

ALIENS

Aliens both illegal and extraterrestrial will gather en masse for the **21st Virginia Film Festival**.



Galaxy Quest



The Immigrant

Over 80 films, dozens of supporting events such as lectures and exhibits, and about 100 guests are on the program this year to examine the theme of “Aliens!”

“The goal,” says festival artistic director Richard Herskowitz, “is to explore the cinema’s ‘fearful and alluring images’ of immigrants, outsiders, and life beyond the boundaries of Earth.” Fear of the unknown might serve as shorthand for describing the essential message of the films slated for exhibition this year. Dozens of classic science fiction films will “Klaatu barada nikto” their way across local screens (a famous quote from the 1951 Robert Wise classic, “The Day the Earth Stood Still,” featured on this year’s program). “But the festival’s main focus will be on the otherness of immigrants and citizens in countries conflicted about their role as ‘hosts,’” Herskowitz says. “There’s a lot in the program about immigration, particularly Mexican and Central American immigrants.”

Director Gregory Nava, one of the first major indie successes of the 1980s, will do a shot-by-shot workshop on “El Norte” (1983), the film that put him on the world radar. “El Norte” (“The North”) tells the story of two indigenous Mayan Indians who flee war-torn Guatemala for a new life as illegal immigrants in the United States. Nava received an Oscar nomination for co-writing the original screenplay.

The festival will also screen “My Life Inside” (“Mi Vida Dentro;” 2007), “a really powerful film about a Mexican immigrant imprisoned for the death of a child in her care,” Herskowitz says. The picture is a production of Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía (IMCINE), which premiered “My Life Inside” at Robert De Niro’s Tribeca Film Festival in April.

Local festival-goers can also look at the “Aliens!” theme through the opposite end of the telescope by watching the portrayal of an American in a foreign land. That scenario plays out in the 1983 hit “Local Hero,” in which an American oil conglomerate sends an executive to Scotland to buy an entire village where the company wants to build a refinery. Wryly humorous complications ensue. The film stars the late Burt Lancaster and Peter Riegert (of Animal House fame). Riegert has been confirmed as a special guest at the festival this year and will make introductory remarks before the screening of “Local Hero.”

“But we’re also including a classic component as always,” Herskowitz says. “We’re featuring two films by (surrealist director) Luis Bunuel and (cinematographer) Gabriel Figueroa: Los Olvidados (1950) and Nazarín (1959). These are emblems of their work together.” Los Olvidados won best director and picture awards at Cannes the year it was released. Thematically, both films deal with the cycle of poverty and despair in rural Mexico.

From border crossings to invaders from space, the sci-

ence fiction side of the program will feature Steven Spielberg's "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" (1977) and the eerie 1942 chiller "Cat People," produced by the legendary Val Lewton, whose films are permeated with an overwhelming sense of alienation and dread. Fear of the unknown was seldom more pronounced — or exploited — in the United States than during the notorious 1938 broadcast of "War of the Worlds," which sent thousands of Americans panicking into the night; terrified that the country was being invaded

by little red men from Mars. As it happens, the film festival's opening night Oct. 30 coincides with the 70th anniversary of Orson Welles' famous broadcast by the Mercury Theatre. In observance of this anniversary, the entire radio broadcast will be played that evening at the University of Virginia's McCormick Observatory. The "War of the Worlds" radio show begins at 7pm in the observatory Dome Room, followed by a 10pm screening of George Pal's classic 1953 film adaptation, famed for its ominous manta-ray spaceships that emit



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screeching death rays (a sound effect that was produced by recording and playing an electric guitar backwards). The observatory will also be open from 7-10pm during the four-day festival to screen experimental films for a program called the "McCormick Observatory Microcinema." Each evening the telescope will be available for visitors to scan the skies. Local connections abound in the Virginia Film Festival, which also delivers a bold, international flavor. UVA Dean of Arts and Sciences Meredith Jung-En Woo was executive producer of "Koryo Saram — The Unreliable People," which will be shown during the festival. The hour-long documentary examines Stalin's 1937 ethnic cleansing campaign that relocated Koreans to Central Asia.

Other highlights include a visit by members of the IRC (International Rescue Committee) who will screen and discuss "The Betrayal," a documentary made by a Laotian immigrant over the last fifteen years, tracing his assimilation into the United States.

Underground filmmakers George and Mike Kuchar will introduce screenings of their outlandish alien-invasion films, with such improbable titles as "Ascension of the Demonoids," "Blips," "Death Quest of the Ju-Ju Cults," and "Secrets of the Shadow World."

Festival organizers also plan a tribute to special effects maestro Stan Winston, a UVA alumnus and festival advisory board member who died in June. "We'll possibly screen 'Aliens' as a tribute to Stan," Herskowitz says. Winston won the special effects Academy Award for the 1986 film. "We're definitely showing "Galaxy Quest" (1999) and will bring in the director (Dean Parisot)," Herskowitz adds, saying, "it has just grown and grown as a cult film." Winston created the eye-popping makeup effects for "Galaxy Quest," a "Star Trek" spoof that was produced by UVA alum and festival advisor Mark Johnson.

When it comes to the nebulous netherworld of films that deliberately blur the line between science fiction and science



fact, the crowning example has got to be the movie catalog of Sunn Classic Pictures. People of a certain age will recall the hilariously solemn TV commercials for the cheesy pseudo-documentaries put out by this production and distribution company. A narrator would intone dramatically about the shocking revelations that could only be found in Sunn Classic movies with quasi-provocative titles such as "The Bermuda Triangle," "The Outer Space Connection," and "In Search of Noah's Ark," which actually played in 1976 at the long-gone University Theater on the UVA Corner. For a time, Sunn Classic was synonymous for "exploitation nonsense," but that didn't stop people from buying tickets. Village Voice film critic Ed Halter will be in town to offer some thoughts on Sunn Classic Pictures for the exclusive amusement of festival goers. A complete listing of all festival events, times and ticket information can be found at Vafilm.com.

"Ultimately, though, the festival remains a forum where film lovers can discuss and contemplate serious social concerns and philosophical issues portrayed in classic and contemporary cinema — set against the academic backdrop of UVA. Recent festival themes of 'Revelations,' 'In/Justice,' and 'Kin Flicks' proved that people want to talk about topical interests as part of their movie-going experience," Herskowitz says.

"I knew that immigration and fear of illegal aliens was going to be a topic of major public discussion in this election year," he says. "So I thought it would be interesting to see if there was any coincidence in our fear of immigrants and a fear of hordes of aliens arriving from space."

Steve Evans is an award-winning writer and film historian who has seen over 10,000 motion pictures, and who is always adding to a carefully chosen collection of not quite half that many. His favorite directors are Bergman, Hitchcock, Kubrick, Renoir, and Ed Wood Jr.

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