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IFO UpDate: Aliens Invade TV, Movies, Malls

From: RSchatte@aol.com
 Date: Thu, 12 Dec 1996 13:17:22 -0500
 Fwd Date: Fri, 13 Dec 1996 02:52:26 -0500
 Subject: IFO UpDate: Aliens Invade TV, Movies, Malls

 Forwarded message:
 From: AOLNewsProfiles@aol.net
 Date: 96-12-12 13:15:21 EST

.c The Associated Press
 By TED ANTHONY
 AP National Writer
 PITTSBURGH (AP) -- Sure, Ross Park Mall at Christmastime may appear a typical crowded shopping mecca. But something unearthly's afoot in this pastiche of suburban consumer bliss.

Don't spread it around, but extraterrestrials -- space aliens, outworlders, little green men; call 'em what you will -- lurk around every corner.

Spencer Gifts offers alien black-light posters, keychains, belly-button chains, mugs and an alien salt-and-pepper set ``for an out-of-this-world taste.'' Downstairs at Claire's Accessories, an entire alien display features mood rings, temporary tattoos, even alien ``Have a Nice Day'' smiley faces.

There's more. The Suncoast video store's main window displays a flying saucer over Manhattan for the video release of the alien invasion movie ``Independence Day.'' The big sellers at the calendar kiosk are ``The X-Files,'' ``Star Trek'' and ``Space Jam.''

We always believed they'd invade more directly -- abductions, manipulation, outright attack. But aliens are infiltrating America in a more insidious way: through popular culture.

Interest in otherworldly beings has escalated in the last two decades, but even more so in the past two years. Now film, television, the Internet, even malls are saturated with alien images.

``ET sells right now,'' says Erik Beckjord, a Berkeley MBA who recently opened the UFO, Bigfoot and Loch Ness Monster Museum in San Francisco. One of his first products: inflatable alien dolls.

Why is this happening? There are several theories.

Our technologically enhanced era has brought us nearer to the stars, both philosophically and physically, in recent years.

Scientific discoveries like the possibility of microbial life on Mars and the existence of planets outside our solar system,

combined with the dawn of the global village philosophy, make many people conclude it would be arrogant to think only Earth supports intelligent life.

But it's more than that. These alien images come from a source all too human -- our anxieties. Some say the belief in aliens, along with the recent popularity of angels, is simply secularized religion retooled for popular consumption.

One such outlet is the Weekly World News, the most out-there of the supermarket tabloids. Aliens are its staple ('`Captured Alien Warns of Invasion from Space!'' ``Demi Moore's Alien Connection!''), and in 1994 it proclaimed 12 U.S. senators extraterrestrials.

'`In our culture today, everything has been solved by science,' says its editor, Eddie Clontz. '`There's just not much left that hasn't been flatly explained. But the human imagination has a need, and aliens are fulfilling that need.'

As television blurs lines between documentary and docudrama, shows about unsolved mysteries are building elaborate theories around grainy footage and conspiracy speculations.

'`It gives us something to create our own ideas with,' says Deon Crosby, director of the International UFO Museum and Research Center in Roswell, N.M.

Her institution is located near the site where, in 1947, something unusual fell out of the sky. Official accounts described it as a weather balloon, but many people believe it was an alien craft.

That incident became a springboard for many popular perceptions, including the '`flying saucer' and theories that Americans are regularly abducted by aliens.

In recent months, some rather gruesome film purporting to show an autopsy of an alien from the Roswell crash has circulated on the Internet, been featured in Penthouse magazine -- and already being dramatized on the immensely popular alien-conspiracy TV show, '`The X-Files.'

Though the latest aliens-on-Earth boom started with 1977's '`Close Encounters of the Third Kind' (followed by TV's '`Mork and Mindy') and grew with 1982's '`ET: The Extraterrestrial,' many attribute the interest of the last two years to '`The X-Files' and its linkage of alien visits to governmental conspiracies.

'`It's brought it out into a weekly ritual,' Crosby said.

Now television offers a gamut, from the broad alien sitcom '`3rd Rock From the Sun' to the eerie drama '`Dark Skies.'

On the large screen, the big-budget '`Independence Day,' about aliens attacking and destroying sundry Americans and their landmarks, was a box office blockbuster and shot to the top of the Billboard video-sales charts in its first week of release last month. '`Mars Attacks!,' a black comedy about similar themes, opens in theaters Friday and is expected to do well.

'`In the '50s, aliens were a metaphor for the enemy. Now, they're the enemy itself because there's nothing to be a metaphor for,' says Robert Thompson, a television professor at Syracuse University.

'`If we can't be afraid of something geopolitical, like the Soviet Union,' he says, '`then we manufacture them.'

Then there's the Internet, a vast and fast information distributor driven in many ways by the very people -- sci-fi fans and technodreamers -- most likely to believe.

In cyberspace can be found 300-plus World Wide Web sites dealing with aliens, including Roswell autopsy pictures, purportedly official government UFO documents and tracts linking alien visitations to apocalypse. A Usenet newsgroup called '`alt.sex.aliens' offers advice on '`how to make the most of your UFO abduction.'

But if aliens are indeed among us, they're staying quiet for

now.

They probably don't want to saturate the market any further, what with such things as pins depicting the Pillsbury Dough Boy with alien eyes or Pittsburgh's Interstellar Cafe, which offers espresso, computer access and lots of talk about what may be out there.

``To me, these television shows, all this merchandizing, is brainwashing the American public into believing,'' says Philip J. Klass, a writer for Aviation Week & Space Technology who has spent his career investigating, then debunking, UFO sightings and alien visitations.

``I would love nothing more than to write a story saying I found something that could not be explained by prosaic or down-to-earth terms,'' Klass says. ``But in 30-plus years, I haven't found one.''

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