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Space Culture Invades America

From: campbell@ufomind.com (Glenn Campbell, Las Vegas)
Date: Tue, 8 Jul 1997 19:05:39 -0800
Subject: Space Culture Invades America

.c The Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) - America is in the middle of a space invasion.

In the news: the Pathfinder landing on Mars, trouble on the Mir space station, the space shuttle orbiting Earth, the suicides linked to the Hale-Bopp comet.

In the movie theaters: ``Men in Black,' ' the Fourth of July's top film, and ``Contact' ' about to debut.

On television: ``The X-Files' ' and ``Third Rock from the Sun.' '

>From Madison Avenue: space- or alien-themed ads from Kodak, Hostess, Quisp cereal, Volkswagen and Breathe Right nasal strips.

And from left field: UFO believers flocking to Roswell, N.M.

What on Earth - or Mars or Jupiter or Pluto - is going on here?

``Earth as a planet is suffering from the view the grass is greener on the other side of the intergalactic fence,' ' said Ed Solomon, the ``Men in Black' ' screenwriter. ``I think people are looking above and beyond for things to find hope in - and be mad at.' '

Jon Hodge, director of the Santa Monica College Planetarium, said space has a particular appeal to restless Americans, who had to start looking to the heavens after the push West hit the Pacific Ocean.

``The public is really interested in exploration and the idea of a frontier, maybe because frontiers are a part of American culture,' ' he said.

``America was developed with a frontier mentality, where people were continually challenged by new problems that had to be faced in new ways.' '

All of a sudden, be it earthly dissatisfaction, a deep-seated American consciousness or just chance, space-related phenomena are arranging themselves in popular culture like aligned planets.

``I think the time is right,' ' said Janos Jeszenszky, a sales representative for Celestron International, a telescope manufacturer.

While ``Men in Black'' was reaping \$51.1 million in its weekend debut, Pathfinder had NASA basking in its best publicity since the early days of the space shuttle program.

Meantime, the Mir space station was getting a much different kind of attention as it limped along after a collision with a cargo ship. Mir got new supplies Monday in a docking mission that went off without a hitch.

Also in orbit is the crew of the shuttle Columbia. The mission has been overshadowed by Mars-mania but is still getting attention as a space sidebar to newscasts dominated by news from the final frontier.

All of this far-out interest got off with a bang in March with the story of the suicides of cultists who thought they would fly off on a spaceship in Hale-Bopp's wake. The mass deaths put a macabre spin on the already big story of the comet, which could be seen from many Americans' front yards.

``There was a lot of interest generated due to the cult suicide,'' said Peter Hubert, owner of Peter & Sons in Redondo Beach, which sells telescopes and photographs of space. ``They all wanted to know if I had pictures of the space ship following Hale-Bopp.''

There was no such ship to be seen, or so astronomers say. Just like the government claims there was no UFO crash near Roswell in 1947.

In Roswell, in fact, the opposite view has become a cottage industry. On the same weekend the Earth invaded Mars, thousands of UFO believers descended on New Mexico for a six-day commemoration of the so-called Roswell Incident.

The tantalizing possibility of life on other planets was a driving force behind the Roswell fascination, just as it has been with the interest in the Pathfinder mission. Millions have followed the Mars landing on the Internet.

Hollywood is hoping this translates into box office interest. On Friday, moviegoers will be able to check out ``Contact,'' the story of an astronomer who has dedicated herself to making contact with life in space.

``Men in Black'' and ``Contact'' are, of course, the latest in a long series of films about space. On the small screen, TV has been just as intrigued by the dramatic and comedic potential of space, in everything from ``My Favorite Martian'' to ``Alf.''

The latest successes include the often-dark ``X-Files'' (soon to be a feature film) and the comedy ``Third Rock from the Sun.''

Advertisers have also caught the space bug, with a number of products being hawked with the assistance of pitch-aliens and flying saucers.

CNS Inc. of Bloomington, Minn., which makes those Breathe Right nasal strips that football players like to wear, produced commercials with UFO-ologists erroneously opining the strip was so effective the technology must have come from a UFO crash site.

Coincidence or conspiracy?

``I don't know that anybody gave any thought to the fact that we had a UFO theme,'' said Richard Jahnke, president of CNS. ``We just wanted to catch people's attention.''

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