Film Review: Contact — Is There Anyone Out There/In There?

I like to see what message a film has and often this message is different from the obvious intention. For example, many films glorify violence and in doing so, validate it as a means and as an end. Hopefully, this is not what the film-maker intends; but it is often what is achieved.

Contact is an interesting film partly because the message is not obvious. The film seems confused. There is an important message: 'Value the individual's inner experience; there is genuine authority arising from this. Don't be too concerned with proof or analysis or scepticism. Also remember the interpretation of experience is individual; for one person it may lead to a belief in God, for another to somewhere else. What is crucial is to look inside and to believe what you see there, both in yourself and in the other when they share it.'

This is a straightforward humanistic message, but it so hidden by brouhaha that I wonder if the film-makers are conscious of its importance. And I wonder how many of the audience will hear it, too. It's almost as difficult to sort out from the background noise as a signal from the stars!

An example of the confusion is that the film is about the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence, SETI, and it mixes that up with the search for the divine. It juxtaposes a sceptical, scientific unbeliever, beautifully played by Jodie Foster, with one who has faith. I can't see why an ETI necessarily has anything to do with God or faith. There seems to me to be plenty of awe-inspiring evidence of divinity abundant around us without ETIs or intergalactic travel. I have a calendar on my wall which has the most amazing and inspiring photographs of distant galaxies; and William Blake seemed to manage quite well without even a camera. The existence of the universe and its glory is sufficient to induce awe, even epiphany; but that still leaves belief in God to faith — it doesn't prove it. One person may say it does, another may say it doesn't.

Contact's message is about personal authority and it follows one person's inner journey towards that. Jodie Foster plays a woman in a man's world. She gets pushed around by men playing power games. She needs their support to make her journey (both inner and outer) and in the end she gets it. The images of people in authority are mostly negative, manipulative and self-serving; this is not true authority, but the abuse of power. Foster reaches a place of genuine authority when she stands firmly in her experience and, although she would like to be heard and understood, she doesn't need it.

Her journey of self-discovery takes place when the ETI sends the plans for a space-travelling device, which is clever, but hardly divine. Our sceptical scientist then journeys through the wormholes of spacetime to another galaxy. (This is beautifully done and I wonder how prophetic these images may prove.) The plot and the distant, more advanced intelligence, call

for her to be unable to prove that she has been anywhere at all. The ETI sends her back explicitly saying 'This is the way we do it and it works', meaning that they invite contact with other intelligences and a visit, and then send the visitor back with no substantial proof, only their personal inner experience, the implication being that this helps that culture grow up. Her journey lasts no time here on earth, and she is disbelieved when she tells her story. Now she is placed in the position of the believer. She can't prove what happened even to herself and the scientist in her is willing to admit this. However, for her the inner experience was an epiphany and, to her, it doesn't matter whether it was 'real' or not. She is nourished and sustained by it. The characters who are playing the power and 'prove it' games look sad in comparison, their need for power and proof a reflection of their lack of inner Contact.

Philip Rogers

Research Report Review: The spread of statistical significance testing in psychology

Hubbard, Raymond, Parsa, A. Rahull and Michael R. Luthy
Theory & Psychology 7/4 545-564, 1997

This is about a paper which is not research in itself, but is making a point about research in psychology. One of the ways to make a psychological research report respectable has been the inclusion of a test of statistical significance. This is based on the hypothesis-testing paradigm, and relates to the elimination of the null hypothesis. In other words, it tells the reader how unlikely this result was to have occurred by chance. If there is a less than one-in-twenty chance that the result could have occurred by chance, that makes the research more likely to be published. If there is less than one in a hundred that is even better, and less than one in a thousand is considered marvellous.

However, the paper under consideration here is saying that significance testing is a fad which grew up in psychology during the years 1940-1955 and is now highly suspect. The American Psychological Association's Board of Scientific Affairs has set up a Task Force to examine the future role of tests of significance in psychology. 'The widespread use of null hypothesis significance testing in theory evaluation is regarded as inimical to the development of a cumulative knowledge base in the discipline.' Furthermore, the Board plans to raise this topic among other social sciences, and also in the statistics profession: 'The fallout from such discussions is potentially staggering, and could result in major changes in curricula, research training, educational philosophies, and the like.'

The paper traces the growth in popular-

ity of significance testing in the Journal of Applied Psychology. 'A clear rise in the incidence of such testing can be observed. From 1917 to 1929 an average of some 17% of empirical articles published in JAP used tests of significance, a figure rising to 75% during the 1950s and 94% during the 1990s.' This constitutes what the authors call 'overadoption'.

The paper goes on to say that statisticians see little of value in significance testing. Indeed, according to the authors, it is difficult to find a statistician who argues in favour of it. 'Many researchers use significance tests because of the mistaken belief that they accomplish far more than they actually do.' The validity, reliability and general inability of research outcomes is established not by values calculated against chance, but by replication.

The authors believe that tests of significance have overcome every branch of psychology with a rapidity of conquest rivalled only by Attila, Mohammed and the Colorado beetle. Will the APA's Board of Scientific Affairs be able to follow through on its proposals to eliminate such tests?

John Rowan

Suicide and the Inner Voice: Risk Assessment, Treatment and Case Management

Robert Firestone
Sage Publications, 1997, £43 hb, £19.95 pb, 333pp.

'Harsh critical parents produce harsh critical children who live with harsh internalised words and in turn treat their children harshly.' Robert Firestone puts forward evidence that for the suicidal person these voices are an essential part of the self-destruction process, if not always conscious.

Voice therapy (the cathartic release of associated anger and sadness) demonstrates how these punitive voices are rooted in childhood. Therapist and patient can, through understanding and recognition of their origins, change the destructive patterns. Trust is, of course, essential, and group therapy can facilitate recognition and abreaction. Firestone also explains how these negative hostile voices can produce regressions, often precipitated by positive events in the lives of achieving and successful people. He believes that patients can move into a 'trance-like suicidal state' driven by these inner messages of distrust and criticism.

Like Alice Miller, Bettelheim, Kohut, Laing and Winnicott, his description of the fantasy bond and voice process evidences the damage done in childhood which, with loneliness and concern about death, can lead to an inward, self-protective, passive lifestyle of alienation, mistrust, paranoia and indifference. This inner lifestyle develops as a defence against the intolerable pain of a vulnerable child. Living in a fantasy world, treating themselves and others as objects, alienated from their own and

others' feelings, especially anger — the thinking of potentially suicidal people is dominated by low esteem and profound cynicism towards the world. While these hostile voices predominate, rational or positive thinking is blocked.

Anna Freud and Sandor Ferenczi both formulated this process of 'identifying with the aggressor' as a crucial part of the process of ego-fragmentation and self-destructive thinking and behaviour.

Working with suicidal patients and those with self-destructive patterns is very challenging. So this comprehensive study of suicide is richly rewarding. There are excellent chapters on 'Methods for Assessing Risk', the role of sexuality conflicts in adolescent suicide, suicide amongst the elderly (much the largest group), the relationship between guilt and religious training, defence formation and 'Couple and Family Relationships'. I particularly liked Robert Firestone's explanation of how we swing between infantile helplessness and the dominant parental role in relationships. Assessment and treatment are well covered, while relevant research and statistics, though American-based, are useful.

Altogether a rich and comprehensive book, with plenty of case material and a good index and bibliography; a book which draws on psychodynamics, object relations and the humanistic existential therapies, too. Anyone working with parents would find Firestone's guide to prevention through 'Good Parenting' rewarding and helpful.

Betty Gould

Earth Poems: Poems from around the world to honor the earth

Ivo Mosley (ed.)
Harper Collins, 1996, £10.99, 430pp.

Earth Poems is an enlightening collection of poetry from different cultures covering many centuries. Pieces by living poets stand beside those of Shakespeare, Kafka, Rumi, Li Po, Auden and Tagore. The theme is a cry for the rights of women, the freedom of prisoners and for the conservation of our planet. These vital subjects are cleverly presented, using poems that compare attitudes in the ancient world with those of more modern times. In addressing global problems, Ivo Mosley also shows how other peoples in other times and places were just as concerned as we are today about right and wrong, truth and dishonesty, beauty in nature, and the ruthless destruction of the planet.

The poems are grouped into convenient categories such as: 'Nature', 'Love', 'Religion', 'War', 'Civilisation' and 'Men and Women', and most of them are preceded by a short paragraph of comment and background explanation from the editor. Generally I found this very helpful and informative, as if the poems were being introduced by a familiar and friendly voice.

Although Earth Poems is a superb collection I did dislike its chunky, square format, which makes it awkward to hold. I also felt irritated that many poems were inconveniently divided over two pages with the poet's name usually, annoyingly, over the page.

Ivo Mosley champions the cause of the underdog: Jews in ghettos; women enslaved by domesticity; orphaned, hungry children; political prisoners. Many of the poems made me sad. They highlight the destruction of the world's beauty, the sadness of relationships that go wrong, the dominance of men over women and of man over nature. I wanted a companion volume to uplift me — one in which I could read about the life-enhancing, successful and happy things achieved by faith and love for the earth.

Helen Williams

The Soul Is Here for Its Own Joy

Robert Bly (ed.)
W.W. Norton, 1995, £12.95, 270pp.

Self & Society has banished poetry from its pages (oh no it hasn't! — ed), so I'll use the back door. Credos are published up front. There are many Credos in this book, from many different religions, like songs and arias set to the music of the flute, the sitar and drum, the violin and horn. The Goddess makes a glorious entrance to a fanfare of trumpets in the Orphic hymn 'To Nature'; whilst a Rogerian Credo is celebrated 700 years earlier by Rumi in 'Praising Manners': 'Inner gifts/Do not find their way/To creatures without just respect.' Set to a lyre?

Mr Bly, the showman, uses many rhetorical tricks including jokes; so his opinions come ready salted. However, the short commentaries in this book are informed by his love of collecting, writing and translating stories, songs and poems. His passionate diction, a harsh whining modulating to a wailing sadness, and his singing vowels with alliterative consonants are used to great effect in his translations of his beloved Muslim gurus, Kabir, Rumi and Hafez. He likes their ecstatic Lover Credo; the soul as 'The guest who makes my eyes so bright/has made love to me.' This Credo is echoed by the Puritan poet, Emily Dickinson, in 'Wild Nights': Might I but moor — Tonight — / In Thee!' The Beloved can be experienced as male or female, irrespective of the devout's sexual orientation, so ecstasy is transforming, not only firm, nor only yielding. Even separation from the Beloved is experienced as a holy state.

The Christian ethos of sin and forgiveness is expressed with the nice etiquette of Anglicanism by George Herbert: '"A guest," I answered, "worthy to be here." Love said, "You shall be he."' The Beloved is the host. The Christian poets tend to separate body and soul, like Andrew Marvell: 'My soul into the bough does glide/There like a bird, it sits and sings/Then whets and

combs its silver wings/And till prepared for longer flight/Waves in its plumes, the various light.' As their poems are presented in their original form, the Christian poets tend to be more poetic, with greater metaphorical density, than the others.

I prefer to take a deliberate, determinedly dilettante approach to delve delicately into the devout and the divine in this treasure store of a book. A gem from Gerard Manley Hopkins' 'The Windhover': '. . . blue bleak embers, ah my dear/Fall, gall themselves and gash gold vermilion'; a celebration of the Risen Christ, the Beloved, the Spirit in Fire and the splendours of Catholicism. Weep, Robert, weep with joy also at the beauty of such poems and such songs.

Dave Jones

Soul Therapy

Joy Manné
North Atlantic Books, 1997, £11.99 pb, 220pp.

This is a delightfully straightforward book — which surprised me a little, since the title and the cover both suggest a New Age offering and (perhaps I am showing my prejudices) many such are vague or confused. In many respects the book is indeed New Age, but at the same time lucid and solidly grounded. Joy Manné is an experienced psychotherapist, a scholar and, evidently, a clear thinker. Her use of the term 'soul', far from introducing an element of mystery, is here a device for simplifying and popularising what might otherwise quickly become confusing and inaccessible. This is a good example of two principles: using words in their basic English sense, and defining them clearly.

Manné in fact begins by defining two of her key terms, 'ego' and 'soul', thereby establishing the tension between the two, the basic dynamic that her book sets out to explore. There is thus an immediate similarity with some Jungian themes, but this is not a Jungian book. The hundred or so references in the bibliography cover a wide spectrum, in which Alice Miller, John Rowan, Stanislav Grof and the founders of the rebirthing movement all figure significantly.

As well as being clear and well referenced, the book aims to be practical, and in large measure it succeeds, leading the reader step by step to a frame of mind in which one not only wants to try out for oneself some of the things the author is proposing but, more importantly, starts to feel that doing so is a real possibility. Matter presented is not left in the realm of theory but, by a combination of examples, self disclosures and concrete description, is all made to seem easy. Certainly this is a very easy read.

The book is divided into five unequal sections. The first and last are both very short. Part one introduces the basic theme and concepts; part five summarises the main themes and provides cautionary notes about either expecting too much too

fast, or allowing oneself to be defeated before beginning by a sense of unworthiness. Part two is quite the longest and offers a description of the path of personal growth as a 'soul quest', something we are driven into by our deeper nature but which can only be successful if we deploy appropriate skills and attitudes in a wise way. These skills, attitudes and wisdoms are simply described. Part three offers reflections on the relationships which grow up along the way, as one 'questor' seeks help from another — much basic wisdom here for therapists and teachers, clients and seekers. Part four provides a more technical description of Manné's specific approach to breathwork, to 'voice dialogue' — a method not unlike psychodrama — and to past-life therapy.

Apart from Manné's skill as a writer, I think what makes her book attractive is primarily the very direct and wholesome approach to ethics which runs through every aspect. One finds one has absorbed not so much the techniques, though these are well described, nor even the human detail, though this certainly makes the book lively, but above all a sense that at the end of the day what counts is the ethical quality of the life lived. The fact that this is achieved without rendering the book in any way heavy or off-putting is a rare achievement.

David Brazier

Illusion and Reality: The meaning of anxiety

David Smail
Constable, new edition 1998, £7.95 pb, 184pp.

This is the first of four books written in a critical spirit to examine the relationship of mental distress to society. It looks at the whole notion of mental distress afresh. The author starts off by questioning the whole notion of normality. In the first chapter he suggests that in our society the 'false self' is the norm, and not something to be surprised at. But if we then ask what is the reality behind the appearance, what we find is a world systematically designed with just the kinds of threats which cause us to have such a false self. These threats come to us first of all in our families of origin, but later exactly the same threats come from the ordinary world in which we have to live. This often produces a kind of shyness which is simply self-protection. Our subjectivity becomes a painful thing, not something to own and stand by, but something to hide. Words, instead of being something to express ourselves with, become something used by other people to dominate us, to deceive us, to use us. In reality, our conduct does not have to be within the reach of words, but we are made to think that it must be, and that if we do not have the words we must be falling short.

This brings us to the heart of the book: two chapters on the language of anxiety, where the author tells us that we allow our words to be taken away from us and used in a mechanical way to oppress us. We

allow our sensations, our feelings, to be defined by others. The reason why our anxiety cannot be cured is that it is imposed by others, and they do not stop. 'We live in anxiety, fear and dread because these constitute a proper response to the nature of our social world . . .' We live in anxiety because that is the truth. The world really is a fearful place. 'A sensitive, subjective appraisal of the world in which we live, as well as of our own nature, uncovers misery which cannot be escaped, risks which cannot be sidestepped.' We look for means of escape, but there are none. The promise of escape is an illusion, fed by television and psychotherapy. Medical treatments, psychological treatments, are just more illusory promises of escape. But the real world in all its horror, internal and external, cannot be escaped. The most well-meaning psychotherapy ignores the moral problem presented by the world's real dangers and injustices. 'Whether they know it or not, and however much they might wish to repudiate such a role, psychological therapists almost inevitably become instruments for the adjustment of individuals to a social status quo.'

How do you end a book like this, which seems to offer no way out of an impossible situation? David Smail suggests that love might help, but feels that there will never be enough love to go round. His final words are: 'There are no ways that we ought to be other than those which we determine for ourselves. The abandonment of our myths, even though it may free us of the anxiety which arises from self-deception, will not bring us peace of mind, but it may enable us to engage with a real world which we have allowed to get dangerously out of hand.' Not a very encouraging message, after all.

Smail is a curious character, it seems to me. He is a psychotherapist who does not believe in psychotherapy. I don't quite know how he manages this. It is as if the person who writes the book has no contact with the person who does the therapy. And yet he seems to survive, and write book after book, article after article, paper after paper, all saying the same thing. Strange, strange.

John Rowan

Taking Care: An alternative to therapy

David Smail
Constable, new edition 1998, £8.99 pb, 165pp.

At first sight, this is a very nice book, with much to recommend it. Smail himself tells us that 'Of all my written works, Taking Care provides the clearest statement of issues concerning psychotherapy and society which I have been struggling with all my professional life.' It is a critical, even a political book. Smail himself has to say that 'Reading it ten years on, even I was slightly taken aback in places at the bleakness of the view of society it portrays.' Not only is society an exploitative mess, but psychotherapy cannot work in any way to help people: 'Psy-

chotherapy is an irrelevance: at best it is a temporary comfort, at worst a distraction.' Since the author works as a clinical psychologist, this seems a sad conclusion.

'Psychological distress occurs for reasons which make it incurable by therapy' says Smail. He urges instead that the way to alleviate and mitigate distress is 'for us to take care of the world and the other people in it, not to treat them.' This says that there is no need for skill in meeting mental distress. It also says that there is no form of therapy which is any better than any other. The reason why Smail can say this seems to be that he is extraordinarily ignorant about psychotherapy. He says: 'There are, I think, three main strands to be identified in the accounts theorists of psychotherapy have put forward of the basic factors involved in change. These suggest that psychotherapeutic change may be brought about through the operation of (a) insight, (b) learning, and (c) love.' This is wildly inaccurate as an account because it leaves out such things as, for example, the paradoxical theory of change used in gestalt therapy, the experiential theory of change used by Mahrer, the re-evaluation theory of co-counselling, the redecision theory used by Greenwald and others, the reliving and reprocessing of trauma used by Grof and others in the primal tradition, the theory of sheer presence used by existentialists such as Laing, the transpersonal approach used in psychosynthesis, and so on and so forth.

Smail seems to think that psychotherapy is about curing people, and casts scorn on such an idea. But the most effective forms of psychotherapy do not work in this way: rather do they operate on the model of personal growth. They encourage the person to take the next steps on the way. This very often does mean leaving behind old definitions and old hurts, and losing symptoms, but this is not the aim and the object of the work. Jungians like Hillman have been particularly eloquent about this sort of thing, but Smail does not appear to know about Jung or Jungians, or at any rate never has anything interesting to say about them.

So when Smail says (as he so often and so depressingly does, and in so many ways) that 'For the vast majority of people who are driven to despair (whether they know it or not) by the nature of our society, the means of rectification of their predicament are usually beyond their own resources' — we can reply that he has no idea what he is talking about, in any real terms. He is labouring under a delusion: the delusion that inner change is no use, that only outer change is worth talking about. So yet again he has to end up with a statement like this: 'It is simply too much to expect people to take on the moral burden of their own suffering, however much therapy we may offer them. Much of what people take to be their own private misery is generated within the social structure in which everyone is located, and is therefore, in every sense, a matter for the greatest public concern.'

And so we come back to his positive position. Smail says he has argued 'for many years now' that the best hope for improving the lot of ordinary people is through 'the building of a re-dignified politics.' He offers no method for this, no

timetable for this, no viable prospect for this. In fact he says: 'There is precious little sign of that happening at the present time.' We are left with nothing. This is a dismal and depressing conclusion. We have to wait for revolution and do nothing in the meantime.

John Rowan

How to Survive without Psychotherapy

David Smail
Constable, new edition 1998, £9.99 pb, 253pp.

'The aesthetic judgements nestling apparently innocently at the heart of so many "humanistic" approaches to psychotherapy and counselling may in some ways be the most difficult to cope with. For, although the hope is held out that through "personal growth", "self-actualisation", etc., forms of experience and relationship far from the dreary norm may be achieved, the fact is that the clients of these particular brands of therapy are likely to find that, despite their investment, life continues to run along much as it always has, and . . . can only lead to a sense of personal disappointment and failure.'

What a miserable old sod! This is a really dreary book, which shits on everything in the therapeutic garden, and has nothing realistic to offer in its place. It takes the view that the world really is a horrible place, which gives people little besides pain, and that there is nothing much we can do about it. The impresses of external power come down through politics, economics, culture, the media, the domestic and work situation, education, personal relationships, family, experience and bodily sensations, and become our symptoms. What chance do we have? Our own internal will-power (on which he spends 26 pages) is insufficient to change anything. And our access to outside resources is likely to be inadequate, too. The only hope, it seems, is political. But unfortunately Smail does not really believe in politics either, so the book ends with a whimper rather than a bang.

The promise of the title is never realised. We need a more equal society, but we are left at the end with the words: 'Perhaps it will never happen. But given intelligence, knowledge, solidarity, unending perseverance and the kind of moral strength and commitment to others seen most clearly in those who suffer most, you never know.' This book certainly doesn't help us to know, since it so consistently exudes helplessness and hopelessness.

John Rowan