engrossing documentaries I have encountered is the new entry to the Nortel Palm Springs International Film Festival, "The Stone Reader," directed by Mark Moskowitz.

Moskowitz, a maker of TV commercials and political infomercials, makes a surprising debut as a documentarian of an odyssey, primarily driven by his own personal obsession- the love of books. It turns out that Moskowitz, between

holding down an exceptionally busy career and raising a family, is an inveterate book reader. He is the kind of person who squirrels books everywhere, reading them in bathrooms, in planes, in waiting rooms; lugging them along on trips, sending them to his friends; devouring and notating reviews of them, ordering them, fervently anticipating their arrival, loving them.

One day, he found a book that he abandoned twenty years ago. Once, he had read a few handfuls of pages. It had showed promise, but he couldn't get through it. Now, when he picked up the frayed copy of "The Stones of Summer" by Dow Mossman, he decided to try again. As he raced through it, he decided this was not just another loosely bound pile of paper pages from the past, but, indeed, he was in the presence of greatness.

And so Mark Moscovitz set out on an odyssey to find the author of a lost book with the unyielding tenacity which he had always devoted to his strange, voracious reading compulsion and his career.

On this journey, he has a surprisingly excited companion- the film audience. Despite its rather low key subject- books and looking for an unknown author- I have never seen an audience so much involved with a film. Maybe it is because Mark is so much like them or their children or their friends- taking a sudden U-turn and going on this personal odyssey. Maybe, they, too, identify with Mark's excitement. For whatever reason, the audience couldn't stop sighing, laughing, breathing loudly, whispering and adding their gestures and reactions as a kind of flowing sub-text with the film. These folks weren't abstracted or chatting privately- I think I was seeing total absorption in the film. I saw many weighty and great films, in this Festival and others, flow silently through and above the audience, without this level of participation.

This movie is about a search for Dow Mossman and it does have some significant discoveries along the way. The story of Dow Mossman, while perhaps not typical, is the story of a creative genius lost in a tenuous marketplace, after having grazed too closely in the pasture of literary greatness. He is a candle, partially snuffed out by his own passion to frame a generational story that is built too thoroughly into his life for him to escape, unattached. The film is a tribute to his work, but, more so, to the hold that books still can have on us. It is the story of someone who loves books and to which this film makes a special homage and a haunting reminder to not get so lost in cyberspace that we lose this simple and perfect pleasure of human life.



Destination Moon

-A Prophecy in Celluloid-

By Johnny Blue Star

Back in 1950, there was a work of prophecy, wrapped in celluloid, called *Destination Moon*. This film, based on venerated science fiction writer, Robert Heinlein's book, *Rocketship Galileo*. *Destination Moon* would revolutionize the level of scientific realism embodied in a science fiction film and serve as a kind of beacon for the real life experiments of rocket science that led to Apollo 11 and the first moon landing. *Destination Moon*, which is based on the efforts of Jim Barnes, a private businessman, to take on the Russians, at the request of General Thayer, an American soldier very worried about the communist menace.

Private enterprise on the Moon? Shades of SpaceShipOne and the works of its designer and entrepreneur, Burt Rutan, a real life Jim Barnes. And just like the real SpaceShipOne, Destination's spaceship, Luna, was launched from the Mojave Desert. The Mojave Spaceport is the first US Spaceport to launch a private rocketship. And let's face it, their walk on the moon was not altogether, ragingly different from the one that Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin lived to walk on- unless you are a believer in the film, *Capricorn One*, which claims it was all a fake TV show.

Some criticized the work for its heavy anti-communist sensitivities. But, when you think about it, rightly or wrongly, the era of space travel was very much about global antipathies and this film proceeded Sputnik's launch by a mere seven years. Anyone who knows anything about this era realizes that it was the competition with the Russians that spurred so much of our activities that later were crystallized in Kennedy's famous 1962 when he urged that Americans go to the moon.

Another source of realism might be the atomic engine. But this was at the height of Eisenhower's *Atoms for Peace* platform for promoting peaceful nuclear energy. And, indeed, the government has toyed with using atomic power for propulsion. Right now, several probes like *Cassini* and *New Horizon* visit the far-flung edges of the solar system with instrumentation powered by the disintegration of U-238. Perhaps not commendable. But, for certain, the use of atomic energy in space- and a foreshadowing of the power forecast in *Destination Moon*.

Of course, Armstrong and Aldrin came down in the lunar module, quite a bit less cinematic and sleek than the *Luna*. Maybe that is why some people still contest the landing itself. They had secretly longed for a pretty thing like the *Luna* to bear our first explorers on the lunar surface.

But scientific realism and some kind of proximity to certain political consciousness cannot completely erase an almost wooden like quality to the film. The characters are not well drawn, the story line is not richly woven nor is there anything that extraordinary about the science. Yet, for its time, *Destination Moon* defined a certain level of commitment to reality as a part of this genre.

But for a small boy growing up in the 1950's, *Destination Moon*, for all its faults, was the defining reality for one's dreams of high adventure and exploration. And it wasn't all that far from reality was it, after all?